



RELEASE

*a taboo
romance*

DAISY JANE

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A Taboo Romance

Daisy Jane

Smeared Ink

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Prologue

Age 13

My heart moved so quickly that I had to really focus on my back not shaking. He cupped his palm to my bare shoulder then gave it a squeeze.

“Wait here, okay, Gen?” He spoke a bit quieter right before; he always did.

I nodded, rolling my bottom lip under my teeth to keep it from trembling. I wanted him to know that I could at least *pretend* to be strong.

With two curled knuckles, he tipped my face to his. “It’s going to be fine.”

I believed him. My heart raced, though.

I nodded again because it was all I could do.

I watched as he took long, graceful strides through a striped crosswalk. His tall frame and generous breadth of his teen chest caused heads to turn as he strode through. After he crossed, he stopped.

I knew what he was going to do; still, I held my breath.

He pushed his hand through his greasy, raven-hued hair. His shoulder shifted under his black t-shirt as he reached into his back pocket, pulling out a baseball hat. His hair disappeared as he tugged it on.

Then he opened one of the two glass doors and walked inside. I can never look away when he’s inside, so I studied the outside of the place.

WESTERN UNION INSIDE.

California lotto tickets sold here.

ABIERTO.

That was just the junk on one panel of the door. The rest of the windows were painted with deals.

Chips, a hot dog, and a slushie, only \$2.99, one of those deals said.

It didn't seem like a deal to me, though. Sounded expensive. A burn clawed inside my stomach at the idea of a hot dog and chips, though. I'd have chocolate milk instead of a slushie, though, because it's so good. If I had \$2.99, that is.

I hear my spit inside my ears when I swallow impatiently.

I know to focus on what I *do* know, not what I *don't*. He taught me that. "*Don't spin. Think on what you know, don't get all twisted over maybes.*"

I focus then on how smart he is. How happy I am to have him.

We're some blocks from our neighborhood this morning because *you can't shit where you eat*. Mattias taught me that, too.

This is probably the 20th time I've come with him.

The first day we met, I came with him. He's going to teach me, he promised. But I guess I'm not ready yet.

I start to chew on the inside of my lip, in the usual spot. It's sore right now. I've been chewing it a lot lately.

Just as I wipe my sweaty palms down the front of my jeans, he exits the building.

Mattias fluidly blends with a small hoard of people crossing the street. Then he weaves out of the crowd without his baseball hat.

He tousles his hair with one hand. His lips twitch like he doesn't want to smile.

I'm smiling at him. My heart goes so fast when he walks back to me. Thuds *hard*.

"Let's go back," he says. He drops a heavy arm across my shoulders.

I am safe with Mattias.

We walk in silence, seven blocks away from the borders of the city, into our darkness.

We live in an apartment on the third floor of a five-story complex. The government pays for some of these people, I think, but I'm not sure.

What I do know is that Mattias pays for our apartment. I know because I sometimes get to help him with work. He pays me. He tells me it's good to work for your money. I don't know how he got to be so smart; his parents were complete idiots just like mine.

Junkies.

My parents are alive, but their apartment has become a *party place*. I guess that's what you'd call it.

All of my mom and dad's friends come over and do drugs. It smells so bad. They fight and scream, and sometimes, there are guns. And let me tell you, guns *are* like how they look in the movies. Scary. Very, *very* scary. Oh, and my mom stopped buying groceries a year ago.

His parents are dead. We don't know for sure when they died, but somehow, he knew they were gone – heard from a dealer or something.

My *alive* parents are just a few floors below Mattias and me. All the poor people live together. If not on our street, then the next one over. But there we are, the poor people, lumped together in run-down blocks.

It's only seven blocks. The streets are long, though, and really crowded. Cities are always crowded.

Crowds are good for people like us, Mattias says. People provide opportunity and safety.

He says safety, but I think he means cover.

The three flights up feel like more work than the walk here.

Mattias is working the column of deadbolts on the door as I toe off my sneakers and move to the window.

Wrapping the rope around my hand, I make sure I'm holding tightly. With my fist, I bump the window, jarring it open slightly.

Not far enough.

I make one more attempt to keep the rope tight while punching up the window. Mattias nudges my hip with his, coming to stand next to me.

“I got this, Gen.”

He lets himself smile at me this time. My belly smiles, then I move.

His elbows spring back, one at a time, until he's pulled up the gray Rubbermaid tub the rope cradles.

Carefully, he lifts it off the sill and lowers it to the apartment floor.

He crouches on his knees, over the container.

Dirty fingers trace the lidded edge. One pop. Another, and then he's setting the lid on the floor.

From over his shoulder, I hand him the bottle I swiped from the kitchen counter.

He takes it from me and motions me down next to him.

First, he pumps the bottle into my hands, then his own.

Without speaking, we wash our hands in the Rubbermaid bucket of tap water.

The bubbles drift over the surface, looking lost before they disappear. The surface goes still.

The water reminds me of leftover cola in melted ice.

“We’ll get to church early tomorrow, okay?” He sniffs at his shoulder, wincing with a wrinkled nose. “I promise.” He smiles, and it’s pretty, even for a boy.

Tuesdays and Fridays, we shower at a church around the corner. Mattias knows the janitor working those mornings.

Otherwise, with no running water, proper personal hygiene (as my school calls it) is one thing we have a problem with. One of the things, I mean.

I dream of bubble baths.

“Wanna do your face then your feet?” He nods to the brown water. We’ve used pure cola water before, so watered down isn’t bad. I say no today, anyway.

I watch him kick out of his too-small sneakers and tug off his threadbare socks.

He cleans his feet, pumping the soap with precise calculation in his brow, clearly measuring his usage.

With wet feet, he returns to the window and lowers the tub outside.

The burn of hunger flares inside of me. Nausea is setting in. I lick my lips. Mattias untucks his t-shirt in its entirety, giving it a hearty shake as he does.

At our bare feet—his wet, mine dirty—swims a sea of stolen snacks.

Snickers. At least three of them. Only, I can’t focus on counting them. I’m too excited. My skin pops and buzzes.

My eyes flick to a bag of chips, then a few sleeves of neon orange crackers. They have peanut butter inside; it says on the package.

My stomach roars and Mattias laughs in response. Feeling exposed from the noise my body made, I press my palms to my belly, hoping to erase the sound.

I keep my eyes moving.

There are a few protein bars, lots of small sticks of jerky, and...a small pink box.

My hunger is swallowed by my greedy embarrassment. My back gets all sweaty.

The pink box holds my stare. *Sanitary Napkins*. There are these stupid flowers painted on the box, too.

I don't want to look at him, but he's there. He's the only one there.

"Do you need that stuff, Gennedy?" His cheeks remind me of foggy red Christmas lights. He rakes a hand up his neck and down over his head.

He steps closer and lowers his voice.

"I'm sorry, Princess." Reaching across, he takes my shoulder. "I'm sorry it's me you have to tell, but you gotta tell me, okay? I don't want you doin' this." He swallows and motions to his chest. "What I'm doin'."

He shakes me a little, and it's just what I need.

It makes me remember there's no room for embarrassment in our life. We have enough real worries, like making rent.

Yeah, Mattias is sixteen. But he's too young for most jobs. Ones that aren't illegal. Any that considered him have told him without proper hygiene, there's no job.

He does what he has to for us to keep this apartment. If I had to live two floors down with my parents again, well, my stomach aches at the thought.

Makes me want to throw up, and I really hate puking.

My parents had handsy friends. Food was less reliable than it is now. They made me do things for them. Finally, I couldn't take it. I left.

Mattias stopped me at the gate when I was running away. He had been my friend for a few months already. Longer than most.

The day I ran was the same day he heard about his parents dying. He had to figure out, right away, how to stay in that place with just fourteen days' notice. And he took me in.

He felt safe. I felt like I could easily close my eyes around him.

First time since understanding what adult men really want from women did I sleep soundly. He was a blanket, or maybe more like a hug. Any symbol he could be, it was always just about feeling like I'm home.

But better, because I've never really had a home.

I've lived with him since that day. We avoid my parents' apartment, but Mattias tells them I'm okay.

Sometimes I wonder if they care or if they even notice that I am gone.

"Okay," I replied finally. "I'll tell you."

"It's you and me, Gen." He smiles then scoops some snacks from the ground.

He tosses me a protein bar and a stick of jerky.

"Start there."

Cross-legged, facing one another, we inhale the snacks.

We have one bottle of water left to share. I'll get more tomorrow at the church and stuff them in my bag like I do twice a week.

When he clears his throat, I know what's coming.

"You wanna go back to school, Gen?"

A piercing glare from the sun shifts to my eyes as he outstretches his legs. I move too, putting the sun behind him.

Mattias is nothing but a golden aura in front of me.

"No, I'm not going."

"You'll be behind next year if you don't go back."

"I'm not going back at all," I argue, folding my arms over my chest with force.

I want to be around him. When I'm at school, they pick on me. I can't concentrate on anything. My heart races all day. I

sweat, I'm jumpy. I hate myself at school because they hate me.

And I want to *help* him. I hate how hard he works. He should be playing video games and thinking he's too cool for me. Instead, he's stealing and conning to keep us from being homeless.

It's only been six months, but Mattias is my family now. Because he saved me when I tried to run away, he feeds me, he solves my problems, he takes care of me.

But he does it all at arm's length, saving both of our pride somehow. I can't explain it, but he never pities either of us. He acts, not reacts, and it ties my heart to his in permanent, unexplainable ways.

"Gen, you gotta go back next year, or the cops will come." His mouth seals shut, and he blinks a few times. My chest feels warm, but not in a good way. "We stick together, Gennedy. Okay? I'll keep you safe. But to do that, you gotta go to school."

I nod immediately. "Okay. I'll go."

That was easy because if it came down to it meaning that I'd go to school and die a torturous death of humiliation and shame every day so I could stay with Mattias, I'd do it.

My heart thumped loudly as I opened a sleeve of mini white powdered donuts. Sugar sounded good.

I liked promising Mattias I'd go to school. It made me feel grown-up. I wanted to feel older, so he won't worry as much. I don't know why, but I felt strongly I wanted him not to see me as a little freaking kid.

At that moment, I vowed to make this up to him one day when I was old enough.

"Thank you for this." I wiggled a wrapper in the air as I sunk my teeth into a soft, moist donut. My mouth watered so much as I chewed.

He blinked like he felt tired but smiled. It didn't curl up on his face much, just kind of sat there.

“Anything for you.”

That’s what he said every single time.

Chapter 1

Age 14

Mattias pushed through the front door of the apartment. Anyone could push inside if the deadbolts weren't locked. I left them open because he said he'd be right back.

He dropped the box that had been in his arms. It fell to the floor with a thud. I watched his thick fingers manipulate the locks until all were secured. He turned to me with a disappointed frown on his face. I hated when he looked at me that way.

“Gennedy.” He didn't raise his voice to me—he never had. But he was being stern, the tone he used to make a point with me. He closed the few steps between us and dropped to his knees on the floor in front of me.

My hands in the tub of water, scrubbing our clothes, he took my wrists in his grasp. I stopped washing. I had to.

“Always lock the door when you're here alone.” His grip on me felt tight, and I guess that was his way of yelling. Holding me tight to send home the words. “Always lock the door, Gen.”

I nodded, swallowing the lump of embarrassment that appeared in my throat. I hated disappointing him, more than anything.

It was already near eight o'clock in the evening, but the apartment was still full of light. Summer ends today, according to the school calendar. My eyes moved from his hold on my wrists up to his face.

His skin was a direct reflection of that long summer we'd had. Tanned and chapped, he'd been in the sun so much the last few months. Doing what it took to keep us here, as usual. He blinked slowly at me, and I loved how his thick, dark lashes framed his dark eyes.

His face used to be bare, but now there's a light dusting of dark hair growing over his top lip. In the last year, his already big body seemed to expand even more, too. Like there'd been Miracle-Gro in his Wheaties or something.

He let go of my wrists and smiled. His smile always made me warm and tingly, like a sip of cocoa in the cold. Nothing made me feel that way but him.

"Okay," I promised. He lifted one of his hands and tucked my hair behind my ear. He was always doing things like that. I liked it when he did.

He nodded over his shoulder to the box on the ground. "Just in time," he said, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

My sore hands wrung out the last t-shirt. I draped it over the drying rack next to me before crumpling to the floor on my butt.

"Yeah?" I asked, dragging the back of my wrist over my forehead. Hand washing our clothes is a way I help, and even though we don't own many clothes, still, it makes me tired. "In time for what?"

He rose, then moved the box towards me with his feet. Then he kicked off his sneakers and plopped to the ground next to me. His knee brushed mine, and it made a little wiggle move up my back. I liked being near him.

He tugged at the end of the box for a moment before a blob of silver fell out into his lap. It smelled funny, but I didn't say anything. Anytime he brought something back to me, I was grateful. I knew how hard he worked for us to have things.

"It's an air mattress," he said, shaking out the metal-colored thing. Once it was completely spread over the floor, he got to his feet and held a hand out to me.

Even though my hands were sore, I put mine in his and let him tug me to my feet.

“So you can get good sleep before your first day of school tomorrow.”

Normally, I sleep on our small sofa; my body curled to fit. Mattias sleeps next to me, on the floor. We always sleep in the same room, right by one another. We have since the very first night.

I look up at him. His smile is proud. He pushes his hand through his dark hair, and it falls over his forehead a bit when he releases it. Two identical lines on either side of his temples tell me he was wearing his baseball hat today for a while.

I don't ask where he got it because I'm smart, too. I never knew I was smart until him. He tells me so every day, and I know it's true because he wouldn't lie to me.

He pulls at the back of his neck with both of his hands. “I'm going to go grab a pump. Lock the door this time, Gen.”

I take a step closer to him because I don't want him to leave again. I hate being alone, but even more, I just hate being away from him. He drops his arm over the back of my shoulders because he knows.

He lowers his cheek to the top of my head and pulls me towards him. “I'll be quick.”

HE IS QUICK. FIVE MINUTES LATER AND I'M UNLOCKING THE line of deadbolts to let him back in. Proudly, he grins at me as he holds up a pump. I'm not surprised he found one; tweakers have a lot of random things.

“Got it downstairs,” he adds, but I'd figured it out. The entire complex is made up of drug addicts and stolen property.

He drops to his knees at the corner of the mattress and hooks the pump up. I watch as the lifeless silver blob fills full of air, growing into a mattress before my eyes. I wasn't excited before, but I am now. It's been a few years since I had a bed.

Probably longer for Mattias. He doesn't tell me much about his life with his parents before they left him.

When it's full and bloated, he smacks the surface with his palm. His fingers open over the felt-topped mattress, and he moves his hand in slow, gentle circles over it.

"Come try," he coaxes with a smile.

I flop down on my back and close my eyes. The mattress dips, and our knuckles brush as he lies down next to me.

"Good," I tell him. It does feel good.

"Good," he replies.

"We'll sleep together, right?" I ask, feeling nervous for his response. But he threads his fingers through mine, and our palms smash together under his tight grip.

"You know it, Princess."

My lips twitch, but I hide my smile. We turn our heads and face one another. He's been out all day; he smells like summer air and hard work. I love that smell.

"You're gonna be great tomorrow, Gen, so don't be worryin' about that."

My throat feels tight, but I fight against it to tell him, one more time, that I don't want to go.

"I'm only going so we don't get in trouble."

He moves his thumb over the top of my hand, and it makes my eyes close because it feels really good. Like a hug for the top of my hand or something way better than that, I just don't know how to describe it. I scoot closer to him on our new bed and nuzzle my cheek to his shoulder.

He reaches over me and smooths my hair back. I love when he does that, and he's done it twice since he's been home. It makes me feel special to be taken care of by him. He kisses my forehead at the hairline and lies back on the mattress again.

"You get meals there, Gen, don't forget. They'll give you breakfast and lunch."

I'm excited about that. And I don't tell him because he'd tell me no, but I plan to bring some of that food back to him. He deserves it more than I do.

“What will you do when I'm gone?”

At that, he laughs. The mattress vibrates from his laughter. “It's only until two every day, Gen.”

“Still.”

He pushes out a breath then turns onto his side, causing me to slide towards him. My hand that isn't holding his falls to his chest, and I turn my head. With my cheek to his chest, I relax. He's warm and familiar.

“School's good, Gen. Okay?” He gives our joined hands a squeeze. “School gives you options. Options get you...” He goes quiet for a second. A few seconds. “Gets you out of here.”

I flinch against him. “I wouldn't go anywhere without you.” I mean that.

He rests his arm over me, holding me in a light hug. “I know, Gen.” He pushes away, rolling to his back again, and my hand falls to the mattress. I roll to my back again, too.

“Sandwich?” he asks, sitting up slowly so as to not toss me in the air with a sudden movement.

“Yeah.”

In the last few months, Mattias had been cutting grass for cash. Working mostly in our neighborhood, too. He didn't want me to go with him, since he worked with other guys. Said it didn't look good.

I spent my time alone or with Michelle, the only other non-addict living in the complex. She's nice. I watch her kid sometimes when she doesn't have a sitter, and she needs to work. She doesn't pay me much, but she lets me eat while I'm at her place.

When I'm there, I use all of her stuff. She has body sprays and lipstick and deodorant that smells like sugar or vanilla or

something. I like her kid, too. He's pretty cool for being two years old.

Between the two of us, we're doing good. Something to eat regularly, and we're on our way to getting the water turned on.

He makes me a peanut butter sandwich, raising the jar of strawberry jam for me to see. I wrinkle my nose to pass on the fruit, and he grins.

"Sweet enough already, huh?" He winks at me and turns his focus back to our sandwiches.

But I can feel the wink flutter through my chest like a lost butterfly. I let my hair cross my face to hide the way my lips just want to smile around him.

We eat our sandwiches while Mattias flips through the advertisements from today's newspaper. The people who pay to get their lawn taken care of don't buy from advertisements anyway, so when Mattias slips them from their paper each day, he doesn't feel too bad about it.

He dog-ears the pages with deals we need. When I'm done, I change clothes in the bedroom. We only have one, but we don't sleep in there. We've always slept out front, by the door. If someone is coming in or we need to get out, the front room makes more sense.

I do change in the bedroom, though, and so does Mattias.

I didn't know, when I first lived with him, that I should guard myself while changing. No one around me ever had. He turned his back to me, telling me to say "all done" when he could turn around. He gave me respect I didn't know was mine to have.

I fold up my clothes and slip into a pair of men's boxers and an oversized t-shirt. After braiding my hair and getting my backpack ready for the next day, I went back out to the front room.

During the day when Mattias was working, the apartment felt more like a prison than anything. The never-ending screaming and slamming taking place in the apartments

around ours, the smell of burning chemicals coming in through the windows—even though it was my constant, I still hated it. It never grew comfortable. Sun pouring in, shining light on the peeling wallpaper, and dark spots of mold wrinkling through the ceiling—my stomach hurt a lot during the day.

Mattias stopped at a quick-mart every day on his way back to me. He got us each a chocolate milk. My favorite drink. It helped my stomach, too. On the days when the market didn't have any, he came home empty-handed, but my stomach felt better anyway.

Seeing him sprawled over his side of the mattress in the fading traces of evening light, the apartment felt like home. It smelled still, and shouting popped off around us like shots in the night. But still, as I lie down next to him, everything feels right.

He takes his shirt off when he works. I know because as he lies shirtless next to me now, he's free of t-shirt tan lines. His shoulders and chest are dark from time in the sun, his already russet complexion is a hue deeper than normal. He's kicked off his clothes, and I can tell by the scent of his skin that he grabbed a shower on his way home. He always tries to, and I always take one after babysitting.

We're both clean.

"It's going to be good tomorrow, Gen. Okay?" He fishes between us and takes my hand in his—my skin tingles.

"Okay," I say because if he says it, it will be true.

"I'll wake you up in the morning for school," he breathes before pressing a kiss to my temple, rolling to his side, and going to sleep.

Chapter 2

Age 15

The drawer is missing the handle. I watch Michelle angle her eyeliner pencil to pop it open. The scratches on the wood tell me this is her favorite trick. She tosses the tool across the counter before shrugging.

“I could fix it, or I could do that.”

I smile at her. The drawer rolls open further, and she motions to the cluster of treasures inside. Maybe not treasures to her, but they are to me.

Inside, there is a small box of tampons, deodorant, a package of razors, tweezers, and a small makeup bag. I grow excited, thinking of what’s inside that bag, and Michelle laughs a little.

“I put in a few foundations, some powder, mascara, you know—*the basics*.”

I use all my energy not to snatch that bag from the drawer, hold it to my chest and squeal. I do smile, though, because I can’t help it.

“Thank you,” I say, finding my eyes have grown warm. I focus on the contents of the drawer so I don’t make a fool out of myself.

“This drawer is yours. And if there’s anything you need, write it on a piece of paper and tape it up in here,” she taps the magnetic mirrored cabinet that hangs crookedly from the adjacent wall.

“I will,” I nod, letting my fingers trace the metal tracks of the drawer.

She smooths my hair back from my face. “I got you some bras and stuff, too,” she says, smiling, letting her hand fall back to her side. She’s not that much older than Mattias at twenty-one, but she mothers me, and I crave it.

I love how Mattias takes care of me; I do. I’d be dead without him. Something about being given feminine things and clothes from another woman, though. Each time she nurtures me, I feel my feminine side come alive.

The Gennedy who feels like a woman on the inside starts to surface, and I feed her with makeup and razored legs, body spray, and low-rise jeans.

“I’ll let you shower, then,” Michelle adds.

Even though we have our water back on, I like showering at Michelle’s. Not only has she given me a drawer and filled it, but she still lets me borrow things, like eyeshadows and cute tops, or even a ring or bracelet.

* * *

LAST YEAR WHEN I WAS WATCHING HER KID WHILE SHE worked, I got my period. I used some of her things and took some too, telling her not to pay me and to call it even for all I’d borrowed.

She walked me back up to our apartment that night, pulling Mattias outside to talk for a few minutes. It was hard not to eavesdrop, even though Mattias always told me it wasn’t smart to listen to things that didn’t involve me.

“Let me do some things for her now, so she isn’t embarrassed,” I’d overheard Michelle say to Mattias in a thoughtful way that almost made me feel bad. Like she *had* to think of me because my own mother never did.

“Gennedy isn’t embarrassed with me,” he said in a reply that made me smile. Made me more than smile. At fourteen,

when I heard him say that, my whole body went fuzzy and warm.

Michelle had agreed that was probably true but that *she* would probably be a better fit for getting me some of the things I needed. Things that came in pink packages and had cartoon flowers or butterflies drawn on them. *Woman* things.

He didn't fight her on it, and I was both happy and sad about that. Happy because I didn't want Mattias having to cut lawns in the heat all day to buy me stupid things like makeup and thong underwear. But sad, too, because it was the first time in two years that he wouldn't be my everything.

My best friend, my provider, my other half. He shared that title now with Michelle, just a sliver. I knew it was a good thing, really, to have more people. But it somehow felt like by her doing things for me, he and I had less together.

"Probably good," he said finally after they shared a long silence, which I, of course, absorbed through the door.

I chose to see it as finally being able to relieve some of his stresses, not as him being relieved that I was slowly less and less of his responsibility.

* * *

"YOU WANT ME TO DO YOUR HAIR WHEN YOU'RE DONE?" SHE asks as she pulls the bathroom door closed on her way out, stopping before it's fully shut.

I nod. "Yeah, that would be awesome."

Today is my fifteenth birthday.

Mattias and I are going out to dinner to celebrate. I've earned some money here and there, mainly from watching Michelle's son.

There were a few times where I did some stuff at the club she worked at. Front desk stuff, selling wristbands. Nothing much but cash under the table.

Michelle and I had decided Mattias wouldn't like me working the entry at the club, so we kept it to ourselves. I didn't like lying to him, so the manager paid Michelle for bringing me in, and Michelle paid me. When I explained the extra cash those few times, I'd told him Michelle paid me more.

True. Technically.

As I'm showering for my birthday dinner, I consider inviting Michelle tonight. Her son, Angus, is at his grandma's place in the suburbs tonight. She could bring a friend, too, and it could be a group thing.

I want more than anything to sit at a table out in public, just Mattias and me, but I'm scared. I'm beginning not to trust myself.

At night, Mattias and I sleep on our air mattresses—side by side. We have *two* now.

But in the last few months, I've found myself inching towards him after darkness takes the room. I want to be near him for things that have nothing to do with warmth or security.

I listen for his breathing, and when it grows calm and shallow, I slide myself towards him. He sleeps deep. I run my nose up his arm and smell his warm, musky skin. Sometimes my tongue makes a pass. He tastes good, and I feel it between my legs.

I force myself to roll away from him, usually in the middle of the night. I soak up stolen moments of cuddling, only to pretend it didn't happen. Keep it a secret.

There was one night, though, that I got too comfortable. The smell of him did something to my synapses. Made them fire off just right or something, because man, I felt good.

Warm everywhere. Clenching... down there.

I fell asleep and must've slept like the dead because when I finally awoke, the room was crammed full of light. Sunshine heating up everything.

That's when I felt it.

His thick, long, extremely hard erection pushed up against my barely covered ass cheek. It was so hot against my skin. Feeling that private part of him put a deep ache inside of me.

Then on a yawn, he rolled away, off to the side of the air mattress. By the time he was on his feet and stretching, I was back to my side, pretending to sleep.

I waited until he was out of the room, then I sighed something fierce. Deep and angsty, like something depended on it. I didn't know what, though.

Before my hand could wander, he popped his head back in and told me to get up for school.

Since I felt him that morning, it's all I can think about.

* * *

MATTIAS AND I SPEND A LOT OF TIME TOGETHER, AND YET, WE spend a lot of time apart, too. Or at least it seems that way.

He's eighteen years old. Legally an adult now, though he's always been one to me, ever since the day we met.

Boys in my grade at the high school are getting blowjobs and having backseat sex, so there's no way someone like Mattias isn't getting some.

He's the kind of gorgeous that stunts your heart for a moment. Jams you up on the inside and makes you feel a million things at once. Makes it hard to breathe or think for just a second. Then when you calibrate, and he speaks, your body goes warm, then a little numb, too. Because all of him feels too good to be true.

The charisma and charm he has paired with his tough-boy exterior put him at scorching levels of heat. He'd gotten his lip pierced on his eighteenth birthday, as well as a barbell through the bridge of his nose. He began testing his limits by wearing gauges in his ears, too. Though his were smaller in size, still, I found it sexy as hell.

He is a bad boy, through and through. Lean torso bubbling with new muscle definition, his soulful dark eyes and those piercings.

He's the inspiration for love poems and the reason you wish on shooting stars. He's a man that makes you acutely aware of how your body feels when you're around him.

He's the perfect man.

There's no way he's some rare, hot-guy virgin at eighteen years old, as much as I want to believe that. Most people who live in our neighborhood are having sex for favors by the time they're fourteen years old.

That would have been me if it weren't for Mattias.

I don't want to think of him running his substantial hands down another girl's bare belly. I don't want his lips to suck the nipple of another woman. I don't want some stranger putting her hands over his tired, work-worn chest at night.

Somewhere inside of me, I know that he must have all that, though. Because he's a man. And I'm just the kid living with him who he brings chocolate milk to.

* * *

MICHELLE CURLS MY HAIR, GIVING ME THE *FULL DANCER treatment*, as she calls it.

She floods my long, blonde hair with ringlet curls. Finger-combing, she sprays so much hairspray I'm pretty sure it's in my DNA now. After forty-five minutes, I barely recognize myself in the mirror.

I touch my eyelid, and she smacks my hand away. "I didn't put setting spray on. Don't touch it!"

"My makeup," is all I can say as I stare at myself, shocked. It's not even close to a complete sentence or thought, but damn, I look good. I finger the ends of the false lashes she glued on. I smear my lips together and pout them.

"You look hot," Michelle says proudly.

I want to ask her if I look too much like a stripper, but I don't want to offend her. I think carefully for a minute as I continue exploring my reflection.

"It's not *too* much, is it?" I chew my lip as she steps back, surveying me slowly. Even if it is too much, *I feel pretty*. Really pretty. And I want Mattias to see me like this. Thinking of it excites me. "It's not," I decide, before she can answer. No rain on my parade and all that an umbrella doesn't really go with this dress.

In fact, I'm wearing one of my *own* dresses. Michelle offered a few of hers but I didn't have the full hourglass thing going on that she did. I have a smaller chest. B-cups, I guess. A lot of girls at school have huge boobs. Like, *how do they not tip over* type big. But I like my average boobs.

I guess I'm all-around average. About five-foot-seven. Dirty blonde hair, long because salon appointments aren't really a thing as a *freaking poor girl*. Brown eyes, nothing special. Legs a bit too long for my torso, average butt. Everything about me is just... plain.

Mattias is not plain. He's *extra* like avocado. He's hot and strong; he's loyal and honest, he's both gentle and tough.

I smooth my hands down my black dress, which fits my average body just perfectly. It's why I didn't borrow Michelle's clothes. I know I can feel confident in this. And that's how I want to feel tonight.

"Heels?" she asks, popping back into the bathroom with a pair hanging from her fingers. I take them in, black and glossy with faux laces running up the heel. They're gorgeous.

"I'd fall flat on my face," I admit because I've never walked in heels. Again, poor.

Poor girls don't worry about walking in high heels. They worry about having a pair of shoes suitable for gym class and not getting them stolen because she likely had to steal them in the first place.

She shrugs, not denying the possibility.

“I’ll wear my flats.” I toe into the shoes that I’d lined up against the bathroom wall. I’d set out my clothes before the shower, too. It felt good to have things to set out. I liked seeing them.

She looks me up and down as she tosses her dark hair over her shoulder. “It works for you, Gennedy. Normally I’d say heels. They make your legs look longer and skinnier. But you, you look great like this. It’s so *you*.”

You look great like this feels a lot like *boring works for you*, but I try not to take it that way. Or at least, I try not to take it to heart. I’d rather be plain than lying in a pile of my own lost teeth, you know?

She tells me to have fun, and I walk back to our place, glad I didn’t choose the heels. I’d already be toothless.

When I get inside, I hear the hall shower running and know Mattias is getting ready for dinner too. When I woke up this morning, he was already gone. Had extra lawns today, I think he’d said.

I didn’t mind waking up alone on my birthday. I did mind waking up without *him*.

I flip through a magazine that came in the junk mail. There’s a coupon inside for a dairy brand at the grocery store, and I tear it out, stashing it away for chocolate milk. I read a few articles, all mind-numbingly stupid. Finally, Mattias is ready.

He places his palms on the tops of my shoulders, and my whole chest threatens to give me away and quiver from the feeling of him. Heat spreads through me everywhere his fingers point. For a split second, my eyes fall closed.

He squeezes, then releases me. “Happy Birthday, Gen,” he says softly against my ear, pressing a chaste kiss to the backside of my jaw. It’s a tiny kiss. Something you’d give your grandmother or.... little sister.

My stomach feels like a pot of boiling soup. I tug at the bunched fabric of my dress, and the neckline lowers a bit

more. As he rounds the counter, I adjust myself to look... *older*.

When our eyes meet, I know he sees that I'm more exposed. I can just tell from the way he chews slowly at the corner of his mouth as our gazes lock. I don't breathe when he looks at me this way. It happens here and there, these intense but short-lived moments of soul-searching and breath-stealing eye contact.

But there's never more.

Never a touch, another look, anything. I've chalked it up to the intense way in which he loves me. Just... *him*. Another beautiful, lovely part of him.

Still, my mouth goes dry when his lips curl into an easy smile. The silver ring in the corner of his mouth always grabs my focus for a moment or two. I wonder what it would be like to bite it and use it to pull his lip into my mouth.

"Princess, you look fucking beautiful," he says, letting the words fall out lazily. I like hearing them slow. I let them soak in, too. My cheeks feel hot so, immaturely, I look down at my toes for a moment.

"Michelle did my hair and makeup, you know, for my birthday."

"Like, that was her present to you?" he asks, bracing himself on the counter by his palms, wrists facing me.

I nod. In a way, it was, so that's not a lie. I wanted to look pretty for tonight.

Trying to act aloof and cool, I toss my waved locks behind my shoulder and dig out the lip gloss from my bag. I borrowed this from Michelle. She wouldn't let me leave without it. "*Hot as hell, but doesn't last, so you'll have to reapply,*" she'd said of the shade.

I rolled more on as I casually, *no-big-deal*, checked him out.

A knot of heat suddenly appeared in my throat, preventing me from speaking. I swallow it down and smile, puckering my

lips slightly to blend the color. “You look nice, too,” I say, trying to pace the words, so they don’t topple out in a nervous rush.

He does look nice. Maybe that’s why I feel all tangled up at this moment, breathless and anxious.

He’s wearing a black and white checkered flannel, buttoned up to his neck. The sides of his head are shaved smooth, the length of his black hair combed neatly to the back of his head. He’s clean-shaven, like always, with black gauges shimmying his lobes. His piercings add something to his appearance that makes me molten in my panties.

When he got them done and asked me what I thought, well, *hell*, I deserve an award for my acting skills. I hardly looked, went back to my phone, and shrugged. Didn’t even say a word. Because it was at that moment that I realized *I* like *Mattias*.

“You ready?” He smiled at me, and I wish I could’ve taken a picture of him then. He never liked me to take pictures of him, so I pretty much stopped asking.

He looked so beautiful there, though. His russet-colored skin glowing in the amber drop-light hanging in our tiny kitchen. The lights glittering against his dark eyes, pheromones swimming around my senses, making me weak and dizzy.

“Yep,” I smiled, both enjoying and hating the flood of heat that rushed through me at that moment.

We had dinner.

It was great. But the waitress gave him her number when she brought the check. She flirted with him the entire night, too. I put on my big girl panties and pretended that I didn’t care.

Because I shouldn’t care. I mean, I don’t.

I care about Mattias. I just don’t think I’m allowed to in the way I want.

I turned my head away when she slipped him the paper. I couldn't bear to know if he took it. She gave us a free slice of cake for my birthday as if the sugar and carbs made up for the fact that she'd all but sat on the face of the man I was with. *Bitch.*

If getting flirted with or getting the number affected him, I couldn't tell. Because we still had a nice night, even though I felt like the kid being babysat by someone who was trying to get a date.

I changed clothes in the bathroom that night and took off all my makeup. I didn't feel like talking or watching anything on his phone. I just wanted to lie down. When he went to the bathroom after me, I turned off the light and slipped into bed.

When he came back down the hall, I heard him stop. There wasn't a sound in our tiny apartment for a few seconds. For once, everything fell still. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping he didn't question me for wanting to go to bed. Or why I hadn't wanted to stay up late on my birthday.

A rush of air hit my lower half as he yanked the covers up and slid into his bed next to me. Our mattresses were side by side, so we shared blankets because blankets are cheaper than individual sheet sets.

After he tucked and adjusted and stuffed pillows and grunted, the room went quiet again. I let my eyes open, and it took them a moment to accept the darkness.

"Gennedy." His voice was really low when he said my name, and it crawled up my spine as he spoke again, at my ear this time.

He had shifted nearer to me on the makeshift queen.

He draped his palm over my hip, his calloused hand connecting with my soft, bare skin. He squeezed, and I tingled between my legs.

"Happy birthday, Princess." He squeezed again and reactively; I closed my eyes tightly. I didn't want him to see my childish disappointment.

Before rolling away, he kissed the back of my jaw. I smelled his musky cologne and slightly sweaty skin, and my fingers itched to roam hungrily over his body. Somewhere. Anywhere.

Everywhere.

“I didn’t take her number,” he added in a hoarse whisper. It was so quiet; I held my breath as he continued. “There’s no girl for me, Gen.” He paused. “Goodnight.”

* * *

I GET UP FROM BED AND SNEAK AWAY TO THE BATHROOM TO pee. While going, I lean over and eye Mattias on his mattress. From my view down the hall, I’m looking at the top of his head, so I can’t see his beautiful face. But then my eyes get caught on it—the rise between his hips, tenting the sheet.

Good morning, Mr. Mattias.

I lick my lips and wipe myself. I shouldn’t feel this way for him.

When I get back in bed, I check and find that we have ten more minutes before the alarm goes off. I snuggle up to Mattias and hold my breath to fall in sync with his. I love his unrelenting exhales against my chest as we give and take breath at the same time.

I snuggle into his shoulder and lick his warm, tangy morning skin.

Then I roll away, and go back to my side before he wakes up. He gave me a good birthday gift. The best.

There’s no girl for me Gen.

I know that doesn’t make me his, but still, it makes me feel good.

I swear I can taste his shoulder on my tongue all day.

Chapter 3

Age 16

“I know it’s not as fun with me as it is with your mom, but hey, I’ll let you eat whatever you want and ride rides with you.”

Angus’s five-year-old little face stared up at me from the middle of our apartment. Michelle had promised to take him to the fair but got called in for an extra shift. People like us never turned down more or extra work because we could always use a few hundred dollars.

He blinked a few times and didn’t say anything for a minute. His silence started to wear on me, and I began feeling nervous. I don’t want Angus upset. Then he glanced around the apartment a few times and looked up at me.

“Is Mattias coming with us?” I could hear the hope lifting his tone.

From down the hall came Mattias’s booming voice. “Angus, my man.” Then he appeared before both of us, a threadbare towel tucked in at his waist, his wet hair sending rivulets of water down his bare chest. My eyes went to his nipples for a moment, and my mouth closed, my mouth drying out.

With a shove of his long fingers, he tousled his wet hair. Water rivulets went flying, and I watched him as if he were Pamela Anderson running in slow motion on a hot beach.

Every part of my body hummed for Mattias.

Last year I’d really fallen for him, and I’d still kept it locked away, deep inside.

Part of the reason I controlled it initially was that I was younger. Fifteen when I began having real fantasies about him. And he was eighteen. I was technically a child while he was an adult.

At sixteen, though, my body feels more grown than it ever has.

I have needs.

Not just lusts and wants but *actual physical needs*. And it just so happens that all of those needs rise up to the surface, begging to be met... when I'm around Mattias.

I want him, and yes, I'm still not a legal adult.

But I can't go another day without knowing at least what *kissing him* is like.

"Going where?" Mattias asks, his brows pulling together as he sizes us up. "Didn't know you were coming over today, buddy."

"Michelle had to work," I say quickly, wanting to reiterate the positive of the situation; Michelle couldn't take him to the fair because she was earning more money for them both.

Mattias nodded immediately, head bobbing in solidarity of the cause. "Work is important. It keeps food in your belly. Keeps your clothes clean." He reached out and ruffled his large hand through Angus's silky hair. "Pays for all the cartoons you watch."

Angus's grin stretched from ear to ear at that remark. "Will you come to the fair with us? Gennedy is taking me since mom can't."

"Is that right?" Mattias asked, slowly turning to face me. His lips curled in a soft smile. "That's nice of Miss Gennedy, isn't it?"

Pride bloomed inside of me under his pleased gaze. I wanted to help Michelle, and I loved Angus. But this happiness I've given Mattias at this moment feels more important than anything else.

"I'd love to go, that is, if Miss Gennedy will have me?"

Angus began to squeal loudly because let's face it, even this kid knew how gone I was for Mattias. He clapped his hands together before turning to me, all but pulling the hem of my shirt in a desperate plea. "He can come, can't he? Please, Miss Gen?" His fingers locked together in a dramatic prayer. "Please?"

I winked and smiled, and Angus knew that was a yes.

Meeting his dark eyes, my heart stuttering in my chest, I said, "I want you to come."

His smile faded away, and our eyes idled together in a dense, heated silence. When he finally swallowed the moment down, I didn't hide my eyes and how they traced his Adam's apple all the way to the hollow of his throat. I didn't hide that I licked my lips, watching him. I didn't pretend that I wanted him to go for the rides and cotton candy.

With a courage that can only be described as desperate with a healthy dose of foolishness, I reached for his hand and linked our fingers together. I did it all quickly, so there wasn't a moment for him to breathe and realize what he was doing. And *who* he was doing it with.

"I want you to come," I said again, stepping towards him.

I could feel the dampness of his body through my light tank top. I wrapped our linked hands behind me and freed myself, leaving his arm around my waist. He just stared at me with his dark, soulful eyes.

"My mom says to go potty before we go anywhere, so I am going potty, and then I want to go!" Angus announced before disappearing down the hall.

My skin felt like the surface of the sun.

Mattias's mouth was closer to mine than it had ever been before. He pushed away, but my heart didn't sink because I could feel the shift in energy between us.

The unsure look in his eyes from a moment ago had faded, and in its place was a man who was sure. *Sure*, and maybe a bit surprised.

“What are you doing, princess?” he asked with a crushed velvet tone. He looked at where his hand rested on my hip, which forced distance between us.

“I want time with you,” I said, not really sure how to say what I felt. “I want you to be my boyfriend.”

His face stayed motionless for a long moment, and then a sad smile lifted the corner of his mouth. “Gennedy, you’re too young.”

I stepped away from him, and I think it was the first time I ever truly got pissed off at Mattias.

Angry.

Livid, even.

He reached for me quickly in reaction to my anger, but I jerked back from him. His eyes twitched, his brow pinched, and he stared at the ground, struggling to calibrate.

“Too young?” I asked, trying to control the volume of my voice. “After everything we’ve been through together, you’re going to tell me that three years matters more than *that*?”

One warm tear swam down my cheek, and I pushed it away. But he saw it.

Angus emerged from the hall, none the wiser to our argument. Though it wasn’t really an argument, was it? It was more like Mattias deciding what’s best for the both of us.

My cheeks burned with my fake smile as my brain flooded with heat brought on by frustrated hurt and anger. But... when I stopped to think about it, as I smoothed Angus’s hair down, how could I be mad at him?

How could I be mad at him for choosing for us *now* when I’d expected and relied on him to do *that very thing* for the last four years? That was unfair of me. I smiled weakly at both of them, toeing the line of *happy and fine*.

“Get your shoes back on,” I said to Angus, blinking a few extra times to will away the warmth behind my eyes. If I were alone, I’d be balling in the fetal position, for sure. I’d put

myself out there to the one person I truly loved, and he'd rejected me with the lamest and cruelest of all reasons.

Too young.

As if love has anything to do with age.

* * *

WE WALKED DOWN THE SIDEWALK TOWARDS THE FAIR, ANGUS a pace or two ahead. It was only a couple of blocks away, in a baseball park on the outskirts of the city. A rideshare wouldn't be worth it, and I don't think Michelle would've wanted Angus to ride in one.

Even though it was sticky-hot outside, I was happy to walk. After what felt like a terrible argument, I needed to just... be near Mattias.

I didn't want to fight with him. I really didn't want us upset with one another. Being in a fight with Mattias feels like putting on a pair of gloves and having all of your fingers go in just two of the finger holes.

Wrong and uncomfortable.

Angus hummed and sang as he skipped and twisted down the sidewalk, full of pure excitement. If it weren't for the coolness between Mattias and me, I'd be doing the same because this would be my first time going to the fair, too. A few times I was invited by some girls at school, but Mattias got a bad feeling from them, so I didn't go.

I want to look over at him, see his expression. Is he mad at me? Wait, I'm mad at him. I mean... He's deciding for us because *that's what he does*. That's what he's always done. And we've survived. We've kind of even thrived. I mean, we're not headed to Harvard and with a Mercedes keyfob dangling from our fingers, but we're clean, we're eating, we're together.

When I get the courage to glance, I find his eyes already on me. His creamy coffee-colored eyes tear into my chest and

send a jolt through my heart. Inside of my ears, I hear its wild beating.

“Gennedy,” he says softly, privately, so that Angus doesn’t catch it.

He increases his pace to fall in line with me. Reaching up, he moves his knuckles along the length of my arm. My entire body flashes with heat, goosebumps spreading over my sticky skin.

Then our fingers are laced, our palms kissing, his timbre settling over my senses like alcohol, making me warm and fuzzy and comfortable.

“We need to talk.”

Not as good as the words I’d like to hear, which would be *I like you, too*, or *I want you, too*, but it doesn’t matter—my wall comes down.

He squeezes my hand when I don’t respond, so I give him a nod of acknowledgement. My face must still be sour or unsure because he stops us, reaching out for Angus to stop him, too.

“We don’t take another step until you say you’re okay.” He keeps his large hand on Angus’s shoulder, and I watch his fingers fan out over the emerald green of his Hulk t-shirt.

Ang smiles broadly up at me. “We’re almost there,” he says in an excited whisper that makes me grin back down at him.

“I can’t wait,” I reply, taking his hand in mine. The only time a person is worth letting go of Mattias for is this kid right here.

Before moving up the sidewalk towards the entrance, which is not too far off now, I turn to Mattias. “I’m okay.”

His eyes study me, and his lips form a thin line. Not sure that he’s convinced, but it’s all I can give for now. I won’t be okay until we can talk.

I know I’m only sixteen, but I *know* how I feel.

* * *

TEN MINUTES LATER, WE'RE SURROUNDED BY SWARMS OF buzzed people, cheap prizes, and rides operated by questionable-looking men. Angus loves it.

Lights flash, and bells sound off sporadically around us, indicating some lucky, broke fuck beat the odds and won a mini-game. The air is dense with frying oil and stale beer, with the occasional drift of cigarette smoke. My calves are coated in dust from the ground we're trekking across, and my skin is damp from the heat and crowd.

We take Angus on a tilt-a-whirl ride together; then we take him to play a ring toss game in a booth. The first few rings barely make it a foot, and the smug-looking carnie behind the booth enjoys it too much. On the third toss, Mattias stands behind Angus, holding and guiding his little arm with precision and power. The ring sails through the air, hooking a bottle in the first row. Looping the neck several times, the ring settles around the base, clinking the whole way down.

The carnie, who is outfitted in a stupid black and white striped apron, sours and grabs the reaching tool that's stuffed in the corner. Lifting it above his head with what can only be described as *dead eyes*, he says, "anything in this row."

Angus looks up at Mattias, who gives him the proudest smile. Something tingles inside my ribcage, and I suddenly feel woozy but in a good way. My cheeks burn under Mattias's gaze, but my eyes flick back to Angus. He's pointing to a large stuffed lion hanging above him, and the man with the stick brings it down.

"Thanks, Mattias!" he says happily.

Mattias winks as he stuffs his hands in his black jean pockets, rocking on his feet. "Where next, bud?" He looks around him, narrowing his eyes here and there as if inspecting all the booths.

"I think you can win there," he says, crouching down next to Angus. Outstretching an arm, he points in the direction of a

high-striker game. Angus's little head twists and his eyes go big.

Turning back to Mattias, he shakes his head, face serious. "I'm not that strong yet. Sorry. Mattias."

Mattias's face remains serious, lips in a thin line as he shakes his head in disagreement. "No way, man." He stares up at the tower; then his eyes fall back to the puck that rests at the bottom, next to the number zero. "You could even break it."

He rises to his feet and begins to stroke his chin in thought. Angus holds his breath, following Mattias's eyes back and forth between them and the game. Finally, Mattias nods.

"If you break it, I'll pay for it."

Angus smiles shyly, and Mattias tosses his head in the direction of the tower. "Let's go see how strong you are."

Angus stuffs his hands in his pockets to match Mattias, and I follow behind them as we make our way to the game. I watch with a huge grin on my face as Mattias helps Angus hold the mallet and smash it toward the bottom of the tower, sending the puck to one hundred on their first swing, Angus's jaw drops open, and Mattias releases his grip on the mallet and steps back before he's caught.

"Told you, my man," he says to Ang, who is now jumping up and down, thumping his chest like the Hulk.

"Take a picture!" he shouts as he beams at the tower, where the puck is now back at zero. He stares, clearly replaying the moment in his mind, over and over. I catch Mattias's eyes under the setting sun, and the darkness in them sends a jolt through my belly.

He smiles. My flesh turns bumpy and warm.

This feeling. This feeling right here is why *age doesn't matter*. And I open my mouth to tell him just that—no more silence and no more games—when my phone goes off.

On the screen is Michelle's name. I look up to see Mattias lifting Angus onto his shoulders in celebration, and knowing he's safe, I answer the call.

“Hey, what’s up? Is everything okay?” She doesn’t usually call from work. Immediately, I worry.

She sighs, and it’s full of irritation, which relieves me a little. If she’s irritated, at least nothing really bad happened. Even though there are security guards and bouncers at Envy, still, I know bad stuff happens there. She’s come home shaken up a few times.

“It’s fine. They just... it got slow. They cut me.” She pushes out a breath. “You guys still at the fair?”

“Yeah,” I say, twisting around to catch Mattias and Angus winning a large red teddy bear from a bean bag tossing booth. I smile and press a hand to my belly. He’s so good with everyone. He’s so... perfect. “Mattias is with us. He and Ang are cleaning up.”

She snorts. “Great, just what I need in my eight-hundred square-foot apartment. More stuffed animals.” I hear her car start up in the background. “I’ll meet you guys. I changed at the club so I can be there in twenty minutes or so.”

“Sounds good. We’ll head toward the food court area and get him a hot dog.”

“Sounds good. See you soon.”

We end the call, and when I return to the boys and tell them the news, Angus begs Mattias to play one more game.

Mattias says we have to eat, but when Angus whispers something in his ear, they look at me.

“We’ll meet you at the food court in a few minutes, okay, Gen?”

“Yeah, is that okay, Miss Gen?” Angus presses his hands together in an unneeded but adorable prayer.

Not knowing what they’re up to, I agree; feeling like a few minutes outside of Mattias’s orbit would probably do me good.

I know how I feel about him.

But tonight, the physical attraction is really hard to ignore. Almost impossible.

AFTER HOT DOGS AND SODA, MICHELLE SHOWS UP JUST AS we're getting Angus's hands cleaned up. He kisses her hello, and then, with a snap of his fingers, Mattias pulls a blue box from his pocket. Michelle looks at me with a smile trapped behind her eyes, but I shake my head because I have no clue what they're up to.

Michelle takes the box from Angus, who hands it to her with so much pride that I find my eyes warm at how sweet this boy is. She flicks it open to reveal a small gold bracelet adorned with several little charms. I can't see what they are, but I remember spotting the row of play jewelry at the last booth. Mattias catches my eyes, and there it is again. That look that turns me into a pile of hot, hormonal goo for him.

"I love it," she says, scooping him up in her arms. He wraps his arms around her neck, only slowing down for a second to kiss her before he's onto something else.

"The Ferris wheel!" he points across the fairgrounds to the large, red wheel that seems to hang idly in the gray sky. "Look, it's in between rides! We can get on! Let's go, let's get on!"

Angus wiggles his way out of Michelle's arms and makes a beeline for the Ferris wheel. Michelle races forward to keep up with him, looking back at us just once.

"I'll ride with him," she smiles broadly. Then we lose sight of her as she blends easily into the crowd.

Mattias laces our fingers together, and it makes our shoulders brush. Hot delight spreads through my core, around my belly.

"We'll ride the Ferris wheel together," he says, lowering his mouth to the top of my ear. I can smell his soap. Irish Spring. It blends with his testosterone-filled scent, and my face goes a little numb. Because ever since I was thirteen, I've always loved the way he smells.

"And we'll talk. Because me and you," he steps away, keeping our hands linked but putting distance between our

shoulders. “We don’t do this fighting bullshit. We’re a team forever, you and me, princess, so don’t shut me out now.”

I swallow, feeling immature and small and awkward. I did shut him out, and I did start this fight, this fight that I absolutely hate. He’s right; we don’t do this.

I didn’t want to do this.

But he didn’t take me seriously. He didn’t hear me. He just... decided.

We wait in line a few minutes, and they go by way too fast. I want those minutes of waiting in the line to last forever, though, because he kept his hand wrapped around mine. Every few seconds, he grips me tighter for a moment, reminding me that we weren’t just waiting but that he was thinking of me as we waited.

As soon as we slid into an empty cart and the attendant pulled the locking safety arm down into our laps, he exhaled. So did I.

“Look at me, princess,” he said, and I knew I’d have to. But I kept my eyes on his black sneakers, the tops covered by his black jeans, one second longer. Swallowing, I told myself everything would be okay. Still, my heart beats like it was just jolted with a shot of adrenaline.

My eyes moved on their own, first taking in the silver ring piercing the corner of his bottom lip. Has a girl ever gnawed on that piercing the way that I wanted to? I licked my lips as my gaze moved up to his amber eyes. I love how they flitted between mine as if he were enjoying me enjoying him. The bridge barbell piercing made him look edgy and tough, paired with the distinct fade he religiously got at the barbershop twice a month—he was the epitome of a sexy *bad boy*.

He tilted his head to the side, and the wave of onyx hair that sat atop his head slid, falling carelessly to one side. It looked hot like that, too, messy and out of place. My heart leapt to my throat and pulsed there, making me pull my hair over my shoulders and around my collarbone to hide it.

He reached out and stopped my anxiously moving hands by squeezing them gently with his own.

“Princess. We need to talk about what you said to me back at home.”

My face, which felt warm before, feels positively fiery now. A bead of sweat slips from my hairline, but I don't want to let go of his hands to push it away. His thumbs stroked my palms, and liquid heat burgeons between my legs.

“You're only sixteen. I'm nineteen.” He releases one of my hands and shifts me so that I'm partially leaning back into his chest. With the hand that is still linked to mine, he drops it over my shoulder. It feels natural to settle back against him this way.

With his newly free hand, he reaches over me and tilts my chin back up towards him. The position feels so comfortable that it makes me... *scared*.

How could it ever be better than this right here?

He curls our knuckles together more tightly as his eyes slowly narrow in on mine. “It's against the law for you and me to be more than friends, Gennedy. Do you get that?”

I swallow hard. I know it is, but for some reason, the magnitude of it doesn't hit me until he confronts me with it. I could get him sent to jail if we were caught.

Jail, or prison. Wherever it would be, it would be away from me... because of me. My eyes get warm with emotion, but I can't bring myself to look away. He rolls his teeth over his bottom lip, and I feel his groan vibrate through my back.

“I'm not going to sit here and tell you that you're young and you could meet someone else, someone you love more.” He pushes a stray hair off my face and pinches my chin with his thumb and forefinger, making my lips fall apart just a little. “Ain't nobody out there who will love you like I will, princess. I can fucking promise you that.”

“I believe you,” I say in a whisper, through a chest full of flames.

“But you can’t be my woman for two more years.”

My heart skips a beat as a numbing tingle spreads up through my temples. I feel a thousand things when I process his words. I want to scream; I want to jump up and celebrate that this protector of a man wants me when he can have me.

Instead, emotion clogs my throat and wets my eyes. “You really want me to be yours? For real? I mean, when I’m eighteen, that is.” A tear slips down my cheek, dampening my lashes. I blink until the blur is gone. He tugs me closer to him, his muscled chest warm and hard against my back.

Our eyes are still hovering on one another, the lights and chaos of the fair moving around us completely invisible now.

“You’re mine *now*, Gennedy. You’re my fucking girl. But I can’t show you how a man claims his woman until you’re eighteen. But don’t doubt for a second that you’re not mine just because I can’t be inside of you.” Holy shit. *Inside of you*. I store those words away for later. “You’re mine now; you’re mine forever.”

Everything grows fuzzy. The sides of my vision go dark, my heart beats more heavily, and my hands—I can’t feel them. I’m breathing hard, and still, I’m staring into his endlessly soulful eyes.

“You’re going to wait for me?” I ask, shocked that a man so gorgeous and commanding would put his heart and needs on a shelf for two years.... For *me*.

He holds my jaw in his hand, and his eyes pinch down on mine. “Don’t be thinking like that. I see what’s going on in that beautiful brain of yours.” He leans down and lets his lips hover at my ear. His voice tingles through my face, making my lips ache. “You’re worth everything, and I’d wait a hundred fucking years for you, princess.”

Then he sits up, and though that’s where he was just a moment ago, the distance seems further. Now that we have this beautiful decision made—I can’t bear the idea of not being as close to him as humanely fucking possible.

“But until you’re eighteen,” he tips his head down, bringing our lips impossibly close. The night around us is a blur of noise and color, all of it a muted blur. “The most we can do is hold hands.”

Growing courageous from our close proximity, I ask, “can we kiss?”

I feel the rumble of his broken moan shift through my back again. I lick my lips, and he watches me before slowly meeting my eyes again.

“Only in public.”

I wrinkle my nose and lift my eyebrows, clearly confused. His lips pull up in response. Smiling, he says, “I won’t kiss those lips at home.”

“Why not?” I ask, sucking in another noseful of his scent. God, I love how he smells.

“I don’t trust myself to stop.” His answer is simple and quick. Because it’s honest. He rests his free hand on my thigh for just a few seconds before pulling it back as if I burned him. I look at him with more confusion.

“See?” he says, lowering his mouth to be close to mine again. “Touching you...” he loses track of his thought as his dark eyes idle on my mouth. “It makes me want things you aren’t ready to give.”

I want to tell him that I am ready to give him the things that I’m sure many women have offered or have given him. I can be his in all the ways a woman is expected.

But I can’t bear a life without him. I can’t risk getting him sent away. If he went away, I wouldn’t survive. I don’t even want to think about what I’d do without him.

Settling back against the hard metal seat, I slide away from him a bit, too. I don’t want to, and he doesn’t want me to, but we both realize we need space. Because if I stay snuggled up against him, who knows how respectful of his wishes—our plans—I’ll be.

“Tonight,” he whispers as our cart lowers to the stopping point, where the attendant is waiting to lift the lap bar. “We sleep on *my* mattress.”

Excitement flutters inside my chest, and my fingers long to reach for him, to pull him in a hug to celebrate this decision. Because sleeping near him is amazing, but right next to him? This must be what Christmas morning feels like for kids who wake up to video game consoles and piles of designer clothes.

“Really?”

He groans a response. “My girl sleeps next to me, doesn’t she?”

I nod. “Yeah,” I reply, because.... *I’m his girl.*

Chapter 4

Age 17

“**Y**ou’re not fucking wearing that.” Mattias sends the door shuttering into the frame with one quick but powerful swat of his open hand.

“This is all I could borrow from Michelle that fit me,” I scream back to him from my spot next to the front door of our apartment. He pads down the hall; his face twisted angrily.

He tugs at the hem of the dress, the backs of his fingers grazing my thigh. “It’s too fucking revealing.” He lets go and makes a face like he wants to spit at my feet. Like he’s disgusted.

I step towards him as he tries to step back, getting in his face. “You’re the one who wanted me to go to this thing, Mattias. Remember? I didn’t wanna go. But you said I need to try and be seventeen.”

His chin lifts, his eyes remaining on mine. I pull at the fabric, willing it to give, to cover more of my cleavage or magically lengthen to hide more of my leg. But it’s not a magic fucking dress, is it? It’s the only one that fit. And whether he believes it or not, it is the most modest, too.

Since the night on the Ferris wheel, things have been... *interesting*.

Immediately, we became so much more aware of one another. I really didn’t think I could be more aware of Mattias because, as Michelle liked to put it, *my ass was obsessed with him*. But knowing that he wanted me, too? Knowing that he

had to show restraint around me? That made it harder because it gave me confidence.

And apparently, that was the only thing I'd been missing.

A year later, and we're both hot-tempered, short-fused, sexually charged, erotically motivated and very fucking tired. Tired of holding back.

Every night we lie together, our lips barely touching. He strokes my hair, and I finger the edges of his gauges, twisting my fingers over the barbell at the bridge of his nose, tracing his collarbone and the curves of his triceps.

He tells me that the day I wanted to run away was the day he was going to go, too. He'd just heard about his parents, and when he saw me, he felt the biggest urge to stay.

"Fate kept me here long enough to meet you," he'd say. "And if fate brought us together, we're meant to stay together."

He stroked my arm that night in bed after Michelle and Angus had returned to their apartment and us to ours. He didn't touch me in a sexual way, but still, his touch did something to weave our fabrics together more tightly, making the two of us impenetrable.

But the year between sixteen and seventeen had been a big one for me, as a woman. My body continued to fill out and blossom, and when I started age sixteen as a thin, somewhat adolescent-looking girl, I was ending seventeen with soft but full curves and even thicker, longer hair. And even though I was known as the poor girl living in the projects, still, boys chased me. Because high school boys care about status, but what they care about more than anything else is *getting laid*.

They never came through my neighborhood because parking a BMW or Mercedes S-Class outside a building like mine just wasn't smart. But they texted. They Snapped me. They slid into my DMs. And when I regularly started working the booth at the club, they lingered in the parking lot when I was off. Always just wanting to buy me a meal, take a walk and "talk," *just hang out*.

I knew what they wanted.

Because even though Mattias and I had to wait, everyone around me was giving and getting.

Sex.

It seems to be the one thing that the world collectively agrees is on.

We all want it, we all want to touch and be felt, we want to share an orgasm with someone who turns us on.

I knew what those high school boys wanted from me. I also knew that I'd wait forever to give it to Mattias, a real man, before I'd give it to a high school boy with no intentions of respecting or loving me.

He shoves his hands through his shiny black hair.

He used to wear it in a coif, styled to the shove of his rough hands. It worked on him, the sides shaved in a perfect fade to accentuate the hair on top of his head. At some point, he'd changed his style.

Now, his fade led to a full undercut, the top of his head full of thick, rich black hair. Shaved down the side to create a small, faux part, he now looked like some sexy cocktail of bad boy and hipster, and god did it work.

If he was sexy before, this new evolution of him was some new breed of hot. The way Mattias watched me go from young girl to young woman, I liked watching him evolve from rough boy on the streets to *man*.

Pulling the ends of his hair, he pushes out a lungful of breath, his jaw tight. Lines of strain twitch and flex in the column of his neck. Even though we're arguing, I want to move the tip of my tongue up the striations of power that flex in his throat. I step closer to him and press my palms to his chest with a light intensity that causes his spine to soften.

"You wanted me to go to this," I reminded him, letting my fingers spread apart. Through his shirt, I can feel his warmth. He sets his hands on top of my shoulders, smoothing them down my arms.

“You know I’m only going with the girls,” I add in response to his deep belly grumble. His calloused palms drag down the soft skin of my arms, leaving a trail of gooseflesh in its wake. I stare at his mouth longingly hating but fully understanding the rule of not kissing at home.

When he finally lifts his gaze to mine, I see the resolve in his eyes. He’s not heated, angry, jealous Mattias anymore. Instead, he just looks tortured. And it twists my heart and throws a weight into my belly.

“I know,” he says, breaking the sad spell that has been cast on us. “I want you to have fun.”

My palms move from his chest up to the sides of his neck. I love feeling his rapid pulse at the base of his throat, under my thumb. He’s breathing fast, and so am I.

“I’m coming home right after the dance is over,” I say, smiling slightly. He matches the small smile, yet neither of us feels particularly happy.

Yeah, I’d rather be here in the apartment with him. In his arms, doors locked, lights off, his warm and powerful body pinning my slenderer frame to the blow-up mattress. I want to feel his sweat drip from his face down onto mine. I want to taste his fatigue, lick up his neck and have the flavor of him flood my tongue.

But it’s not time.

He nods silently and solemnly. “Have fun,” he says finally, then shakes his head, laughing a small, humorless laugh. “Fuck, Gen, I’m sorry. You’re right. I wanted you to go.” He moves his palms to the tops of my shoulders again and squeezes them in the most friendly, platonic way.

“Have fun. Seriously. Just...” he lets the thought trail off before he presses a chaste kiss to my cheek. “Just, come back to me, okay?”

I cock an eyebrow. Mattias has never worried about that because he knows just who and what I’m holding out for. Yet, he sounds insecure.

“Is there even another option?”

I like the way his eyes study mine before he smiles. It tells me he's not just listening to what I'm saying but really thinking about it, too. Not even teachers and school instructors give me that kind of attention.

"I guess not," he says finally, after smiling and slowly taking his hands off my body. I hate how cold my shoulders feel without his hands resting on them. In fact, when we aren't together, I hate how I feel.

His absence is heavy in my bones when I meet my girlfriends at the dance.

I didn't tell Mattias, but three different boys asked if I'd be their date. I could've said yes. Got myself a pretty nice free meal, too, I'm sure. That's what prom is about. Dressing up and showing off. But for me, it's about the experience. And in a poor girl's world, a perk like a nice dinner in a fancy dress doesn't come without a trade-off. *Putting out*. Not only would I not be putting out, but I wouldn't be putting myself in a position that required me to say no, either.

A group of girls seemed the safest, best way to tackle prom. The girls I'm meeting are my geography friends. Meaning, they wouldn't be my friends if we didn't live on the same street, but because we live on the street we do, we are limited to one another.

Casey, who is the only senior among the four of us, actually lives really close to Mattias and me, in the complex next door. She lives with her dad, who seems scarier than an actual prison inmate. Her attendance at school is spotty, and when she is there, she's tired, bruised, and hides inside a hooded sweatshirt.

Roxanne and Julisa are sisters, and though they're Hispanic, they're Irish twins, with just a few months shy of a year between them. They don't look alike, so I don't know if they're full or half- sisters, or if their bond is legal or blood, even. But it's not my place to question. They say they are sisters; then I take them as sisters, the same way I don't stand for anyone questioning Mattias as my family.

Wearing a silver dress, Julisa's long black hair is down into two distinct boxer braids. Her face is a palette of shades, and when I look at Roxanne, I see her makeup is done fancy, too.

"Your mom in town?" Casey asks them as they saunter up to the smoking spot at the backdoor of the gymnasium.

Julisa slides her old iPhone into her bra and fingers the length of her braids, which rest over her shoulders.

"Yeah," she says with a pop of her gum. "For the weekend."

"She came home just for our prom," Roxanne sing-songs, placing her hands over her heart, batting her long, faux lashes dramatically.

"Yeah," Julisa adds, popping her gum again, this time I think just to annoy me. "Mother of the year," she deadpans.

I wiggle my eyebrows and lift my crossed fingers into the air above my head. "Maybe mine will come home with a corsage and one of those little wind-up disposable cameras and ask to take pictures of me and my date," I say through fake tears of hope. The only part of this that isn't funny is the remnants of thirteen-year-old me that are still alive inside, the girl that *does* miss and wants her mom.

"Shit, girl," Roxanne smiles, pulling her long dark hair up into a ponytail. I can see her hair has been beach-waved, but Rox has never been one to care about looking fancy for formal events. I saw her picture from the Sadie Hawkins dance last year. She wore a ponytail and overalls. At least tonight, she's wearing a dress.

"You're more likely to get ten dates before your mama cares about taking your picture."

I nod, not hurt by her words. The three of us have a pretty similar situation. Their mother may come around more, but she's no more or less of a junky than my parents.

"Where's Grace?"

At the question, Grace's mom's SUV pulls up behind the gym, and within a moment, Grace pops out. She shuts the door

with an exaggerated slam and curses in Spanish as the vehicle zips away into the night.

“Let me guess,” Julisa starts. “Mommy dearest didn’t like your girls hangin’ out for the whole world to see.”

In unison, our eyes go to her chest, where her double-D tits are nearly kissing the underside of her chin. In a black v-neck dress with what I’m sure is a push-up bra, she puts her hands on her hips and does a little shimmy.

“The girls need air, and she knows there’s nothing she can do about it.”

Julisa pulls her vape from between her breasts and takes a hit, releasing a lungful of discarded smoke into the air above us.

“She could stop paying for all the slutty shit you wear,” Rox adds, and to that, I stifle a snort because, as far as I know, she’s right. Grace’s mom is sober and straight, and though they’re still considered poor, they’re just plain working-class poor, not drugs and bad choices like the rest of us.

Grace makes a poor attempt to tug up her dress, and her chest jiggles, threatening to spill over.

I push them down with the tips of my fingers, stuffing them inside the skin-tight dress like batting in a plush toy. She tugs the fabric and fluffs her hair, wiggling her hips as she smooths the dress down there, too.

“Yeah, well, fuck her,” she says, puckering and parting her lips to blot the color. “She’s just pissed because Richard dumped her, and I’m still young.”

“She’s young too,” I reply because, like most of our parents, Grace’s mom got pregnant pretty young.

“Not as young as me,” she says with snark, shaking her tits. Her stringy brown hair is down and growing tangled around the nape of her neck as her shimmy becomes a dance. The other girls whistle her on, and Julisa smacks her on the ass.

I look back to where her mother pulled away a minute ago and feel bad. Then again, who knows what it's really like at Grace's house. If I've learned anything in my life, it is that you cannot trust people's words.

You have to see through their actions. Their actions dictate their character.

Because my parents *said* they'd get better so they could parent me. But they didn't. Mattias never promised me anything with words. But with his actions, he gave me a roof over my head and put food in my belly. He taught me things with patience and kindness. He showed me love without making me realize the absence I'd had of it.

He set the bar high because now I knew I couldn't accept anything but actions. And most people like to talk.

Maybe Grace's mom is really the witch she makes her out to be, and maybe I'm seeing the wrong side of things. Again, somewhere, someone at some point trusted and cared for Ted Bundy. So... yeah.

"What did Mattias think of this dress?" Julisa asks, smoothing her hand down the small, hand-sewn sequins that adorn the entire dress. Surprisingly, this isn't a dress that Michelle wears while working at the club. It's one of her own going-out dresses. It's v-neck, with a deep plummet, and short, covering just a few fingers-worth below my ass. It's fitted and snug and shiny and sexy. I love it.

I smile broadly at her, and she slaps my arm. "You slut."

"I wish," I say, my smile fading. "Still waiting." The girls know we're together. I couldn't lie about the most important relationship in my life. Plus, Mattias is a panty-creamer. I love bragging that he's mine. Even though he's not *technically* mine yet.

Grace licks her lips and does a sinister eyebrow wiggle. "I'll fuck him while you're waiting to turn eighteen. You know," she narrows her eyes seductively, "to keep him warmed up for you."

I swallow hard, my heart beginning to race. I know she's joking, but the territorial female inside of me wants to rip her head off by the mousy shit she calls hair and kick it to the curb.

But obviously, she's joking.

I wrap my hand around her throat playfully. "You can," I say with a broad smile. "If this is the last thing you want to see."

Her eyes, as plain brown and mousy as her hair, move quickly between mine. I feel her heart beating in her throat against my grip. I smile down at her, a strand of my blonde hair falling loose from my simple updo and sweeping over my shoulder. I tuck it back, still smiling.

She swallows, and I feel it disappear below my thumb. "I'm kidding," she says, though it sounds more like a whisper.

"I know," I say, letting my hand drop away, "me too."

A moment passes, but she smiles, and I'm sure now her mom doesn't seem so bad. I didn't mean to scare her; I was kidding! But I wasn't kidding that if she came near my man, I'd kill her. I probably would.

How could I let another woman touch my man?

THE DANCE IS LAME LIKE I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE. I MAKE sure to take a few photos on my phone, though, to make it seem like I had fun. Mattias will ask, and since it was his idea, I want him to think he made a good choice. I want him to know that thinking of me is always a good thing.

The girls are going out, but I call Mattias to pick me up. He's between cars right now, but he's got a bike and two helmets. He answers on the first ring, and I tell him I'll wait a block down from the school to avoid the crowd of cars.

A few minutes later, his light is flickering against the asphalt, growing nearer. He lifts his helmet off, and his hair is left in a messy heap. I watch his hand smooth through it, and time seems to turn to molasses, his lips moving in slow motion

as he tells me I look beautiful. I stare at his mouth and his full pink lips. I keep thinking about what Grace said about keeping him warmed up.

I lick my lips, letting the tip of my tongue linger in the corner of my mouth.

“Thanks,” I reply to his compliment.

Suddenly, my heart is racing. “I kept imagining you in a suit,” I admitted to him as he passed me the spare helmet. I tugged my ponytail free, letting my long hair curtain around my shoulders. He reached out and I felt his fingertips against my scalp as he raked his fingers through my hair. He always did that for me when I took my hair out of a ponytail. It was this insanely casual but deeply intimate thing that I never understood the power of until this moment.

It is an act of comfort provided for those you love.

I shake my head, and he takes his hand back, giving me a partial smile in the moonlight. I secure the clip under my chin once the helmet is on, then he does the same for himself, all while watching me.

“Ready to go home?” he asks, his voice hot and sweet like tempered chocolate. God, how could I not want this man? Under that sequin dress, inside of that white lace thong, that part of me that was too young for Mattias, it tingling and clenched for him.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

He threw a leg over the side of the bike and gripped the handlebars, staring forward. Slowly, I slide onto the seat behind him. His spine snapped upright for a minute, when I slid my bare hands under his shirt to wrap them around his core. With my hands linked just above his waist, I felt the temperatures of our skin adjust and shift, meeting at sizzling.

When the bike finally stopped, I lifted my cheek from his back, where I’d had it pressed the entire ride home. I tried to listen to his heart, but the noises around us were too loud. So instead, I enjoyed the warmth of his skin, soaking in every last moment before we had to separate.

We walk slowly up the stairs, and both stop on our porch.

My hair is a mess; I can feel it is wild and frizzy around my shoulders and down my back. His is messy too. And his lips are pink and wind-chapped. The tip of his nose is a little pink, too. He stands tall in front of me, and for one of the first times I've ever seen, he lets his eyes lose control.

Slowly, he traces the length of my neck with his coffee-colored gaze. His tongue darts out over his bottom lip as his eyes move across my collarbone, down the split of my breasts. My cleavage is decent in this dress, made to look even bigger by the tighter fit. I hear, and I know I don't imagine it, a low rumble from somewhere inside of him as he takes in my breasts in that silver dress.

Then he rolls his teeth over his bottom lip and cradles his jaw while watching my narrow waist dip into my sculpted legs, made toned by hard work. He enjoys my body, this time, I know for sure he does.

He drops a hand to his pocket, patting it once. The fabric tightens, his shirt tightens under his palm, too. He repeats it on the other side with his other hand, casually patting his pocket and smoothing his shirt.

But after doing it on both sides, the fabric of his groin is taut, and I can see a very large and distinct bulge.

My pussy clenches, and my breath falls out fast, making my chest go hollow. My eyes are slow to move from his crotch but eventually, I meet his eyes.

"I'm going to take a shower, princess. Be asleep when I get out, okay?" He reaches up and cups my cheek in the quickest show of affection. "Goodnight."

As soon as I heard the bathroom door lock, I made myself come to the image of his bulge. I didn't even think about us messing around. I just laid there, hand inside my panties, eyes squeezed shut, thinking of that massive curve in his jeans.

"Seven more months," I panted as I came.

That's all we had left before I turned eighteen and graduated high school, too.

Chapter 5

Age 18

Imagine there's a delicious cookie sitting right in front of you. It's perfect. It's your favorite cookie. Baked to a golden brown, hard on the outside but still so fucking appealing. On the inside, it's complex and sweet, soft and mouth-watering. Once you sink your teeth in, the sugar spreads across your lips, and your tongue is filled with all that flavor you've been craving... immediately, you're addicted and ready to binge the entire batch... and then some.

Now imagine you had to stare, sleep next to, confide in, hold hands with, laugh at, share fears with that cookie for YEARS without being able to really have it, taste it and experience it in the way it's best experienced.

Yep.

Mattias is my cookie.

I don't know what food I am to him. But I know he's been craving me as much as I've been craving my cookie. Because the last year has been... hard.

The last six months, I'd been having the girls over often. I didn't even want to have them over. Mattias sure as shit didn't want them in his house. But we knew.

We both silently acknowledged that it was harder and harder to avoid one another physically, and inviting the girls over seemed like the only truly safe barrier. Half the time when they were at our place, he left. I hated it when he left, but I'd begun getting turned on just watching his arm flex as he stirred his morning coffee.

When I showered, I'd open his shampoo and stand under the warm water, taking in his scent. It made me tingle and throb everywhere, just smelling his fucking shampoo.

I used his towel and often traded our pillows. Sometimes I even put his toothbrush in my mouth, desperate for tastes of him.

Some days, we didn't even kiss. Not because we didn't want to but because we both felt certain we couldn't stop.

This morning, just two days away from my eighteenth birthday and two weeks away from my high school graduation, I'm watching Mattias shave.

Each sleek pass of the razor over his chiseled jaw makes my insides clench tightly. Having to listen to Julisa, Grace, and Roxanne talk about their sexual conquests the last two years has been... *testing*.

Every backseat blowjob that Julisa gives makes me imagine Mattias and I tucked away in a backseat somewhere, his probably perfect and beautiful dick seated comfortably in my throat.

When Grace had sex on a pool table after a football game our sophomore year, I laughed at her recklessness. But for two years, I've imagined that very scenario; only I'm the one with my back to the felt, and Mattias is the one boxing me in, filling me up, fucking me good.

Roxanne had plenty of stories of her own, many involving never even getting undressed. She liked to take high school guys into the gym after school and get pushed up against the folded bleachers. With her skirt around her waist, she'd had sex with many guys that way.

I didn't want to get fucked in a gym by a random high school guy who spent his free time playing video games and jerking off. But I'd touched myself to the fantasy of Mattias smoothing his hands up my bare thighs, bunching my skirt around my waist, and sliding himself into me while pinning me to those bleachers.

I had the hormones of a teenage girl with the temptations of a kid in a fucking candy store.

In the morning, Mattias with a sleep-ridden face and mussed-up hair. Hot as sin.

Coming home from work, his muscles swollen and glistening from hard work, his shoulders colored from the day. Panty-tingles in human form, straight out of a scene from West Side Story or something. Had to read it sophomore year, and yeah, I had myself a Tony. White tank top all snug on his rippled core, dark hair a sweaty mess of perfection.

At night, when he folded the blankets back and let me into bed, my body caught fire at the sight of his bare chest. A light trail of hair walked down his tight belly and disappeared under the waistband of his sweats, making my mouth go dry.

Other places were less dry.

Sometimes, I molded myself to his backside, but he never spooned me. "I'll split you in two, Gen," he'd say, referring—without actual mention—to his extremely hard dick. I'd seen his erections here and there, but he worked to hide them from me.

One night after I'd had to drive Julisa's car while she and her flavor of the moment fooled around in the backseat, I snapped. I was tired of wanting, watching, and second-hand experiencing.

I actually had love in my grips, too, and my friends didn't. They were getting physical without having to work at that hard emotional level in a relationship. They weren't sharing lives and secrets and feelings. It didn't seem fair.

I slammed the front door and didn't bother with the row of deadbolts. I dropped my bag onto the Rubbermaid tub by the front door. The same tub we used to pull up through the window for water. We weren't that broke anymore, so the tub held all the mail that came for Mattias's parents.

He'd been leaning over the kitchen countertop, nursing a long-neck beer, reading something on his phone when our eyes met.

The slam was unlike me, as was the piercing fucking gaze I shot him down with.

“What’s a matter, princess?” he asked in his usual calm voice. That still timbre enraged me.

“Do you even fucking want me?” I shouted, smacking my hands against my chest because if anyone earned the chance to be a dramatic bitch once in a while, it was me.

He set the beer down and straightened his spine, folding his strong arms over his chest. “You know I fucking do, Gennedy.” I’d heard him say my name a million times before, but this time, it turned my blood to pure anger.

“Stop,” I shouted, toeing off my shoes. “What does it matter if I’m not eighteen? If you love me and you trust me, why does my age matter?”

The mention of my age softened his face and shoulders as he realized what fight he was dragged into. I got closer to him, close enough to smell the beer on his breath and the soap on his skin. He pinched his gaze, analyzing me.

“We’re almost there. Don’t lose sight of the goal.”

“The goal,” I repeated it stupidly because I didn’t even know what that meant.

He looked irritated in response and sighed. “For you to be legal.” Then he set down his beer, looking irritated. “And I do trust you,” he said, his voice growing soft again.

He took my hand with his and pressed it to his heart. The way his skin felt against mine reminded me of holding my hands out near an open flame to warm them. At first, just warm but then I was hot, and the heat moved down through my arm into my chest.

“But if anyone knew, I could get in trouble. If I get in trouble, you won’t have me. You get it?” He brought my hand to his mouth and pressed a slow, tender kiss to my curled knuckles. With his other hand, he gripped my waist and tugged me towards him. Then his arms wrapped around me, and I heard him suck in a breath near my neck, my hair whooshing into his face.

“I’d go to jail for you a thousand times over, princess. But then you’d be alone. And I don’t want that for either of us.”

I nodded into his chest, feeling so cared for by the way he spoke softly and held me gently. How he met my anger with kindness was something I’d never had or experienced anywhere else. When I was a girl, when my mother got angry or upset, my father met her anger with more passion and hate, escalating the situation. It always led to disaster.

“I wouldn’t tell anyone,” I whispered meekly because I still wanted him so badly right then that I had to try. “People see us kiss anyway,” I added because, well, that was true. He put space between us, and though it was less than a foot, it felt like a football field.

“Kissing is a risk, but it’s a calculated risk,” he explained, moving his fingers through my tangled hair. I loved when his fingers tucked delicately behind my ear, moving hair away from my face. Like he wanted to see me better. Being seen by someone like him made me feel like a queen.

“But we gotta do it right, okay? We’re almost there.” He pulled me back towards him, and I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

“Okay,” I said simply because emotion had grown thick in my voice, and I was scared to cry. He’d seen me cry, of course, but this time, it felt silly. Because, as usual, Mattias was right. We needed to do this the right way to be proud.

Then he moved his lips to my ear, speaking quietly as if we were in a room full of people and he was imparting some deep secret to me.

“It’s not easy for me, Gennedy, living in this box with you. Holding you, tasting your lips, touching you, and never really getting to claim you in the way that I need.”

Claim you in the way that I need. Holy shit. My spine rolled, and my heart pounded. Sex. He was talking about having sex with me. I’d imagined it and fantasized about it more than I’d like to admit but hearing him talk about it—which he rarely did—ignited a blaze between my legs.

“Soon,” he said, breaking the moment. “Soon, G.”

HE SMIRKED AS HE DROPPED THE RAZOR TO THE BASIN, swishing it around to free it of hair and shaving cream. “Like what you see?” he asked, his grin spreading.

Biting into my bottom lip, I nodded. “Two more days.”

He stopped what he was doing, gripping the edge of the sink. Our eyes met in the mirror. “Really?” he asked. “I didn’t know.”

His grin returned.

“And how would you like to spend your eighteenth birthday?” he asked, letting his tone dip low, like the smooth rumble of delicate bass. This is the tone I imagined he’d use with me when we had sex.

He tossed a towel over his shoulder and turned to me, letting the razor rest on the countertop. He was smooth-shaven with traces of shaving cream near his earlobes and a spot under his chin. I reached out and wiped it away, and as I did, his eyes fell closed. He leaned into my touch, and though it was small and brief, the gesture floored me.

He needed and wanted *me* the way I did *him*.

Though I’d known that fact for a while, it was always good to see the proof. Young love needs validating, and though I liked to think of myself as above it—I couldn’t avoid the fact that I wanted his validation as much as any other girl wanted to be validated by her boyfriend.

“Let’s take a ride, then come back here.”

He didn’t look surprised that I hadn’t wanted a fancy dinner or a night out. Since the night at the fair a few years back, when the sexual tension between us became smothering, we’d go for rides on his bike.

Nuzzling close to him with the wind whipping around us, it felt like only the two of us existed. I got to hold him, we were alone together, and the world was uncomplicated and beautiful. Those rides had become our date—and they were

better than any overpriced restaurant food or stupid movie. They were as perfect as those early days, swapping card tricks.

“Okay,” he said, after a moment where nothing but silent excitement and passion were exchanged between us.

I stepped up to his body and perched on my toes, finding his lips with mine. It was the first time I’d broken the rule of not kissing at the apartment. He didn’t push me away, but I wasn’t surprised.

I knew with how close we were, he’d let me cheat a little.

Surprising me, he wrapped his hand around my chin and gripped my face tightly. His tongue parted my lips and swept through my mouth aggressively as he groaned. My hands fell to his chest, and my hips rocked forward, my belly connecting with a part of his thick, hard cock.

He stepped back and instantly released me but this time, we were both smiling.

“Soon,” I said in a breathless whisper.

He just growled and returned to the sink, pulling the towel from his shoulder to wipe his chiseled jaw clean. I watched him, my body reminding me that I am a woman and *this* is my man.

He nodded once. “Soon.” He sent me off with a wink, and I floated down the hall and out the front door, off to meet the girls.

I hadn’t planned on it, but I knew they’d be hanging out at Grace’s place since her mom was at Richard’s most of the time. Yeah, Grace’s mom had gotten back together with Richard and mostly abandoned her daughter at their small, crappy apartment. Turns out, *you can be a shitty parent even when you aren’t addicted to drugs.*

The blocks seemed to fly by, and before I had time to complain about the heat or my feet sweating inside my shoes, I was pushing open the almond-colored apartment door.

“Hey bitch,” Grace said from her spot on the living room floor.

She was lying on her back with her legs up against the wall, crossed at the ankle. Hovering over her face, she flipped through a worn magazine. On the couch adjacent to her sat Roxanne, who had a chemistry book open in her lap. Casey, who'd graduated last year, was also there. She'd been staying with Grace since Grace's mom had been gone a handful of nights, or at least that's what she'd said. We all knew that she needed to be out of her place and away from her father as much as Grace needed her there.

"What's up," I said rhetorically, sinking into the couch next to Roxanne. "Where's Julisa?"

Rox slammed the chemistry book closed and slid it onto the table in front of us. "Working," she yawned, leaning her head onto my shoulder.

"You done studying?" I nudged the closed book with my toe.

"She wasn't studying. She was trying to power-memorize so she won't fail," Grace chimed in from her spot on the floor. Her hair was strewn about, a hair tie lying on the carpet next to her.

I cocked an eyebrow at Rox with a smile on my lips. "You mean, you didn't offer to suck Mr. Wolf's dick to pass instead?"

She smiled and smoothed her long dark hair down her chest, casually picking at the broken ends. "Oh, I did," she said, "but it turns out, sexual favors aren't how you graduate." She turned to me and pulled her lips to the side. "His rules, not mine."

"Ah," I said, tipping my head in acknowledgment. I can honestly say I believed her when she said she'd offered. My friends used their bodies to trade for success and things they wanted, and to me, it was no different than what Michelle did.

Julisa came through the front, slamming the door so hard behind her that the lone framed piece of art on the wall shook.

"I do not want to fucking work at Envy ever again."

I sat up straight. “You were working at the club today?” She’d worked in the club a few times, just the booth like me. But today was a school day. She never missed school for anything. School was where we saw each other, carved out some happiness in the dismal reality we all existed in. “I thought you were sick,” I added because I hadn’t actually realized she was missing today.

With just two weeks left until my eighteenth birthday, I’d had nothing but Mattias on my mind.

Rolling her neck out, her eyes closed shut, and she sighed. “Had to. Needed some extra cash.”

“Don’t we all,” Rox said, patting the last available spot on the couch next to her. Julisa sat down and emptied her purse on the table. From it came a compact, three tubes of lipstick, two foil squares, her Hello Kitty wallet, her keys, and a small can of mace.

“Do you see what I see?” she asked, nudging the contents on the table. I studied them, trying to figure out what was missing.

“Did you lose your phone?” I asked, still looking at the objects.

“He didn’t pay me,” she said. “All those tips were for me. They had me standing at the curb, selling VIP vouchers. He promised me that I’d get paid for that today, not in two weeks.”

“Fucking Mike the Dick,” Rox said. We all looked to Grace, who had rolled over and was now sitting cross-legged on the carpet, magazine cast aside.

“He really is,” she added.

Michael, better known as “Mike the Dick” to us, owned Envy. I’d seen him getting handsy with just about anyone, and I knew he was a creep, so the fact that he didn’t pay her out didn’t surprise me.

The worst part was that we didn’t have a father to march down there and demand equality. We didn’t have mothers or school guidance counselors, older siblings, or boyfriends.

When we got screwed, we just laid there and took it, all of us and all of the people in our income bracket.

I nodded to my bag on the floor. “I have thirty bucks; you can have it.”

Her thin lips turned up into a cheshire-like smile. “Wanna know why I need it?”

Grace snorted from her spot on the floor. “Girl, you don’t know the difference between a need and a bad decision.”

I looked back to Julisa. She wiggled her eyebrows in a way that told me what she needed was going to be... ridiculous.

“I’m getting my nipples pierced,” she announced, shaking her chest at me. Through her tank top, her braless breasts swung back and forth.

“Don’t give me a black eye; my birthday is coming up.”

She stopped, smoothing her hands down her large chest seductively. “These are gonna make me money, ladies, and then who will be laughing!”

“Us when you go through metal detectors,” her sister said to her, and we all laughed.

“Why do you want to get them pierced?” I asked. She’d never mentioned that before.

Tipping her head to the side with impatience, she rolled her eyes. “So when I start dancing, I make more money.”

“You’re gonna dance, like Michelle?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, Sister Gennedy, don’t act so surprised.”

Yeah, they called me a nun since I was still a virgin. Though they made fun of me like crazy, I suspected they were all a little jealous of what Mattias and I had together.

I twisted a lock of my hair around my finger and batted my eyes playfully, feigning innocence.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, bumping her shoulder into mine. “Wanna come with me?”

“When are you going?” I asked.

She shrugged and looked around the room as if looking for a reason not to go. “Now?”

Knowing Mattias wouldn’t be gone for at least another hour—he had a meeting with his cousin tonight about some work contracts regarding their lawn care business—I nodded. “Sure.”

Grace and Casey stayed behind, but Rox joined Julisa and me at the piercing shop. As it goes in most neighborhoods like ours, there was one just a few blocks away. It was a piercing, tattoo, and smoke shop; all rolled into one dive location. Located next door for all your VHS needs was a dirty movie store. And I’m serious about the VHS tapes.

When we walked inside the shop, a wave of pot smoke washed over us, leaving us heady and dazed.

“Can you get second-hand high?” Rox whispered as Julisa forged ahead to the desk. A skinny white guy sat behind it, with large gauges in his earlobes. They were far larger than what Mattias wore, and I was surprised to find myself disliking them. His skin was pale and from his septum hung a thick, pewter ring. With bloodshot eyes, he looked us all over.

“What’s up, girls?”

“I wanna get my nipples pierced, that’s what,” Julisa said with a flirt in her tone as she leaned on her elbows, holding her chin in her palms. I couldn’t see her face, but I’m sure she was giving her very best “natural” duck face. Impossible, I know.

His chin lifted slightly as if he were trying to appear hard and masculine. I had to hold back my snort because this guy was nearly half the weight of my man if I had to guess. Still, white guys that looked like Eminem and Travis Barker had a love-child were totally Julisa’s thing.

They shared some hushed words, and then he nodded back to where Rox and I stood near the door of the shop, our arms linked.

Julisa looked over her shoulder at me. “Buy two, get one. Wanna get one of yours done?” She danced her eyebrows into

her hairline, and instinctively, I tore my arm from Rox and cupped my palms over my nipples.

“No fucking way,” I said, nearly cringing at the idea of a thick, sharp piece of metal piercing through my body. “No, no,” I shook my head and continued to cup my breasts like if I let them go, then they’d somehow get pierced.

The Septum Eminem Travis Barker guy laughed.

“A minute?” Julisa smiled at him, and his cheeks got some color when she did. She walked backwards to us; I’m sure giving him her most over-the-top teenage whore eyes as she did. I rolled mine before she turned around.

“Could be a good birthday gift, you know,” she said.

I snorted. “I’m not getting a birthday gift for myself.”

Lowering her voice, she said, “for Mattias on your birthday, dumbass.”

Rox sidestepped to align with her sister. Both of them staring at me, she said, “oh yeah, that’s hot. Like, the first time he sees you naked, boom, surprise, my nipple is pierced.”

I thought about that.

Mattias himself had plenty of piercings.

Would he want his girl pierced?

All I knew was that we’d both wanted each other for so long, I didn’t want to do anything right before to lessen the experience. I didn’t want to be sore or bleeding if that was a thing that happened with piercing.

I scrunch my nose. “No,” I finally decided. “But if I change my mind,” I called over their shoulders to the guy behind the desk, “I’ll come here for sure.”

He raised his thumbs up to me, and I smiled.

Then, after plopping down sixty dollars in cash and signing a release form, Julisa disappeared behind a frayed black curtain. Ten minutes and two yelps later, she came out smiling, her mascara running under her eyes.

“Did it hurt?” Rox asked.

“Like a bitch,” Julisa said, smiling broadly. “But they’re hot as hell.”

She tugged her top down, right there in the shop, and showed her swollen, pink pierced nipples to her sister and me. I was surprised by how hot it looked.

“*Damn*, you weren’t lying.”

She covered herself again. “Now imagine a guy’s tongue all over them,” she said, biting into her bottom lip.

“You’re such a skank,” I laughed.

But as we walked back to Grace’s apartment, I did picture it.

I pictured Mattias’s tongue tracing a silver barbell along my nipple. I liked the vision.

THOSE LAST TWO DAYS CREPT BY. BUT FINALLY, WE WERE AT the finish line. The start line, too.

We stared at one another, sitting cross-legged on his air mattress. Next to us sat his unlocked phone, the time on display –11:51 pm. In nine minutes, it would be my eighteenth birthday.

In nine minutes, I’d legally be an adult, and there would be nothing keeping Mattias and me apart anymore. We could finally express our love physically, the way that Mattias had expressed to me... since the first day we met, really.

“Wanna learn another trick?” he asked, eyes still focused on that phone screen. We’d been playing cards, and he’d been trying to teach me new tricks all evening. But as time grew nearer to midnight, we grew much more restless and couldn’t play anymore. Instead, we just sat and talked.

“I love you,” I said quietly as his palms moved in slow circles on my bare knees. His fingertips kneaded my skin gently as he did. I was already so fucking wet.

“I love you, too,” he replied.

“I know, but like, I *really* love you. Not like the way we’ve been saying for years. I *love you, love you.*”

He smiled. “I *love you, love you*, too, but you already knew that.” He tilted his head to the side, his eyes prodding me. “Are you nervous?”

My heart beat loudly in response to the question. I nodded.

“Why?”

I chewed at the inside of my mouth for a second, trying to decide why I was nervous. Because while I’d really just become super nervous in this last hour, for the last few years, I was never nervous. Only excited.

“I know it’s going to hurt, and I don’t want to disappoint you.” Cringeworthy honesty. I couldn’t meet his eyes for a minute, afraid of what I might see.

But he laughed. Like, the type of laugh that makes your eyes wet. When he finally calmed, he patted his thighs for me to sit in his lap. A dangerous game we could play, now that we had just a few minutes left in this torturous wait.

Not waiting, he grabbed my hips and pulled me into his lap, wrapping my legs around him. Though I was sitting on him, his face still hovered well above mine. I could feel his breath on my nose. His dark eyes stared at my mouth for a moment before he caught my gaze.

Smoothing his hands up my spine, I could feel every callus and bump on his palms against my back. It had the same effect as a glass of champagne, filling my veins with a warm, happy high.

“You saved yourself for me, Gennedy. That is something no one does anymore, did you know that?”

I nodded because everyone I knew lost their virginity years ago.

He moved a hand to my throat, keeping the other one at the small of my back. Massaging my collarbone, his fingers drifted down my sternum, resting in the valley between my breasts.

I was dressed comfortably, in just a tank top and gray yoga pants. No point in dressing up if we were just going to be naked. Plus, as much as Mattias liked me fancy, I knew he preferred me this way. No makeup, comfortable, happy.

His hand resting so close to my breasts made my neck get hot. All the need that had been coiling for him *for years* was starting to unspool. I rested my hands on his knees behind me.

Looking down at his hand, I watched as it moved slowly to my right breast. I looked up into his eyes, which were already pinned on mine. His thumb smoothed across my nipple, and it immediately rose up to his touch.

“Does that feel good?” he asked, and I nodded.

He massaged it a bit more before lifting my tank top up, just over that breast, exposing it completely. I wasn't wearing a bra.

My heart began to race, watching him lick his lips while examining me. First, he pinched my nipple then cupped my entire breast. After giving me a sexy, lazy smile, he sealed his lips around my nipple and sucked it in his mouth, making me moan.

“One day, Gennedy,” he said in between passes of his tongue over my nipple. His kissing and sucking were driving me wild. “I'm gonna put a baby in you, and my baby will feed off this.”

The way he punctuated *'feed'* made me hot for things I'd never imagined. He grabbed my breast a bit harder than I expected and kept his eyes on mine as he sucked my nipple into his mouth.

It was so fucking hot. What he said, the way he was handling me, the promises of forever without the corny words. I shifted in his lap, edging closer, dying for friction against my aching pussy.

His lips swam across my chest and up the column of my neck, which was completely exposed to him as I tipped my head back on an exhale. He tugged down my shirt, and the act

of covering my breast made me whimper. After waiting for two years, these last few minutes were so painful.

“After all that, you cheated,” I whispered against his ear as he slowly tucked his fingers into my hair. He held my head with power, bringing our lips together in a scorching kiss that left my thighs burning.

He smiled, knowing I was referring to the fact that we had a minute left before midnight, and he’d already tasted my bare skin. Shaking his head, he left a small kiss on the tip of my nose. “It’s five minutes behind.”

I swallowed hard. He heard and laughed again. One hand left my face to reach for the phone, and in my peripheral vision, he held it up. 12:01 which meant, it was really 12:06. He hadn’t cheated after all, and for some reason, that made my eyes go warm with emotion.

The phone slipped from his hand, and his hold returned to my face. He’d been tender with me many times in our lives together. Losing your parents—for both of us in different ways—wasn’t something kids were supposed to go through. We had our ups and downs dealing with it. But he’d always been there for me, my soft place to fall and show my pained ugliness.

But this tenderness was different. The way he cradled my face like I was made of glass or his prized possession or... the love of his life. It was how a man treats his lover.

“It meant something to me beyond the law.” He spoke softly, holding us together at the forehead. His thumbs stroked behind my ears, and he pressed a quick but body-numbingly powerful kiss to my lips. “I had to do it right because... well...” He trailed off for a moment, keeping his eyes on mine. His grip tightened, his thumbs slowed, and he kissed me again. “Because you’re not just my girl. You’re my woman, and one day you’ll be my wife. You’re my everything. Forever.”

I let out a choked sob, still trying not to go full ugly-cry, but it was getting hard. In the way that he always knew just

what to do, Mattias began kissing my cheeks and lapping up my tears.

“Shh,” he coaxed, pressing his lips everywhere as he smoothed his rough palms up my arms. “What you said about age before, about how it didn’t mean anything because we know what we mean to each other.” He kissed me again, moving his tongue between my lips just slightly. “I agree with that. I know that you know you’re mine, and I’m yours. It doesn’t matter to me that you’re only eighteen. You *know* it’s real with us.”

I nodded, not bothering to wipe away the tears that continued to spill over. “It’s the only thing that’s real to me. Me and you,” I said, my bottom lip quivering.

“I love you,” he said, and though he’d said it many times before, now it sounded different. Or maybe the way I heard things had changed. Now that we were about to make love and start our forever, everything was the same as it was moments ago and yet...incredibly different.

Erotic.

Every breath felt tempting and needful, like now that we could have the physical, we both knew we’d be ravenous and insane. The beginning of the best part of our lives... the time where we’re finally together.

“I’m clean. I’ve abstained since you were fifteen, Gen.” He put a curled knuckle under my chin and took my mouth with his. The way he kissed me felt like a storm of emotions tearing through both of us: relief, happiness, excitement, desire.

Fucking *finally*.

He pulled away and rolled his teeth over his bottom lip. Reaching behind him, he dug into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a folded envelope. “But this is a blood test from two weeks ago to prove it.”

He released me to open the paperwork. Holding it out for me to read, I kept my eyes on his.

“I trust you.” I didn’t need a lab to tell me I could trust the man I love.

He nodded slowly. Scrubbing one hand across his chin, the other still holding the paper, he looked me in the eyes. “I need you to read it.”

Without hesitation, my eyes flicked to the paper and dragged over the black lines of information. I saw the tests, listed by name, some easily recognizable like HIV, others names I’d never seen. Married to each test was the word **NEGATIVE** in tall, proud letters. I took the paper from him and let it fall to the bed, where it sailed slowly through the air before it covered his phone.

“I trust you,” I repeated. I just wanted his hands on me again. When he reached out, this time he rested them on my hips, nudging the waist of my yoga pants down as he did. It was his skin on mine, and still, I needed more.

“Still, Gen, I wanted you to know. Just the truth between us. That’s how we’re gonna work, forever, okay? Truth. Even when it’s ugly.”

I nodded.

He seemed to study me for a moment, memorizing my eyes or the moment, I’m not sure. I smiled at him and did the same, saving away this moment for recall later.

Then, within a split second, the soft caress of his gaze drained away. In its place was a piercing darkness, a passion so potent that my body shivered hotly.

“Are you ready?” he rasped. Shit, that rough whisper made me melt a little.

I nodded.

“Arms up,” he said with a tone that was both commanding and calm. I lifted my arms, he took my shirt by the hem and lifted it over my head and off my arms.

After, he reached around and collected my hair from my back. Carefully, he draped it over my shoulders then finger-combed it slightly. Cautiously, he tucked some behind my ear

on one side. Our eyes met, and I realized he hadn't looked at my naked chest yet.

His mouth fell open a bit, but still, he didn't speak. Dragging his fingers through my hair until he reached the ends, he pushed it aside, exposing my breasts again. Thumb and forefingers around my nipples, he began tweaking them gently.

My spine lengthened in reaction to the pinches, and he made a noise, a rough rumble from the back of his throat. I felt it low in my belly.

"Julisa got her nipples pierced," I said, wincing at the second pinches he delivered. They were gentle, but my nipples were sensitive. I was learning. "She wanted me to do mine, too."

Leaning down, he sealed his lips over one and sucked it into his mouth. His tongue worked slow circles around my areola before his teeth sank softly into my fleshy nub.

"*Ohh*," I moaned softly as my head fell back heavily.

He grumbled his tortured appreciation against my breast as he continued to suckle and nibble, driving me insane. My hands fell to his neck, where I gripped him around the collarbone. I didn't know what to do with my hands while simultaneously wanting to touch him everywhere all at once.

He kissed his way to the valley between my breasts then lifted his face to look at me. His lips were swollen, his nose pink. He looked more handsome than he ever had.

"And you said no."

I shrugged, massaging him at the base of his neck. I loved the slight contrast in color of our skin—his an ombre of beautiful golden tans and mine a swirl of ivory, peppered with faint freckles.

"I didn't wanna be like, sore or like, sensitive. You know, for *this*."

He scooted me off his lap gently. Then he reached back and yanked his shirt off over his head in that sexy, casual way

that hot guys always do.

Grabbing my face, his grip tightened, and lines appeared on his forehead, eyebrows pulled together in a frown. “You don’t show your body to strangers.”

“I know,” I said because I wouldn’t ever do that.

He nodded, and his grip softened before his hand fell away.

“I’m gonna be tame with you tonight, princess, but after that,” he paused to smile at me, his thumbs stroked over my cheekbones. “No matter how we’re fuckin, it’s gonna be rough and raw. And you’ll like it. You’ll crave it just the way I give it, and you won’t be able to come without it, or me.” His words made my head swim.

He got off the mattress onto his feet, so I did the same.

Everything has moved so slowly until this moment, and now things are happening so fast. He started to strip, and as much as I wanted to watch him, I wanted to be ready for him, too. A moment after we stood, both of us were completely naked.

Closing the small but heated distance between us, he took my hand and placed my palm on his shoulder. With his fingers wrapped tightly around my wrist, he guided me across his clavicle, then helped it descend his chest.

He kept moving my hand. One pec, then the other, and now he had it over his belly, the tips of my fingers dragging through a stretch of dark hair that spilled down his torso, melting over his groin.

“Follow the yellow brick road,” he rasped as I spread my fingers through the bristly darkness, down to his groin. He dragged in a breath and drew his head back a little as if bracing himself for my touch.

I licked my lips, my pulse moving so quickly that I wanted to sit back down.

But not yet.

“Touch me, Gennedy.” It was somehow both a command and a plea, and I was happy to oblige. Still, though, my hand moved more slowly than I wanted.

“You teasin’ me, princess?” he asked, noticing my deliberate pace.

I didn’t respond. Instead, I finally looked down at my fingers, which now moved through the small thatch of dark hair on his groin.

And there *he* was.

Thick veins of strain and arousal pulsing up his meaty shaft, standing tall between us. Wrapping my hand around his cock, I shuddered at how warm and hard he was in my palm. He groaned in response, and a bead of arousal arose at the slit.

“He likes you.”

I smoothed my thumb over the swollen, pink crown of his cock, then slipped it in my mouth. Salty but otherwise flavorless, I liked the taste. I liked the idea of *consuming* him.

“Fuck, Gen,” he groaned, his hands beginning to twitch at his sides. “Let me touch you now. Before I pop off everywhere.”

I swallowed at the choice of words. I’d known this moment was coming. I’d thought about it time and time again. But now... I was really going to have sex with him. Mattias. The man who has taken care of me but also loved me completely. I grew woozy for a moment as it all settled in. We were already naked together! Holy crap.

“Yes,” I breathed out, “touch me, Mattias. Put your hands on me. Now.”

He chuckled at that, but the laughter didn’t make it to his eyes. I think he was a little nervous, too.

He gripped his erection, pumping it casually a few times as he stepped back to take me in.

“Fuck,” I uttered, completely paralyzed by seeing him touch himself. Arousal thickened between my thighs. His eyes

snapped up to mine, then down to where he was stroking himself, then back to me.

“Do you like this?” he asked, his fist working slowly toward the root of his cock. I nodded because right then, my mouth was dry, and I couldn’t speak.

“Does it make your pussy wet?” he asked, stepping closer to me again. I nodded, but before I knew it, he had his free hand between my legs.

He squeezed the fleshy inner part of my thigh, and my spine began to curl, the building pressure in my belly growing more and more intense.

“You ready, princess?” His tongue peeked out and swept over his bottom lip as he watched his hand disappear between my slick folds. My head fell back, electricity zipping through me everywhere. Even my breasts tingled and throbbed.

Two thick fingers spread me open then he was making circles around my clit, causing me to rise to my toes. My body wanted to get closer to the thing that was making me feel good.

Him.

It was always him making me feel good.

He laid me on my back but stood at the foot of the mattress, stroking himself. I didn’t need to see other dicks to know that Mattias was big, but I wasn’t afraid.

I wanted to take him, however bad it hurt. Over and over again. I wanted it, the pain, the pleasure, all of it. And I’d earned it.

When he let himself go, his cock continued to stand tall against his belly, which was knotted with muscle under smooth, russet-colored skin. He reached down and took my leg by the foot and lifted it level to his face. His eyes stayed tamped on mine as he kissed my big toe.

His lips moved down the line, kissing the top of each toe, making me realize that everything was erotic when Mattias did

it. Gripping my ankle, I gasped when the pad of his tongue made contact with the top of my foot.

Unhurried, he licked his way up my shin, pausing to press a wet, hot kiss to my kneecap. Then he lowered himself over me as he licked and kissed my inner thigh, his other hand now pressing down on me, just above my sex.

The pressure he was putting on my mound intensified my already aching pussy, and the throb there was growing close to unbearable.

Without warning, he sealed his lips over my clit and sucked my swollen nub in his mouth, groaning loudly as he did.

“Ohgodohgodohgod,” I panted, reaching down between my legs to feel Mattias. His hair, the sides of his head, the tops of his shoulders. My fingers were frantic, trying to touch as much of him as I could while he sucked and licked me.

I felt my knees lift to heaven and my feet plant firm against the mattress. Looping his arms under my knees, he jerked me down, causing my pussy to collide with his face. His nose nudged my clit as his tongue explored my folds.

“How do you make yourself come?” he asked.

I lifted my head from the pillow, peering down over my naked body, which at some point had become glazed in a thin layer of sweat. Seeing my lower half with Mattias’s face pressed against my cunt—fuck me, it was hot.

Dropping my head back down, I forced my hands to grip the sheets instead of him because I was on sensory overload. Too many good vibes at once.

“What?” I panted, shimmying my hungry hips to find his mouth again. He slapped my wet pussy, jolting my head up from the pillow again.

“Answer me, Gen. How do you like to come?”

I swallowed as he let the tip of just one finger trail down the split of me. Up and down, he let that one finger barely connect with my slick lips, driving me fucking insane.

“I use my, I use my fingers,” I panted, squeezing my eyes shut, my hips lifting off the mattress. I was a slut for him, and it didn’t surprise me. The fuck-gates were open. I needed it all, and I needed it now.

That response earned me one slow lick up my seam and a quick kiss to my clit. My grip tightened on the sheets out of frustration.

“And do those beautiful fingers stay here,” he asked before pressing the pad of his tongue to my clit. In short, quick circles, he teased me, making me moan and writhe underneath him. As soon as I lifted my hips, he removed his mouth, stealing away the pleasure.

I made a noise of frustration, which he easily ignored. “Or do they find their way in here?”

He used the tip of his fingers to circle my entrance. I could feel the excess arousal dripping down as he did.

I shook my head and panted my response. “*Nonono.*”

“No, what?”

“Nothing goes in there. I mean, I haven’t.. Nothing. Just my clit.”

“Hmmm.” His groan was one of satisfied approval as if the fact that I’d never experimented with myself pleased him. “Nothing, and no one goes in here but me now, right?” He squeezed my swollen lips, and my legs dropped to the mattress in a melted heap.

“Right,” I agreed. It was true, and he didn’t need to ask, but I liked saying it aloud. I like hearing that I belonged to him and he belonged to me.

“Good girl,” he praised, then he climbed over me, and when his lips crashed down on mine, I opened my eyes.

In the push-up position above me, he broke the kiss and stared down into my eyes. I loved how he looked. Determined, aroused, sexy. And more than that, he looked like he belonged to me. He looked like he was mine. Because the intensity of

his eyes told me nothing could take him from me or this moment.

With his knees, he nudged my legs apart further, then lowered himself until our lips met. His kiss was feral, biting into my bottom lip before he gagged me with his tongue. I choked at first but met his intensity, my tongue colliding with his.

“Yes, Gennedy,” he coaxed me on, loving the reckless abandon surfacing inside me. “Show me you want me.”

Did he really not know?

Wrapping my legs around his lean waist, I reached between our sticky bodies and grabbed his cock. He hissed out in reaction, and I felt him leak onto my belly. I lifted my head to peer between us, but the closeness of our bodies made it impossibly dark.

“I didn’t come,” he said, reading my mind. “You’ll fucking know it when I do.”

Then, using the position I put him in, he began sinking himself inside of me. I winced as the broad head of his cock entered me. Everything burned and ached, but still, I wanted more. I wanted the pain because it was from him.

“More,” I pleaded, my eyes squeezed shut in a moment of agony.

“You’ll get more when you’re ready for more,” he said, his mouth right next to my ear. My eyes opened directly into his. He pressed his forehead into mine and braced his weight on one arm to free the other.

He cupped my breast, kneading and massaging it before he sucked my nipple into his mouth and bit hard. At the same time, he sank all the way inside of me.

I cried out, but he captured it with an open-mouthed kiss, wet and hungry.

Each time a surge of pain rippled through me, my body was met with an equally powerful rush of pleasure. It felt like, despite all the compulsory self-gratification I’d been indulging

in for fucking years, the most important orgasm of my life was on the brink of explosion. And it had been brewing, building, gathering emotional clout and physical control for years.

“It’s, *it’s*...” I realized how hard it was to speak. My breathing was both rapid and shallow, my thoughts scattered across a million wavelengths, unable to send a proper string of coherent thoughts to my mouth.

“Tell me,” Mattias purred down into my ear before slowly dragging his tongue up the side of my cheek. The primal, feral man came out of him when he fucked; I could see that now. Just another side of him that I fucking loved.

“It... it feels good.” I managed the *one* sentence before breaking out into a series of moans as he withdrew then pummeled himself into me. He was big, and I burned as I stretched to accommodate him.

The best of burns.

“*Mmm.*” The noise he made against me as he sucked at the column of my throat was so masculine. An hourglass inside me flipped in reaction, and my body was on the official countdown to combustion.

With each thrust of his hips between my spread legs, the base of his cock ground against my clit, making my lower half burn. When he slowed his sawing, taking more time with each filling stroke, that’s when I cupped his face in my hands.

“*Thank you,*” I managed to speak and not moan. I wanted him to know how much I loved him for waiting, how much I was enjoying what he was doing to me, giving to me. “You’re making me feel so good,” I whispered, my voice beginning to soften, despite my need.

“You’re welcome,” he kissed my lips, chaste and quick, then rose to his knees over me. We stayed connected as he did and the new angle—the back of my legs pressed up against his broad chest—allowed me to see us better.

Both of our eyes fell to where we were joined. He pulled out a little, giving me a glimpse of the sticky base of his cock,

glistening with our arousal. I swallowed hard as I looked up at him.

He didn't smile, and neither did I.

Our eyes idled on one another in an emotionally tense moment. I reached out and stroked my hand up his solid thigh. At that, my touch jolted us from the moment.

Swiping his thumb over his tongue he reached down and began teasing my clit. Up on his knees just slightly, he held one of my legs as he sawed in and out of me, rubbing me the entire time.

I wanted to keep my eyes open. I wanted to watch it all, etch it into my brain to replay for all of eternity.

But what he was doing—this sex we were having—I couldn't keep my eyes open.

I'd expected sex to hurt, and it had. What I hadn't expected was to *orgasm*. What I hadn't expected was to enjoy it. *This* much.

Knowing I was nearing the point of no return, Mattias dropped his voice to a throaty whisper.

“Your pretty little cunt is going to come all over my dick soon, Gen. I can feel you, wet and starving.”

My eyes fluttered open long enough to blink him into view. Sweat glistened across his chest and forehead, his arms swollen from strain, his gaze both aggressive and sensitive, somehow.

“She's formed to me now, princess. She knows who commands her, who to get wet for, who to come for, doesn't she?”

He lifted his thumb long enough to slap my clit with his hand. I felt the shock of his hit vibrate through my groin, into my sex, making me clench down on his length even harder. He chuckled darkly and replaced the pad of his thumb over my clit.

“See, she likes anything I do.” He hollowed me almost completely, leaving just the thick head of his cock breaching

my entrance. His thumb started working fast, tight circles, and my legs wanted to melt down to the bed. Somehow, they stayed up.

My lower half pulled tight as I felt myself beginning to pulse, my pussy hungry for all of him. Starved was right, really.

“You want more?” His hand left its tight grip on my ankle as he stroked the stalk of his length not inside me. I nodded, my eyes fluttering closed again.

Then it all went dark as he shoved into me, the fullness and pressure breaking the last bit of my willpower. I’d wanted to come together. That’s what people do when they have sex in movies.

But I couldn’t. It was so overwhelming.

Being with Mattias was like all the puzzle pieces of my life being flipped, right side up, in perfect order.

Sex with Mattias felt like all of the pieces were locked into place, slid together, completing the landscape of my life.

I didn’t warn him because I couldn’t speak.

My hands gripped the sheets tightly as I began to come.

It was dark. It was hot everywhere. My thighs quivered as my sex clamped down on his cock, drinking him in with each desperate wave of orgasm.

“Yes,” I panted, “*thank you, thank you, thank you...*” my words trailed off. When the explosion of light and color had finally ended, and my breath began normalizing, I opened my eyes.

Above me, Mattias rolled his teeth over his bottom lip, one hand gripping my thigh so hard that I’d probably have a bruise tomorrow.

A mark from this was something *I wanted*. A visible memory.

His hips jerked back quickly, and his other hand fell to his length. His cock was flushed, kaleidoscopic shades of deep red

and light pinks. With his large hand curled around himself, he pumped once and groaned. He pumped again, and his eyes flicked to mine in warning. One more quick, tight stroke of himself, and he was groaning and erupting.

His milky release seemed unending. Each time his stroke went from root to tip, another stream of release ribboned out of him, painting me. After he was finished, he leaned back on his haunches, dick still in one hand, the other hand now holding my calf.

Eyes on his work, he pressed a kiss to my inner calf and then licked me there, too. I didn't know he loved to lick, but god, now that I knew he did, I'm pretty sure my purpose in life is to feel that tongue on me everywhere.

It was pretty quiet in our apartment, the air mattress squeaking against the worn floor the only white noise. When I thought he'd get up to grab a towel, he instead lowered my legs to the bed and took his place next to me, on his side.

Positioning my head to rest on his arm, which he snaked underneath me, he leaned over me and sucked my nipple into his mouth. I could feel his come—that was all over my belly and tits—beginning to dry, my skin growing taut underneath.

Then, with my hand fitted under his palm, he laced our fingers together and began dragging them through the mess.

Electricity zipped up my legs, and excitement butterflied through my lower half. We'd just had sex, and yet this quiet, erotic act of moving our fingers together through his release was lighting me up, making me anxious and needy for more.

Slowly, lazily, our fingers spread through his come over my belly then up the smooth curve of my plump breast. He brought the tips of our fingers to my nipple, and pinched and swirled until traces of his come were there, too.

Then, with his eyes tamped on mine, he sealed his mouth over that same nipple and sucked hard. I gasped and felt everything tingle between my thighs.

I didn't think guys did that, tasted their own come. But Mattias never seemed scared of anything. That made me crazy

for him that much more.

“Open,” he said, his voice sounding thick and somewhat sleepy now. My lips peeled apart as I opened my mouth. As our linked fingertips came nearer, I felt the sides of my mouth tingle, and then, I began to salivate.

Somehow, like everything else, he knew.

His full lips curled into a smile, his lip ring glistening. “Hungry for it?”

I nodded, and then, with more intensity than I’d expected, he laid our fingers onto my tongue, spreading them around with force.

I swallowed, breathing through my nose, then closed my mouth around us.

It was salty, like the precome, and though it was stronger and thicker—I loved it.

“Mmmm,” I purred through closed lips, the noise of my praise making his cock lengthen slightly against my hip. When he pulled his fingers from my mouth, my lips popped, and I clucked my tongue in disappointment. He laughed, unlinking my hand from his long enough to wrap it around his already hardening cock.

“I like that you like it, princess. Can you feel that I like that?” He closed his grip over mine, and we both squeezed him a bit tighter.

I nodded, feeling sleepy already. I wanted to give him a handjob. I wanted to take him in my mouth and experience him losing it to me and coming down my throat, I wanted—it didn’t matter. As much as I wanted it all, the build-up and anticipation paired with the actual act of fucking—it had me *exhausted*.

He leapt from the bed, and I opened my mouth to ask where he was going but decided I’d rest my eyes for just a second.

When I opened them again, it was because a cool, damp cloth was being spread over my belly and breasts. Mattias’s

hair was falling over the side of his head; his bridge piercing shifted as he furrowed his brows.

“What?” I asked, wondering why, after that, he’d look concerned.

He finished cleaning me up and sat next to me on the side of the bed, his weight causing me to slide towards him. He rested one heavy hand on top of my belly, his fingers opening and closing with a light intensity that made my lips tingle. Even his casual touch lit me up.

But my eyelids were still so heavy.

“You’re going on the pill or some shit. I’ll take you to the clinic tomorrow.” He leaned down and kissed the center of my forehead, letting his warm lips linger long enough for me to lift my hand and tussle his soft hair.

“When I come on you, I want it to be because *you* want that, princess. Not because I *can’t* come inside you.”

I nodded because I wanted what he wanted, too. I always had. It wasn’t even some submissive, weak female shit, either. I truly just loved him so much that... I wanted what he wanted. Because that’s love... right?

“Now you need to sleep because we have a big fucking day tomorrow.”

“Yeah?” I asked through a yawn, my hand now stroking up and down his hard, muscled forearm.

He nodded.

“What are we doing?” I tried to make my brain focus on the next day, tried to run through my mental to-do list. It was Saturday that much I was sure about.

He leaned down, letting his lips whisper against mine, causing my chest to break out in gooseflesh. “Fucking.”

Chapter 6

Age 19

“Watch again, only this time, really pay attention to the cards. That’s where a lot of people fuck up. They think I’m going to do some sleight of hand shit. But it’s the cards that move a lot faster than my hands, got it?” Mattias’s thumbs fanned the edges of the split deck as he shuffled them together one more time.

“Okay, ready?” he asked Angus, who held his face in his hands so tightly that his cheeks were turning pink.

“Ready,” he nodded like a soldier would to a sergeant.

“What about you, princess? You ready?” Mattias’s eyes glittered as they searched mine, a wide smile on his face. From my spot next to him on the bench, I draped my hand over his crotch, which was hidden by the wooden tabletop of the picnic bench.

“Always,” I smiled back, and I felt his cock jump up a bit against the zipper in appreciation of my casual grab.

We leaned into another and shared a quick kiss; still, his tongue made its way into my mouth, leaving behind the taste of Corona and chewing gum.

“Gross,” Angus said dully, “just do the trick!”

Mattias snorted. Reaching down, he patted my hand that still covered his fly, wordlessly telling me to keep it there.

Since my eighteenth birthday, we’d become woven together in a way that felt permanent. At nineteen, he wasn’t proposing to me any time soon, but the way we were together

in bed made me feel linked, more than any ring or piece of paper could.

Still, the ring and paper were important to him. But he had a timeline for that. “Want my princess to be able to celebrate with champagne at her own wedding,” he’d said one night after he’d taken me in the kitchen, across the tiled countertop. Never thought I’d enjoy having grout imprinted on my cheek, my knees sore from scraping the worn wood cabinets. The truth of it was that I was disappointed when he didn’t leave traces of *him* on me.

I’d noticed a few bruises and hickeys after that first time. I was showering, soap sliding down my skin under the warm water. Then I saw, without suds, the marks. My fingers roamed over them, taking their time to discover every indentation, every molecule of discolored skin.

I loved it.

At graduation, two weeks after we’d started sleeping together, under my robe, I’d worn an off-the-shoulder dress. I borrowed it from Michelle.

Along my neck and my upper arms, Mattias left ropes of purple and I wanted people to notice.

Then when he took my hand after the ceremony, and I was able to wear my robe open to proudly display myself underneath—I smiled at parents who shot me weary eyes. I grinned at the men whose eyes feasted on the markings. It made me feel powerful, feminine, and I think the best thing it made me feel was *owned*.

I wasn’t owned the way a person owns a baseball hat or a sports car. And the way I was owned didn’t parallel the way a white man living on a plantation owned people with dark skin. This wasn’t that, either.

It was hard to explain in my head, so I knew I couldn’t explain it to anyone else.

I guess it made me feel owned in the sense that I belonged somewhere to someone, and it was the same for him. He possessed my thoughts when we were apart; he owned my

body when we were together, and no matter what, we were halves to a whole.

Becoming part of something bigger, committing your heart and body and mind to a person—even at my age, I know that’s big. So yeah, I show my marks of our love off proudly. Because I am proud to be with someone I’m safe with. When you have safety and trust, love is limitless.

If there was a limit, we hadn’t found it yet. And we’d done a lot of searching.

You could say Mattias lived by the adage “don’t ask for permission, beg for forgiveness.”

When it came to sex, the last year had done a pretty good job in an attempt to make up for lost time. I don’t know what I pictured for myself when I was thirteen, just beginning to dream about boys, but it wasn’t this.

We can’t keep our hands off of each other.

I’m overwhelmed with the need to trace his jaw with my lips, stroke him through his clothes no matter where we are, nip at his ear while I tell him what’s happening between my legs. I’m whispering. I’m giggling. I’m emotional when he fucks me slow. I’m sad when he’s at work. It’s all-encompassing. The type of romance that both breaks you and builds you, but either way, it’s in your bones to stay.

Mattias spread the cards over the table, and I could tell he was going extra slow this time. This wasn’t even a card trick, not really. This was more of a sleight of hand trick with cards, but Mattias wanted to make sure Angus knew the fundamentals.

To some kids, learning card tricks was probably pretty stupid.

But to Angus, it was fucking rad. Because Mattias was fucking rad with the sides of his heads shaved, his piercings, his tall frame that made other men stand a little straighter, too. Angus looked up to him, and we both knew that.

Plus, when Mattias taught me card tricks those years back, I learned a lot about people and life, too. Michelle was a good

mom, but Mattias was the masculine figure he'd been missing. So when Mattias wasn't working, we tried to spend time with him. Michelle appreciated it, too because his behavior was always so good after his time with us.

It wasn't me that made him hold his chest higher, walk with his shoulders back. That much, I know.

"Now," Mattias said, settling the remainder of the deck. In the middle of the table, spaced perfectly, sat five cards, facedown. He dropped a finger to the red and white print of the card and tapped slowly. "Remember to watch the cards."

Angus nodded, and I had to stifle a smirk at how serious he was taking it. As if successfully learning this card trick was going to unlock launch codes to stop a missile from destroying mankind. Yeah, the kid was *that* into it.

Mattias spread his fingers apart, the span of them making it to the card at the end. With his pinky and ring finger, he slid three cards above the other two. Using digits from his other hand, he began moving his fingers in circles atop the table. I smiled, watching Angus, his head figure-eighting, eyes peeled.

None of the cards would actually change order at this phase, and after several circles on the table, Mattias froze.

"What did I do there?" he asked, an eyebrow cocked at Angus. The sun was mostly blocked by the birch trees that lined the edge of the park, where we sat. But when it peeked through and peppered the side of Mattias's face, he morphed from man to painting. Silky hair pulled back, the delicate fade of his hair accentuated by the dramatic dipping shadows. The chocolate of his eyes seemed to lift to a soft amber color, and his smile nearly sparkled.

"Nothin." Angus wiggled his hands. "Fancy hand shit."

"Hey!" I furrowed my brow at him and leaned forward across the table, trying to imitate Michelle's most menacing look. He smiled broadly at me in return, and Mattias put a hand to my shoulder to guide me back.

He knocked a knuckle to the table. "No cursing. Apologize to Gennedy."

“Why?” Angus asked, and he really didn’t have any pre-teen snark in his tone. Just genuine curiosity. Mattias didn’t grow angry that he questioned him. Instead, he took a breath and linked his hands together on the table, kind of fatherly.

“Cursing isn’t a big deal, Angus; I’m not gonna lie to you. And most people? They fucking curse.” Angus grinned, and Mattias winked back. My belly fluttered a little from the interaction.

“But when you’re a kid, it gets you into trouble. Now, the more you’re in trouble as a kid, the more you’re in trouble as a grown-up. But when you’re a grown-up, being in trouble is a big deal.”

Angus’s face pulled together in the center, the expression of a thoughtful old man. Gradually, he nodded. “Like, jail?”

Mattias nodded. “Jail or prison, it could get you there.”

Angus looked worried. “I saw a thing on TV about it.” He shook his head vehemently. “I do not want to go there.”

Mattias tapped his own chest. “I don’t even wanna go there, my man. So yeah, you’re a good kid. But cursing? It can wait until you’re in high school. And not a freshman either. Wait until your upperclassmen. Never in front of adults, never for no reason. Got it?”

Angus looked pained for a moment while he committed Mattias’s rules to memory. Then he stuck out his little fist, all balled up, waiting for a bump. “Got it.”

Mattias gave him a knuckle-bump and wink; then we went back to the cards. Flattening his palms, he dropped a hand over two cards and a hand over the remainder. Moving them around quickly for a minute, he stopped, leaving just his two pointer fingers on two cards. He moved those, except this time, it was slow and intentional.

Angus was going to need a neck massage after this. When Mattias’s fingers moved, Angus’s whole head moved.

“I’m not gonna ask about a card. Just tell me what my hands did.”

Angus placed his hand on top of Mattias's left hand. "This one did the same circle over and over, and your other hand did different circles to confuse me and make it look like all the cards were moving."

Mattias nodded proudly, and there was that flutter in my belly again. It made its way into my rib cage this time, too.

"Now tell me what my fingers did."

Angus lifted his hand and cupped his chin in adorable thought. A little Einstein pose.

Finally, he nodded, looking more grown-up than a moment ago. "Your middle finger switched those two cards. Slid one under the other, to the other side."

"Did any other cards change individual spots, or was it just those two?"

"Just those two," he said with a proud nod. I couldn't tell him if he was right or not because I'd gotten lost in Mattias's energy while he'd been doing the trick. I tightened my hand on his cock, and his eyes dropped as he slowly turned his head towards me. Hooded eyes, crooked smile—my casual affection was going to get me fucked, in a good way. The best way possible, really.

"You're right," he said, still eating me up with his dark gaze. With his focus back on Angus, they shook hands. "Good job, sir," he said. Angus looked like he'd just won a million free Happy Meals.

"Celebrate with ice cream?" he asked. I reached across the table and smoothed his hair back. His cheeks were red with victory and happiness.

"Sure," I said, "as long as it's okay with Mattias. He has to work this afternoon. Time for ice cream?" I asked, giving his bulge another private squeeze.

He cleared his throat, and I'm sure it was to stifle a moan.

"I thought you don't cut grass on the weekends?" Angus asked through a stretch.

We were on our feet and walking down the sidewalk at the edge of the park. Because this was the shit side of town, there wasn't a cute ice cream shop or even a Baskin Robbins around. But there was a drugstore two blocks away that sold twelve different flavors by the scoop. Without a discussion, we all headed in that direction.

“New client. He's got a party tonight. Wants his place looking good,” Mattias explained to Angus, the same way he'd explained to me when I'd complained about him working.

Weekends were for us. When he said he'd have to work most of the late afternoon this Saturday, I got mad. Jealous, really, but it sounded really dumb to say you were jealous over someone mowing a lawn.

Still, I was.

But he explained to me like he had when I was younger, that work had to always be a “yes” unless it was an emergency. People like us, with little education and even less opportunity, had to work as much as they could, whenever they could, and they had to save.

He worked hard to support us every day, from sunup until sundown. Honest work, with his feet in boots and the sun at his back. I loved him for it, so I apologized profusely when I saw the edges of his eyes grow sad when I complained.

He had to work for us; there was no choice. I brought in very little money from the booth at the club. At seventeen, I could've started dancing, but Mattias lashed out at just the mention. It wasn't the idea of me showing my body that bothered him, either.

He wanted to provide for me. I reacted to that, coming in hot about how I fully expected and wanted to work after graduation because relying on him for everything wasn't good for either of us. I didn't like feeling needy, and I didn't want that extra stress on him forever.

His response? “I want you to work. You're way too fucking smart to just sit at home. I'm not letting you do that. But I want you to wait. Wait until you find what you really

wanna do. No more strip clubs and convenience stores. You wait til you find what you want. Until then, *I* support you.”

I wanted to honor that request, so I’d slowed down working at the club for a while. I was still going, though, because I refused for Mattias to buy his own gifts and pay all the damn bills. With the small bit I brought home, I paid the water bill. It wasn’t much, but it felt good to help.

“Are the houses really big where you go?” Angus asked, now skipping cracks in the concrete by taking long leaps.

“Some,” Mattias answered. “But just because a house is big doesn’t mean it feels good inside. Like a home.”

Angus nodded sagely as if he were already privy to this bit of life knowledge. It made me smile.

His fair hair shone brightly in the sun as we continued up the sidewalk to the drugstore. When we were just a block away, Mattias’s steps slowed. After a few seconds, I was just about to ask why he was slowing down when he stopped in his tracks completely. I reached out and took Angus by the shoulder, stopping him so I could stop, too. I wrapped my arms around him, and when I turned around, the look on Mattias’s face made my heart free fall to my stomach.

“What’s the matter?” the words flew out of my mouth, and I felt myself dragging Angus with me towards him. His face was drained of color as he blinked drowsily, staring down the stretch of commercial property ahead. A tattoo shop, check cashing place, a Subway, and a nail salon. Not much more.

I trailed his eyes off the sidewalk to the road. A black and white car was headed towards us, its red and blue hood ornaments flashing brightly in alternating bursts. Then I heard it. The woop woop of the patrol car.

Confused at his reaction, I asked again, “what’s the matter?”

“Gennedy, listen.” His eyes shot to mine and took hold of my body, my spine now fiery with worry. My limbs even tingled. “Listen, Esteban is going to be in contact with you.

I've been building a future for us. It, it was gonna be a surprise."

He rose to his toes, something I'd never seen him do, and pinched his eyes on the cruiser that was growing nearer. Why did he keep looking at the stupid police car? We'd seen a million of them in our day, living where we did. Hell, we knew some by first name because they spent so much time breaking up domestic and drug disputes in our complex.

We were comfortable with the law because they were never around for us.

He held his hand over his mouth a moment before his eyes flicked down to mine. "I was close to being done." He shook his head, an expression of utter sadness engulfing his normally masculine and tough features. I'd never seen him sad like this. Not even when he told me about his parents.

"I'm going to use my call on Esteban," he continued, speaking more rushed now, which made my heart absolutely skyrocket. Angus tugged on my hand, and I yanked it away from him hastily, not wanting a second of this interaction with Mattias to be interrupted. Not until I found out what the fuck he was talking about.

"What? What are you...?" I trailed off because I didn't even know how to finish that sentence.

"Esteban will call you. Answer your phone for every call you get, okay?" He reached out and smoothed his hand down the side of my face, and since my hair was pulled back, I felt his palm cup my face completely. His skin on mine. His hand was sweaty. I swallowed hard.

"You're scaring me, Mattias," I whispered, but I wasn't trying to be quiet.

"I'm sorry, Gennedy. But I promise I will explain everything. Just, just, make sure you connect with Esteban. Okay? I love you. I love you," he gripped my face harder and slammed his lips down on mine just as the cruiser kissed the curb.

When the officers made it to the sidewalk, Mattias released me. Everything that happened after that was a complete blur.

I'd pulled Angus to my chest to shield him from the sight. Mattias's wrists pinned behind his back with metal, like muzzling a dangerous animal. My Mattias, sliding into the back of a cruiser, some strange policeman patting his head to get him to duck, so he didn't hit his head on the way in.

I tried to stay calm; I did stay calm, as much as I could because I had Angus there. I cried; the tears came fast and continual, without my permission. I cried, and I held Angus, who then had begun crying.

"Where is Mattias going?" he asked as the first tears rolled. He was calm but growing more panicked as the car pulled from the curb, taking our everything with it.

"Just to talk," I reassured him, wiping under my nose to wipe away the snot that bubbled there. Though my words were soft for Angus, inside, I was absolutely falling apart.

I got Angus the ice cream cone, in a daze, and for a million dollars I couldn't tell you a single detail about the hours after Mattias was arrested. My mind swirled over and over everything repeatedly, and I went through the motions to get Angus back home.

I stayed at his place until Michelle got home from work, which wasn't the original plan. She was going to grab him from our apartment.

Our apartment.

Was it still our apartment? I didn't know.

When the locks started folding on the door, I leapt to my feet and finished the chain sliders to let Michelle in. Her face was ripe with confusion.

"I was knocking on your door forever," she said, lifting the purse over her head and dropping it to the floor. "Did we say here?" she shrugged. "Anyway, how was the day?"

She moved through the small space to the kitchen, where she pulled a mug from the drying rack and held it under the

sink. Turning the water on, she began filling the mug when she looked up.

Her mouth opened, but when she saw my face, it closed again. Her gaze flicked to Angus, who was in a ball on the couch, dozing, cartoons flickering quietly in the background. I didn't want to wake him up. With tears already swimming down my cheeks, I pointed down the hall to the bathroom. We could turn the exhaust fan on in there, for some privacy.

She guided me down the hall with a concerned hold on the back of my elbow. With the door shut, I broke down. She pulled me into her, and her warm, motherly embrace only fueled the tears. And it was at that precise moment that from my back pocket came a muffled ring.

I've never reached for something so fast. I felt like a cowboy in the old West reaching for his pistol in a fucking duel. The phone was unlocked and to my ear in a moment.

“Gennedy, it's Esteban.”

I sniffled up the bubbles of snot and held the phone out, tapping the speakerphone button. I hadn't explained things to Michelle yet, but I knew a second set of ears wasn't a bad idea for this call.

“Este, what the fuck is going on?” I hissed down into the speaker on the phone, my hand shaking. Michelle took the phone from me, holding it steady in her open palm. I wiped under my eyes, trying to push away the wetness for a moment, at least. My face was swollen and warm. I hiccuped into the receiver.

“Don't lie,” I yelled, though it wasn't Esteban's fault, I was so mad at Mattias that I had to yell. I needed to yell.

He sighed into the phone before taking a collective breath wherein I'm sure he was deciding what version to deliver me, how much truth to tell.

“Gennedy. Mattias and the guys have been selling drugs on their work route. Two of the other guys got picked up today, ratted out our boy. I was working on getting him out on bond, but,” he paused, and I knew what was coming was going to be

bad. I could feel it in my bones. “He doesn’t want to bonded out.”

He doesn’t want out.

He doesn’t want out.

I turned to the toilet and emptied my stomach, tears of disgust, pain, and anguish clouding my eyes as I wretched. The world grew fuzzy at the seams as I leaned over the sink, splashing water at my open mouth, needing the taste of sickness to be gone. Needing to get back to the call.

“Esteban, this is Michelle.”

They’d met a few times at Envy, though how well they knew each other, I wasn’t sure. Right now, it didn’t matter.

“What’s up, Mami,” he said coolly, and I was so angry that he wasn’t panicked or stressed like I was. I was angry, too. Angry at Mattias because clearly, Esteban understood what was happening. I was the one in the dark.

His girl. His princess. The love of his fucking life. The one he shared everything with. I was the one in the dark, not knowing what the fuck was happening.

“What’s going on?”

Esteban did a little chuckle, like, *oh what a loaded story*, and it made me mad. Furious. Because none of this was fucking funny. I spit into the basin of the sink and rinsed my mouth again before flushing the toilet. As I washed my hands, I stared at the phone in the mirror.

“Mattias has been working with three other guys, selling weed on their route.” He cracked his knuckles, and it floored me that this conversation was casual enough to him that he could crack his fucking knuckles.

Michelle must’ve seen the veins of rage running up my neck or my clenched jaw in the mirror’s reflection. She tipped the phone away from me a bit, and I turned back to the sink.

“Was he doing lawns at all?” she asked, and yeah, now that I heard the question aloud, it was a good one. I wanted to know, too.

Another wave of sickness washed over me, weighty and powerful. I gripped the edge of the sink as my bottom lip, and hollow cheeks trembled, saliva beginning to pool. He lied to me.

Mattias lied to me.

“Yeah, he was. But this supplementing, it was going fucking good.” My head started to swim, thinking of Mattias having a secret life. One where he sells drugs and... has a lot of money, apparently.

I filled my mouth, and the cold water immediately turned warm and thick with saliva. I spit it out.

Michelle’s head must’ve been swimming, too, because she stuttered a little. “Well, okay, um,” she looked my way, then her expression shifted, and she turned back to the phone in her palm.

“Why doesn’t he want to be bonded out? What can we do?”

“I don’t know why he don’t want out. I’m out of town right now,” he said, sounding far away from the receiver. I wondered if he was checking for privacy. That made my pulse pick up. Not wanting people to hear you meant you were doing bad things. Mattias has been doing bad things.

I wanted to hurl again, and my face felt all hot and sweaty and disgusting. With anger, misdirected, of course, I whipped around and took the phone from Michelle hastily.

“How did he know the cops were coming?” I hissed, trying to control my voice for Angus.

“What?” He didn’t really sound confused, but more that he was buying time.

“When the cops were driving up,” I clarified slowly, angrily. “He knew. He started to tell me I needed to get into contact with you.”

He sighed, long and heavy, another stall tactic.

“Esteban,” I bargained, “he’s my life. You have to tell me.”

“Word was that maybe, maybe one of the guys on his crew was a snitch. He had some shit with his old lady, some domestic abuse, and other shit they were gonna put him away for. Long story, he threw them boys under the bus to lessen his own time.”

I still couldn't believe it. Mattias had lied to me. *He'd been selling drugs.*

Well, he'd been selling weed. And somehow, amidst the chaos of untruths and secrets, the fact that it was just weed did make me feel a little better.

We'd smoked it together, and I'd tried some chocolate chip cookie that Grace stole from her mom's stash once. Not addictive, not the gateway drug that DARE posters make it out to be, and *not that bad.*

I was already beginning to let him off the hook a little, and I didn't know how to feel about that.

Maybe that's naivete and my age?

But maybe... that's love. The willingness to understand even the most hurtful of actions. The ability to break down a lie to see what it was protecting, to understand and accept. To forgive and promise to do better.

Maybe. Maybe not.

“How will I get kept in the loop with the legal stuff?” I had no idea how any of this worked.

“I'll let you know. I'm going to go see him in two days when I'm in town. I'll call you then; we will figure it out.”

I swallowed, and my heartbeat increased again. I was panicked for the call to end because... well, I guess I thought Esteban would have a way to get Mattias out. Or answers. Or a solution.

He's a criminal, not a magician, I know.

The call ended, and questions flooded my mind. If he thought there was a snitch, why'd he still do his route? Why didn't he tell me he was selling pot for extra money? How could he lie to me? Why didn't he want to bond out? Michelle

was studying me; I could feel her empathetic gaze like a tanning bed.

I dropped the lid closed on the toilet and sat down, pushing the sink and sweat-dampened hairs off my face. Michelle crouched in front of me, her shiny dark hair pulled back into a perfectly smooth ponytail. She still had her work makeup on, too. Perfect black cat eyes, long lashes thick and full, giving me just subtle looks into her moss-covered-sepia colored eyes. She did this sad little smile that made a fresh batch of tears pour down my cheeks.

With her palms gently massaging my knees, I let it out. More tears than I knew I had inside me. Tears for things unrelated to Mattias. Sorrow for the life I should have had if my parents weren't fucking junkies. Anger for how flammable my life constantly felt. This morning I woke up with everything, and now I'm crying in Michelle's apartment, empty.

Alone, indefinitely. Being by myself wasn't something I feared. Stupidly, I didn't prepare myself for having to be alone. Because I had Mattias. No, I didn't have him. *We had each other.*

Yet he was doing something that changed both of our trajectories and telling me never entered the equation.

“Stay here with us tonight, and we'll get things figured out, okay? I'll call the jail tomorrow, and we'll see what's going on. Michael has a lawyer on retainer; I'll reach out. Okay?” She stroked my hair now, then cupped my cheek. “We will get it figured out.”

I nodded, but only to get her to stop talking. I love Michelle, but everything she said was just a shot in the dark. We wanted to figure it out but on some level, it all felt predetermined. Anything I did at this point was just spinning my wheels.

After all, according to Esteban, Mattias didn't want out.

And I knew nothing about sentencing for selling pot. I never thought I needed to know about it. What exactly would

they charge him with, and more importantly, how long would the sentence be?

With Michelle's arm wrapped around my shoulder, she walked me to her room and sat me down on her bed. I watched her untie my shoes and shimmy them from my feet, rolling my socks off, too. I couldn't speak; I didn't have the energy. I wasn't snorting and sobbing, but still, tears dripped off my face into my lap.

She began moving around the room, setting things on the nightstand like a glass of water, some Tylenol. She plugged my phone in and sat it next to the rest of the stuff, then fluffed the pillow behind me as I tipped into the mattress. It swallowed me, or maybe the day had, and immediately I lost myself to the deepest sleep.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK FLEW BY, AND IT WOULD BE THE LAST stretch of time ever to pass quickly.

I still hadn't seen or spoken to Mattias directly, and it was making me crazy. Staying with Michelle felt like mental torture because every time Angus shuffled a deck of cards, the sound drove rage into my veins.

Cards reminded me of him. The one who I gave all my trust and love to. The man who lied to me.

I still stayed with them, though, because the idea of sleeping in our apartment without him was, despite the lie, *soul-crushing*. An agony I didn't know if I could bear.

Esteban had followed up with us exactly as he said he would. After his visit with Mattias, he called me. I'd learned that Mattias didn't want to bond out because he didn't want me to spend money on it. That he was pleading guilty anyway so he'd be back locked up regardless.

The valiance and masculine urge to protect me almost sickened me for the first time ever. Normally, I loved the control that Mattias took over our lives. This time, it felt sickly ironic. Because where was that protection when he risked our lives for his side gig?

He would stay locked up for one more month, but there'd be no trial or jurors. He would enter his plea and be sentenced, and the public defender speculated he'd be there for four to six years.

I'd be twenty-three years old by the time he was out, and that was the best-case scenario.

This morning, Michelle was driving Angus to her mother's house and then me to the prison. She'd been in contact with Michael, our boss at Envy, and he'd agreed to have his lawyer meet us at the jail. He'd be meeting with Mattias before he saw us, and it had to be that way because, legally, we were strangers to Mattias. We could ask him questions, but he couldn't really give us much information.

Only Mattias could.

I'd pulled on a pair of ankle-cuffed sweatpants and one of Mattias's hoodies because even though I was angry and hurt and a plethora of other emotions, still, I missed him. And wearing his hoodie that was coated in his smell made me feel, even if irrational, a bit better.

I couldn't remember when I'd last showered, shaved my legs, or combed my hair. It was up in a messy mom-knot, and a pair of Hepburn-esque shades covered my eyes and the dark crescents underneath them.

When we'd entered the building, I was much like I had been the previous week. Useless. Slumped over in blue plastic chairs, elbows to my knees, nerves kept my feet tracing the edges of the filthy grout below me. Michelle spoke with the officer behind the plexiglass for a few minutes. She signed some things then waved me over to show my ID and do the same. I didn't read it, and I didn't even pretend to read.

I'd agree to anything to see him now.

Michelle didn't go in with me like she'd said she would. Normally, I'd want to be alone with him. Nothing about this, though, was normal. But going alone felt necessary, as Michael's lawyer came out with his briefcase, I knew talking to him was more important for Michelle. They went outside to

a circular brown table that had metal loops in the center for handcuffs to be chained to.

I didn't watch them because, at that time, an officer with a centipede-like gray mustache called my name and summoned me with an expressionless face and two curls of his fingers.

There was no room for us to have a private conversation in. No gentle cop making sure I was okay. He motioned me into a tiny space that was mostly filled by a plastic, empty chair, and I sat down. There were probably twenty other booths, separated by gray partitions, stuffed with cheap chairs. A wall of plexiglass and old phones separated us from them.

I couldn't hear the door open on the other side but I saw it. My stomach went queasy because I just knew it was him. Even though other people were here waiting, I just knew it was him.

I watched the corner of our tiny stall, waiting for a hint of color, a flash of movement. I stared, unblinking until... there he was.

Our eyes locked as the officer behind him stopped, struggling with the chains. After he'd brought Mattias's hands to the front and cuffed him, the man grabbed the handset I saw from the corner of my eye. My watery eyes left Mattias's soft brown ones, flicking up to the officer. He wiggled the handset, instructing me to pick up mine.

"Fifteen minutes," he said when I pressed the receiver to my ear.

I nodded, the first tear breaking free. With the cuff of my sweatshirt pinched tight in my palm, I swept the tear away as Mattias struggled to get his ankle chains around the legs of the chair.

Once he sat, I watched him raise his linked hands to the wall and take the phone, pinching it to his ear with his shoulder.

"Hi," he said

"Hi," I replied.

Then my bottom lip quivered a little. I'd known it as I slept on the couch at Michelle's; I'd known it as I went a few days without smiling. Now, with him in state-owned clothes, chained to a desk, it really hit me.

I'd lost him.

Indefinitely.

The tears came, and this time I didn't wipe them away. Trying to swallow this moment and digest it with even a shred of grace was taking all of my energy.

"I'm so fucking sorry, Gennedy."

The unsteadiness that strangled the normally rough timbre of his voice only made my sobs rack up louder. His broad frame stretched over the small desktop in front of him, leaving his face as near me as it could be. His breath fogged the plexi. He was stripped of his piercings, the dark length of his hair now messy and hanging down, curtaining his delicate fade. I had a flash of his face at the gate the day he stopped me from running away. There was a troubled youthful look to him like there was then. The strong man who abstained from me, fucked me rough, and tongued me after he filled me was gone. In his place, this version of him.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to get in trouble, Gen. That is the only reason. I was protecting you from this." His eyes moved around the small space as he said this, but I knew what he meant.

The sadness inside me turned on me, without my permission, because as mad as I was, I hadn't planned to come here and lash out. Yet the words filled my mouth and flew from my tongue as if they possessed a mind of their own.

"Just the truth between us. That's how we're gonna work, forever, okay? Truth. Even when it's ugly." I repeated, *ver-fucking-batim*, his own words back to him. He flinched like a slap had pierced his cheek.

His eyes fell with shame to the tabletop for a moment before they rose to meet mine again, red-rimmed and watery.

“I didn’t want you to get in trouble if anything went down. That is the only reason, Gen. The only fucking reason.” His eyes moved frantically between mine while the rest of him remained still. His breath was suspended as he silently begged for me to understand and believe him.

I swallowed against the thickness in my throat, the anger, and hurt.

Steadying myself with a slow exhale, I shifted the receiver to my other ear.

“Este said you didn’t want to be bonded out.” My gaze was so intense that if we were in a fantasy movie, lasers would be piercing through the divider between us now. “You didn’t want time together before going to prison.” It wasn’t a question and yet somehow it wasn’t a statement either.

The sentence just floated between us as we both dog-paddled in the chaos, yet neither of us reached for anything. We just... silently struggled.

Then finally, he spoke.

“Gennedy, I didn’t want you to ditch school and be put in the foster care system. Yeah. But, you know, I fucking...” He pulled his free hand down over his face, and his knuckles grazed the clear partition. Pushing out a breath, he continued. “I wanted you to have a chance for a better life. I mean, I did my best to make sure you got the shit that you needed, so life wasn’t a complete fucking drain for you. I couldn’t tell you about this because it would put you at risk.”

I wanted to tell him, remind him, that he saved me. That he did give me everything I needed. But he continued, and I wanted to hear this, so I shut up.

“I’m not gonna sit here and say I did this for us because I don’t want you to feel any guilt for where I am. I chose this. I am here because of my choices.”

His words were chipping at my hardened, hurt exterior.

“I saw what kind of money was being made, and weed seemed low risk. You know, it’s legal here.”

“It’s legal, but you still can’t sell drugs on the street, Mattias. Jesus Christ.” There my mouth went again, reacting before I could smooth the kinks out. The words were laced with anger and frustration. At least to his ears, it sounded that way because he winced a little again. I heard the truth, or maybe I felt it. My stomach turned again because the anger was quickly draining away, sadness refilling the void.

“I understand that,” he said with more patience than I deserved. Because he was behind bars, and I was crying, snipping, arguing.

Pieces began to settle into place. He was going to be in here for a while, no matter how bad it hurt my heart. There was no time machine. He’d done what he’d done, and here we were. It was time to be a big fucking girl and face what’s next.

With the sleeves of my sweatshirt, I wiped my cheeks again and pulled in a slow lungful of steadying breath.

“I did it so that whatever you decided you wanted to do, I could support you. Really fucking support you. Get us out of that fucking apartment.” He chewed at the corner of his mouth as the cocoa color of his iris turned dark, seriousness overwhelming his expression.

“I’m gonna marry you, princess. I’ve known that for a long fucking time. But I never wanted to marry you until I could take care of you the way you deserved.”

I had the strongest urge to press my hand to the divider, but I knew I couldn’t feel him, and being so close to touch while being unable would be too hard.

“I love you, I didn’t want to lie to you, but I promise you that is the only lie I’ve ever told you.” He paused, his face more worried than the day on the sidewalk. “I need you to be honest with me right now. I can’t go back to that cell without knowing.”

I nodded immediately, another reaction without my control. My body was used to complying, agreeing, giving when it came to Mattias.

He held up a finger, indicating the number one, telling me there'd be multiple questions. I worried my fingers on my free hand with the crimped cord of the handset. I nodded him on.

“Do you believe me when I tell you that this is the only lie I've told you?”

The question was an onion, layers of thought, and unspoken questions. He was going to get many answers from just one word. He knew it.

He never wore expensive clothes. He didn't buy us new things or gifts. Nothing in our apartment had been fixed, and still, I didn't have a car. If he'd been doing it for any other reason aside from saving for our future together, I would have seen it. I believe that.

I nodded, and it made his shoulders and chest go concave with relief.

“Say it,” he whispered.

“I believe you.”

Which meant not only did I believe him but that I still trusted him, despite the breach. With trust came, of course, love.

He held up two fingers, the symbol of peace. His eyes were looking wet again. A tear never broke free.

“I love you,” he said again, and it felt like he'd said it more in this short visit than he normally did. I realized then that he may have been scared. And not of prison.

Losing me.

“Will you stay with me? Will you wait for me?” His voice was low, though not by choice. He was nervously awaiting my response. He expected, I think, for me to say no.

He lied.

But I believed it was the only lie. Still, now he would have to atone for that choice in prison.

There isn't a lie so big that it makes me not love him. I know that. Even if I didn't know that before, now I know...

There was nothing that could make me want a life without him.

I didn't nod this time.

"Yes," I said, letting the tiny word drag out like honey off a spoon. I bit into my bottom lip. I had the strongest urge to tell him, so I did. "I love you, Mattias." I held back the cry that wracked my brain, that lodged itself in the back of my nose. I forced a shrug. "There isn't a question of not staying. I love you; that means forever to me."

His nostrils flared, and he lifted his head, letting the phone drop under his chin. He exhaled something between a lungful and a nervous breath.

He always said he loved and needed me. But seeing the relief in knowing that we were still solid and strong after all of this—solidified that I'd made the right choice.

I would wait for him.

After all, he waited for me.

Chapter 7

Age 20

This is my second birthday without Mattias.

Last year, I'd had my nineteenth exactly five weeks after Mattias was arrested. Michelle took me out to dinner, and I cried into chicken parmesan before drinking *her* three glasses of red wine, then vomiting in the bushes while we waited for the valet to bring the car out.

Great birthday.

This year felt like the worst birthday yet.

And there had been a year where my mom and dad completely forgot it was my birthday, locked me out while they traded sex for drugs, and then forgot to feed me.

This still felt worse.

The ache of his absence began to make itself comfortable in my DNA. The familiarity of not having him was feeding into my depression, which had been going strong since the arrest.

I still had Michelle, and thank fuck for sweet Angus. He was getting older now and didn't want to play cards as much. We still did, but we also did other things, like browsing comics at the shop uptown. When I spent time with him, I felt a sliver of the old me come alive. He held happy memories of Mattias, and he was always so sweet—he was lighter fluid to the ember inside me. The part of me that remembered who I was.

When I wasn't with Angus, I lost my light.

JULISA AND ROXANNE HAD MOVED AWAY AFTER WE graduated, so I didn't see much of them anymore. The closer I got to Mattias after my eighteenth birthday, the further that Grace, Casey, and I drifted, too. Now it had been months since I'd heard from any of them.

Casey reached out when Mattias went away; she even popped by my apartment a few times. But life keeps moving, even if you're stuck. The girls kept living, and I was rooted here. I didn't blame them.

I had been working at the club more and more. It wasn't even about the money. Did I need it, use it and find months to save it? Yeah. But I needed to be at that club as a distraction.

The heavy pulsing of the trance music, the flickering neon lights amidst the seductive darkness, voices a smooth jumble with no real thoughts audible. It was a perfect place to get lost. To disappear, really.

Tonight I had big plans to watch a movie I'd rented from the machine in front of the grocery store. I bought myself a facemask, ordered Thai food from the fancy place uptown, and had already slipped into flannel pajama pants and a tank top, sans the bra.

Everything was in place for the night. Pad Thai in the styrofoam clamshell on the table, waiting to be devoured. The mask was applied. Pressing the eject button, I waited with the DVD sunk down on my finger, tight at my knuckle. This was the final piece of my lame birthday.

But the disc drawer never opened. This DVD player was one that Mattias had traded for back in our early days. The day we got our power turned on and in our names was the day we plugged in the DVD player and watched a rented movie together.

Putting my hands back behind the unit with a frustrated sigh, I felt around until the cord fell between my fingers. I gave it a gentle tug, but yes, it was plugged. With my knuckle, I pressed the power button yet again. Still. Nothing.

I shoved the disc back into the sleeve and sunk back into my seat on the couch. I stared at the black TV in silence as I ate my pad thai. Loneliness was like cancer. It started somewhere, in your heart and brain maybe, feasting in small bits, taking bites here and there, pacing so that it wasn't debilitating. But the more it took, the more you gave until it devoured every healthy and happy part of you.

The food was *probably* great.

The movie *probably* would've been great, too, had I gotten to watch it.

I peeled off the mask and tossed it into the trash, giving my face a rinse in the sink. I didn't run my fingertips over my skin and hold my face close to the mirror to inspect my pores like I usually did when I splurged on a mask. It *probably* worked.

Tonight I couldn't feel or sense anything but overwhelming, all-encompassing *loneliness*.

I missed Mattias so much. Visits at the prison were rushed, laconic catch-ups. Thirty fucking minutes three times a week. Do you know how many minutes are in a week? I do. I know because I only get *ninety minutes* with the love of my life every week. And the other *1,990 minutes* are spent trying to forget those ninety so that I can live. Or at least try not to be a worthless, mopey sad-sack.

I hadn't been interested in drinking. When the girls had drunk at parties back in high school, I DD'd or nursed one lame light beer.

Tonight, I pulled out a bottle of wine that the boss at Envy had given all the girls for Christmas last year. I don't know if it was nice or expensive, but knowing Micheal, it was probably neither.

Taste didn't matter. I popped the cork with Mattias's pocket knife, and by the neck, I took the bottle to bed with me. I took several long pulls before closing my eyes and waiting for the booze to take me to sleep.

It was harder than I thought it would be, loving someone you don't have any access to. I thought I'd stay busy—and I

did. What I didn't realize was that I couldn't be happy knowing he'd be out in "*just a few years.*" I thought the idea of having him again would be enough to get me through.

I was much, much lonelier than I ever thought.

And my body still craved and needed things. In the wee hours when I'd roll over or stretch, my mind heavy with sleep, muscle memory took over.

My body remembered I'd slept next to Mattias for years, we'd slept *together* for years, and *it wanted him*. It called out to him with internal pulses and moist throbs. When my head finally caught up, another wave of sadness would wash over me. It hurt more in the middle of the night than in the daytime.

And it hurt plenty during the day.

I AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING WITH A RACETRACK FULL OF stock cars zipping through my skull. My slow movements felt jarring, and the crack of my ankle seemed to blare as I stood from the bed. Rubbing my temples, I got my bearings a moment before I burped, tasting last night's wine.

I felt like a bag of burning crap, and yet, I had no regrets. Because this headache was a happy rerouting of pain. I could take two Advil and have a cup of coffee, or I could feel this dull ache in my temples all fucking day. That way, Mattias's absence won't be the primary pain in my head for one fucking day.

Alcoholics have begun to be understandable to me recently.

Padding down the hallway, I burped again and had to press the back of my wrist to my lips. I swallowed down the rising remnants of chardonnay and flicked on the bathroom light.

Keeping my head down, I blinked a few times to adjust. There were four vanity-style lights above the mirror, but only two bulbs still lit up. Still, it felt like being under a spotlight. I rubbed my temples some more before finally facing my reflection.

My long, honey-blond hair was dark and stringy at the roots, full of oil. The ends looked thirsty and frayed, and when I fingered the pieces that fell under my breast, they crunched between the pads of my fingers. If my eyes were a photo finish, they'd be the furthest from glossy. They'd be even foggier and more lackluster than matte. Underneath them, darkness pooled. Exhaustion, the wine, a seemingly unending supply of tears... a Russian roulette of reasons for me to look like trash. But it didn't end there.

My lips, which Mattias loved to bite and taste, were dry and chapped, looking more unappealing than ever before. Turning to the side, I stuck out my arm and surveyed my skin and silhouette. Apparently, the sun had become my enemy. My creamy skin now looked pale and sickly.

Briefly, ideas of giving myself a trim, a blowout, shaving my legs, and putting on BB cream flew through my mind. A gold-framed image of myself looking taken care of and healthy flitted through my mind. But I sighed because only thinking of it made me tired.

Too tired.

I splashed my face with water before squirting some face cream into my palms. While I massaged it into my skin, I remember how Mattias loved to touch my face. He got in these incredibly intense moods sometimes, and when he fucked me, it was intense, to say the least.

In the missionary position, he kept our chests tight, his nipples branding my chest as he fucked me. Our mouths he kept together even closer; I swallowed his exhales, and he devoured my moans. And what he did with his hands was what usually did me in.

The heel of his hands rested on my jaw, his vast palms spread over both my cheeks. The tips of his finger milked my skin, kneading hypnotically as our noses brushed. He whispered things in feral grunts.

“You're welcome. Let her come, princess, let that sweet pussy of yours weep for my cock.” He yanked his hips back, stealing himself from me. My hands fell low on my belly,

itching to ease the abrupt ache of emptiness. He growled as I pressed into myself, thighs trembling beyond my control.

His tongue followed the shape of my earlobe. He whispered low, his breath igniting a ripple of goosebumps down my neck. "You're welcome."

I gasped when the broad head of his cock tickled the deepest part of me. I held back the cough that clawed at the base of my throat and had to swallow a few times to keep it down. Grinding his groin against mine, his substantial length made the back of my eyes go dark. Then the corners of my vision went fuzzy, too.

"There it is," he hummed against my ear, the three words vibrating down my neck. His hands still worked my face gently while his lower half pinned mine. In a few rough and offbeat thrusts, he had me there, about to come. With my mouth as dry as a desert, I nodded, and then my eyelids were too heavy to keep open.

He ground his groin down on mine again, then pulsed himself inside me, causing my sex to swallow him in the final act of appreciation. My orgasm rocketed up my legs from my toes, burning in a halo around my hips, landing between my thighs. Mattias's fingers had stopped moving on my face, and his hips were jerking less frequently now.

I was going to make him come, and that sent another hot wave of desire rushing up my spine. Bearing down on that thick, hard length consuming me, I tipped my head back and moaned uninhibited.

Clenching, sweating, panting. I came so hard that I thought I might get emotional, so I held my palms to my eyes as I exhaled slowly. With one hand, he swatted mine away. I exposed my blurry eyes to him. His lips grazed the tip of my nose in a brief but sweet kiss.

He moved his hips once, then kissed me, this time letting our tongues twist. And as the kiss intensified, he moved his hips again before I felt him. The sudden stilling of movement. The pulsing of his cock. The flood of warmth spreading through me, to my hips. The broken grunts as he unloaded

himself inside of me until there was nothing left, and he grew soft.

“Thank you,” I said when I finally spoke, sweeping my fingers through his hair.

I stroked the part that had been buzzed and tangled with the length. His lips carved a hot path down my jaw, then discovered my neck until they stopped promptly at the base of my throat. Slowly, his tongue jutted out over my pulse, which flickered at the hollow of my neck.

I moaned, and even though I felt sated between my legs, I enjoyed the wet warmth of his tongue.

“Thank you, too.” And then, as if the intensely connected sex with me was the cure, the sharpness of his features soothed. Sometimes, he’d even be very, very happy after we made love like that.

I WASHED THE SOAP OFF MY FACE AND PATTED IT DRY, TAKING some unexpected tears with it. After brushing my teeth, I combed through the tangles of my hair so that it didn’t get matted, then put it up in what Michelle called the “*messy mom-of-a-newborn*” bun.

My jeans were clean, but sometimes they bugged my skin, especially if I’d been drinking. Almost everything bothered me the day after a drinking binge. Instead, I wore my favorite sweatpants and a t-shirt; I think it may have been Angus’s from when I’d stayed at Michelle’s. I didn’t look homeless since I wore some slides and sunglasses, but I certainly didn’t look like a woman desperately in love with and missing her man.

But I was that woman, wasn’t I?

Then why wasn’t I dressed up? Why wasn’t my hair done? Hell, why wasn’t my hair even fucking *washed*? The drive to the prison took too long because I’d started thinking about the last two years.

Two whole years and I'd nearly wasted them. No, I *had* wasted them.

My sadness stole them from me.

I had to try to be happy, no matter what it took. Because another three years like this? I didn't know if I could do it. And I didn't know if there was an alternative I could face.

Mattias had been sentenced to seven years for his part in the operation. Turns out, the guy who dealt to Mattias was part of something else, *worse*. I didn't ask the details and they never came willingly. The person at the top and all the subsequent players meant nothing to my life.

Only what happened to Mattias.

My body had memorized the flaws in the series of highways I took to the prison. The big dip in the road happened about twenty minutes into the drive and no matter how much I slowed down, my body still flew inside the cab. Usually, my head smacked the roof. Still, over half an hour away, the first bump was like an alarm.

Okay, you're on your way and twenty minutes into this drive. Stop crying.

Then about ten miles after that, a large sign for a restaurant stuck up through the thirsty-looking trees that grew along the shoulder of the freeway.

Auntie Anne's. A winking old woman with a pie in her hand. If the artwork was any indication of what the restaurant would be like, the pies would be poisonous, and Auntie Anne was going to harvest your kidneys while you were out. I thought that every time I passed the sign.

The sign was a second alarm of a different nature.

Okay, you're only about half an hour away now. Start your calming breathing.

At the beginning of his incarceration, I'd experienced some panic attacks on the way to and leaving the prison. Since I didn't have enough money to see a therapist, I googled

“tricks to slow anxiety” and came across a slew of techniques. I’d tried them all, too. The one that worked?

Counting out of order.

Something about how it made your brain work really hard to speak out-of-sequence numbers back to back. When the brain focused on anything else, it released its death grip on anxiety.

Sixteen. Forty-nine. Eight-six. Three. Twenty-one.

About fifteen minutes after that, the sign for the prison popped up, and that was my third and last cue. My anxiety was settled at this point, and now it was time to smile.

I never had to practice smiling before.

It always felt forced and unnatural when I saw Mattias if I tried to smile right away. I was happy to see him, of course, but the overwhelming feeling wasn’t happiness, rather sadness. So I smiled like a fool in the cab of my hunk-of-junk on wheels as I finished the remaining five miles to the prison.

I pushed through the familiar door into the lobby of the prison. It wasn’t really a lobby. There weren’t old magazines, quiet TVs playing old talk shows, there were no dishes full of candies, and there sure as shit weren’t any smiling receptionists waiting to help.

Plastic chairs lined three walls. A large, protective booth sat in the middle of the room, adjacent to a partial wall with a metal detector between the two. Two guards stood around the detector, and a tired-looking middle-aged woman in a police uniform worked behind the desk.

I could’ve learned the names of the guards. Brought them things when I came, been friendly with them. It could have changed the experience of coming here for seven *fucking* years. But knowing them made the experience that much more real. Pretending they were strangers made it stupidly easier for me.

I handed her my ID, and we made the usual exchange of limited words. No one else was waiting today. Because today

was Thanksgiving. People loved their incarcerated loved ones, but apparently not as much as their tryptophan kick.

After shuffling through the same dingy halls, the guard took me to the same room that was lined with chairs, plexi dividing the criminals from their visitors.

Mattias was brought in right away. I stood again, and then we both sat at the same time. The booth we were in today didn't need a handset; rather, there was a circular voice box in the center of the plastic barrier. Both of our chests tipped forward over the desk, towards the silver circle.

"Happy Thanksgiving, princess," he said. "Happy belated birthday, too."

He sounded further away than he did when we had the handset. I thought briefly about asking to be moved but didn't have the energy to make a stink.

"Hi," I replied, "Happy Thanksgiving to you, too."

The gloss from his eyes faded as he surveyed me warily. "Gen, are you taking care of yourself?"

Well, damn. He may not have said, "*you look like shit*," but really, *he just said I look like shit*.

But I knew I did. The problem wasn't that I had a lying mirror; the problem was that I couldn't bring myself to care enough to change. I shrugged and gave a small smile. I tried so hard to never admit my pain to him because it was selfish. After all, I have all my freedoms. He's locked in a cage like an animal.

"I put some more money in your commissary account," I said in a completely transparent effort to change topics.

He cracked his knuckles, and it was starting to annoy me that his gaze was still somewhat analytical. What did he fucking expect? A prom dress and a crazy smile every week?

"I'm doing the best I can, okay, Mattias?" I spat unexpectedly, unable to bite back the stinging irritation inside of me. Am I taking care of myself? What kind of question was

that? I was alive, wasn't I? I could take care of myself. But how could I really *care* to do that without him?

He dropped his tone to a soothing rumble. "I'm not trying to piss you off, okay? I just worry about you."

I didn't want to fight with him, not after the night I'd had, or the day I'm sure he was going to have. Spending holidays in prison can't be easy.

I changed the subject again. "Does Thanksgiving suck in here?" I asked.

His eyes were still moving around the wad of hair on my head when he nodded. "But everything does."

"Same here," I replied under my breath, immediately regretting it.

He raised a hand to the divider and tapped his pointer finger slowly.

"Are you in there, princess?" he whispered, and the question incinerated my shoulders and burned its way down my spine.

I laughed awkwardly. "Right here."

He shook his head, and I noticed how matte his eyes looked. I noticed that his cheeks almost looked gaunt, and his once thick fingers were starting to appear long and thin.

But his words stole me from my chance to analyze him.

"You need to get happiness for yourself. I can't have you in this much pain." He leaned back, yet when he spoke, I could hear him just the same. "Date. Find a guy. Have a safe, random hook-up. Please. Do something that will make you remember that *life is good*."

I snorted and chose to ignore the wetness that had appeared in my eyes at his words. "I can't go fuck some other guy and be cured of my mood, Mattias." Sometimes he could be such a fucking idiot.

We just stared at each other for a long moment before he spoke again.

“You’re waiting for me, but when I get out, I want my Gennedy. I don’t want the Gennedy that’s suffered for years.”

Something between indignant anger and awe took hold of me then, making my responses volatile and probably a little confusing.

“This *is* your Gennedy. This is who you made me,” I hissed in an angered whisper that I wasn’t proud of, but hell, it had been so hard lately. “Both good and bad,” I finished because it was true.

My body softened and I fidgeted with the hem of my old t-shirt, then smoothed my hands over the sunglasses that were flipped up on my head. “I don’t know how to be happy without you Mattias, that’s the problem.”

He sat up and pulled himself close to me, as close as he could. I hated how loose his white t-shirt looked. We weren’t allowed to bring food; at least, Mattias hadn’t earned that right yet. I told myself to add more money to his commissary once I got back home. He needed to eat more.

“Try,” he said, then he uncharacteristically started fidgeting with the hem of his shirt, too. “I don’t want another man to touch you, but I think touch is what you need.”

Hearing him just say the word touch did things to me. That’s how I knew I’d survive this depression I was going through because I still hugely craved Mattias. No amount of time could change that; of that, I was certain.

I shook my head. “No fucking way. I don’t want to fuck some random guy, Mattias, and I really don’t want you telling me to do that.”

He took a moment to just stare at me, and in my grouchy state, I didn’t have the patience to read into his intense fix on me.

“No,” I said again.

He lifted his hands to tell me he’d given up.

He told me about the GED program he was finishing, and I reminded him again how proud I was of him for doing that.

He'd also told me he'd started checking out books in the library, something he never did before.

I told him I'd taken on more hours at the club, that Michael had been thinking of opening a new club, that Michelle and Angus would be away at Michelle's mom's house today, and that I'd been trying a new card trick.

He grinned at that, and for a split second, I felt like we were connected like we were before, like everything was normal and we were happy. Like that last day in the park, before the arrest.

"Show me the trick," he said, nodding towards me.

"Can't," I said, turning out the pockets of the sweatpants to expose their emptiness. "Didn't bring a deck today." It was strange of me not to because even though we didn't always use them, I did always bring them.

He gave me a pointed look. "Get happiness, Gen."

He knew that forgetting the cards was symbolic of something greater, and watching him come to that realization kind of scared me. Because like everything else in my life, nothing ever felt big until Mattias acknowledged it.

"I don't get you," I said, unable to control my saltiness today. "I'm your princess," I said, using the term of endearment he'd labeled me with since I was a young girl. Thirteen, to be exact.

"How can you really love me the way you say you do and then want me to go fuck some guy to," I did finger quotes around the next words, "*get happy*." I shook my head, letting my hands hold my forehead for a confusing and frustrating moment.

For the first time in a long time, his face went very fucking serious. He brought his mouth to the speaker, and when he spoke, his voice wasn't docile and calm. Though he kept it low, it boomed with control.

"First of all, you *are* my princess. I would do anything for you." His jaw tightened as he tried out words in his head, taking a minute before he spoke again.

“Second of all, I am secure in our love, Gennedy. Do you fucking get that?” Spit freckled the barrier between us as he held his jaw tight.

“I am a real man. You are my woman. I know you are true to me. So when I say go fuck some guy, it’s *not* easy. But I know you’re *my* good girl.” He leaned back again, and I breathed a private sigh when I saw the strain in his neck release. “I trust you.”

We didn’t revisit the topic, and we finished our visit talking about what the cafeteria served him this morning. It could’ve seemed like small talk, but knowing what he ate and when, what times he exercised, and what books he read kept me feeling connected to him, as much as I could at least.

On the drive home, I didn’t cry.

And I didn’t want to, but the idea of a serotonin boost in the form of a random lay was taking up far too much real estate in my brain, considering I’d never be with another guy while waiting for Mattias to get out.

Never.

Chapter 8

Age 21

The flutter of cards falling together amidst a chaotic shuffle has to be one of my favorite sounds. It's comfortable, like the worn spine of a well-loved book. And it brings me comfort, too. I shuffle again.

"What are we playing today, Miss Gen?" With his knuckle, he nudges his glasses up the slope of his nose. They slide back down. I smile at him, and his freckled cheeks grow rosy.

"War," I croon, "it's fast and fun. You'll like it."

His grin is ear-to-ear as he rubs his palms together enthusiastically. "I'm excited."

"Well, *duh*."

He smiles at me, and I wink back to him. I always like to tease him a little in a playful way. Sometimes I worry that if I don't play around a little, he'll think I'm faking my kindness. He gets picked on sometimes, so his esteem isn't the highest.

Being nine isn't easy, he says.

I explain the game to him and deal us two cards apiece, face down. At the same time, we each flip a card. He has a nine of spades, and I am stuck with the two of diamonds. He grins as he swipes my card and his, sliding them to the bottom of his pile.

We go like that, round after round, and I win them all. Luck of the deal, I explain to him, which then leads to him accusing me of cheating.

“Never,” I reply. Because on our side of town, getting caught cheating is as bad as being a snitch. There is a moral code amongst the poor criminals, a hierarchy of acceptable sin among the sinners, one could say.

“Cheating is not something you want to explore, Ang. Trust me.” I take his stack and blend it with mine in a seamless shuffle. “Can we give it another go? And you can trust me when I say, this game, War, is all luck and absolutely no skill.”

He scratches at his temple, his eyes drawn together in a state of obvious confusion.

“So why is it a game then?” he asks finally.

I grin madly before erupting into laughter because hell, the kid has a great point.

After regaining my composure and blotting at my eyes with the hem of my oversized t-shirt, I rub my hands down my thighs. “Okay, so an *actual* game then?”

He looks at his wristwatch decidedly and shakes his head. “Can’t. We’re out of time.”

I reach for his wrist and tug it towards me to check for myself. Because that *flew* by, it never feels like enough time with Angus these days.

“Gotta get to Grandma’s before four-thirty, remember?”

Our eyes meet, and in unison, we say “*pot roast*” because Tuesday is pot roast night, after all.

I drive him twenty minutes outside the bustling city to a small home in the calm suburbs. Delivering him to the door, I greet Michelle’s mother, Lily, and say goodbye to Angus, happy to surrender him to a warm home with a hot meal and loving arms. I would’ve loved Grandma Lily when I was a kid.

Walking down the porch steps towards the sidewalk, where my small sedan hugs the curb, I smile to myself. I’m happy for Angus. Michelle is a good mom, and she has a good mom, too. I may not have had Michelle and Lily, but I did and do have Mattias.

Mattias. My brain goes back to him like it usually does when I don't have an immediate task at hand. This is how it goes.

Tasks are completed, I've arranged my thoughts, and then when freedom spans vast in my brain, Mattias slips in and swallows me whole. I see his face in my mind, and my heart beats fast, my palms grow clammy, and my body excites.

Then I see my Mattias how he is now. Head shaved, robust frame considerably thinned down, body cloaked in the most ominous orange color I'd ever seen. A color I will forever hate.

I blink enough for the wetness to dissolve. I've learned to control the tears, reserving them mostly for the shower, the bed at night, the bathroom at the club. I used to shed them everywhere, every freaking second. Cry, cry, cry, even during our first visits.

"Don't cry, Princess," he'd say. "Your tears ax at my calmness. I can't fucking watch you break a foot away from me and not be able to touch you, hold you, make it better. I can't turn around and go back to my cage with this pain swallowing my peace." He'd said that or a variant of that the first few times.

So I learned to be strong.

At least for those thirty minutes. We only got thirty minutes three times a week. I cried in the car after and the entire two-hour drive back home.

I have another visit in two days. The steering wheel swishes through my hand as I pull into a parking spot at the club. I don't start work for another two hours, but I don't want to go home.

Home.

What has that word ever meant to me before? It's a place for most people. For me, since I was thirteen, it's meant Mattias. He *is* my home.

The place I live was going to be *our* home. He'd bought it for us. It was going to be a surprise, and in a way, it was. His

cousin has alerted me to the safe-deposit box at the bank, and I was given a key. There I found money, the keys to the house, and the deed, which was in my name.

Pulling the strap of my bag across my chest, I push the lock down on the car door and slam it closed—the entire little car rattles. I walk two blocks down from the club under the slowly melting sun, where a small park is tucked between a restaurant and the back of a library.

Lockwood Park. There are two picnic tables at this park. I don't come here as much as I go to the park near Angus and Michelle's apartment—the apartment complex I grew up in—but it's a close second.

I settle in at one of the evergreen-coated tables and reach for my cards, stashed away in my bag. A worn rubber band keeps the deck together, and I slide it up my wrist as I prepare to shuffle.

Mattias taught me how to play cards. Back when I moved in, and we were stealing water from the apartment's main hose-line outside, before we had an air mattress when our diet was solely snack food. In those days, all we had was a deck of cards.

But it felt like we were rich.

He taught me how to play so many games, and once we'd thoroughly exhausted our favorite five, we moved on to sleight-of-hand tricks. The way he taught me was torturous but so much fun.

He'd do a trick for me twice a night and repeat that for a week. At the end of the week, he'd do it one more time, slowly. Then he'd ask, "well, how'd I'd do it?"

I felt pressure to show him I was smart, and I wanted to impress him. Even at thirteen, I wanted him to think the world of me. I thought the world of him, after all.

"Don't get flustered. The first rule is confidence."

He would do the trick again if I really got lost in the solving process.

Then, he'd tell me how to perform the trick, and I'd learn it right then, first hand, fingers on the cards.

I dealt myself a simple game of solitaire, enjoying the generous breeze that somehow found its way into the somewhat hidden, pocketed park. I don't even hear myself making choices in my brain. I swear I just begin moving cards to where they belong. Playing cards is as instinctual as breathing for me.

After a few short minutes, I get lost in the game, and my mind settles comfortably on Mattias. I imagine he's here next to me, his heavy palm resting on my inner thigh.

He'd be touching me somehow, even if we were just playing cards. Because though he is a man of many love languages, his native tongue is *touch*.

I smile to myself as I place a red queen of hearts on top of a black king of spades.

A voice startles me from behind, and it's enough to make me jump. And not because of the tone or choice of words but rather, not many people come to this park. I'm suddenly aware of how alone I am, despite the bustling buildings and a weekend-ready city of people all around us.

"Classic solitaire, huh?" That's what the voice says.

I'm ready to turn to see the man, but before I can, he's slipped into the picnic table across from me. He's smiling, and it's the strangest thing.

He's a stranger.

This man with shoulder-length messy blonde hair and sun-hugged skin, piercing blue eyes that remind me of a beautiful cloudless sky, and a smile so happy that his cheeks must be sore.

And even though he's a stranger... my heart doesn't race. My skin doesn't break out in a nervous sweat. I don't itch at my thighs under the table, a nervous tick I do when I want to flee.

This man makes me feel safe, which is really stupid because, at some point, women felt safe around Ted Bundy, after all. I remind myself, as I continue to move and place cards in my game, that any safety or security I feel now is false.

This surfer-looking bro could be anybody. A *Ted Bundy reincarnate* for all I know.

“Yep,” I finally say, after an uncomfortable amount of silence wherein we both know I was mentally sizing him up and worrying for my safety.

“Ever play spider?” Even his voice has a tinge of valley-boy, and for some reason, it threatens to make me smile. Mattias told me not to smile and show softness to strangers because it creates perceived vulnerability and lowers your inhibitions. You don’t want to be approachable to strangers. Then again, this guy has already approached me.

“Spider solitaire?” I ask with a controlled laugh because, *of course, I’ve played that*. Who hasn’t? “Yeah, I have.”

I shuffle again then look up to him. Gosh, his eyes really are beautiful. The kind of blue you see on ‘KEEP TAHOE BLUE’ bumper stickers. He lifts a hand to his ear and tucks his long hair back. I notice his wrist is wrapped in several bracelets. Some are twine with multi-colored beads, and others are leather, tied with reckless and dangling ends.

My eyes go back to his face, and he smiles, letting me know he’s caught me taking him in. I’m not used to a man who wears his hair long and has jewelry on, rather than *in* him. Still, something about this stranger is different than all other men I’ve run into in the last few years. He doesn’t send my internal red flag up the pole, and his presence doesn’t cause me to urgently pack up my cards and haul ass into daylight, either.

I hope I’m not being foolish, but my gut is good. I don’t think this bro, who looks like his name would be Kelly or Slater, is a bad guy.

“What’s your name?” he asks me, as I’m wondering about his. It makes me smile, and damn, it feels good not to force it. But after a moment, the guilt that lives inside me reaches up and pulls the edges of my mouth back into a frown.

“It was beautiful while it lasted,” he says. He must be talking about my smile because his eyes drift across my lips before he responds. “My name is Silas. My friends call me Si.”

I smile. “I thought maybe it was like Kelly or something.” He returns the smile, and we seem to be locked in an emotionally dense moment, Si and me. “You look like a surfer or skater or something.”

He straightens up, bowing his chest and shoulders out proudly. With a broad smile, he nods. “I’m pleased to give off that vibe. I do indeed skate and surf.” He locks his fingers together on top of the table.

I raise an eyebrow. “Surf? We’re at least an hour from the water, maybe more.”

“I don’t do it as much as I used to when I lived right on the beach. But a few times a month, I make the drive early in the morning, catch some swells, then head back to the city.”

I lick my lips. “You had a place on the beach, and you chose to move here?” I don’t really even know if I like the beach. In fact, I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t. Having sand everywhere sounds pretty awful. I just know that *anywhere* is better than the city.

I used to not mind the city. It helped me not feel alone. Without Mattias, it doesn’t matter how many millions of people are stuffed into the buildings all around me. I’m still alone.

“I own a board shop downtown,” he says, slowly studying me as I process the information. My face contains no reaction, but internally, I’m a bit surprised. He doesn’t seem old enough or, well, *responsible* enough. Bracelets and tangled hair don’t scream *business owner*.

“Oh yeah?”

He nods, tucking hair behind his other ear now. “I own one by the beach, but it was time to expand. I wanted to be here to open it and get it on its feet for the first few years.”

I curl my lips downward and nod. “Cool.”

He grins. “Very cool.”

I noticed then that his lashes are dark and thick and... I think of Mattias. And the guilt tears through me again. As if our hands being near one another lessens my devotion to Mattias, I pull my hands off the table, and a few cards that stick to the heel of my palm sail through the air to the ground.

Hastily and somewhat embarrassed, I swipe them too eagerly from the patch of concrete below the table and scrape my fingertip.

“Shoot,” I exclaim, pulling it up to my mouth, pressing my lips to the hot, torn skin. I look at it, and the pad of my finger is pink, blood slowly rising to the surface. When it takes a minute for the blood to surface, you know it’s going to be bad.

Silas rises, coming to my side of the table. He doesn’t touch me, but he hovers over me and narrows his eyes on the finger I’m cradling to my chest like a broken wing. The finger doesn’t hurt that bad, but I’m suddenly uncomfortable with how comfortable I am with him behind me.

I don’t like it. Neither does my guilt.

I jump up and take a step back from him. Slowly, his head falls to the side, and his eyebrows cinch together.

“Are you afraid of me?” he asks in a tone so soft and docile it couldn’t be misconstrued as threatening, no matter what.

I shake my head. “We’re alone in a park, and I’m a female,” I state as if he didn’t know any of that. But it’s true; backing up from him should and *does* make sense.

Except, I’m not doing it for those reasons.

I’m doing it because it feels *good* being near him, and I don’t want that. I don’t want that at all.

“My shop is just up the street,” he says, nodding beyond the bank on the edge of the park. “Let’s get your finger bandaged.”

I look back in the direction of the club, a few blocks away. Then I look back at him. “Okay,” I reply, then, out of sheer self-obligation, I add, “I’m going to text my boss and tell him I’m with you, in case I don’t show up to work later.”

He lifts his brows, his lips twitching like he’s fighting off a smile. “You better show up to work then because I don’t want you playing hooky and your boss thinking I kidnapped you.”

I eye him as he fights the smile, then text my boss. Because even though I don’t feel like I need to, again, at some point, some woman thought she was safe with *Ted fucking Bundy*.

“Where do you work, anyway?” he asks as we collect cards. He passes his portion to me, and I stack his against mine, banding them all before dropping the deck into my bag. We walk to the edge of the park as I adjust my bag, tugging my hair from under the strap.

“I work at Envy.”

He doesn’t react like most people do. Instead, he nods. “What do you do there?”

I begin to answer but lose my voice when I feel his large hand tug a piece of long, stray honey-colored hair from under my bag strap. His fingers work through the tangle gently before he drapes the piece over my shoulder. The ends fall well below my breasts, but he doesn’t look.

I smooth my hand over the untangled piece. “Thanks.”

We continue to walk.

“I work the booth up front, and sometimes I serve drinks in the VIP, but not often.”

He nods, stuffing his hands into his pockets. Will I get to feel his hand again? It was nice. I actually shake my head at the thought, hating that it came into my head. He glances at me as we put more and more sidewalk behind us.

“What?”

“What?” I question back.

“You shook your head.”

Damn, he saw that. “Nothing, it’s nothing,” I say, studying the tip of my finger as we walk because I have to put my focus on something –*anything* but him.

I look past him into the shop we’re walking past. *Get Cut then Dye* is painted on the mirrored window in beautiful pink calligraphy. On top of the words, our reflection takes me by surprise. Silas is medium-height, definitely taller than me but probably a tiny bit shorter than Mattias. His build is slim and trim, and while Mattias wasn’t a bodybuilder, he definitely has more bulk than Si, even in his current lean state.

I never expected to like my reflection. Mattias showed me how, made me feel beautiful. Then I never expected to like my reflection *with another man*.

But I do.

His knuckles brush against mine with intention, and I look up at him.

“What’s your name?”

For some reason, we both stop walking. I look over my shoulder. The club is a ways away now. Turning back to Silas, he’s smiling and his white teeth contrast his light pink lips—my own lips tingle, and I wonder how he kisses.

Sweat beads along my spine, and my neck grows hot. I don’t want to kiss Silas. What’s wrong with me? Taking one step back, I tuck my hair behind my ears, gnawing a bit at the side of my mouth before responding.

“Gennedy,” I finally tell him.

“Gennedy.” He repeats it. A lot of people do. It’s not a common name. “Do you go by Gen?”

I nod. “Sometimes.”

“Do you go by anything else?” He’s still smiling, and it’s not smarmy at all, which is... *surprising*. And nice.

I shake my head.

“Come on, Gennedy,” he nods to the shop two feet down from us. “That’s my shop.”

He bandages my finger in a comfortable silence that he seems to know I need. He drives me to the club and waits at the curb like a dad, making sure I get inside. He wanted my phone number.

I said no.

Because I already have a boyfriend.

He gave me his number instead.

Chapter 9

Current Day, Age 22

“Thirty dollars,” I state, hardly looking up, sliding my palm underneath the plexiglass partition.

The man pays with a card. Which means he’s single.

Single guys pay the entry fee with a card to save their cash for the girls inside.

Married or attached guys—or guys with less reputable jobs—pay cash for everything all night.

I run the card, he signs, and I hand it back. The next group of horny, eager men approaches the window.

The leader of the pack slides a roll of bills under the partition towards me. “I got this, sweetheart. All five of those deadbeats, let them in on my dime.” He keeps the bills in his grip as I try to take them, which means he wants eye contact.

Men do this to me all the time. I fight the urge to roll my eyes and point a finger down my throat because *god*.

I am *not* impressed by this fuckhead paying for him and his buddies to come harass struggling women all night.

Still, I’m working, so I look at him.

He is what I expected. Swollen with steroids and pre-workout, skin sprayed orange, tribal tattoos eating their way up his trunk of a neck. His collared dress shirt is unbuttoned far too much, giving me a very sleazy, Hugh Hefner vibe, and around his neck are two large gold chains, outfitted with diamond-encrusted crosses. His hair is styled to the heavens,

gelled into stiff peaks. I can smell his nauseating and overdone body spray from here.

He is the average strip club customer.

I count his bills after giving him the tiniest courtesy smile, and my grin grows when he ushers his crew inside. They're all wearing jeans that have studs ornamenting the pockets in Fleur-de-lis styles.

Letting the smirk fall away, I turn my attention to the next customer. My breath catches in my throat. My hands fall to my lap, where I smooth them over the ridge of my thighs.

"Este," I say his name, but he doesn't smile. *He knows his name.*

I don't know what else to say. Men bustle up behind him, peering around him, and I ignore their impatience.

He steps towards me before leaning down to get his mouth closer to the small speaker centered in the plexi.

"I just got back in town," he spoke softly into the speaker, and somehow, despite the bustle of tit-hungry men all about, I *only* heard him. "You're my first visit."

The words "I've missed you" are heavy on my tongue, but the setting isn't right. "I get off at three; I need some sleep, but want to meet me for breakfast?"

His dark eyes swim over my face a few times before he nods.

"That place on the corner, where we used to go?" I offer.

"See you there at eight," he agrees.

I don't know where he's staying, and though he knows I'm not living in the apartments next to the diner anymore, it's a place we both know.

He turns around to face the buzzing men behind him, and as soon as they take in his appearance, their jeers and complaints slow to a crawl.

The black marks around his eye, tattooed there years ago as a reminder to on-lookers that he is not to be fucked with, do

something to people the first time they see him. Then, as expected, their eyes move collectively to his shaved head, then down the column of his thick, tattooed neck.

He doesn't look like someone who appreciates impatient assholes.

They step back, he glances at me long enough to wink, and then he's gone.

"Who was that?" the girl working the booth with me tonight asks.

She's new. I think her name is Chelsea or something. I turn to face her. Her eyelids are streaked with color and glitter, her large false lashes forcing her lids down a bit.

"My boyfriend's cousin," I answered. She doesn't need to know, but more importantly, she won't remember.

Este isn't Mattias's real cousin, but I may be the only one who knows that. Este lived in our neighborhood, too, but when Mattias went away, he moved too.

At age eighteen, I moved in with Michelle for a couple of years. Este came by every so often with whatever he could at the time. Sometimes gift cards for department stores, so Michelle, Angus, and I had new clothes. Other times he'd bring small-sum scratcher lotto tickets, cases of food, or crates of wine.

I'm not an idiot. I know Este made money by boosting things and pawning or reselling them. He tried to keep me on his schedule and bring me things, which is pretty nice considering I'm not Mattias's old lady, not officially. He had no obligation to me, and yet he did what he could. He had contact with Mattias, too, though I know he wasn't able to visit the prison in person like I could.

THE REST OF THE NIGHT GOES BY HOW IT USUALLY DOES. Sweaty, red-faced men try to impress me with their wads of stinky cash. I put wristbands on and give small, appeasing fake smiles until I smell the coffee brewing from inside the club

behind me. When the club manager starts making coffee, I know we're past closing. After counting my register drawer twice, I take the zipped pouch of earnings to the manager, grab my purse, and blink up at the moon as I make my way to the car.

The darkest part of night always seems to be right now, *right* when I'm leaving the club. An hour from now, the sun will start its ascent, but at three in the morning, the only light comes from my cell phone. Not even the moon is visible, as the parking lot attached to the club is lined with large, overgrown trees. How they provide no shade during the day but block out the moon at night is *beyond* me.

I leave the club with a bouncer pacing behind me, making sure I don't get assaulted or kidnapped, solicited, or followed. I lift my hand in acknowledgment as I reach my car. He recesses into the shadows, and I pull out of the small parking lot, alone and tired.

After taking off my makeup and braiding my hair, I pull on a pair of well-loved and very worn plaid pajama pants. They are Mattias's. I sleep in something of his every night. His scent is long gone, but still, the fact that they once held him is enough to bring me a sliver of peace.

Even though I'm eager to see Esteban, working nights never get less tiring. With my alarm set, I drift off easily.

THE ALARM GOES OFF, AND I'VE GIVEN MYSELF JUST ENOUGH time for a messy top-knot, sweats, and the drive there. When I push inside, my wallet and cell phone tucked in my armpit; I see Este in a booth. He's sitting up, his large fingers pinching a spoon he swirls around a mug. Steam drifts towards his face, which is pointed down to the drink. He doesn't look up until I'm sitting across from him, placing my items on top of the table next to the napkin dispenser.

The coffee is dark, like the ink on his face. On the surface, an almost-melted ice cube drifts from one side of the tan porcelain to the other. He takes a sip, and then our eyes meet.

A grin slowly takes hold of my face, seeing Esteban again. The sadness that comes with any sort of happiness these days is there, brewing in my belly as I reach across the table and squeeze his hand. Esteban being here is yet another unneeded reminder that Mattias isn't, but I smile through the pain.

"I'm so happy to see you."

He only gives me a half-smile, but I know him. It's all his hardened exterior will allow, so it's as much of a victory as anything.

"I am, too, Gen. How's my cousin?"

My smile starts its descent, and I move my ears to keep it up as long as possible.

"He's okay," I say as truthfully as possible.

"You still see him every week?"

"Three times a week," I correct him because the thought of just once a week sends a shiver down my spine. Three times a week isn't nearly enough, but once would be pure torture.

It'd happened before, a few times. I'd shown up, rocked on my feet eagerly at the guard's desk, waiting to hand them my ID and be approved to see him. Only to be told he's in the shu for an entire week and to come back after then.

He said he couldn't tell me why he'd been put in the solitary housing unit when I'd ask. It was something dark he'd been forced to do, no doubt, and wasn't proud of it. The second time he was put there, I didn't bother asking why. Whatever he did, he did it to protect himself, and as long as it didn't extend his sentence, I supported his choices.

"When you seeing him again?"

Hope lifted inside me for a moment, thinking of Mattias's reaction to seeing his cousin again after a few years of being locked up. But that quickly waned because I knew Este wouldn't be doing that.

Criminals don't visit locked-up criminals.

“In a couple of days,” I said after quickly eyeing the screen of my phone to verify that today is Saturday. Unless I am meeting Angus or seeing Mattias, the days just run together, one right into the next. Nothing memorable to separate one from the other.

“Can you deliver a message?”

The waitress meanders up, pulling a pencil from behind her ear. I don’t need to look at a menu; this is one of the only places I have ever eaten out at. It’s on the right side of town for people like us, which automatically puts it within my still-limited budget.

I order my food and a large coffee to-go, though we’re eating in. It’s a strategy because the to-go cup is bigger than the in-house mugs. She’ll come check on us a few times and refill it each time, so I will get much more. Este’s eyebrows pull together impatiently, and I think it’s a day I’m going to need *a lot* of caffeine.

“You get messages to him all the time.” I sound nervous or scared, but I’m not. What I really am is selfish because if I have to give him anything—even if it’s just words, it lessens our time together. It takes away from his focus, which is me. And I’m starved for his attention, addicted to his gaze, desperate for his words.

Este shifts in the booth, the vinyl squealing as it drags against his leather jacket.

“I’m leaving again, got some work up in Canada.”

“Canada,” I repeat, thinking it sounds even farther and more foreign than it would have just a few minutes ago. To know someone living in another country is a lot different than just knowing it exists. I’m ready to ask why as the waitress brings over my coffee, housed in a large Styrofoam cup.

Once she’s gone, I don’t have to ask.

“I’m going to be up there for a while,” he says, rolling his curled knuckles to the inside of the opposite palm. They pop; he switches hands and takes another drink of his coffee.

Casual, nonchalant, as if leaving the country for a few years is no big deal. To him, I guess it isn't.

“Why?”

His face remains expressionless as he slowly tilts his head to the side, wordlessly telling me I know better. “Work,” he answers finally. I purse my lips and give a single nod.

“What’s the message?” I ask, knowing full well I’m going to do this favor for Este, no matter what it is. Even if the message is a dangerous delivery, he’ll code it to protect me because that’s what these men do. They take care of and protect the people they love.

He takes another drink of his coffee, and I study the dark ring of liquid where his cup was resting. I don’t want my measly thirty minutes to bear any weighty information or news, but I know I don’t have a choice. I look back up at him, his dark eyes are so much darker than I even remember. They’re almost black.

They aren’t real cousins, but Esteban and Mattias share quite a few features. Tall, tanned but naturally brown skin, dark hair, and sharp jawlines. It could be the fact that they’re both Mexican-American, or it could be the fact that they’d been forced to act “hard” and be men long before they should have.

Maybe parents weren’t lying when they said if you cross your eyes too long, they’d stay like that. Maybe that’s what happens to men like Esteban and Mattias. Act tough long enough you forget how to be soft.

Though I know that theory doesn’t hold weight because as rough as Mattias comes off, I know him, and he’s anything but cold and scary. He’s open arms and safety, understanding and wisdom, reprimand followed with praise.

Not just the sharp jaw and piercing eyes. Which, by the way, comes across as more hot than scary, to me at least.

“Soon.”

My mouth goes dry, and I’m pretty sure my heart both stops and grows louder in my ears. My lips stick together as

the word falls out. “Soon.”

He nods, and then, for the first and probably last time ever, Esteban smiles broadly. “Yes, soon.”

Chapter 10

“I ’m gonna slide my tongue through those sweet lips, princess.” His breath is hot against my neck. My body rushes with warmth. I lift my hips and gyrate to find him. He’s hard and heavy between my spread legs. Cock resting against my mound, he licks up the side of my neck. The gesture sent a pang through my chest, making my nipples achy and hard.

He kisses behind my ear. “Then I’m going to bury my face in that shrine of yours.” He bites the bottom of my earlobe. It’s hard enough to make me moan.

He licks over the evidence of his bite. “I’m going to eat you until you can’t take it.” He moves down my body, stopping to cup his mouth over my clothed breast. Sucking my nipple through my thin tank top, he groans against me. I feel it vibrate through my chest like a bass through a speaker.

He yanks me to the end of the bed and drops off the side to his knees. Hanging my legs over his shoulders, he lowers his mouth to my sex. I’m breathing so hard; the edges of my consciousness grow fuzzy. My mouth is devoid of moisture.

“And what will you do when you feel that good?” His head disappears between my spread thighs, then his finger tugs my panties to the side. My lower half quivers at his fingertips graze my swollen pussy.

His small touches always make me so wet. The way he mindlessly strokes the tips of his fingers up my forearm as he reads or listens to music...

It makes me feel so fucking good.

“I’m going to come,” I whimper.

I don’t want to talk anymore. I want to feel him now. But he loves to hear it, so I give it to him. My lips twist to the side, and I blink lazily at him, playing dumb.

“Where will you come, princess?” he growls the question, and I love that he *works for it* with me.

He nudges my pussy open with his nose before smashing his closed lips to my clit. He rubs them up and down, purring against me to tease me. It works.

I’m holding my knees and biting my bottom lip as he works my pussy with his talented tongue. With the tip, he swirls tight circles around my nerves, making them hot and sensitive. Then he slows down and uses the thick pad to tongue me up and down. Up slowly, down the same way. His thumbs work my thighs as he sends commands into my open sex.

“Say it, Gennedy.”

“I’m going to come on your tongue and in your mouth,” I whisper through indiscernible exhales of pleasure. I’m breathing hard like I always do when he does these things to me. The truth is, I like the dirty talk because I like seeing him so turned on. But I wouldn’t be brave enough to explore it without him.

He makes it safe.

“Good girl.” And then he continued his mind-blowing oral techniques, alternating speeds and sensations to keep me needy. When I opened my eyes and looked down at the man between my spread legs, I let go.

“I’m going to come,” I panted, grabbing my breasts over my top, pinching my own nipples. He growled his pleasure at that as he ate me, shaking his face against my arousal. The sound of his wet lips moving through mine sent a rush of urgency low in my stomach.

My release came, urgent and hot, zipping down my spine. Spreading like wildfire through my pussy.

“Yes,” I begged as he ate me more hungrily, wild and raw. His face was slick, and I could smell myself in the air. “I’m going to come now,” I panted. “Now.”

“*Now?*”

“*Now?*”

“Gennedy, do you want to go *now* or not?”

His masculine voice shook me awake, as well as his palm on my bare shoulder. I blinked a few times, needing a moment to calibrate. Heat and dampness pulsed between my thighs. God. I was just about to come –an orgasm in my sleep.

One of my many Mattias dreams.

I push out a breath and roll to my back, smiling up at him.

“I’m going to the gym, Gen. But if you wanna go, you gotta get up now.”

I push my fingers through his hair and move my hand to his cheek. My thumb drags over his full bottom lip, and he nips at me playfully. He is a beautiful man.

He sucks my finger into his mouth, and his eyes grow murky as his tongue wraps around me. My dream serves as foreplay, and I reach down between us.

I find him warm and still a little soft. But as I trail the tips of my fingernails up the curve of him, he begins to harden. My pussy pulses at the feel of him getting aroused for me.

“Fuck me,” I say to him, tilting my chin up to give him access to my mouth.

He laughs off my plea and places a chaste kiss across my lips.

“I’ll make love to you, Gennedy,” he softly says. His heavy palm smooths down my cheek then neck, ending on my collarbone. The weight of him draped against me complements the pressure between my legs. I feel so good when he touches me. Better than I want, and it scares me.

I want to close my eyes and get lost in the darkness inside my head. I want to be fucked while I'm lost up there, not thinking, only feeling. But I don't argue for a pounding because I know he won't give it.

Instead, I spread my legs and watch him climb over me, kicking off his boxers during the position change.

I look down at his thick cock bobbing between us. He's wide and long, heavy with a perfect crown. I think about running my tongue around the edges of him all the time. And his foreskin, don't get me started.

It's sexy and perfect, and when I think of him tugging it down and making himself come on his muscled belly? Yeah, that's panty-creaming material.

My body thrums—literally thrums—on the mattress beneath him. He cages me in, penetrating me slowly, his hips working in small, gentle strokes. Since I'm slick and ready for him, I lift my hips and get more friction. He groans as his head breaches me. A sigh of relief leaves me because *now I can relax*.

I grind against him, looking to relieve the all-consuming ache between my thighs. I want him. I do. But he isn't the only one I want.

And that hurts.

I need to feel good to bury the hurt.

“Make me feel good, Silas, please,” I beg him.

He does.

Chapter II

“Come on, Gennedy, one more time.”

I tip my head to my shoulder in exaggerated fatigue, letting my eyes fall shut.

“Genn,” he whines loudly. The table jumps a little as he eagerly slaps his palms against its surface.

Opening my eyes, I remain expressionless for a few more seconds. He bites his cheek, eyes dancing chaotically between mine.

“Fine,” I finally say. “Just one more.”

He thanks and praises me, the smile on his face huge. I was always going to play one more. But I like messing with him a little.

“Try winning this one,” I say as I casually shuffle the faded deck of Bicycle playing cards.

He barks out a laugh, which turns quickly to a cough. He’s had that cough for a while. I slide around the circular metal table at the park and rest my palm on his back. Smoothing up and down as he coughs, I grab his inhaler from his backpack with my free hand. I’ve done this plenty of times.

With a shake and click, he inhales as I hold it steady to his lips.

“Thanks,” he says with a shy smile once his lungs have settled.

I wave a hand through the air to say it's nothing. But I never really say it. Because I want him to believe it's nothing, not make him feel bad, and if I speak, he will hear the concern in my voice.

Angus has been asthmatic since I can remember, when I started watching him when he was just two, at least. It only seems to be getting worse in the last year, though.

I slide back to my side of the table and finish shuffling. He likes it when I go back to normal and move on. It helps to diffuse the environment around us, too. If Angus goes on a long-winded coughing jag, but we behave normally right afterward people go back to their lives sooner. And that's what Angus wants.

After splitting the deck evenly, I pass Angus his portion. Then we start.

Turn your card over, eyeball the cards, take both if yours is the higher of the two. War.

I'd begun to teach Angus some other games, like free cell and solitaire. I wanted to teach him poker, too, but I thought it best to wait a few more years.

We played our final game of war, and as luck would have it, I happened to get dealt the better cards yet again.

"Sorry, buddy," I said, ruffling my fingers through his soft, caramel hair. "This one's more about the luck of the deal than anything else."

He tapped his finger to the lens of his glasses. "Like these. Born with needing them, can't help that."

I wrinkled my forehead at his comment. I didn't like that he viewed glasses as a flaw.

"Yeah, you were born needing them, so they are part of you. But wearing glasses isn't a pro or a con. It's just a thing. Nothing to feel good or bad about."

He nodded, but his face said yeah, sure. It made me a little sad to know that Angus had a tough road ahead of him because he is such a good kid.

“Mom’s coming home in thirty minutes. Wanna get ice cream first?” I wiggled my brows conspiratorially. He grinned, and we walked down to the corner store for ice cream.

ONCE I’D GOTTEN ANGUS’S HANDS WASHED AND HIS ICE-cream-streaked t-shirt off, Michelle came home. She looked tired. She had to work again later, too, but Angus was going to his grandmother’s house tonight.

We chatted for a bit, I text messaged her some pictures I took of Ang earlier, and then I said goodbye.

“You ever wish you still lived upstairs?” Angus asked me unexpectedly as I leaned down for a goodbye shoulder hug.

I smiled at him to mask the sadness that reared inside me at the question. Every day I wish I could live there again, with Mattias.

“Sometimes,” I lied. “I like driving. You’ll like it when you can do it, too.” That part was true.

He looked like he didn’t believe me, and sometimes I think Angus saw the real me as much as Mattias did.

“See you tomorrow, kiddo.” Michelle and I exchanged a tired hug, and I left. I drove my battered teal car back to my small, white stucco house. I take in an extra breath and a minute to myself before I open the backdoor.

The small house was crammed with big smells, all of them good. Chicken and vegetables in the oven, coffee brewing, a candle burning. I sniffed again, recognizing the scent of pine-sol, too. I looked around the small dining area attached to the kitchen, then down the hall. The house was spotless.

He’d moved in last week. We’d decided it was best. It was time. All of us decided.

The house is clean. I should be happy, right. Like, don’t most women complain about this shit? But instead of feeling grateful, I feel angry.

Irritation pricks at my skin like hot ants stinging against it. I feel jumpy and unsteady on my feet from stress, too.

“Gennedy,” he says my name before he greets me. Always. I like it. I do. But I put my palm up, keeping a small distance between our bodies. He stills, then raises his hands in surrender.

He doesn’t speak, and his calmness is one of the things I love about him. But right now, I don’t want to feel my love for him. At this moment, my love for him feels like it’s stealing from my love for Mattias, and I can’t let that happen.

I promised him. I promised him I’d wait for him.

Silas knows that, too.

“I miss him right now,” I admit awkwardly like I have freely done over the last year. “The house...” I trail off, but Silas nods slowly, understanding just what I’m feeling. The way he always does. And that’s another reason I love him. I twist my lips together to keep them from trembling. Right now, I hate that I love Silas because I miss Mattias so fucking much.

“I just always thought we’d be here together.” I want to add *but I love you, and I’m glad you’re here*. But I don’t. I hate that I don’t, but I just can’t find the energy.

Silas rests his hands on my cheeks, tilting my face to his. His long, blonde hair is unruly right now, tangled and a bit greasy. He’s been working on this place all day and hasn’t showered yet. I can see it, and it’s sexy.

My lips curl a tiny bit in response to him. He smooths a thumb over my bottom lip and smiles.

“You will be here with him one day. When he comes back.” He smiles, and I don’t know how he does that. I don’t know how he gives me safety by painting a picture of my future that doesn’t include him. Only to turn around and hold me, feed me, make love to me... it can’t be easy. He loves me as much as I love him.

But I’ve been straight with him about things since day one. A year ago, when we met, I told him that I wasn’t able to give him forever.

He said he'd be part of my game of life, even if he was just a temporary player. As long as we had time together, that's all that mattered. He made it so easy to have everything without giving everything, which is exactly what I needed.

I wanted a man to touch me. I wanted someone to eat with. I wanted a secret-holder and a best friend, in the flesh. But I didn't want to give him my forever. My promises of *ever after*. And Silas obliged.

He is a special man.

"I'm sorry," I croak out in a broken whisper, emotion thick in my tone. I move his hands off my face, down to my hips, and close the step between us. My chest heaves against his; then, with a slow sizzling passion, his lips find mine.

He kisses me so unhurried that it makes me impatient, but that's how Silas does things. And with how I'm feeling, I'd rather get lost in him physically than think about things again.

For the trillionth time.

I'm *here* now, so I need to be *in* the here and now. Mattias always says that.

But then Silas pushes away from the kiss and cups my face.

"I'm going to see him tomorrow," he says, going in for a kiss. This time it's me who pushes him back a bit.

"What?" He's never gone to see him by himself. Ever. He always goes with me. "You mean, you want to go?" I say, thinking I'm clearly clarifying his statement.

Because, why would he want to go alone? "You want me to take you?" I ask, my eyes drifting between his, searching for obvious answers. I only find more confusion in them.

Silas shakes his head. "No, Gennedy. I'm going to see him by myself. After lunch." He kisses the tip of my nose and leaves me confused in the living room. He is plating up dinner and commanding Alexa to deejay for him while I stand there, wondering...

Why is Silas going to go see Mattias by himself?

Chapter 12

Knowing that Silas has plans to visit Mattias later, I make plans to visit him first. Sounds petty; maybe it is. I tell myself it's only so that I can deliver Esteban's ominous message. But in all truth, I'm going to barrage him with one question: *why?*

Why is he asking to see Silas alone?

No, I don't *know* know that Mattias has somehow reached out to Silas and asked him to come. But I know he did. Because Silas doesn't plot, he doesn't veer from his intentional heart. Going to see Mattias without me is *a Mattias move*.

I just don't know why.

I plan on finding out, though.

I tug my long hair up into another messy top knot, pull on my jeans, throw on a hoodie, and call it good. The first year I visited him, I showed up to that prison looking like it was school picture day. Every freaking visit. But to feel comfortable, I learned, I had to be comfortable.

Mattias always contended that he liked me better with my hair messy and no makeup on, anyway. Said it reminded him of the days when all we had was each other and some candy bars. How we didn't worry about what we looked like because we didn't have the luxury. It was hard, he'd said, but sometimes I look back, and it seems so simple.

Poverty can be simple. It forces you to focus on the essentials, which are food, hygiene, and a roof, not always in that order.

Also, looking like a college student after a frat party was my normal since I had to get “dolled up” at night for the club. If I even so much as painted on an eyebrow before then, Silas would probably wonder where I was going.

I didn’t want him to know. Not yet, at least. I didn’t want to lie—he didn’t deserve to be lied to, but I hated thinking that Silas was going to share something with Mattias that didn’t include me.

I love Silas.

I love Mattias.

But the idea of them meeting without me... I don’t like it.

I decide on telling Silas that I’m going to stay with Angus for a few hours. It’s Monday; he’s not well and skipping school. In less than a minute, my lie is sorted out.

Padding down the hall with sleep still fogging my brain, I blink Silas into focus. He’s pouring boiling water from a stainless carafe into a single-serve pour-over contraption. I never thought I’d consume anything fancy. Now my boyfriend makes me fresh pour-over every morning.

I smile when our eyes meet, and my heart dances a bit quicker against my ribs. His beach-blond hair is up in a matching top knot, his slender and lightly muscled body on full display. Riding low on his hips are a pair of running shorts. Small running shorts. His thighs are pumped from his run, and his skin glistens from the hard work.

“Gennedy,” he says my name before resting the water carafe on the counter.

Slowly, he walks to me and wraps his arms around my waist. He smells like an attempt at deodorant was made, though it was likely environment-conscious and therefore useless. My cheek glides against his chest as he pulls me tight to his damp body.

I can easily admit now that I like to be hugged by Silas. It’s not overpowering muscles; there’s no alpha grip or whispered words of sin. Silas feels safe and comfortable, and the gentle passes he makes up and down my spine with a

tender touch—they make me feel protected emotionally. I can't explain it. His aura is what keeps me together, even when I'm mad at myself for loving him.

“Where are you headed this morning?” he asks, sizing up my clothes. He then returns to the coffee, rids the contraption of the used grounds, and begins to rinse it over the sink, his eyes on mine.

He's smiling broadly at me, and it's impossible not to return it. Between the sight of his shirtless body and the scent of his musky skin still in my nose, there's a tingle deep inside me. I lick my lips and try to push away thoughts of being taken by him under our comforter, trapped with our own body heat and no lights.

Memories of sweat rolling down the hollow of my spine flood my mind. My brain grows tingly and fuzzy as I remember how he fishes his thick fingers through my hair, holding my head as he saws himself in and out of my spread legs.

I clear my throat to remember what I'm doing.

I'm *lying* to him.

I swallow and sip the coffee he's made for me. It burns my tongue and the side of my cheek; I force it down anyway.

“Ang isn't feeling well, so Michelle's letting him stay home today. I'm just going to go check on him,” I lie, hating that it sounds so believable. Because if it's that good, it must mean it's easy for me. And I don't want to be a person who easily lies to people they love.

That's the type of people my parents are. Or, were, I guess.

When Mattias got locked up, I immediately moved in with Michelle until I was ready to move into the house he'd purchased for us. After a year of staying with Michelle and Ang, I finally moved.

On my way out of the apartment complex, I ran into my father.

It was so surreal, seeing someone who is so deeply and irrevocably part of who I am... and yet, he was a complete stranger. It made me sad for us both in those first few seconds we stood there.

He looked worse than I remembered, and I remembered him looking like a bag of flaming shit.

A drug user for years. That's what he looked like.

"Your mother ran off on me, being greedy, and got herself killed."

That's what he said to me before he scratched madly at the base of his throat, then below his cheekbone. Then he coughed, spat, and walked away. I didn't speak a single word. At least, for once, he told me the truth about something.

"Oh, that's a bummer, poor Ang," Silas said, shaking his head in sympathy. My chest went hot right then because I felt extra shitty for lying, seeing how loving Silas was being.

But I have to know why he's going to see Mattias without me. I have to know why and how they have a relationship separate from me.

A week after I met Silas, I'd gone to see Mattias.

I told him *everything*.

That a man had approached me in the park, that I was attracted to him, things like that. Mattias had questions about Silas, questions that I couldn't answer right then. But after all of his questions, I'll never forget how somber his face went for a good thirty seconds. Then he looked at me, his dark eyes piercing, full of intention.

"We stay together, you and me, Gen. But you need a man in your life, one that isn't in a cage." He swallowed; his gaze trained on me. I remember crying, but I wasn't making a single sound. Tears rolled silently, hot and fast, down my cheeks as my nose grew wet and my lungs burned in agony.

"Start seeing him. We stay honest with each other; that's how we make it." He took a breath. For a moment, my eyes unfocused, and he became an orange blur. I wiped away the

tears with the backs of my wrists and swiped under my nose once, too.

When I looked back at him, he had the phone pinched to his ear with his shoulder, free hand pressed to the plexiglass dividing us. He never did that.

“I love you, Gen. But I want you to be taken care of until I’m out of here. Date him. Find out if he’s a good guy. And if he is, bring him in.”

When I’d fallen in love with Silas after just three months of dating, I cried for nearly a week. My face was so swollen that I had to put bagged peas on it before heading to the club. I felt so guilty. And I hated that I had to tell Mattias that I’d fallen in love with Si. Imagining his face... It made me sick to my stomach with stress.

But I promised to stay honest.

The day I told Mattias that I loved Silas did not go as I’d expected. I thought he’d be angry; I thought he’d be hurt, I wondered if he’d end it. I thought I would die if he ended it, truly, because there wasn’t a version of Gennedy that existed without Mattias.

“I love him, Mattias. I didn’t want to love him but,” I shook my head, focused on his eyes through the barrier between us. They were foggy, or maybe mine were foggy, or both. I blinked madly, determined not to lose sight of his beautiful but ominous darkness. “I do. But here’s something you have to believe,” I’d said, inching my way as close to him as I possibly could. At that moment, I would have sold my soul to the devil himself to be in Mattias’s arms. To smell his familiar scent, musky and masculine. To taste his full lips and feel his tongue move against mine. I understood people who made deals with the devil right then.

“I’m still waiting for you.” I swallowed down the knot of pain that had been living inside of me since he’d been incarcerated. “He knows,” I added, trying not to sound panicked. But I was panicking, for so many reasons. I didn’t want to hurt him, and I couldn’t lose him, either. “He knows

I'm committed to you. I told him that we're going to be together when you're out.... Whenever that is."

Mattias lifted his chin, his chest spanning the small space in front of him as he puffed it out with confidence. Even in his jumpsuit, his strong and silent demeanor did things to me. Made me needy and desperate. I pulled my legs together under the small tabletop.

"Bring him here. We need to meet." He gave me a slight curl of his lips; I wouldn't even call it a smile. But it wasn't a grimace, and I took that as a victory.

"I love you," I said, no longer trying to control the tears.

What was the point? I felt horribly sad. Happy and sad, fused together so intricately that I didn't even know what one felt like without the presence of the other. I pressed my palm to him, and though we were still divided, I felt his love burn through my fingertips and down my arm.

"I love you, too, princess." He dropped his hand, so I did the same. We never actually touched, but I felt the loss of contact inside me everywhere. "Bring him in. I love who you love," he said simply.

At that point, I hadn't read into those words. He was the most supportive man I'd ever met or would ever meet; of that, I was convinced.

When I brought Silas with me to my next visit, I was invisible.

AS SOON AS SILAS AND I STARTED DATING, I MADE HIM FULLY aware of my situation. That I'd been in love with Mattias since I was a young girl, that he'd taken care of me in more ways than imaginable. We stayed up all night that night; Silas starved for stories about Mattias and me. I gave them gladly because it was rare to be able to freely talk about Mattias and our past this way.

Girls at the club didn't care and didn't want to hear it, and three years post-incarceration, Michelle couldn't hear another

word. But Silas, he wanted to know.

I told him how we stole water and food, lived without electricity, and made friends with maintenance men in order to steal showers here and there. Silas listened—yeah—but he asked so many questions, too.

What were his parents like?

Does he have siblings?

Was he arrested often?

Who did he do lawn care with?

And it surprised me even more for the more personal questions.

When did you realize you loved him?

When did you express your love physically?

Is he the only person you've ever loved romantically?

It wasn't just the care he'd put into the questions he'd asked; it was also the bated breath he held while waiting for my response. He cared about me so much that the nitty-gritty details of my past and my love were *important* to him. *Crucial*, it felt.

Over the next few months, he brought up Mattias daily. Asking me things about him. What type of food did he like, what he looked like, details of his legal case. Anytime he had a question, he asked it. He was devoted to knowing and loving Mattias, for my sake, and that made me love him more.

The day I brought Silas to the prison, I realized a few things.

When we entered the small space, a second chair haphazardly shoved next to the first, Mattias rose to his feet. My head volleyed between Mattias's intense gaze, which was fixed on Si, and Silas's blue eyes, which were set on the man on the other side of the partition.

Time stood still as they took each other in. I expected it to be more of a sizing-up than what it actually was. Where I'd expected dogs sniffing around one another, snarled lips

exposing sharp teeth—a warning that they’re both willing to bite to protect me—I was met with something entirely different.

The air was heavy with unspoken affection. It was as if all the things I’d told Silas had made him feel love for Mattias. But you can’t love a man you don’t know, right? And Mattias. The man I’d loved since I knew what love really was, seemed to respect Silas almost immediately. They spoke through the handset, and I only heard Si’s side of things. After eating up most of our time, Si handed me the phone.

My palms were sweaty, and the handset slipped once before I spoke. Adjusting, I gripped it more tightly. This level of nerves was rare for me.

“So…” I let the word fall. “That’s Silas.”

He smiled. Not a partial. Not a slight. But a full smile. I never forgot how handsome his smile was, but seeing it again hurt. It was beyond handsome. It filled me with love and lust, and possibility. His smile made the whole world make sense.

“Gennedy, princess, you did good.”

You did good.

I always wanted to hear his praise. To know that after everything he’d done for me, for us, that I could repay him in some small sort of way by making a good choice on my own.

Mattias and Silas immediately liked each other very much, even though they were polar opposites.

Mattias is my dark and thoughtful man who thrives on protecting the people he loves. With stealth and strength, he provided for us and saved us. He is my dark knight.

Silas is my light and gentle guy, who quietly loves and gives tenderness in place of big actions and strong words. He offers safety and warmth, understanding, and love. He is my prince.

As we left the first visit, I realized I didn’t know what was going to happen, but my gut wasn’t completely filled with dread.

There was some optimism and exhilaration in there, too.

Chapter 13

That night back at the house after meeting Mattias, Silas stripped off my clothes, one item at a time. His pace was unhurried, and he even stopped once to put on house music. The volume was so low I couldn't hear it, but I felt the pulsing beat rise up through my feet from the hardwood floor.

He kissed my forehead, then the tip of my nose, until our lips met. Against them, after a slow, perfect kiss, he spoke.

“Gennedy, do you remember what I told you when we first started dating?” I remember how his voice was quiet, as if we were broaching a sensitive topic.

My mind started working. What was he going to say?

I shook my head, confused as to what he was leading me into.

He stroked his hand down my hair, pushing it out of my face, behind my ear. The way he touched me was more of a whisper of a touch than anything. Always tender and delicate.

“Remember when I told you that I love equally, Gen?” He kissed the tip of my nose again before sliding the straps of my top down the sides of my shoulders. His hands on my rib cage, he shimmied the top down to my waist, then crouched, tugging it to my ankles. I stepped out instinctively.

I remember him saying that. I do. Because I remember thinking it was his tender-hearted way of saying that he would accept Mattias, regardless of his criminal record.

He smoothed the pad of his thumb down the bridge of my nose before cradling my jaw in his hands. Angling my mouth up to his, he sealed his lips to mine. Even his passionate kiss is still soft, his tongue swirling lazily around mine, his moans more of a vibration into my lips than an actual noise.

When we broke apart, we were both panting a little, catching our breath from the kiss. My fingertips trailed over my bottom lip, enjoying how swollen it felt from our contact.

“Well, I think it’s time we talk about that.”

He reached his hand down between our bodies and cupped my sex. I rose to my toes and let my eyes fall closed. After visiting Mattias, Silas and I usually had some very intense, emotional sex. I cried. Sometimes he did, too. I thought because he saw the rawness of my pain, how it felt to be torn between two great loves.

Moving his fingers up and down the seam of my jeans, my forehead fell to his chest.

Applying more pressure to my warm and throbbing pussy, he used his free hand to tilt my chin up. “Do you want to talk?”

I bit my bottom lip.

The question was easy, but the answer felt complicated. I did want to talk. But I was scared to listen. I don’t know why. I trusted Silas with every part of me, and whatever he was about to tell me, it would change things.

Before I could really respond with more than a sad nod of my head, he was unbuttoning my jeans and tugging them down. Pants and panties banded around my ankles; Silas flipped me around. His fingertips grazed my back in a series of predictable movements; then my bra fell to the floor.

“You know I love you, right?” He asked the question while his lips scattered kisses on the back of my neck, at my hairline.

“Yes,” I panted, gripping the counter tightly.

“Do you know that love comes with other things? Respect, admiration, trust...” His words trailed off, but his mouth kept

moving against my hot skin. When his kisses made their way between my shoulder blades, he continued.

“When the woman I love is in love with another person,” he breathed against my skin, his large hands falling to my hips. His kisses fell down my spine like liquid heat, the intensity, and pressure in my sex growing to a painful peak. “That person becomes someone that I want to love, too.”

I nodded and tried to focus on his words, not on his fingertips curling into my hip bones, sending a rush of wetness to my pussy. His hands were so big; everywhere they landed seemed to swallow me up in a way that drove me wild.

“I asked a lot of questions about Mattias.” He kissed until he reached the swell of my bare ass, then he paused. His hands swept to my cheeks, and he pulled them apart slowly. I gasped when I felt his tongue move between my spread ass. Up, he’d lick, then down he’d kiss.

“Everything you told me about him was incredible.” The pad of his tongue discovered parts of me that only Mattias had until now. With one heavy hand on my lower back, he pushed until I folded at the waist, my elbows now on the counter.

The tip of his tongue moved tight circles around my asshole, and when he pushed his finger in, I gasped.

His mouth kissing my bare ass cheek, he whispered, “I’d built him up in my mind, Gen, from everything you shared with me.” He curled his finger inside of me and with gentle force, used his foot to spread my feet apart further.

“I started to feel like I knew Mattias myself. I started to think about him when I wasn’t around you.”

So many thoughts were flooding my mind at that point. I wanted to focus on what he was saying because I knew there was a hidden message, but before I could fight the lusty haze in my brain and ask, he gave me what I wanted.

Pulling his finger out of me, he rose to his feet. Glancing over my shoulder, I could see his blonde hair moving in the peripheral. I heard his zipper.

The weight of his long, thick cock against my ass felt like a breeze of relief rolling through my tense and tightened chest. I don't know why but I felt so edgy, even though he'd been touching me like crazy.

“When I say I love equally, I mean that I fall in love with *people* before anything else.” It was then that I felt the broad head of his large cock pressing up against my pussy from behind. Gripping himself, he moved through my wet lips, gathering my arousal. I loved it when he did that. The little groans of appreciation he made when feeling my wetness always floored me, too. It felt good to know that he enjoyed how much *he* aroused *me*.

“Once I love a person, I love what they come with.”

His hands were back on my hips after he said that, and slowly he began pushing his cock inside of me.

My knees threatened to give in to the intrusion. His hands held my hips more tightly as I repositioned myself on the counter.

“That means when I love a woman, I love making love to a woman.”

He thrust into me again, this time with more speed but still with care. When he pulled himself almost all the way out, leaving nothing but his pulsing cockhead inside of me, he let one hand move from my hips to the back of my neck.

He didn't jerk my head back or tighten his grip around my throat. Rather, he gently kneaded the tension at the top of my spine while he sawed himself in and out of me.

I still remember the moan I gave as my palms gripped the tile countertop.

“And that means when I love a man, I love making love to a man.”

The pressure building inside of me then became too much to bear when I processed those words. My thighs trembled. My belly, too. He read me like a book, the same way Mattias did.

“Take it from me, Gennedy,” he coaxed in a wave of soft and tempting words. “You deserve it, princess, so take it.”

He thrust in and out of me a few more times before I rose to my toes just as my pussy began to spasm around him.

“There you go,” he crooned softly as I began moving up and down his perfect length. With a jolt of my hips, I stuffed his dick inside of me, riding him harder than he’d ever fuck me. I listened to our broken breathing, my ass slapping against his thighs, my wet sex milking his cock until finally, I heard his groan.

We came together because Silas always came when I came. He couldn’t help himself. As he grabbed a paper towel from the roll on the counter and began cleaning me up, I asked him what he meant by what he’d just said.

“You, you love Mattias?” I questioned; confusion evident.

When I no longer felt the cloth between my legs, I bent over and pulled my underwear and jeans up back. Silas scooped my bra and shirt from the floor and motioned for me to stick out my arms. His after-care was something I didn’t know existed until him. The man was an emotional caregiver as much as any other type.

He shimmied my arm through the bra, one strap at a time, then spun me around to hook it closed. When I turned back to him, he held my face in his hands.

His soulful blue eyes twinkled in the dim kitchen light. With his warm release inside of me, his hands on me, I felt the strongest urge to connect with him. Was it that or his words that were making me a pile of vulnerable mush?

I didn’t know.

“I love you, Si,” I whispered, but I hadn’t meant for it to be a whisper. My voice was just weak.

“I love you too, and no, I’m not in love with Mattias.” A lock of his shoulder-length hair fell across his forehead, and he tilted his head, causing his hair to gather on one shoulder. “Not yet. But the foundation, Gen, it’s there.” He kissed my

forehead, between my eyes, and continued to hold my face close to his.

“I’m just saying, Gen, that meeting him today, talking to him, hearing his voice...” Silas lets the sentence hang between us, but I lose his eyes as he gazes off lovingly into the empty kitchen. “I liked him a lot,” he finally finishes.

Confused, happy, a flurry of conflicting emotions running rampant in my veins, I step back from Silas and watch as his hands fall in slow motion down to his sides. His face doesn’t look hurt. He must’ve expected this reaction.

I swallow hard and then push out a steadying breath. “You, uh... wait, what?”

He smiles and flips his hair to the other side of his head. At some point, he’d kicked off his jeans. Now he’s got a post-sex glow and only boxers on.

And he’s telling me he’s attracted to the love of my life.

Chapter 14

I began bringing Silas to each visit with Mattias.

After the first time, they'd spend five of the thirty minutes talking, and now, a year later, I split the thirty minutes down the middle with Si. We each get Mattias for fifteen minutes, three times a week.

Sometimes, I know what they're talking about because of what I hear from Silas's side. Sometimes, I know what they're talking about because Silas or Mattias have told me ahead of time. Like when Mattias wanted some money moved around—Este, his usual right-hand man, was out of the country. Instead, Silas was tasked with those things. Though he owned his own business in two locations, Silas was always eager to help Mattias in any way, shape or form.

No matter what, though, Silas always visited Mattias with me. Together.

On my way to the prison, I decide to focus on Este's message, not on the fantastical ideas that Silas has put into my head over the last nine months.

Ideas that the three of us could actually be together, in the way that I'd envisioned being with just Mattias. Because though we didn't discuss it often—thanks to a far-off release date—I thought about it internally a lot.

It was never something I thought I'd want, simply because it wasn't something I was really aware existed. Sure, I'd walked in on plenty of group sexual acts performed to acquire

drugs (thanks, mom), but I didn't know that the love and care of an actual relationship could be expanded from two to three.

"Soon," I repeated Este's message aloud to myself as a last-ditch effort to keep my brain on track.

Hating that I needed to, I shot Michelle a text message asking her participation in my cover story. Ever the reliable and staunchly loyal friend, she agreed without question. Though I was required to promise her, I'd explain later.

By the time I'd shown the state-issued ID that I'd shown the desk guard at least a hundred times, my baby nerves had become full-grown.

I was ushered into the small meeting space; today, we were fortunate enough for an actual room rather than a cubicle in a row of many. My fingers tangled together in my lap as I waited for the guard to bring him in. The familiar jingle of keys had me on my feet, and then, the door opened, revealing a freshly shaved Mattias, his hair newly cut and his orange jumpsuit looking clean.

His lips twitch with a smile, but he doesn't give me one until the guard leaves, warning us that we have our usual limited amount of time.

"You look really good," I say to him, my voice coming out raspy. I didn't intend to sound like a possessed dog in heat, but damn, he looks good. A flutter of appreciation moves through my belly to my chest, and then I'm hit with the emotion of seeing him.

My eyes grow misty as we settle into chairs across from one another. The guard lingers outside the door. Mattias is a model inmate, earning him some perks. One of those is trusting him with his visitors alone when he gets a room.

Silver bracelets keeping his wrists close, he places his hands on top of the table and outstretches them to me. I take them, and god, does it feel like coming home. His large, warm hands cradling my small ones, the way he purrs Gennedy across the table as his thumbs stroke me. My skin tingles hotly everywhere.

“Why did you come early?” he asks, his voice quiet but powerful. “Where’s Si?”

I fight the urge to pull my hands from him and stomp my foot like my inner child is screaming to do. I won’t act that way because Mattias hasn’t gone behind my back. I won’t allow myself to think that. There is an explanation.

“Why did you ask to see Si without me?” I ask, unable to ease into the question because of so much angst running through me. Raising his linked hands up, away from me, he slowly drags his thumb over his full bottom lip. My eyes track his movement, and my lower half seizes in appreciation of the simmering movement.

“We have a relationship, Gen. You gave me that, you know that?” He leans forward, scooping my hands up again, bringing me relief. I didn’t want to give up his touch so soon. “You always say I saved you, but we save each other every day.”

I stay silent because he shifts in his seat just slightly, his tongue moving across his top lip in thought. I know there’s more, and I’m so eager to hear it.

“I have my cousins, but that’s business, that’s mechanics. Not the same as personal connections. And the way we grew up, we didn’t have a lot of chances to make friends and find loyal people. But you have always been loyal to me. And he’s loyal to you.” He stares into my eyes with an intensity that causes my breath to seize up in my chest. “Now, he’s loyal to us. And that’s because of you.”

“Loyal,” I repeat, stupidly, because I am utterly transfixed by his words.

He nods. “That’s right, princess. You know how fuckin’ rare it is to find loyalty these days?”

He leans back and does a small, sadistic laugh, and I can see the wear of prison in his eyes at that moment. “I asked him to come here without you because I trust him, and I have some things I need taken care of, and I don’t need you to worry.”

My mind races. My eyes flick to the seafoam-colored cement walls, which are chipping and smeared with what I can only hope is dirt. The place is filthy. My stomach feels ill.

“I don’t want you to be in here any longer or for any other charges,” I say, not even trying to be subtle. I don’t know what he’s going to ask Si to do, but I don’t want either of them doing anything illegal. “I can’t lose you for longer. And if I lose him...” I let the sentence hang, and he shakes my hands to bring my eyes to his.

“It’s all good things I’m having him do, Gen. I just don’t want you involved.” He leans forward and drops his voice to a whisper. “You trust me?”

I nod.

“Not a nod. I want to hear it.”

“I trust you.”

He gives me a large smile, and it’s contagious. “Is Gonzo looking?” I know by now that the day shift guard on Mondays and Wednesdays is Gonzo. Without moving my head, my gaze darts to the rectangular window inside the steel door.

“Nope.”

“Kiss me.” He whispers.

It’s been months since our last kiss. Months. I cried the entire drive home last time we kissed. Silas held my hand, rubbed my back, and made my favorite meal when we got home from that visit. It felt cruel to be so sad about another man in the presence of him, but he never made me feel bad.

Rather, he seemed sad, too. As if he understood the tear running through my heart beyond what was reasonable. It only made me hate our situation more. But it made me love them both more, too.

Leaning a little further over the table, our lips meet in a short but mercurial kiss that leaves my face warm and my pussy throbbing.

“I miss you,” I say on a breathy exhale as I let my fingertips roam over the place where his lips were just on

mine. “Esteban came to see me last week.”

The warmth of his face drains, and I’m left with the hardened Mattias that the other inmates must always see. The Mattias that stole for us, the Mattias that stood outside our apartment door to make sure I was protected when the fighting in the complex got out of control, the Mattias who fought men that got too handsy with Michelle at the club.

“What’s the message?” I watch his Adam’s apple dip below the pinched collar of his state-issued jumpsuit. He laces his fingers together atop the table but settles back into his chair slightly as if bracing himself for a bullet.

“Soon,” I reply. “All he said to tell you was soon.”

His shoulders soften, and the tendons of strain running up the column of his neck seem to disappear. His jaw unclenches, and he pushes out a small but relieved breath.

“Fuck,” he groans, almost sexually.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Is he gone?” Mattias asks, and I nod in response.

“Canada for a few years,” I repeat Este’s plan verbatim. Mattias nods somberly before pressing a single fingertip down into the table.

“That’s loyalty, Gen. You see that? And we have that with Silas, now, too. You did that, princess.”

I smile at his rewarding words. But I can’t help but ask the last question on my mind.

“Why didn’t you just tell me you wanted to see Si alone?”

He nods towards me. “Have you been freaking out since he told you?”

Uncomfortably, I nod.

“That’s why. I didn’t want you to worry, but I also didn’t think Si would tell you, at least not until after.” He grins broadly. “See, that’s why I fucking love Silas. Because he’s always honest. Always wanting to do right by you.”

“And you,” I add.

“And me,” he agrees.

Breaching a topic we never discuss, Mattias clears his throat. “My parole hearing is coming up. Don’t get your hopes up, but I want you to know the DA might reach out.”

“To me?” I ask while stupidly pointing my finger back into my chest.

He nods, then shrugs. “Maybe. I don’t know. They don’t fucking tell me anything because they’re scared I’d find a way to coerce you. You know, since I’m a brown-skinned criminal.”

Just then, Gonzo’s face sucks up all the real estate of the window. He knocks three times, the warning that he’s coming in, then the door swings open.

“No fuckin’ way that was thirty minutes,” Mattias gripes in a loud, aggressive tone that should scare me. Hearing him use a powerful voice should send me running because it’s loud and booming and directly contrasts the quiet demeanor he bears around me. But because I trust and love him, the booming timbre vibrates between my legs instead. I hate that he has to have a tough side to survive, but it definitely turns me on.

“You’re right. Anyone ever tell you that you’re a fuckin’ genius?” the guard snaps back with a snarky smile on his stupid, ugly face. “We need the room.”

“Who’s we?” Mattias asks while narrowing his eyes at Gonzo. In a split second, his features go soft. “Oh, oh, I see. I gotchu Gonz. Pay up first, and take us to a cube.”

The guard shoves his fat hand in his thigh-level cargo pocket and pulls out a brand new deck of cards. He tosses them to Mattias, who pockets them immediately.

“Alright, let’s go,” Gonzo says, taking Mattias by the length between his wrists. “I’ll come back for you,” he tells me.

When he leads me into our normal cubicle, Mattias is already waiting on the other side.

“What was that about?” I ask into the handset that we both immediately grab.

“He fucks his girl in there when the Warden’s out.”

I scrunch my nose, remembering the mysterious colors smeared on the dilapidated walls. “Seriously?”

He nods with a sinister grin that zips like electricity through my veins. “They nasty, Gen. Everyone in here is nasty as fuck.

“Even the guards?”

He laughs. “Especially the guards.”

He sits up real straight and digs into his pocket, revealing the new deck of cards. Quickly, he makes work of the plastic keeping them together, and pulls out the informational cards, as well as the Joker.

“I got a new one for you to teach Angus,” he says.

Through the receiver, I listen to the beautiful sound of Mattias shuffling a fresh deck of cards.

Chapter 15

Silas and Mattias had been growing close during the visits, and they both seemed as happy to see each other as Mattias did seeing me.

And now, as Si's first all-alone visit with Mattias is approaching, the topic of our relationship has surfaced.

My head grows fuzzy while my entire body seems to go numb.

"I work well in a throuple." He shrugs and turns to the stove, moving a wooden spoon around a large silver soup pot. Steam clouds his face, and I stand there, watching him.

"Throuple," I repeat awkwardly. I don't phrase it as a question or a statement; it sounds like a foreign word that doesn't quite fit in my mouth, so I spit it out.

He chuckles, replacing the spoon on the trivet near the stove. Closing the distance between us, he presses a kiss to my temple and leads me to a seat at our dining room table. It's his table, really. He brought it when he moved in. But it has become ours.

Just like this house.

"When two people fall in love, and one or both of them fall in love with another person, and then the three of them make it work, together, so no one gets their heart broken." He crosses his lean legs at the ankle as he stretches. With his elbows out and his hands linked together behind his head, he grins.

"Ask me, Gen. I know you want to."

This feels like something I should have already known about Silas. You should know that the man you love has been in a throuple with two women. Right? Surely, I should've been privy to that information before I said I love you or even before he moved in with me.

Staying calm, I remind myself who I'm with. This isn't Mattias. This is Silas. And Si does things so differently than I would, or than Mattias would. And it's not fair to be mad at someone for their past, anyway. I just wish I would've known, that's all.

"Yes," he answers despite the fact I didn't ask it aloud, not yet. "I have been in a relationship with two people before."

Silas, who is twenty-five, just like Mattias, told me he'd been in just two serious relationships. I didn't know that being a throuple was one of those experiences, and I wasn't the type of girl who needed to ask.

Now I kind of wished I had, but I'm not sure why. This doesn't change anything between the two of us. All Silas is telling me is that he's... bisexual, I guess, and happy to share. Suddenly my mind is full of questions.

How does one man please two women at once? Or... did they not all do it together? Seems like they'd have to do it together to avoid tensions and jealousies. Then again, if they all loved each other, would there be jealousies? My mind whirred with all the complications that a throuple must bring with it. I didn't know until his hand came down on mine, but I was drumming my fingers against the tabletop.

"I didn't tell you before because it really didn't seem important." He begins stroking my hand with his. "Love is love, relationships are hard work regardless, and I don't like titles and boxes. I like to just... *be*."

I smiled softly at his words because it was so Silas to be so uninhibited and free-spirited. It is something I love about him, though I didn't know that trait carried over to his love life.

"Okay," I say, my voice a bit unsteady. "I get that."

His hand ceases motion above mine. “Wondering how sex went?”

Like a thief caught red-handed, my eyes flick up to his immediately, and my pulse quickens. My spine and neck grow warm, and I find myself shifting in my chair.

Awkwardly, I admit it. “Yeah, kinda.”

His hand continues to soothe mine, and a tingle spreads through my arm and up my shoulder. Silas touches me in such a tender way that even his non-sexual caresses make me achy for him.

“How does one guy please two women at once?” I ask, sounding incredibly naive for someone who works at a strip club. But of all the things I’ve done, having a wandering eye was never one of them. I didn’t know how dating or other relationships worked. I wasn’t interested because I had my own prized relationship.

I tap my chin with my free hand. “I mean, I can think of ways, but that leaves you multi-tasking and potentially not enjoying it.”

Faceless, beautiful nude girls drift through my mind, their legs spread over Silas’s full pink lips. Another sits naked on his outstretched arm, her arousal centered on his hand. Yeah, that could work.

He weaves our fingers together atop the table then places his other hand on mine.

“It wasn’t two women, Gennedy. I was in a throuple with a *man* and a woman.”

I swallow. My heart pumps faster and pounds in my eardrums. Immediately I imagine the faceless woman straddling Silas’s mouth from my earlier fantasy. She shifts into a man, and the entire thing changes. I drape my hand across my chest and blink at him awkwardly.

He tightens his grip on my hand, nestled tightly between his two large palms.

He clears his throat, and for a moment, I think I've made him uncomfortable with my reaction. Shame flushes my cheeks, and I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I assumed it was two women. I don't know why I said that."

The kind man that he is, Silas lets me off the hook with a soft smile. His blue eyes twinkle, and it does something to my belly. Makes it twist and burn all the way to my pussy.

"Because it's what everyone thinks normal is." He chuckles softly, and I realize how fortunate I am to have a boyfriend who makes even the hard things easy. "But normal people are rarely happy, Gennedy. You'll see that."

He leans forward across the table, and my body does the same on instinct, meeting him part-way. We share a slow, burning kiss that leaves my lips wet and worn. When we pull apart from one another, everything clicks into place. Like puzzle pieces, information tucks itself inside my brain, right where it needs to be. Comments, facts, moments all click in place, and the invisible weight on my chest partially lifts.

"You'd be in a relationship with Mattias and me?" I ask, digging for confidence through my fear and excitement. "You'd be in it for him as much as me?" I'm trying hard now to throttle my excitement because as much as I'm greedy for an outcome that *doesn't* involve me breaking anyone's heart, I realize that Mattias would have to be on board with this. And Mattias isn't gay or bisexual. Mattias gets hard for me, and only me. *He tells me.*

We share another intimate kiss before he responds in a low, smoky tone. "Yes, princess. I'd make love to you, and he would make love to me." He pushes a strand of hair from my face, dragging his thumb over my cheekbone. In the wake of his touch is a tingling heat.

"We'd do lots of things, the three of us. And everyone would be very, very happy." The velvet of his voice melts through me, pooling in my groin, making my arousal pulse.

"Mattias," I pant to him as he steals my lips for another kiss. With each kiss and each admission, I grow more feral.

“He wouldn’t,” I say, not wanting this dream to gain too much momentum before we have to smash it to smithereens.

When Mattias said he loved who I loved, I hadn’t considered what type of love that meant. I’d assumed it meant platonic, devout, like a family member. Silas bombarding me with questions about Mattias meant, to me, that he wanted to grow closer.

Now, with Silas’s hands moving underneath my shirt, his admissions making me drunk, I wonder if I had it wrong.

“Am I wrong?” I ask Silas, desperation dripping from my words.

He nods. “I think you *are* wrong, princess.” And before he kisses me, his bright eyes penetrate mine with a sinister gaze that tells me he knows something that I don’t.

Chapter 16

It seems pointless to keep any lie going at this point.

Mattias will surely tell Silas that I went to see him. And if he doesn't, it didn't occur to me that Silas would see my name on the sign-in sheet.

I go by Michelle's on my way home from the visit with Mattias. She's barefoot, wearing rolled-up boxer shorts and a white tank top, stained from years of wear. Her long hair is up in a messy wad—she's who taught me how to do the messy “mom” bun. Music is playing from her phone, which is tucked inside a drinking glass. The poor person's speaker.

Angus is at the kitchen table, math book open, forehead in palm, groaning at the notebook paper in front of him. Eraser tread is everywhere, and the air is thick with frustration. After I drop the bag of groceries I'd brought over on the counter; I take a seat adjacent to him.

“Looks like you're having fun,” I say with a smile as I drag the corner of the textbook towards me, perusing the page. Rather than feel insecure that I only have a high school diploma, I feel confident. I almost didn't have it.

I have Mattias to thank for that, and I'm grateful that I do have it because getting the actual paychecks from Envy, not the under-the-table pay, requires me being an official employee. And that required a GED, an ID, and a passed background check. I'm glad I have it, or else I may be dancing as opposed to working the booth up-front.

“Fractions,” he sighs. He flops forward, his head smacking the lined paper on the table. Laughing, I flip back a few pages to find the lesson. I skim it, we work together on a few problems, and when I see he’s getting it, I let him finish.

In the kitchen, Michelle pours herself a glass of wine. I rarely drink, but she passes me a glass, and I take it. It’s white and smells like wine, the only way I know how to describe it. Timid, I take a few sips. I don’t like the flavor but I do like the warmth that spreads through me as the alcohol begins to hit.

“Tell me what happened today,” she says, finishing her glass. I don’t even think this is her first.

I explained to her how Silas told me he was going to see Mattias without me and how I freaked out. At this point, her face scrunched up in utter confusion, but I finished the story.

I told her that I went to see Mattias, and he told me that there was some business to be dealt with that was better suited for Silas. Her face was still confused but when I swallowed thickly and shifted against the counter, her features began to soften.

“What?” she questioned. I peeled a long piece of my hair from the messy bun and began anxiously twirling it around my finger. “What?” she dragged out in a deadened tone that told me she was worried.

“Well,” I start, not really knowing what exactly I’m going to tell her. After all, Mattias hadn’t really said anything, not set in stone at least. “He has some stuff he needs taken care of, and he asked Si to do it; he doesn’t want me involved.”

Michelle’s brows pinch together as she tilts the glass back, drawing in another long sip of wine. “If it’s business, why not Esteban?” She’d met him a few times, back when Mattias and I were living in the complex.

I shake my head. “He’s out of the country.” Uncurling the strand from my finger, I tuck it back up into my bun and begin tracing the edge of the wine glass. “And he said Silas is loyal to us both, that my relationship with Silas has allowed him to have a relationship with Silas, too.”

Michelle nods slowly as if she doesn't see a problem with any of that. "Okay, so, why are you like, twitchy and nervous?"

I keep tracing and begin to study the bottom of the glass in an effort for my eyes not to grow fuzzy. Sometimes looking at someone you love during a hard admission makes you extra emotional.

I clear my throat, but the emotion that formed doesn't move. Stubborn bastard. "Before, when Mattias needed things done, if it wasn't Este or another cousin, it was me. You know? I was the one adding funds to his commissary. I was the one sending or bringing things."

Finally, I look up to her, and the soft knowingness in her expression causes a tear to break free. I wipe it away quickly and glance at Angus, who is fortunately still groaning over fractions.

"I love Silas. I didn't realize it until today but..." I trail off, but Michelle doesn't rescue my broken thought. She nods at me to go on. "Mattias loves him, too."

She smiles, her eyes turning up on the ends in acknowledgment of Mattias's large heart. "Mattias," she says, forcing a breath out. "You got a good one."

Knowing that even my selfishness is safe with Michelle, I nod. "I do. That's why it feels weird sharing his heart."

Michelle picks up her wine and finishes before setting it down on the chipped tiled counter.

"Just wash it out now, so you don't have anxiety in the morning," Ang chides from the table without looking up. Michelle rolls her eyes privately between us before she picks up the wineglass and begins rinsing it in the sink.

"You're right," she calls over her shoulder to him without looking. "Waking up with last night's dishes in the sink still dirty always gives me anxiety."

I smile at her, and my eyes move between the two of them, admiring their bond. Sure, Ang has to grow up a little living in the poor, dilapidated, struggling part of the city, but it gives

him character. That's what Mattias says about us, and I think it's true.

He doesn't have a lot of chores; Michelle wants him to focus on school. The only key to getting out of their current situation is money. Money from a good-paying, legal job. That means Angus is determined to go to college one and studying hard now is the start.

So even though she won't let him do the dishes, he reminds her just to do them so that she isn't anxious in the morning. They really are a good team.

"Okay," she says after setting the glass upside down in the drying rack. "The way Mattias loves Silas isn't the way you love him." She wrings her hands in the dish towel, and we move to the living room, sitting cross-legged across from one another on the couch.

"And Silas, well, that man probably does love Mattias the way you do," she laughs, but her words cause my spine to go stick straight. After a moment of laughing, she looks over at me, reading the seriousness on my face.

"Ohmygod," she exclaims, sitting up off the couch. "Is Silas bi?" she asks in a choked whisper meant to provide a barrier between Angus and us. "Wait," she pushes a hand out in an effort to slow the quick-moving tide of information that seems to have rolled in. She realized Silas's truth before I did. "Am I way off base?"

I chew at the corner of my mouth and move my fingers along the seam of my jeans. "Nope, you're right. Silas told me he'd be in a relationship with Mattias, too."

Michelle's brows pull together. "Like, if you and Mattias weren't together, he'd be attracted to him, too, yeah?"

I shake my head. "No, like, he would be with us both... he used the word *throuple*."

"Throuple," she repeats, testing it carefully as if it's sharp on her tongue. "Is it like, a sex thing or a complete relationship thing?"

I shrug. “I didn’t ask a lot of questions. I guess I assumed a complete relationship.” I assumed that because that would be the only option to alleviate the need to break a heart. If the three of us were together in *all ways*, no one would be dumped. *That* I liked.

She settles back against the couch and puts her feet up on the coffee table. Her head tips back and her eyes close. “I’m not surprised he likes to sword fight.”

“Huh?”

One of her eyes pops open, and through her thick lashes, she peers at me, then grins broadly. “You’ve been under a rock, Gen.” She scoots closer towards me, as Angus is within earshot. The entire apartment is within earshot, to be fair.

“I mean, I’m not surprised to find out he likes guys, too. That’s all.” She looks off for a moment before a troubling grin lights up her face. “I bet he looks hot sucking dick.”

I smack her in the arm as my cheeks flood with heat. “Hey! That’s my boyfriend you’re talking about!” But still, I pull my knees to my chest and stifle my grin there.

When she calms, I add, “I didn’t know. Not until he told me. I had no idea he likes guys, too.”

She shakes her head. “I think I knew he was bi just from hearing his name.”

We both laugh at that, and then Angus slams his textbook shut. “I’m taking a shower,” he adds in a worn-out voice. “Then it’s my TV time.” He gives us both a warning glance that says, *get out of the living room because the TV is mine, and I don’t want gossip interrupting my show*. I’m familiar with that look, and so is Michelle.

After Angus shuts and locks the bathroom door, I turn to Michelle. “Si wants us to stay together after Mattias gets out. All three of us.” I bite into my bottom lip, and her eyes follow the movement.

“You want that, don’t you?” she asks in a low but prodding tone.

“I don’t know how it would work,” I admit, feeling immediately freer for saying it aloud. “But if it really could work, it would mean I get to keep both of them in my life.” I shrug, confused. “I do want that.”

Michelle’s face grows serious, and she drags her feet off the table. Sitting more intently with her elbows resting on her thighs, she holds her face in her palm as she looks at me.

“I just can’t see Mattias wanting sex with a man or, well, with anyone but *you*. That man loves you, Gennedy.”

I nod. Her words should make me feel good. It should make me fucking giddy that he loves me so hard that outsiders can feel it. But the wave of hope I’d been privately riding seemed to lap at the shore and fall away under the weight of her words. “I don’t think he’d ever go for it in a sexual way, either.”

A beat passes. “Would you?” she asks.

I don’t even know what it would look like, the three of us together.

Who makes decisions about where we live and who pays what bill? I want to be a mom. How do three people have a baby? Who marries who? What last name would I take if it became that serious?

Then there’s the sex.

That’s the part that has me... *wild with want inside*.

Would we take turns? Would we all be doing something at once? Still, no matter which way it plays out in my mind, I get excited. Mattias spreading me across the bed with Silas cradling my head with his lap, Mattias taking me from behind with Silas’s cock lodged down my throat, Silas going down on me as Mattias strokes himself through his sweats, verbally guiding us... Even if it’s just a fantasy, it’s always hot.

My voice is small when I finally answer, and I think it’s because I can’t believe my own response. And saying it out loud to another person makes it even more real.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I would.”

Chapter 17

“It’s probably annoying if I ask to go and just like, wait in the car, right?” The afternoon of Silas’s private visit with Mattias I felt nervous, and called Michelle.

I paced the length of our bedroom, the hardwood growing warm under my feet as I did. With the door not all the way shut, Silas showered just a few feet from me in the master bath.

Michelle laughed. “Let’s not go full Fatal Attraction on him, okay?”

I wrinkled my nose and gave the floor a break for a second. “I think we’re both too young for that reference.”

“The heroine was crazy as shit,” Michelle replied. I snorted my appreciation.

“Fuck you,” I picked up the pace again, leaning back once to make sure the water was still running. I’d checked at least five times already. I would hear it turn off if it did, and still, I checked. “I’m not crazy; I’m just a little, uh...” The sentence died because I didn’t know how to describe the weird things I’d been feeling.

For some reason, I felt jealous. When I imagined Silas and all of his sun-laden beauty leaning towards the partition, my stomach twisted. Something about picturing Mattias smiling sinfully back at him, his head cocked to the side and back a little, the way he always perched when he admired... me.

My ears filled with the wild pounding of my unnerved heart.

Wait.

Mattias loves me. He's never expressed wanting another woman, let alone another man. So why am I tripping? Silas is sexy as shit, but he's got a penis. That will be a deal-breaker for Mattias, no matter how charismatic and luring Si will be—naturally, of course.

Even though logically, it looked as if I was worried for nothing, I couldn't shake the sourness from my gut. It was one of those moments where I thought my instincts might actually be right, and it was my hopeful brain leading me to trouble.

"Yeah," Michelle said, sounding puzzled. "What exactly is going on? You're like, paranoid or... jealous." She took a moment wherein I think we both realized at the same time that I was undeniably jealous. "You are jealous, aren't you?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose and tipped my head back, grunting pitifully. "I am, *fuck*, I am," I admitted woefully. Because it made no sense.

She spoke carefully, trying not to offend me. I don't think I could be offended; I just didn't need to get more confused than I already am. "Are you worried that Silas will like Mattias more than you? Or," she started, taking an extra cautious break before she continued. When she did, her voice wobbled with uncertainty, like maybe she wasn't safe to offer this up. "Or, are you afraid that Mattias may like him, too?"

My cheeks flared. Suddenly I was aware of my tone. "Am I talking loud?" I hissed into the phone, cupping my free hand around the receiver for God only knows what reason.

"Gen," she started, still choosing her words carefully. "Now that Silas and Mattias have gotten close, do you think it's possible there's more there between them? Are you afraid Mattias feels it too?"

I felt my eyes go hot, and I knew that crying wasn't a good response. Part of me must have been afraid of that, even if I couldn't admit it to myself.

"I think," I started, my thoughts shuffling into place a bit as I peered out the window into the car-filled street. This

neighborhood was mid-class, maybe on the lower end, but nice. I liked seeing nice vehicles in front of homes. “I think I’m afraid of being loved by no one.”

Michelle didn’t speak for a minute, and it was like the DJ had cut the track. Silence fell between us because Michelle had a great family, so she really couldn’t understand, as much as she may try. My subconscious tapped my inner mic. *Excuse me, childhood trauma, this one’s for you.*

“Listen, Gennedy, I know your parents were fuckheads.”

I laughed, not just because it was true, but the way she used such a calm, soothing voice while saying “*fuckhead*” was undeniably hilarious.

“What?” I could hear her smile through the phone.

“You said fuckheads like a ballerina whispering across a stage,” I teased, finally taking a seat on the edge of the bed. My feet were sore, and I couldn’t listen to my ankle pop one more time.

She laughed. “I’m very eloquent, okay? Now, back to the real shit.” We sighed in unison, which brought another small wave of laughter. Then, back to business. “Why are you going to be on pins and needles when Silas is alone with Mattias?”

I glanced at the strip of light dividing the door and the wall.

I’d fallen in love with Silas unexpectedly and very quickly. Hell, as soon as I met the man, he wasn’t the Joker you take out of the deck right away. I knew he was meant for more, even when I didn’t want to accept it.

Mattias had been the one to urge me into Silas’s arms. Invite me to be loved by another man, to sate me while Mattias couldn’t. He’d said with conviction and certainty that our love could survive another man’s presence in our relationship.

It was me who had assumed that when Mattias got out, whoever I was with would be gone. I’d break up with him and be back with Mattias. I’d even told Silas when we met that I couldn’t promise him time, but I could promise him a good time.

Now, though, I wondered if Mattias had other plans. I certainly knew now that Silas did.

If Mattias was bisexual, that was a big thing to know about yourself. The world is filled with people trying to unpack their sexuality and have a better hold on who they are. If he'd discovered that and not told me... my head began to swim. He'd lied to me about the weed, and I'd forgiven him. I'm waiting for him. But another lie? I don't know.

The water turned off abruptly. I turned my back to the door and cupped the phone again.

"I can't answer that right now. I gotta go, Michelle. I'll call you back."

I felt bad ending the call before I could hear her voice again, but by the time I'd set it on the nightstand and returned to my spot on the bed, Silas was filling the doorway.

His long, blonde hair looked the color of raw honey when it was wet, thick tangled strands falling in wet waves down his shoulders a bit. Drops of water made me jealous as they clung to his skin, rolling down his abs and belly. The towel at his waist would normally be a disappointment, but right now, my head was too much of a mess for that.

"Don't worry about the visit," he started, and I loved and hated how both of the men in my life had the uncanny ability to read my face. Or maybe I just didn't have the poker face I thought I did. "It's cool."

"It's cool," I repeated awkwardly because those were awkward words to describe their visit, weren't they?

A man visiting his girlfriend's boyfriend in prison. That man is *attracted* to both girlfriend and boyfriend.

Yeah, that's not normal. It definitely isn't easy, breezy, "cool."

Trying to control my frustration, I bite the corner of my mouth, tossing my hair behind my shoulder. I can't lie to Silas. It doesn't feel right.

"He's magnetic and beautiful," I said quietly.

The bed dipped as Silas took a seat next to me. His skin was damp as our arms pressed against another. My body tingled at the contact, clearly confused because this was not one of those situations.

“So are you,” he said, his voice low and full of bass, like thunder. He leaned across my lap and dipped his face in front of mine, the ends of his hair dripping onto my jeans. The smile he gave me before he sealed his lips to mine was playful, and it made me feel better. So did the kiss.

Hopping up from the bed, our moment ended because I knew he was on a schedule. He was visiting Mattias at three and couldn't be late. He needed to leave in less than ten minutes.

I watched him get ready, and spoke to him, hoping it didn't sound like desperate bargaining.

“I don't know if he's bisexual, or like, I don't know, curious when it comes to men.” I appreciated that whatever reaction Silas yearned to make, he held it back, keeping his face impassive and controlled. “But I know both of you. And you're both just... incredible,” I admitted. I couldn't bring myself to say the words Michelle had said. To offer up that big of a fear, letting everyone take a peek at my deepest insecurities.

He threaded his arms through a t-shirt and kept it bunched at his collarbone while he spoke. “Trust me, Gennedy, okay? We're solid. You and Mattias are solid. Okay? Don't worry about this visit.” He fished his head through the neck-hole and tugged the shirt down. Finger combing his already drying hair, he swiped on deodorant and smiled.

“There will be a time for us to have a talk.” He capped it, then went to work on his belt, which had been hanging open and lifeless from his jeans. “But now isn't that time, okay?”

Sometimes, Silas and Mattias were like the crystal balls of my life, guiding me based on their visions. I'd always trusted both of them, and really, with the exception of prison, I had no reason not to believe them. Even from prison, Mattias was taking care of me.

If it weren't for his urgings, I wouldn't have given Silas a real chance, despite the fact that I wanted him.

"Okay," I smiled because I didn't know what else to do. Just smile and trust him because I could hear the authenticity in his voice. He was being honest. I couldn't argue that and arguing my neuroses didn't seem smart, either.

"Tell him I said hello," I said, sounding far sadder than I'd wanted. I forced another smile.

He fed his arms through a sweatshirt then tugged it over his head. The ends of his hair stayed tucked inside, so I stood and helped him. While my hands were behind his neck, my interlocked fingers held us together that way for a moment. His soulful blue eyes searched mine, and then we shared a kiss. There weren't any more words, but the way he kissed me back brought me some relief.

I'D PLANNED TO GO TO MICHELLE'S ONCE SILAS LEFT BECAUSE I'd probably wear a fucking hole in the ground if I stayed home alone. But once I'd headed her way, my phone rang. When I saw it was Julisa calling, I answered immediately. It had been a year now since I'd heard from her. I missed her. I missed all my friends, but they'd gotten out and away. Couldn't punish them for living their dreams. I didn't expect them to stay tethered to me.

"Hello?" I answered, sounding hesitant as if I didn't really believe she was calling me.

"Gennedy, oh! Hi, hi, hi!" she chanted excitedly, sounding really fucking cheerful. Like, manic on an upswing cheerful. "Are you still in town?"

I snorted because "in town" sounded romantic as if we shared some sweet small town growing up. Mature trees lining the street, growing to the blue then curling into each other, shading the pavement. Cookie-cutter houses and 2.5 kids per home. Fresh baked cookies and report cards stuck to stainless steel fridges with magnets. Family hugs.

“If by ‘in town’ you mean the same town I’ve been my whole life, then, yes.” I laughed a little. “You know I’m still here, J.”

She guffawed. “You know that’s what I meant! Well, guess what, bitch? I’m in town, too!” I could hear something in the background, clicking and dragging, or something. I tried to listen more closely to the background as she spoke. “Last I heard, you got yourself a little house, you fancy-ass! What’s the address? Text me. I can come over, right? Can I crash? For the night?”

“Yeah,” I replied quickly, eager for company. I felt bad, but secretly, I’d hoped Julisa was bringing an army of issues she needed help sorting through because I wanted one night to focus on anything other than my own fucking problems.

When we ended the call not long after, I texted her my address. Still wanting to focus on anything but Si and Mattias, I stopped by the organic market on my way home. This wasn’t a place I’d been to more than a few times, and I don’t think any of those visits included purchasing anything. Now that I thought about it, I think Mattias and I had popped by here twice to use their restroom.

Rich white people shop here, so their bathrooms have moisturizing hand soap and soft paper towels.

Making my way down the alcohol aisle, I thought about picking up a bottle of wine. But if the meeting between the men left me even more uneasy, well, then I’d get drunk. And I had a year where I drank a lot, before Silas, after Mattias went away. It was a road I didn’t need or want to go down again.

Instead, I grabbed a small case of sparkling water, key lime flavor, and a small, pre-made charcuterie board I’d found on an end cap in the deli. On the board was peppered salami, a few types of cheese, some pita and crackers, dip, olives, the normal stuff. The board cost twenty dollars, but the value of its distraction was worth far more than that.

“This is for ya?” the woman at the cash register asked. I eyed her nametag, but the name was completely worn off. I nodded.

“Yep.”

I passed her a wrinkled twenty and seven crisp one-dollar bills, which caused her eyes to flit back to me. Crisp ones. Envy wasn't far from here. This was the median, a store that bridged the wealthy world with my world. Though anyone could come in here, girls that worked at strip clubs and had boyfriends in prison rarely did.

I smiled at her, and surprisingly, she returned it. After declining a bag, she slid my items to me down the belt, and I took them. “Take care,” she offered as a goodbye, and I smiled.

The brief exchange left me distracted because for a moment there, I wondered if she was going to judge me. Though she was just a woman working a register—just like I did at Envy—still, there was a moment where she could have. But she didn't.

The distraction was short-lived because when I got back in my car, it didn't start.

“Fuck!” I smacked my hands against the steering wheel, and all the nerves I'd convinced myself I didn't have, rushed to the surface in an angry flash-flood. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I screamed, slamming my curled fists against the steering wheel.

My eyes went freaky wide as I willed myself not to cry. I could get a jump; I'd done it a million times before. I knew the car not starting wasn't the reason I was moments away from a full-on sob fest.

A knuckle tapped at my rolled-up window, and my body jerked back in reaction. I sighed with relief, my hand resting over my chest as I took a calming breath. It was the woman from the cash register.

She pointed down, indicating she'd wanted me to roll the window down. I held up a finger. Fortunately, I didn't need the car to be on to roll the window down. This car was an old piece of shit. I had the hand crank.

I cranked repeatedly until it was partway down. She bent at the waist, lowering her head to speak to me.

“You were my last customer. I just punched out. Need a jump?” her eyes flicked to the hood and back to me. “I heard it turn over.”

Grateful, I smiled.

After fifteen minutes, she'd pulled her only slightly better car up to face mine, jumped me, and we'd said our goodbyes.

A perfect stranger had been kind then helped me, and I didn't know if it was the universe's way of saying, *see, not everything is bad, not everyone has bad intentions* or if it was the world saying *I'm giving you this because I'm about to knock you down again*.

I hoped for the first.

I popped a few cans of sparkling water into the freezer to speed up the chilling and unwrapped the charcuterie. A hot shower and clean pair of sweats later, I was ready to have some much-needed girl time. Julisa texted that she was just a few minutes away, so I unlocked the front door and connected my phone to the small speaker Silas kept in the kitchen.

He liked to listen to audiobooks when he cooked, which he did often.

Silas surprised me. I mean, I guess it wasn't so much the things that he liked surprised me but more so that we crossed paths and that we were mutually attracted to one another.

He seemed like someone who'd want a tanned beach bunny on his arm, a girl who wanted to sway to wordless music as he strummed his guitar by a fire on the beach. A girl with a nose ring and an affinity for homemade hummus. He looked like he'd had lots of toe-headed babies with a woman who referred to herself as they/them and followed her horoscope religiously.

But he liked me.

The only part of the vision I'd had for his life that overlapped with his current reality was that I had blonde hair.

Dingy blonde, the kind that the less popular, poor girl in the movies and books had. Fitting, right? Thanks, universe.

He didn't just like me.

Julisa came through the door not too long after, dragging a large rolling suitcase behind her. After a hug hello, my eyes dropped to the bag on the floor. She held her palms out to the side. "What can I say? I need a lot for crashing just a few nights."

My eyes tugged down on the ends, unable to hide the sympathy I had for her. It felt impossible for any of us to find security and safety, and it was hard not to blame it on our similar childhoods. I thought I'd beat the stereotype... until my boyfriend went to prison for selling drugs.

I hugged her again, and she unloaded a few heavy sobs into my shoulder. I stroked the ends of her long, dark hair. She sniffled a few times, and then I felt safe to pull back.

"What happened?" That was the only question I could ask because, truthfully, we'd kind of lost touch in the last few years. I didn't really know what had been going on with her.

She dragged her wrist under her nose. "My boyfriend and I broke up."

I nodded. "Yeah?" I wiped a tear from her cheek.

She nodded. "Yeah. We were together for one year. The longest I've ever been with a guy." Her bottom lip trembled, so I pulled her in for another hug.

It took a while—and we ended up opening a bottle of cheap wine she'd stuck in her bag—but finally, Julisa wasn't crying anymore.

She didn't want to talk about what happened, she'd made that clear, and I didn't press. She caught me up on what she'd been doing for work—she'd been certified as a phlebotomist and had been working at a local lab. She said she loved it.

"I'm so proud of you," I said. The truth? I was proud. But I'm jealous, too. I was still working where I had been two years ago—a fucking strip club. And not only did she have a

real job, but it could be a career. Hospital jobs have benefits and all that.

But I felt bad for her because Julisa was strong as hell. Seeing that she threw her life in a bag and drove two hours told me she was really hurting.

“Thanks,” she smiled weakly, her dark hair falling from her face as she tipped her head back. She finished the wine. I couldn’t tell if she was tipsy or not since we were sitting and her face was already drooping sadly.

“How are you hanging in there?” Her fingertip mindlessly followed the stem of the wine glass, up then down. “You know, with Mattias still away.”

Away. I wanted to laugh at how everyone had to soften it as if saying the actual thing was too harsh. How’s he doing in prison. Just say *prison* because that’s where he is.

I hated how it was so hard to shake the frustrated state I was in. I took a drink of my sparkling water and popped my lips before I spoke. “It’s hard. But I’m living with my boyfriend. We’ve been together for a year, too.”

She shook her head, bewildered. Her eyes opened up more, and maybe her sadness just needed a shock. I smiled.

“Mattias knows. And...” I cleared my throat, my stomach fluttering with nerves as I toed into the topic. “We’re still together, too.” Her mouth fell open for a moment before she nodded.

“Really? Wow.”

I nodded. May as well put it all out there. “Silas. My boyfriend, that’s his name. Anyway, he’s um, he’s actually visiting Mattias now. In prison.” Now I know why she didn’t just say *prison*. It does taste bad and feels bad, too. Broken glass in my mouth, almost.

Her brows pulled together, but her face wasn’t just confusion. It almost looked like confusion with a healthy side of... irritation.

But I couldn't be reading her right...right? I smiled, and took another cooling drink of my key lime bubbly. It did cool me too, and it was then that I realized how warm I'd become, my skin radiating heat into my clothes.

Clearing my throat, I kept a natural smile as I spoke. "I know it's not common. But, everyone's happy."

Her lips turned down, not in a frown so much as an expression that said, oh, wow, I didn't think you could get two guys. And the frustration of the day had reached max. The pressure had reached maximum, and the valve was knocked to release.

"You seem... surprised," I said slowly, controlling each word while I could. Anger tapped at my temples, or maybe it was my rapid heart.

She shrugged but didn't even attempt a fake smile. The room felt cold now, but my skin still burned. I took a breath, letting it out slowly to try and gain some composure.

Julisa and I had been friends for a lot of years. We are still friends, or else she wouldn't be here. We're both just... emotionally off. We need to de-escalate.

"Look," I started, but she took control quickly. She put her hands palm-down on the table.

"I'm sorry, I'm all out of whack emotionally. You know, my old man fucked me up in the head a little." She was referring to her much older ex-boyfriend, the one that just dumped her. I gave her an understanding smile and ignored how fiery I still felt.

With what felt like the millionth shrug and pacifying smile of the short time we'd been together, I changed the subject.

"Are you looking for a place in town again or..." I eyed the large suitcase. "Or is that the result of tossing things in during the heat of the moment?"

She pointed to me when I said that, then laughed. "I don't even think I have many clothes in there." She tilted her head to the side with a wonky smile. "I think I put the remote to the TV in but not a single pair of shoes."

We both laughed, and at that time, Silas came in the door. I twisted in my chair, draping my arm over the back. “Hey, babe.” I greeted him, and I loved him so much more for not calling me out on the fact that I *never* called him babe. Ever.

Mattias had been calling me princess since I was a little girl. When Silas learned of that, he adopted it too. I’d never been the one to use pet names. Nicknames, like Si, yeah. But *baby* and *honey*, I guess I’d always felt too young or insecure to pull it off.

I also hated that the presence of my old friend caused me to use that term.

Silas tugged his wallet from his back pocket and deposited it with his keys onto the counter. Immediately, I wished Julisa wasn’t there. I wanted to wring every last detail about his visit with Mattias out of him. His eyes tamped down on mine as he pushed his long, shiny hair onto his head, wrapping an elastic around it. The man fucking made a messy bun his absolute bitch.

I turned back around, ready to introduce him to Julisa, then saw her face.

My friend was imagining Silas pinning her to the hall and fucking her while I slept soundly in our bed. *Yes*, I could see that much in just a look. Plus, I knew her then and I can see now she hasn’t changed. What’s good for Julisa is all that matters.

I’d found myself showing my teeth to females who lingered on Mattias a little too long here and there. I’d never been jealous or defensive over Silas. I love him, but I’d never felt the urge.

Until tonight.

And it wasn’t a choice. I just... reacted.

On my feet, the cavewoman in me walked to Silas. I wrapped my arms around his neck and rose to my toes before sealing my mouth over his. I delivered the longest and loudest kiss I’d ever given anyone, and before it ended, he reached down and grabbed my ass in his large palms.

Step off, bitch I smiled and cheered to myself.

“Glad you’re home,” I purred against his lips, and like he was in on the whole thing, Silas kissed the tip of my nose and then my forehead.

“Good to be home, baby,” he said, in a husky whisper that I’m sure made Julisa crazy. It made *me* crazy.

“How was your visit?” I asked, hating that I couldn’t really find out until after she left. Because I didn’t even want the full story in front of her. It was none of her business.

Knowing just what to say, Silas gave me another chaste kiss before sitting down at the table where I’d been sitting. “We can talk about it later,” he said, smiling to Julisa who, at the moment, looked like a cartoon dog with his tongue rolled out over the table, drool dripping from his chin.

Not so subtly, I took a seat right next to Silas and linked our fingers together and set them on top of the table. Then, in the same manner of a dog lifting his leg to mark the hydrant, I used my free hand to stroke our linked hands.

Silas cleared his throat, but I think he was probably stifling a laugh or a comment like, *who are you, and what did you do with Gennedy?* Because if I wasn’t using token affectionate names, I sure as hell wasn’t stroking our interlocked hands at the dinner table.

I’m sure if you grow up with warmth, you’re warm. I grew up nearly alone until Mattias, so I guess I haven’t figured out who or how I am, not yet at least. Even though I’d maybe roll my eyes if I saw a couple like us, having Silas smile warmly over me made me realize that maybe I *do* like this.

It doesn’t feel natural to call him baby and be this affectionate, but it isn’t just Julisa’s smug look of disappointment that feels good about this encounter. It’s making Silas happy because Silas’s love language is definitely touch, with a heaping side of verbal affection.

He likes this, and for that, I like it too.

“Julisa, this is Silas, my boyfriend. Si, this is Julisa,” I said, carefully choosing her full name as opposed to her casual

nickname. Because as mature as I want to be, the bitch's reaction to learning I had two guys... it's how we've both been treated our whole lives.

Like people like us didn't deserve happiness or, hell, anything outside of the last choice. She'd been one to complain of that in high school, when the popular, rich guys asked all the cheerleading, sports-playing, mall-clothes-wearing girls, leaving us to whoever else wanted to go.

We hated that.

And yet, here she was, treating me the way that we always hated. We were supposed to be on the same team, and really, I couldn't handle another person *not* being on my team. I'd had enough of that with every single year of my life before this.

Even the grocery store clerk had shown me more kindness than my so-called friend.

She outstretched her hand over the table, and I couldn't help but notice how her eyes went hooded as he closed his large hand around hers.

She bit her bottom lip, just briefly, then batted her thick, glued-on lashes at him. "Silas, that's such a cool name."

He smiled broadly at her, my loving, carefree Silas, who didn't have a hurtful or frustrated bone in his body. I loved him for that, though right now if he wanted to cop a feel and shove his tongue down my throat, I wouldn't hold it against him. I would, however, hold my body against his.

"Thanks," he replied coolly, and I appreciated the fact that he didn't share his two brothers' names with her because if she's creaming over Silas, then she'd really wet herself over Quade and Arlo. "I've heard of you, Julisa. You have a sister named Roxanne, right?"

I stroked my fingertips through the fuzzy blonde hair on his forearm, and I loved that her eyes went there, briefly, before they went straight back to him.

Since he'd come home, I don't think Julisa looked at me even once. If I was going to get less territorial, she wasn't helping.

Silas scooped up some prosciutto with his fingers and pinched a fresh mozzarella ball with it before tossing it back. He took my can of sparkling water, and right before he had it to his lips, Julisa stood from the table.

“I can get you a drink, Silas,” she offered, acting like she fucking knew where things were, acting like she paid for any of this, acting like a fucking desperate hostess serving millionaires.

Silas dropped his arm between my back and the chair and began kneading the base of my spine under my shirt. Like hot butter on a skillet, my body softened to his touch. His touch said, *relax, baby, it's fine.*

“Gen and I like sharing drinks,” he replied, without looking over at her where she stood near him at the edge of the table. Pressing another kiss to the tip of my nose, he stroked a piece of my hair from my face and nodded his head toward the fridge behind us.

“Hungry? Get a movie or something set up, and I’ll make us something to eat.” He spoke in a private tone, not trying to keep it from reaching Julisa but definitely making sure she knew he was focused on me.

“Sure,” I said, “I just grabbed this to take my mind off you being gone.” He looked to the nibbled at charcuterie and then back to me with a vulnerable softness in his eyes.

“Everything is okay, and I’m back.” He kissed my forehead and linked both of our hands together again before pulling me to my feet. “Go get your pajamas on, get comfortable, I’ll make us some dinner.”

I nodded, then remembered Julisa was there. I couldn’t kick her out but it both saddened and annoyed me that she’d behaved how she had. Sure, I was being a little “*I’m wearing his letterman jacket, not you,*” but she was bringing it out of me.

“Julisa, do you want to borrow something to wear to bed?” I asked, trying to be as good of a host as I could. She was making it hard. How could she be acting like everything we’d

always hated? What had happened to her in the last two years? I wouldn't let myself go soft. A lot had happened to all of us; it didn't give her a reason to act like I was a hunchback who was lucky to pull one guy, much less two.

She nodded, suddenly saccharine sweet. "That would be awesome, Gen. Thanks so much." She rose and collected the board I'd bought and carried it to the counter. She set it down and lowered her voice as I moved toward the bedroom down the hall.

"If you get me a container, I can put all this away. Save it, so you can snack on it later." I could practically hear her batting her stupid eyes at my boyfriend.

Had I not met Mattias, is this what I'd be? A thirsty bitch willing to disrespect myself and my friends for male attention?

After pulling my hair onto the top of my head, washing my face, and getting comfortable in a pair of Silas's pajama pants and a crop top, I grabbed some clothes for Julisa to wear. Could've grabbed her my Scooby-Doo t-shirt that is more homeless than vintage, but I was nice. I grabbed her a simple gray tank top and plaid pajama pants.

What I returned to in the kitchen would have been laughable. It *could have* been laughable. But the way my emotions had been all day—well, I *reacted*.

Caged against the counter, Silas gripped the edge of the tile as his spine half-mooned away from her. He had nowhere to go, and yet he still strained away. Up on her toes, her dark hair no longer looked shiny from my vantage point at the end of the hall. It looked stringy and greasy, and in this light, her clothes looked wrinkled, and her suitcase that stood near the door, it looked more worn and used than it had before.

She drew her arms more tightly around him, and I had to press my wrist to my mouth so as to not laugh at how pathetic and predatorial she seemed.

Back in the kitchen, I quietly set the clothes down on top of her suitcase, standing silently behind her. Silas didn't look

at me or acknowledge my presence because I'm sure he didn't know what I was up to.

She stepped closer, and I looked down at their feet, the back of hers now level with his toes—that's how fucking close she stood. With coffin-cut black nails, she ran her fingers over his chest, chin tilted up to him in a seductive, uniquely feminine way. I rolled my eyes.

"I'm sleeping over. Do you get cold at night?" Then one of those long, plastic fingernails moved over his lips. When his head jerked back from her claw, colliding with the kitchen cabinets behind him, I knew it was time to step in.

"I know you couldn't make it work with your ex, but Silas is *my* boyfriend."

She whipped around, her body language protective and defensive of Silas, her arms extended back toward the counter. Still fucking caging him in.

If she would've apologized and fucking humbled herself even one god damn iota, that would've been different. But still, my friend is acting like she's here to rescue Silas.

I didn't roll out my neck and crack my knuckles, but I may as well have with how prepared I felt for this moment.

She smiled at me but didn't say anything, and the memories of us being seventeen-year-old girls, sharing cigarettes behind the high school,

AND SHARING WAR STORIES ABOUT OUR COMPLETELY TERRIBLE parents flitted through my mind. I'd have a place in my heart for her when she was ready to respect me. Until then, I'd have to shelve those memories.

"I'm not going to kick you out, Julisa, because that's the kind of person *I* am." I refrained from tossing a dramatic thumb back into my chest. Stretching my arm, I wiggled my fingers, and Silas ducked under her arm and found my hand. Rolling me into his chest, we embraced in front of her, holding tight as I spoke again.

“Tomorrow morning, we can have breakfast, and Silas and I will drop you anywhere close to here that you need to go.”

Her dark eyes went to Silas as if he'd somehow help her and take her side. I laughed out loud at her reaction.

I broke from his arms, though Si tried to hold me tighter; I needed to do this. Stepping in so that we could kiss if this interaction were different, I spoke to Julisa in a controlled tone.

Maintaining my tone helped send home just how different I was. She was different too now, I realized, but had gone the wrong way on the spectrum.

“If you want that god-awful suitcase on the sidewalk with your shit spilling into the gutter, keep it up.” I smiled, but her smile fell away.

Back on my side of the kitchen, I looked up to Silas, who took me back into his arms.

“What's for dinner?” I asked, feeling a rush of adrenaline from the exchange.

Maybe it wasn't fair to Julisa, but she'd helped me relieve the stress and tensions from the day.

I guess she was being a friend, after all.

Chapter 18

“I want to talk about the visit,” I whispered, stroking the tips of my fingers over his parted lips. Nestled into the nook of his shoulder, I kissed the side of his jaw, and his fingers traced lazily over my spine. “But not until she’s gone.”

He turned his head, so our lips met. We shared a slow, sticky kiss. I loved the feel of the wiry hair on his chest under my hand as I enjoyed the muscular slopes in his chest.

He shoved his fingers through his hairline, but they jammed up when they met his man-bun. Keeping me in his nook, pressed to his chest, he turned onto his side, matching my position. We faced one another for a quiet moment while my fingers continued their destinationless journey over the beautiful landscape of his chest and belly.

“I thought she was your friend,” he whispered finally, breaking the silence.

After Silas and I had made dinner, the three of us sat and ate in almost complete silence. It was probably the first time that silence brought a satisfying feeling.

I’d have traded that victory for one three years ago, but hey, beggars can’t be choosers, my mom would ironically say. Because she really was a beggar, and usually, she wasn’t full of any wisdom.

I dragged my forehead across his chin, loving the way that a day worth of growth grated against me gently. It made my

face tingle. Then I buried my nose into his neck and sucked in as much of his tangy, amber scent as I could.

“We are,” I said finally, keeping my voice a whisper the way that he had. “Or we were. I don’t know.” I didn’t give pride or ego to Silas. I felt safe to be vulnerable with him, the same way I did with Mattias. That fact wasn’t lost on me, and it would be one I’d revisit later on.

“She didn’t know about us,” I started, then quickly amended it because it sounded worse than it actually was. “I haven’t talked to her in a really long time. Like, six months before I even met you, I stopped hearing from her regularly.”

His fingertips continued their worn path up the hollow of my spine.

“I told her about you and us, and she asked about Mattias.” I could see her expression in my memories again as I recalled the moment. “She made me feel undeserving and didn’t try to hide it.” Without a high school moment where I tell him verbatim the catty dialogue we’d both partaken in, that summary would have to do.

I added to it because that wasn’t even the part that bothered me most. “She could have hoed all over you,” I admitted, “I mean, it would’ve annoyed me, but I wouldn’t have snapped.”

His arm lifted, and his hand swallowed my neck from behind, kneading my sore neck. “Did you snap?” he asked in a whisper.

I nodded because it felt like I did, which should’ve seemed stupid now that I was lying in his arms, naked after a night of being worshipped and devoured. My life could be sad and hard, but it was good. I had love. And for me, that was, I was learning about myself, vital to a healthy existence.

Didn’t matter, though. I was still pissed. Hadn’t tried to mentally finagle ways I could repair the snap. Smooth over the fracture of the evening. But I couldn’t. I admitted to Silas exactly what hurt the most.

“I’ve told you how I grew up.” I had told him all about my life, in detail, omitting zero details... not even when it came to the years with Mattias. “Julisa and her sister lived close. And you know, they had it like I did. Maybe a little better but not by much,” I admitted, and the only reason I’d claimed that they’d had it better is that they at least had one sober parent at all times.

It didn’t make that parent smart or suited for the job, but still, there was an adult there. Until Mattias, I’d spent plenty of nights alone and scared.

“Having someone and having someone that actually gave a shit about you, you know, that meant something to us. We talked about getting out of the neighborhood, maybe even out of town, but no matter what, the thing that was always the most important was finding someone.” I focused on my fingers which still played mindless over his body. “You know how it is. Daddy issues and all that.”

“Mommy issues, too,” Silas added, tugging me a bit closer. He probably didn’t even know he was doing it. He spoke emotional support like it was his first language.

“Yeah,” I said in a huffed out breath. “That, too.” I placed a kiss next to his nipple. “I thought we had this unspoken bond like *you don’t shit where you eat, you’re true to your crew, stuff like that.*”

I felt him nod above me. “I get you.”

“I guess it really was just in my head because she clearly wasn’t operating under any loyalty clauses.”

Silas tipped his head down, so his words tumbled over me. “I’m pretty sure she would’ve pounced on me like a cat in heat if you hadn’t come out right then.” He laughed a little, and his hand resumed stroking up my back. It felt so nice.

“I mean, that’s just not cool.” I refrained from calling her *a fucking cunt* because Silas would be on my side, but he had a soft soul, and my namecalling would only make *me* feel better. Wasn’t worth it.

Damn, his tenderness was rubbing off on me.

Speaking of.

I reached down between our bodies and found his cock, softened to his thigh. Scooping him into my palm, I began to work him, tugging gently, twisting slowly. He groaned a little as the blood in his body began shifting south.

“Her stuff looks worn out. She looks a little worn out too, and I don’t mean that in a catty female way. I mean it in an observational way,” I said, meaning it. She really looked a little different when I paid attention. That’s the key. If you want to know if someone is struggling, you have to be able to see it. My eyes were open.

“Hmm,” he hummed aloud in response to what I was doing beneath the sheets and my words. I kept going.

“I’m going to ask her if she’s in trouble. I mean, I won’t word it like that,” I said, finding I was talking more to myself than trying to have a conversation. Silas’s breathing had thickened, and what did I expect? Touch his cock and expect him to care about this? Still, my brain would ache if I didn’t finish my thought. And if it were completely insane, even with getting his dick stroked, I’d expect Silas would interject then.

“I still think it’s best if she goes tomorrow, but I will make sure she’s okay.” I didn’t have a lot of extra money, but because of Mattias’s generous purchase of the home I was living in, my money went a lot further. Silas paid the house bills. Though he owned his own businesses, he didn’t spend money like an asshole or act like a complete douche. And I never asked him for help, and he never offered. I liked it that way. He paid the house bills, and it was perfect that way. That left me able to spare some cash.

“I’m going to give her a little money and just make sure she knows that she can always come here if she’s in trouble.” I moved my thumb over his slit, and he groaned when I smeared his arousal down his length.

“Good,” he breathed. “That’s good. Good of you,” he added after a raspy breath.

He was lengthening in my palm but was still somewhat soft. I nipped at the bottom of his earlobe and slid my tongue along his jaw. “How did Mattias seem today?” I pressed a kiss under his chin, and he tilted his head back to broaden my canvas.

I trailed kisses down his throat, enjoying how his throat swallowed thickly as my grip on his cock flexed and tightened. “How’d he look today?” I clarified my question and didn’t ignore the fact that he hardened in my palm almost instantly at the mention of Mattias.

“Good,” he breathed out, not even trying to pace his response to not come off thirsty. I’d never met anyone like Silas. So open and willing to share what he wanted. “Trading for more protein is paying off,” he commented. It’s true that Mattias had been using the additional funds in his commissary to trade guys for more protein at meals. He was trying to get healthy, back to his old self. He had made it halfway through his sentence and wanted to celebrate by treating his body better.

“I know,” I agreed, but it felt a lot more like coaxing than agreeing. Because he began to move his hips into my fist, and his palm now cupped my bare shoulder. Kneading and massaging, he held me as I gripped him, hard at the base.

“I told him,” he panted, driving his hips up harder this time, his body smacking loudly against my hand. I curled my fingers more tightly, and he hummed his appreciation. “I told him he’s looking good.”

I knew where this was going. It hadn’t happened before, but after the conversations we’d recently had about Mattias, the lights were on. I couldn’t deny it if I wanted, but I could see clearly what Silas wanted.

My guy.

He wanted *my guy* to be *our guy*.

He gripped the back of my neck urgently as he slowed his hips and nudged me down, between his legs. The weight of his

thigh draped over my shoulder helped put me in a place of total comfort.

I can't say I'd ever been comfortable with the idea of all three of us together before. Not until this moment.

"The whole drive home, I was hard," he admitted as I smoothed the pad of my tongue over the tip of his throbbing cock. I gripped his head tightly and pulled my hand down slowly, causing veins to shift and pulse under his foreskin. Precome pooled at his slit, and I gladly licked it up.

"What did you picture?" I asked, knowing that he had a fantasy in his head. He had to after everything he'd admitted the other night.

"Tell me, baby," I said, this time feeling at ease with my choice of words. "What did you picture when you rubbed yourself over your jeans on the drive back?" I didn't know for sure that he did, but when he groaned and let his groin melt into my palm, I knew I'd got it right.

"*Ohfuck*," he gritted, taking me by surprise by how he flexed and seemed to fill my palm further. "Um," he panted, trying to enjoy the way I gripped and stroked while also trying to explain himself. "I thought about blowing him, Gen. I thought about sucking his cock while he went down on you."

He reached down and found the spot between my thighs, soaked and swollen. I moaned when he connected with my clit, his thumb moving in tender circles. "And I thought about what he must look like, fucking you hard, the King burying himself in his temple."

Hell, I moaned at that. Hearing Silas talk about wanting to fool around with Mattias was far hotter than I'd imagined. Imagining the two masculine forms tangling together with sweat and passion, it twisted my lower half in a tight, searing knot of need. I just didn't see how it would really work, and I couldn't imagine Mattias actually doing the things that Silas was beyond comfortable doing.

"I'd touch myself while I watched him fuck you hard, the way you like it," he rasped. His cock hummed and vibrated in

my palm, so I released him and cupped his balls to change the intensity. His spine straightened, but he groaned with pleasure all the same. My clit had a pulse, and my sex was slick with how turned on I was. We were getting off on the idea of the three of us. We were both picturing Mattias... and he wasn't even here.

My fist flew up and down his erection, or maybe he was just pumping his hips that fast. He moaned as the images he'd laid out took him to the edge. He erupted with a groan that he himself stifled with a bite into his bottom lip. Thick lines of strain ran up his throat, and he held his jaw tightly closed, pushing out his exhale through a nearly completely closed mouth. I sucked him again, jerked him again, and then he fell to his back.

His release covered his chest and belly, the blonde hairs now coated and sticky. I stroked my hand over the mess on his body while peppering short kisses around his nipple and up to his collarbone.

One more time, he exhaled a lungful of air that seemed to last over a minute. In the dark, he turned to me, the wisps of hair along his forehead curling from the heat. We were both sweaty now.

“I’m serious that I’d be with both of you, Gen. I know you may not be ready to talk about it, but I think we have to. Very soon.”

Mattias is just halfway through his sentence, so I don’t know why we need to make decisions now. Then again, agreeing to a throuple right this second—though seriously permanent—would end this whole talk in its tracks. Briefly, I considered it, then got hung on his wording again.

“Why soon? Mattias could stay in another four years. Two, best case, but I’m not banking on anything.”

He pushed the hair from my face then held my jaw in one of his large palms. His thumb had a tight grip.

“Gennedy, he’ll be out next week.”

Chapter 19

This is the reason why I wanted Julisa to be gone when we talked about “the visit.” Okay, maybe not this exact reason because never in a million years did I expect this to be the outcome. Truly. When he’d been sentenced, though, the judge claimed that release could come earlier, with the help of good behavior.

But there were no exchanges of hopeful glances. Mattias never even mentioned the possibility like it was real. Less than seven years felt like nothing more than a magical hope.

And I’ll tell you what’s good. There is no magic on our side of town. There is no hope in the ‘hood. “*Wish in one hand and shit in the other, see which one fills up faster*” had been the only words of wisdom my father had ever uttered.

They were ugly and definitely not the polished sentiments that most parents imparted on their kids, but we weren’t the median family. We were broke, and my dad was uneducated and addicted to drugs. Truthfully, I’m surprised he knew any anecdotal *anythings*, so to get one that was true? I remembered it.

And he’s not been wrong.

There’d been no point in hoping or praying for leniency or any other immature, fairytale-esque thought that people uptown had no problem indulging in. Rich people had hope because good things happened to them all the time. They won cruises and found money on the sidewalk and walked places

for exercise, not necessity. Hope was a tangible thing to them because they'd seen it work.

I swallowed a thousand times or at least attempted, but my mouth and throat had dried up. Silas had left the bed and was cleaning himself in the doorway of the bathroom, waiting for me to speak.

Mattias is getting out in a week.

“They are really letting him out early?” I asked, but it truly didn't sound much like a question as much as it sounded like pure fucking shock.

His grin stretched from ear to ear because he was clearly pleased about the news.

I was pleased, too. Beyond fucking pleased.

Mattias getting out is something I've been fucking crying about, wishing for, dreaming of... for years. Literal fucking years.

This was the news I'd been waiting to hear. No, this was the news I'd been fucking living for... and now that I was hearing it, well, it felt a lot different.

Silas tossed the damp towel into the hamper, only partially making it in. He didn't fix it because Silas was a million beautiful and wonderful things, but I was beginning to think, simply having something hanging from between your legs made it *humanly impossible* to put your dirty clothes in the actual hamper.

It had to be a genital thing, seriously.

In the way that he always did, Silas adjusted our bodies on the bed so that I sat between his legs, my back pressed tight to his chest. He draped his heavy arms over my shoulders, resting his open palms atop my bare knees. With his lips at my ear, he began to rock our bodies together ever so slightly. The motion we made lulled me into some pocket of comfort that hadn't existed just a moment ago, and I dropped my head to his bicep, kissing it before resting there a moment.

“I know you’re happy because I know how much you love him,” he started. Sometimes it scared me how well these men knew me. If I lost them, I had the overwhelming sense that no one would ever know me the way that they did.

“I see the hesitancy in your eyes, Gen,” he said, his words so quiet that I had to stop our soothing rocking so I could better focus.

“I’m scared,” I admitted, because why not admit it? After all, he’d pull it out of me anyway. Better save the time and just be honest.

“I know, princess. I just don’t know *why*.”

His fingers began smoothing over my head, which was still resting against his arm. “I love you. You love me. You love him. He loves you.” He didn’t pose it as a question, so I stayed silent.

“Right? Have I got it right so far?” He continued smoothing his hands through my hair. My scalp pricked and tingled, and my shoulders unraveled a bit.

I nodded.

“Right, princess?”

The first time he started to call me the same pet name that Mattias did, it had made me angry. That was our thing, and it went way back to a time when our love for one another was based on understanding and survival. Nothing more.

I didn’t get the guts to ask him to stop, and when he’d used the term in front of Mattias at a prison visit, I was surprised.

Mattias seemed to enjoy sharing the name. Sharing *me*.

“He is making you happy,” he’d told me over a phone call where I’d sobbed to him that he must not love me if he could smile at my lover and let him borrow a most intimate term of affection.

“I made you happy, then I made you unhappy,” he’d said. “Si makes you happy again. And he respects me, and us.” I’d imagined him linking his hands together over the neon fabric that covered his tight core. “That’s rare. And finding

something rare and beautiful is special.” If I were there, he’d pinch his eyes on mine, to impart a bigger message on me. I know he would. “You hold onto the rare and beautiful with both hands. Or in our case, all four hands.”

I thought at the time that everything Mattias said came with an invisible and unspoken “*until I get out*” tethered to it. I thought we never actually said those words because it would be extremely hurtful to Silas. And it would’ve been.

But in recent weeks, I was beginning to wonder if I was wrong about that.

Silas folded his legs in, tightening his hold on me. “Right?”

“Right,” I said, feeling his still sticky body pressed to my back. He peppered the back of my neck with kisses before resting his chin on top of my shoulder.

“What if in the future, I love Mattias the way that I love you?” Before I could protest and say that Mattias would never or could never love another man in a sexual, intimate way, Si worked on changing my mind.

“Don’t think too hard about what it looks like because no one ever knows how it’s going to look. You always *think* you do, and that’s the problem most people have. Having an image in your head that you measure everything against. You just set yourself up for a really frustrating kind of disappointment. The most frustrating kind really. Because it’s all your own fault, you projected unspoken and unrealistic expectations onto something or someone that was completely unaware.” He paused and took a breath. “Sets you up for a hard road. So don’t lose yourself in *picturing anything*. Just focus on the love you give and the love you receive.”

Shit. When he said it like that, in a way which I agreed with everything he’d said, all I could do then was just bob my head like a fool.

“True,” I added. Because it was true of all relationships. The way you expect your parents to behave, what you want

from friendships—I had proof of that sleeping two doors down.

If I hadn't expected Julisa to have some unspoken allegiance on behalf of our aged and failing friendship, maybe the encounter would have gone differently. Maybe she still would have been a thirsty bitch looking to fuck my man. But maybe I added some sort of pressure to her by behaving like we had to pick up where we'd left off. I didn't know, but I had to accept that it was a possibility.

After all, I did think the trouble I'd run into in my relationship with Mattias was because I'd had a vision for us. Together for every moment of the day, forever, and all that.

Probably pretty unhealthy.

I'd have to retrain my brain and my heart to love blindly. I wanted to do it, to keep both of the men I loved, but I didn't know if I could.

I did know, though, that I could *try*.

“Then if we are ever at a point where each of us loves the other very deeply, all the way around, why does it matter if we are three instead of two?”

I opened my mouth to respond but came up short because I didn't have an answer to that.

It shouldn't matter if there are three of us in a relationship. So why does it? It would sure get me off the hook with having to break a heart, which would then break two hearts because how can I break someone without breaking myself? Impossible.

He pressed a chaste kiss to my cheek and began rocking us again. “It doesn't matter. And I think we all just need a few weeks to *exist* together. Can we agree to that for now? Just a handful of weeks to share air and... exist.” The way he repeated the word made my cheeks flare.

A storm of thoughts moved through my brain, and a rainbow of assorted and very unplanned words left my lips. “I agree. We need to just live together for a while and see how everything goes.”

His arms banded around me with more force, and his legs did, too. Wiggling against me while holding me tight, he kissed me everywhere along my cheek and ear, making me squeal.

The stubble that needed shaving this morning now tickled and grated my neck.

“Okay, okay!” I giggled, trying to wiggle out of his arms and off the bed. Once I did, I looked back to a very naked Silas sitting on the comforter. His eyes drank in my bare body as if it were the first time he was seeing it. I smiled at how his reactions to me always gave me a confidence boost.

You can be the most confident bitch in the world, *Elle fucking Woods* for that matter. But nothing boosts your ego like hungry eyes raking over your naked body. Oh, and those hungry eyes are in the head of a *very* good-looking man.

“Shower?” I offered, pacing backward until my feet connected with the cold tile of the bathroom floor.

We showered and dressed, and even though Silas hadn’t elaborated on a million details like I so desperately wanted, I could have floated into the clouds if I wasn’t in that house. I may not know the details, but I knew the key fact. Mattias would be in my arms in a week. That knowledge turned me into a junkie.

Mattias. *One week.*

I was so fucking high off that.

My highness definitely benefited Julisa. Though I’d already decided that tough love wasn’t the way to go, still, I found myself counting out extra bills into her palm. More than I’d planned. And the words I’d left her with were much softer than I intended, too.

She could one day thank Mattias for that.

She seemed to soften some in the nighttime, too. Or maybe last night we were both just off, but saying goodbye felt a lot like flipping through a yearbook, catching vignettes of the best moments on just a few pages. We ended on a good note

(meaning, we weren't going to go full fucking catfight) and the next time we meet, I think it will go a lot different.

Silas had zero interest in waving off Julisa. His loyalties lay with me, and the fact that she wasn't respectful of my boundaries (his words, not mine), he decided to read a book in bed while we said our goodbyes. He didn't even give her a second glance or an over-the-shoulder wave. That would earn him some head later.

When I turned the lock, I found myself practically sprinting down the hall towards our room.

Our house—the one Mattias had bought with his secret weed money and put in my name—was small. Tiny, some would even say. At just over 1,200 square feet, it was perfect for us. Compared to the five-hundred-square-foot stain on Earth that we called our apartment, this place almost felt big at times. And with just two people, well, space was never an issue. Like I said, Mattias and I were sardines before. This is definitely more of a koi pond.

“Tell me everything,” I demanded breathlessly, knowing how wide and crazy my eyes probably were. Pretty sure I hadn't blinked in over a minute, just standing there, waiting to devour all the morsels he was going to give me.

Letting the split book rest against his chest, Silas folded his arms behind his head, leaning against the wall. His long legs were outstretched, crossed at the ankle, feet bare.

Silas was always barefoot. He claimed nothing could hurt his feet because they'd been conditioned to rough sand, but I'd definitely heard the sailor's speech when his baby toe hooked the edge of the bed before.

“Did he have to snitch to get out early?” I asked, feeling pretty nervous about what the answer may be. Mattias isn't a snitch, but to get out of prison early? I'd probably do a lot of dishonorable things if I were him.

Silas snorted a laugh and tipped his head forward a bit, indicating for me to take a seat along the edge of the bed. I did, though keeping my body down in one spot felt like

harnessing the Goodyear fucking blimp with a single strand of hair. Immediately, my knee bounced mindlessly, and I began gnawing at the corner of my mouth, and twirling a piece of hair around my finger, too.

“First of all, Mattias wouldn’t snitch,” he replied, throwing air quotes around *snitch* like it wasn’t a real word. But it is. Then again, Silas didn’t grow up how we did.

“I didn’t think he would,” I said, not sounding as defensive as I felt.

The fact that one man knows the other that well should threaten me or make me jealous, but the soft way he said it made it seem like we were on the same team, discussing a fellow teammate. No rivalry.

“Turns out, he’s had *really* good behavior.”

I cocked a brow. I’d watched plenty of prison documentaries in the first year that Mattias was away. There wasn’t a lot of “*gee, you’re a good boy, so here’s your freedom*” moments happening. The most heartwarming thing I ever saw on them was when someone wasn’t suicidal or massively depressed.

Seeing my skepticism, he shrugged. “He didn’t say this, but I’m thinking Esteban’s departure to Canada may have something to do with it.”

The way he made his voice private while it was just the two of us in our own house made my nerves flare.

“What do you mean?” I asked cautiously.

I couldn’t imagine Mattias being responsible for someone dying, and I think that’s what was being insinuated here. I could forgive a lot when it came to Mattias, but that? I rested a palm over my stomach and spread my fingers wide, willing the sloshing feeling inside to chill the fuck out.

Silas lurched forward a bit as he sat up, sending his book to the bed. He patted the comforter next to him and organized his long legs into a comfortable cross-legged position. I joined him on the bed.

He took me by the hips and scooted me closer to him. Even though it had been a year, every once in a while, a traitorous chill ran through me when I'd feel so warm and comfortable with Silas. Illogical, I know.

"I don't think it's that *Scarface*, Gen. I think it's more like, Esteban probably proved a point to someone with his fists. Made them see why they should testify on Mattias's behalf."

Confused, I played with the hem of Silas's t-shirt, trying to understand the situation.

"Testify? I don't understand."

Silas pulled me onto his lap, and a flash of us on our sides this morning moved through my mind. I loved being back to chest with him. I loved the reverse too. There's nothing like the heaviness of a strong male body pressed against yours in a possessive and intimate way.

"The lawyer of one of the main players in the case brought some new evidence in, and I guess got his client's sentence reduced." He shrugged again; I felt it from behind me, but then his arms tightened around me. His hands woven through mine, he kissed my cheek.

"That prompted Mattias's lawyer to call his sentencing into question. The judge wanted to review the testimonies, check some character references. Esteban drove home the importance of honesty when he paid the witnesses a visit."

"That sounds illegal, and illegal is what got him there in the first place." I sounded sour, but why? Mattias was getting *out*, and that's all that mattered. Hell, I myself didn't even believe selling pot was that big of a crime. Definitely not prison-worthy.

He kissed me again, and the heat of his touch spread down my neck, flaring in my chest. All this talk of Mattias getting out was making me insatiable, and yet, I didn't want to be. I wanted to plan, scrutinize details, deep clean, buy things, and prepare. Cradled by my strong, warm man, I knew everything else would have to wait.

“The ring leader’s charges got reduced. It stands to reason that everyone else should have had theirs reduced, too. But the legal system isn’t worried about making things fair and tying up loose ends. There is no ‘customer service’ of the court, Gennedy. You have to advocate for yourself and fight every fucking day.”

He spoke like he knew from experience, but he didn’t. Silas was a law-abiding, wealthy, grown-up boy scout who probably hadn’t even ever had a parking ticket. He understood because he understood Mattias’s struggles.

“He advocated for himself and did what he needed to do so he could be out of prison and live his life with his *family*.”

The word family made my heart palpitate, and I froze the stroking motion I’d been doing up and down Silas’s arm.

“We’re his family.”

We’re his family. How can two men who have never been in a room together without a partition be family? Then again, I know firsthand that love isn’t defined by proximity or touch. Love is the connection of your soul to another. It never fades or dies, and even when it isn’t the focus of your life, it’s still a slow-burning ember in the background of your existence.

I nodded and swallowed. “Yes, we are.” I’d meant to say those exact words, and yet still, when they left my mouth, I mouthed them silently again. We are his family. Silas is part of this deep-seated connection now, too.

“Will you promise that you’ll give the entire situation some time?” he asked.

I nodded quickly because even if I didn’t know how Mattias felt about everything or what would happen between the three of us, promising him time also gave me time.

And I’d need time to think about this. Could I be romantically involved with two men under one roof? It had been different when one of these men was under lock and key, but both of them in the flesh at the same time? I wasn’t sure. I hated feeling pulled.

When Julisa and Roxanne used to argue and turn to me to decide, I hated that. I don't like feeling that I belong to two people, that I'm being stretched thin so other people can have what they need.

But time. I will give it time.

"Is the release next week for sure?" I guess I should have asked this first because if it somehow falls through, I think I may actually die.

Silas kissed the side of my jaw and moved our linked hands to my chest, where we squeezed my breasts. "For sure. We will pick him up next Thursday at 3 o'clock sharp."

"Holy shit," I murmured as Silas's tongue swept up the column of my neck.

We had sex after that, not speaking more than groans and moans. I focused on the tender fusion of our bodies, how good it felt, how good I felt, and tried hard to only think of Silas and the orgasm he was pulling from me.

When I came, I wondered what it would have been like to have Mattias there, too.

Chapter 20

Time has never flown for me. Time is usually a decrepit woman with a broken walker crossing a busy intersection.

The week leading up to Mattias's release didn't just fly by. It seemed to magically evaporate, and before I knew it, it was Wednesday night.

I'd spent the week deep-cleaning. Did the house need it? No. But Mattias had never been in this house when it was my home. I wanted him to feel like he finally had the home we'd always wanted as kids.

I became Suzy fucking Homemaker in my quest to make the place as comfortable as possible.

I made chocolate chip cookies and left them on a plate under the light above the stove. I lit a candle that smelled like fresh linen. I'd mopped and wiped down baseboards, put extra fluffy towels out in the bathroom, lined up his favorite shaving products along the sink in the bathroom, and I'd even stocked the freezer with several homemade meals so that we'd eat warm, home-cooked food all week.

Silas must've wanted the same energy for Mattias because he planted flowers in the box under the front window, pressure-washed the stoop, put out a new doormat, mowed and edged the lawn, and picked up two bags full of puzzles, books and movies for Mattias to have in case transitioning to freedom felt overwhelming.

He did something else to prepare, too. When I was plugging in an air freshener in the bathroom, I saw it.

A very large bottle of lube.

I stared at it so long that the bottle itself almost went liquid. Floating pieces of metallic swarmed the sides of my vision, and finally, I blinked and looked away.

Holy shit.

He bought lube for... the three of us? No. It must've been for Mattias. Maybe he was thinking Mattias hadn't had privacy for years, and he'd wanted to indulge in a nice, long jerk session when he had his first shower at home?

That had to be it.

Still, I gave the bottle of lube a second glance before I shut off the light and pulled the door closed.

Thursday morning, I woke up feeling like it was fucking Christmas, and I was the child of a wealthy oil tycoon. Practically rubbing my hands together excitedly, I was up before the sun. Michelle and I were going to a salon this morning; I was finally going to get the full-wax treatment that Michelle and the other women at Envy always got.

Michelle went first, talking to me throughout the entire thing. I sat in a chair near her head, keeping her company as well as giving her privacy. She'd given birth, she'd explained, therefore someone seeing her goods get waxed was nothing. But I didn't want her to watch me, so I stayed where I was.

On my turn, I broke the big news. I hadn't told her last week because I'd wanted to tell her in person. I mean, you don't deliver big news over the phone; that's just lame. When the esthetician left the room to get her supplies, I turned my head on the table. Michelle was playing with loose, long ends of my hair that hung over the side.

"Oh hey, I forgot to tell you," I started casually, because hey, this was a big moment and probably one of my last big ones.

She didn't even move her eyes to mine; she just kept mindlessly playing with my hair.

"Mattias is getting out today at three."

If she was able to breathe, I couldn't tell. Her expression went to blasphemous, disbelieving shock before it froze. Literally froze. She just stared at me, mouth agape. She didn't even blink.

"I'm serious, before you ask," I said, getting ahead of what I thought the next line of questioning would be. That's what I'd ask if it were me.

Then, in an act of the purest love, her eyes welled. She cupped her hands to her face, her long acrylic nail connecting with her bottom lashes.

"Oh my god," she whispered into her palms, but I heard it.

"I know," I whispered back, just as the esthetician barreled through the doors with an armful of supplies.

She let the items fall to the counter adjacent to us. "Alright, let's skin the cat."

WELL, AS IT TURNS OUT, MY INCREDIBLY HIGH THRESHOLD FOR pain apparently only applies to emotional pain.

"Need more water?" Esther, the ironic name of the esthetician who'd just tried to murder me by ripping apart my vagina, just asked.

I wiped my forehead with the back of my wrist again, swallowing the last of the iceberg-temperature water in the minuscule Dixie cup.

"I'm okay," I said, forcing a wobbly smile. From the corner, Michelle still snickered. I rolled my head back on the paper pillow that reminded me of the doctor's office.

"Shut up," I murmured through clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry," she admitted with a laugh, which then caused Esther to laugh. And while I was still in shock from the pain, I

laughed too. Because even with my vagina being nearly ripped off my body, I still had that heady feeling.

Michelle's reaction to Mattias coming home somehow made it more real. I don't know how to explain, but her eyes—I knew what a big deal it was when I saw her wide, shocked eyes.

"I'm really sorry for screaming," I said finally, as we all began to catch our breath after some very teary laughter.

Turns out, getting sugared does *not* hurt any less than getting waxed. But I didn't know that because I had never even been waxed, either. But when Esther smacked that fiery blob of wax against my body, my spine tightened. My body became warm and aware, and while it was slightly uncomfortable, it wasn't awful. In fact, it kind of felt good.

I began to let a cocky smile spread across my face, and then Esther *actually* began. I guess I'd thought the hot wax was the painful part. But the hot wax was, in comparison, actually like a massage from a five-star resort.

"Holy fucking shit!" I'd screamed, snapping at the waist like a cartoon character in a folding chair. Esther nudged my shoulder down, and when she held the blob up, my eyes went to my crotch.

All that pain and only a quarter-sized patch of skin was exposed.

Very quickly, my full-sugaring turned into a landing strip. And when I say strip, I mean *fairway*.

Still looked better than anything I could do. What would Mattias say? How would Silas like the feel of it?

I imagined them discovering it at once, one on either side of me in our bed. When Silas had insisted we switch our queen for a California king a few months ago, I wondered if he'd had something like this in mind?

Just the thought of the three of us there, naked, emotions high, dicks hard, and my body thrumming. Holy crap.

“You okay?” Michelle said, the last of her smile draining away as she took in my serious expression. Damn my daydream.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, “just trying to give my body a minute to realize it’s over now. No more trauma.”

She laughed and sat back in her seat. “I really hope your boyfriends don’t like the *au natural* look. Or else you just went through that for nothing.”

I wanted to comment on the fact that if I liked it, it wasn’t for nothing just because the men in my life didn’t. I wanted to, but I got hung up on the first part.

She’d called them my “boyfriends,” plural, not singular. And she had said it comfortably. It hadn’t happened yet, but I could hear in her voice that she would support whatever relationship I chose.

Esther shot me a look, tugging her head to the side. And for a second, my body reacted, tightening like it was preparing to do battle. But when she spoke, I realized I had her all wrong.

“Now, honey, if your boyfriends don’t like the way you groom your cat, they can go find another. They should just be lucky they get to pet it in the first place!”

Michelle and I both laughed again because only this woman could get away with referring to vaginas as cats to be groomed. Pussy, apparently, wasn’t in her vocabulary.

WE WERE HARDLY ON THE SIDEWALK OUT FRONT OF THE TINY salon when Michelle grabbed me by the shoulders.

“He’s really getting out!” Her voice was high and loud, and a few people across the street glared at us. Fuck them.

I nodded, a grin so big my vision narrowed.

Then we hugged, and we both got emotional because Michelle and Angus loved Mattias, too. And they hurt for me when he was away. She cupped my cheek in a true Hallmark moment, then said, “are you gonna start fucking them both?”

Cue record scratching. Our Hallmark moment was over. “Yeah,” I nodded, “that’s what Silas says we have to do to figure things out.”

Michelle looked to the side thoughtfully, and her mouth opened and closed a few times. Finally, she said, “at the same time or one-on-one?”

I tilted my head to the side, keeping my lips in a thin, unimpressed line.

“What?” she said, feigning playful shock.

“I don’t know, okay? I honestly don’t know. I wish I could tell you because then I would know what to expect, but I’m in this thing, and I haven’t the slightest freaking clue.”

Uh, emotional outburst, party of one. Your table is ready.

Michelle took me by the shoulders and gave me a shake. It felt aggressive for the moment, but her face was serious.

“You have two good men. If you gotta do some spit roasts to keep them both, then do it. Don’t be stupid Gennedy.”

I cocked a brow. “Spit roasts?” I asked, stuffing away her advice to pull apart later.

She rolled her eyes as if I asked what color the fucking sky was. “Filled at both ends, at the same time. You know, the way you spit roast a pig.”

My head wobbled back. “A sexual act where I’m the pig,” I clarified.

She nodded again with just a partial eye roll this time. “Yes. It’s hot. Don’t be judgy.”

I just laughed but knew this was a perfect opportunity to seriously spill the fear jar and see what the contents look like to someone else.

“You know what the funny thing is?” I asked, barely peeking up at Michelle.

She knew I was tossing the hook in the water and nodded me to keep going. “I don’t know how it would actually work, you know, like, the serious stuff. But when I imagine living

with both of them, doing life with both of them... it doesn't feel weird or wrong."

She made a noise in the back of her throat, an ugly cross between a snort and a scoff. "Because it's fucking not. *Love is love*. That's not just for gay people. It's for every relationship that doesn't fit inside some psychotic cookie-cutter man and woman mold."

I don't know why, but that snorty scoff and those rough words made my eyes hot.

"I can't see Mattias going for it, though," I admitted because that was the only thing tethering this massive idea to Earth.

"He wanted you to meet a guy. You met a guy," she says, ticking these facts off on one finger, using her other hand to hold it down.

Adding another, she said, "he wanted you to get laid, you did, and you told him *details*, and he was okay with it."

"We both wanted me to share details. That way, it felt like he was part of it, I guess." It sounded weird saying it out loud. Is that really why I'd given him details of the sex I had with Silas?

Michelle made a face that said, uh-huh but moved on to the next finger she held down. "He and Silas get along. Like, *really* fucking get along."

The pulse that beat at the hollow of my throat started pounding harder.

"They do." Once I thought about it, I'd never seen Mattias give another man the same smile he gave me. But with Silas, he gave him the soft, walls-down version of himself that he gave me. Only me.

On the last finger, she counted off the most poignant of facts.

"And Silas is bisexual. We may not know about Mattias, but I'll say this: most men are, at some point, curious about other men. If that other man is a tall, washboard-abled surfer

with long blonde hair and a gentle touch, well, that's just a plus."

Silas's intoxicating charisma and dizzyingly good looks were disarming. If Mattias was curious at all, like Michelle said, Silas would do the trick. Scratch the itch. Cure the urge.

"But," she continued, yanking me from my thoughts. "He could have reflected on life and love while locked up." She went serious. "He could realize that nothing matters other than having the people you love close to you."

My mouth went dry at the brief image of Silas and Mattias standing face to face in front of me, their staggering but towering frames casting a shadow over me.

I DROPPED MICHELLE OFF AND WAITED IN THE CAR OUTSIDE our house. I'd texted Silas that it was time to leave, and he'd texted that he'd be right out. Lazily, I unbuckled and slid over the center console when I definitely should've just gotten out of the car and walked around.

After the gear shift went up my ass and I used some choice words, I settled in the passenger seat. While trying to fix my hair in the tiny fold-down mirror, Silas opened the door.

He had a brown paper bag with him, which he deposited in the backseat.

"What's that?" I asked, nodding to the bag.

Then I noticed his hair was down. Clean and combed, tangle-free. He'd been working a lot at his new shop lately and hadn't cared for himself as much as he should. Today, though, he'd clearly shaved and took time grooming. I looked at his lean legs under the wheel and saw he was wearing his nicest black jeans.

"Baby," I whispered, not usually a fan of the term, but it felt fluent in that moment. "You look so good." Then my damn eyes went watery again.

He patted my leg, a way of saying thank you without making me full-blown cry.

“Some stuff for him.” He shrugged and put the car into gear, clearly not wanting to face me while admitting the contents of his very fucking thoughtful gift.

“His metal, so he can put all of his piercings back in right away. That’s part of him; he shouldn’t have to go without.”

Fuck, I wanted to keep my mascara decent, at least until I saw him. I lifted the hem of my black and white striped sundress and used the back of it to blot at my eyes. Silas’s sweet heart was hurting mine. I smiled up at him.

“And a new iPhone because, I mean, he can’t use the phone he had four years ago. It’s too fucking old.”

I nodded, a permanent grin eating at my face. How incredibly sweet was this man of mine? Or... *of ours?*

“And just some shirts, some pants, you know, so he can be in real clothes right away. And uh, the new Jordans.”

“You fit all of that in *that* bag?”

He snuck a glance at me as the road whipped by around us. “I put two bags in your trunk this morning before you left.”

I grinned, and my heart expanded inside my ribcage, spreading a strange, full feeling through my chest. “You’re so fucking sweet.” And I had to say it. “I love you.”

He shook his head as his cheeks went crimson. “It’s what I’d want done for me.” Then just a simple shrug.

I could have let him off the hook, but I called him on it because we were tiptoeing when, pretty soon, we’d need to run.

“It’s more than that, and we both know it.”

His smile slid off his face as he chanced another glance at me. The road was empty, but I was appreciative he kept his gaze forward.

“You’re right,” he said, his voice raw and vulnerable. “And I love you too.”

We didn’t say another word for the rest of the drive, each of us chasing our own tumbleweed of thoughts. When we

pulled into the gravel lot where the release gate led, Silas took my hand.

“You ready?”

My heart was beating so fast, I couldn't speak. I just nodded like an excited puppy.

“Let's go get our guy,” he said.

And then we did.

Chapter 21

The minute between 3 o'clock and 3:01 seemed to be an eternity. Seriously. Snails in fucking quicksand moved faster.

I DON'T KNOW WHICH OF US LET GO FIRST, BUT AT SOME POINT, we'd mutually and silently agreed to release our grip on each other. With our hands at our sides, we stood in front of my piece of shit car, leaning back nervously against the hood.

THEN THE BLUE METAL DOOR AT THE END OF THE CHAIN-LINK tunnel swung open. Everything was dark, not cryptically, but the actual light in the hallway flickered out. When it turned on again, both Silas and I were straightening against the car with interest.

Then he was there. His silhouette swallowed the doorway and seemed to float down the length of the hall towards us. Everything inside me turned to chaos. The thrumming at my wrists went completely haywire, my heart, too. Beads of sweat formed at my hairline and the back of my neck out of nowhere.

My spine turned to a steel rod, and my feet seemed to move on their own. What started as hesitant steps quickly transformed into desperate leaps, as if I were running to get the antidote to save mankind.

It felt that way.

I didn't waste time looking at him. I needed to feel him. Smell him, whatever he smelled like. I wanted to taste him. I had to run my fingers under his shirt, up his spine, and listen to his exhale against my ear.

"Princess." I couldn't see him; even if I wasn't burying my head into his neck like an insane tick on crack, my stupid eyes went hot again.

Then I felt the weight of his hand heavy on my head, his husky fingers pulling through my hair. "Your hair is even longer," he commented into my temple, and that's when I really fucking lost it.

Ugly sobs, clinging, and lots *and lots* of shushing and reassuring from Mattias. When we finally pulled apart and sucked in my air and snot, he pinched my cheek.

"I've thought about touching you for so long." His thumb traced my bottom lip. "You have no idea how *good* you feel."

I just nodded, which didn't even make sense as a response, but it's all I could do not to spend our first few minutes together ugly crying.

"I missed you so much," I spat out, my jaw quivering like a damn cartoon character. But I managed to smile with only one tear breaking free.

"I love you, princess," he said, and then he took my face in his grip and covered my mouth with his.

My body lit up like a fucking Christmas tree, and the swing from emotional to *hot* was extreme and undeniable.

"I love you, too," I sighed, content burning bright at the base of my skull. *Finally, everything is okay again.*

He linked our fingers together on one hand, and then, knowing it was the time but not knowing what exactly to do, I extended my free hand to Silas.

When Silas took my hand, his eyes moved slowly down my arm, over my other hand that was linked to Mattias's. Everything moved like molasses at that point. Silas's eyes crept over Mattias's shoulder, crawled over his clavicle, and

seemed to slow dance their way to his face. My gaze flicked to Mattias, where I saw the exact moment his eyes met Silas's.

There was a deep understanding, an unspoken exchange of trust, and something that felt a lot like love. I didn't feel like I was interrupting; rather, I felt part of their privacy, *in on the secret*.

Where I'd expected Mattias to outstretch half of a handshake, he didn't. The exchange I witnessed made my low half tingle and my heart nearly, seriously, explode.

Mattias slowly, like lukewarm honey dripping from a spoon, closed the distance between the two of them. He clamped one big mitt on the back of Silas's neck, his fingers subtly caressing the tan skin under Si's hair. He swung his other arm under Si's, around his back, and pulled him into an intimate hug.

The way you hugged your soldier when he came home from deployment.

Then a pulsing began somewhere inside me, wracking my frame with drunken desire. Mattias pressed his lips to Si's ear and whispered to him. I couldn't hear what he said, but I felt the low drawl of his deep timbre ping-ponging between our already closely knit bodies.

This was the first time the three of us were together, barrier-free, and we already felt like a unit of one.

When their embrace ended, Mattias was slow to take his hand off Si's neck. And when I finally tore my eyes away from Mattias—which was really fucking hard because I'd gone so long dying to see him—my chest tightened at Si's expression.

Neck and cheeks flushed, his lean fingers were pushing long hair away from his face. When I stole a glance at the tail of his shirt, which drifted just above the top of his fitted black jeans, the pulsing inside me roared to life, stronger than ever.

He was *tucked into his waistband*, and when he did that, I wasn't sure. But what I *was* sure of? Silas was *hard*. One moment of affection between the two of them and the man was already hard.

And the fact that it *turned me on* made me realize: I'd be very, very disappointed if Mattias didn't want the same thing.

With one of my hands in Silas's and the other gripping Mattias's hand, we walked to the back of the car, where the trunk was open.

Silas pulled the bags to the edge, draping shirts and pants over the open trunk. He drug out a box of shoes and held up two clear bags full of sterling silver.

"We thought you'd want to feel like *you* as fast as possible," he said, in a somewhat shy tone that I'd never heard. His cheeks were still flush, too. *Fucking adorable.*

Mattias looked between the two of us before reaching behind him and tugging his shirt off over his head.

The last few times I'd visited, I could tell he was getting healthier, eating more protein. But holy shit. Where he had lumped muscles and corded torso before, now he was pure lean muscle, tight-knit and perfect everywhere.

He must've noticed Si and me drooling because he twisted his lips up on the side. "You have a lot of time to do crunches when you're in a cage for ten hours a day."

We didn't give him privacy as he dropped his jeans to the gravel and stepped into a new pair that Si had bought him. How did he know Mattias's size for everything? I wasn't sure, but I was too transfixed by the situation to ask.

After he was clothed in dark jeans not un-similar to Silas's and a button-down white shirt, he toed into the brand new pair of Jordans. As if he knew exactly what Mattias wanted to do next, he pulled a zipper bag from the trunk and opened it. Holding it open to expose the contents to Mattias, I also saw what was inside.

Alcohol wipes, two types of tweezers, and a mirror. Mattias fished around in the bag and then crouched over the open trunk for a few minutes before *voila*. When he stood to face us again, my shoulders went tingly, and my body turned hot from the inside out.

With his bridge and lip piercing in, his gauges replaced, and his hair smoothed back, I think I got pregnant just from looking at him. Seriously. It's triplets.

"You are *so* handsome. You are a treat for my eyes, and I've been craving you." I smiled, and he tossed me a wink. Silas opened our doors, and for some reason, I took the backseat without question.

With Silas's hand on the gear shift, we backed out of the parking lot and headed toward the main road.

And the cherry on top of my overwhelmingly delicious sundae? Mattias rested his hand on top of Silas's for the entire drive back to the house.

Our house.

Chapter 22

When we got to the house, Silas carried the bags in from the trunk, letting Mattias enter first. After all, he was the man who bought the house we were living in. It felt weird for a split second when he pushed the front door open and just stopped. But after slowly peeking around the kitchen and living space that the front door opened up to, he walked in.

“It’s just how I imagined it would be,” he said finally, and when he turned around to face us, I could see his eyes were just a bit moist. “And it smells like you,” he said, reaching out to pull me to him. With my ear at his chest, I could hear the rapid beating of his heart.

I shook my head against him. “I can’t believe you’re home.”

His arms tightened their hold as he dropped his mouth to the top of my head, kissing me. “I really can’t believe it either.”

Silas moved the bags to the master bedroom down the hall, and when he made his way back, the three of us stood in a triangle, silent but smiling.

“I’d like to see your shop,” Mattias said finally, lifting his gaze to Si. Without hesitation, as if the president of the United States had asked him for a favor, he nodded.

“Yeah?” His tone dripped with excitement, and it made me want to grin. Silas really did like Mattias. And while based on the hard-on he’d gotten in the parking lot not more than two

hours ago, I knew he was attracted to Mattias sexually, it was becoming hard to ignore that the captivation spanned far beyond *“he’s hot, and I want to fuck him.”*

Mattias nodded. “Yeah, I’d love a fucking shower where I’m not protecting my asshole,” he said, partially chuckling, I think to make the truth of the statement more palatable for Si and me. He nodded down the hall. “I’ll grab a shower, then maybe we can get some food and head that way?”

I was poised to answer, but Si beat me to it.

“Perfect. What are you in the mood for?”

I knew Si was referring to the food Mattias wanted to get, but the question still made me tingle. A mental picture began unfolding in my brain, me on all fours with Silas behind me, Mattias standing in front of me, pumping himself onto my tongue.

“You in there, princess?” Mattias asked, snapping me from my fantasy. It had only been a split second, but the vision acted like a viagra to my already out of control need.

“Huh?”

They were both smirking at me. Two men, one swarthy with hair the color of a starless night, the other golden-skinned with long locks that reminded me of champagne. Different in nearly every way. The thing they held in common? Loyalty, love, and respect.

“Mattias wants a sub and a slice of white cake with chocolate frosting.”

I turned to face Mattias, who just shrugged. “I missed a lot of birthdays, and next to you, the thing I missed most was cake.”

Silas pulled a hand down his jaw, revealing a smirk.

“Alright, alright, one of the things I missed most was sex.”

Si winked. “I was going to say, if you missed cake more than sex, I’d love to know what cake you were eating.”

There it was. Sex. The first mention of what I perceived to be the elephant in the room. We were going to try to co-exist, share our love and see what happened. And Mattias's hand on Si's on the drive home gave me hope, but I wasn't an idiot. You can't cling to hope for dear life because it more than not results in disappointment. Still, at the mention of sex, my pulse quickened and I grew antsy on my feet.

"I missed a lot of things," Mattias amended, and I was thankful he didn't continue the line of conversation down that path. I wasn't ready.

Yet, I was the only one who seemed nervous. Interesting.

"Alright," he said, shoving his hand through his dark hair. "I'm gonna have a shower and shave, then I'll be ready to hit it."

Si nodded towards one of the brown bags he'd brought in from the trunk. "We got you a new phone. Want me to set it up for you while you're showering?"

"Si got you everything in those bags," I added because I wanted Mattias to see how caring Si was. I felt like I was auctioning off a date and listing off all his pros to get someone to bid.

Mattias, my strong protector, and alpha male prison release, then did something else that left my mouth agape. He hugged Si again, using the same intimate grip at the back of his neck as he did.

Something about those two in that embrace put gooseflesh on my chest and neck.

Then he drifted down the hall towards the shower. He didn't close any doors, and I guess he'd gotten used to not having any privacy in prison. I wondered what else he'd struggle to transition with but hoped that whatever we could do, we could help him.

Then, after a moment wherein Si and I just stared at the hall where Mattias had been, we finally looked at one another.

Slowly, Si smiled at me, tucking a piece of his blonde hair behind his ear. "Sit with me while I set up the phone?"

For a split second, I'd considered joining Mattias in the shower, not because I needed to get clean but because I desperately wanted to get dirty. But he'd just walked into a home he purchased but had never lived in. He'd just been given freedom. I didn't want to overwhelm him.

"Okay," I said, slipping into a chair next to Si at the table. He began peeling the plastic from the thick, rectangular box when I blurted out the question that had been on my mind for a while.

"Where will we all sleep tonight?"

I'd lived in the house Mattias bought us before I met Si, but the bed we shared was our bed. A California King-sized mattress that was molded perfectly to the shape of our spooning bodies. Another large man would easily fit.

Silas shimmied the lid off the box and tipped it sideways, letting a space gray cell phone fall into his waiting palm.

Holding the power button down, he looked at me as if the answer were obvious.

"After Mattias sees the board shop, we'll go get some new sheets. Some that none of us have slept on. A new place for us all to sleep tonight."

The smile I'd held back earlier tore through me to the surface, and Si immediately flushed. So, of course, my grin grew. I pinched his side before looping my arms around his waist, tipping my head towards his shoulders.

The familiar smell of wildflowers and musky skin wrapped itself around me in return. I loved how Silas somehow always smelled like a beautiful day at the beach, even if he hadn't gone.

He cupped my cheeks and pressed a chaste kiss to my forehead. Then he turned back to his task—setting up Mattias's phone.

While I watched Si swipe and type, my mind became a greedy little bitch and drug me back to the fantasy of the three of us. I had to tap my foot, wring my hands, play with my hair

—basically; I had to fidget like a moron just to keep myself occupied.

Fantasies are harmless, yeah. But I know me. If I fantasized about it, I'd obsess over it. Start drawing all of our initials on the top of the grocery list and projecting my wants onto them. Completely. So I shook my foot and watched Silas key in our location while we waited for Mattias.

Chapter 23

I'd been to Silas's board shop before, more than a few times. The fact that it was near the club made it a common place for me to hang out after lunch, before my afternoon shift. I wasn't there often enough to be helpful when customers asked me questions about which deck was best for them or which wheels went best for the conditions they skated in. But I was there enough to feel comfortable.

After Mattias had a religious experience through lunch, we ordered the new sheets. Turns out, anyone can have anything at any time as long as they have money. Being a *struggle bus* in the finance department my entire life meant that I really didn't know that until now.

When the aisles over the department store held far more options than we realized, we just a little stumped. Neither Silas, Mattias or myself said a word about the fact we were selecting sheets for just one bed, we knew. Maybe that's what took so long in making a choice?

After minutes of staring at flannel, checking thread counts, and analyzing patterns, finally, Silas chose. We ended up with a pair of black striped sheets and a few extra pillows.

During the entire process of selecting bedding, Mattias stayed pretty quiet. His silence was unreadable, and it made me nervous. If it made Si nervous, he didn't show it. He paid for everything—after I made him promise to let me chip in later—we walked the few blocks down the quiet downtown streets to the board shop, Tilt 2. The first shop, of course, held the namesake Tilt.

Trailing a few paces behind them, I listened to Silas's tour of the shop. He explained that they rotate the display on the longest wall; summer holds skateboards, and winter holds snowboards. He explained that they sell boarding passes to the local ski resort and that they also do repair, housing a small shop off the inventory room in the back. He showed Mattias racks of Tilt-branded gear, pads, helmets, stickers, water bottles, everything.

Mattias had a strange expression on his face once we loaded back into the car, ready to head home. I didn't ask because I figured that getting out of prison—even if he was only there for three years—must be overwhelming. Adjusting to a daily rainbow of life choices must be... tough.

But when the car fell silent, and we were just a few blocks from the house, he shared with us what I suspected he'd been feeling most of the day.

"I gotta be real right now," he'd said, and though we were already quiet, I held my breath to better hear what he was going to say. It was like that with Mattias; the world stopped when he spoke. You felt his words in every nerve ending and follicle. He just had that kind of charisma.

"You got a dope life, Si. Two businesses, and it's shit you love, too. It's not like owning a business your dad had that you hate. You board. It's you."

Silas flushed a little but didn't shy away from accepting the compliment. Mattias wasn't a business owner or an educated guru, but he was real and honest. No matter what. So a compliment from him was always genuine.

"Not everyone believed Tilt 2 would make it since the water and nearest skate park is an hour away." He kept his eyes forward, but his hands adjusted on the wheel a few hundred times. "But it's found a family of boarders and, yeah, it's going fucking great."

"Well," Mattias began wrapping up his thoughts as Silas tipped the wheel towards the curb in front of our place. "You took care of our girl for the last year. And I'm proud and lucky to know you." Then he slapped his palm down on Si's thigh

and shook it for a moment before popping out of the car onto the sidewalk.

Before Mattias was released, I thought for sure I'd be so fucking uncomfortable in this scenario. I thought I'd struggle to adjust to romantically loving two people at once under the same roof.

But the moment we came back from our day out, and Silas asked Mattias if he wanted to learn how to make vegan tikka masala, I realized that it wasn't going to be weird at all.

I sipped white wine at the table, shuffling a well-loved deck of cards while absorbing the two of them together.

Their voices were soft and didn't carry far, but we were in a small space, so I heard them. Mattias explained to Silas that he'd never really cooked anything, that reheating things or boiling water was as much experience as he had. But, and this stopped me mid-deal, he said to Si that he wanted to learn.

"I don't want you two having to do that shit all the time. I wanna learn, too. And not just spaghetti and shit. Teach me something complicated."

Silas nodded in understanding before reaching up to a cabinet only he could reach until now. He pulled down a notebook where he scribbled amounts—aggravatingly enough, never full recipes—and flipped it open.

"I'm not a vegan, but I think eating vegan a handful of meals a week is good for staying lean and keeping your gut healthy." He licked his thumb before settling on a favorite.

"Vegan tikka masala. It's good as shit, it can be made a bunch of different ways, and it always impresses people if you garnish right."

"Garnish?" Mattias questioned, and I could just picture that bridge piercing rising up with his eyebrows. Their backs were still to me, so I couldn't be sure.

Silas tasked Mattias with dicing peppers and cauliflower, but when he started chopping, Si gripped his wrist.

"No, *nonono*," he laughed, and Mattias laughed too.

“I told you, man; I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.”

When I thought Si was going to take the knife and demonstrate, immediately, he surprised me.

“Step closer to the counter,” he ordered, though his tone was mild with soft edges. Mattias tightened his body to the counter. Silas stepped behind him, hovering his chin over Mattias’s shoulder. He didn’t rest it there, but their ears grazed a few times as Si took Mattias’s right hand with his. Slowly, he moved the knife they both held. Pieces of red pepper toppled onto the cutting board.

My thumbs pinched the deck of cards, frozen mid-shuffle.

He was teaching Mattias how to cook, but in such a tender, intimate way, I got teary-eyed. Blinking away the heat from my eyes, I honed in on Si’s soft words.

“Curl your fingers in, so the knuckle is out. That way, if you slip, you don’t cut your fingers off.”

Mattias turned his face towards Si’s, a whisper of a movement, and Silas did the same. They could have kissed they almost were. Instead, a slow smile crept over both of their faces, and a moment later, they were back to cooking.

I finished my glass of wine, but neither of them wanted any.

“Figure why pick up a vice now if I could make it through prison without one,” Mattias had said when I’d offered him a glass.

“That’s smart,” Silas had agreed.

There were a ton of things like that. Statements and admissions where one of them seemed to genuinely agree or admire, and I knew both of these men—it wasn’t fake, and it wasn’t forced. Though they may have contrasted physically, they in fact shared a handful of qualities, one being the inability to be phony.

The entire last year, they’d grown a bond of their own, Si getting the same amount of time with Mattias as I did. I try to imagine if I’d met Mattias online rather than at the gates of our

dump of an apartment complex. How exciting would it be to finally meet? To learn each other's nuances, like how Mattias's solemn face really just means that he's tired or how Silas's knuckle cracking is a habit of his when he's agitated and trying not to lose his cool. To experience a chest-to-chest embrace, to discover the other's secret flavors and private quirks.

I shouldn't have been surprised at how comfortable they were with one another. Maybe I wasn't surprised as much as... relieved. I don't know what I expected, but clearly it wasn't this, because watching them together made breathing so much easier than it was last week.

We ate dinner, Silas and I on one side of the table, Mattias on the other. He thumbed through Si's notebook as he stuffed his mouth full, sticking little yellow Post-It notes on each page he wanted to remember. When I glanced over my auburn spoonful of seasoned veggies, I caught the proud way his head tilted back just a sliver, how his lips curled on the ends almost imperceptibly, and how, while he ate, he watched Mattias.

I couldn't take my eyes off either of them.

After we ate, I washed the dishes while my guys played cards. Because it was the thing I did to soothe myself when I got nervous, Silas had learned quite a few tricks, too.

The husky sound of their laughs, the slapping of hands against the table, and the vibration of positive energy that flitted through the room made me so fucking happy. The happiest I think I'd ever been.

And we hadn't even made it to the bedroom yet.

Chapter 24

After we'd played cards for a while, Mattias said another shower sounded nice. I think if I had to shower in a room full of strangers for years, I'd probably *binge* private showers, too.

But it'd been a handful of hours now since he'd been released, and I couldn't stand it. I could not go *one more fucking second* without having him.

"Silas," I started, feeling uneasy and nervous, both things I didn't usually feel with Si.

"Yeah, babe," he said, rinsing dishes. A strand of his sun-kissed hair fell across his forehead, and my heart skipped a beat as I watched his strong, sudsy hand push it back.

"I want to have sex with Mattias right now, alone."

There.

I said it.

Beating around the bush or trying to tiptoe into it would have been so much fucking harder. My ribs ached from the obscene dance my heart was doing.

Say something, I panic-thought to myself as I studied his wide blue eyes, seconds ticking by.

Then he smirked.

"Have fun." He leaned down and kissed my forehead and returned to the dishes.

I couldn't move. I just stared at him, my mouth open stupidly. It was that simple?

"Silas, I—" I'm glad he cut me off because I really had no idea what I was going to say.

"Enjoy yourselves." He leaned down and pressed a warm kiss to my lips. "I love you."

"I love you, too," I said. Then I didn't stick around.

A minute later, Mattias, in nothing but a bath towel folded around his waist, had me pinned to the bedroom wall. Our mouths smashed together in years of pent-up desire, heartache, frustration, and carnal need.

"I missed you so much," I panted when our kiss broke, his mouth taking bites of my neck.

"Fuck, Gen. You have no fucking clue." And that's the last thing he said before he tore my pants down and fucked me right there against the wall.

With my panties and jeans still banded around one ankle, he mauled my mouth as he sawed his hips between my legs.

One of his strong hands pinned my leg to the wall from behind my knee, and his other hand held the base of my throat. I felt his power on me, against me, inside of me. It was impossible to keep my eyes open with that kind of completion and pleasure.

He grunted and groaned, still attacking my mouth with his. I held his shoulders, loving how I remembered the flex of his muscles against my palms. His skin was hot and growing damp with sweat as I let my hands slide down his biceps.

Digging my nails in, I gripped him hard as I came, my orgasm taking quick control of me. I hadn't anticipated it, but everything about having him back felt so good. So right.

He didn't warn me, either. As soon as my pussy began tightening around him, he exploded.

The grip on my throat tightened in a beautiful pain that made my eyes water and my toes curl.

When his throbbing release ceased, and my climax finally slowed, we stood there together, breathing.

Breathing and staring at one another.

Before he pulled on pajamas and disappeared down the hall to meet Silas, he kissed me once softly and said, “I live for you, and I love you.”

We played a few rounds of Mexican Train Dominos and had some hot chocolate before we finally decided to call it a night, around twelve in the morning. I told Mattias and Silas I’d rinse out our mugs and lock up, then meet them in our room.

I did those things, and when I finally made my way down the hall towards our room, I had a funny feeling in my stomach. An awareness inside of me somewhere telling me that something was going on.

I pushed at the only partially closed bedroom door, and the room was revealed to me.

His cheek went hollow as his jaw tore open, a flash of pink appearing between their open mouths. Mattias’s thumb was pressed against Si’s ear, his fingers lost in the waves of golden hair. The noises. Both of them groaning, low and raw like some sort of ASMR porn. The hair on my neck stood up.

Si’s long arms were looped tight around Mattias’s back, his hands woven together. This didn’t look like a first kiss embrace, and yet, I knew it was because I’d been with them all day until now.

I stood there, watching their frames sway and strain, nearly fusing. Si was breathing hard through his nose as Mattias held control of the kiss, holding his face tightly. The olive skin of his knuckles was turning white, he held so tightly. Then Si pushed his hips forward, and I watched in what felt like slow motion as their groins connected.

Every nerve ending inside of me rose to the surface, blazingly aware of the act unfolding in front of me.

My two handsome men were experiencing their love for one another.

And my body appreciated it. My sex clenched, and my fingers tingled, my legs wanting to move towards them.

But my heart cemented me to the spot in the doorway. And my heart is what made me interrupt the erotic first kiss.

Awkwardly and stupidly, I cleared my throat because I didn't know what else to say.

Stomp my foot and throw my hands to my hips, crying, "what about me?" wasn't really a good option. And my skin pricked with annoyance when the first throat-clearing went unheard because their kissing and growls of hunger were growing loud.

I did it again, hoping to God for all of our sakes that they heard.

They broke apart, but not the way I expected. They didn't leap apart, no one's eyes went wide, and there wasn't even a single drop of guilt in either of their faces.

I shook my head, which felt bitchy and immature, but I didn't know how to express exactly how I was feeling.

We'd agreed to live together but as far as sex and sleep and relationships and life were concerned? We hadn't discussed anything.

Si had told me that we'd be getting a big bed and sleeping together.

Mattias had been the one to share and plan his release with Si.

Si had told me that we'd work well together, the three of us.

Even if I'd agreed with all of it and wanted all of it, shouldn't they want to hear me say it? If things were going to work the way at least Silas had envisioned, didn't we all need an equal say?

As if they'd planned it ahead of time like a fucking flash mob, they both came to a side of me, taking one of my hand in theirs.

I yanked my hands away and took a step back, landing myself in the dark hallway. I stared at them, tall and strong, broad-chested with kissable lips, each their own unique brand of masculine.

They both stood with jaws clenched shut, eyes idling on me. I'd just caught them kissing, and they weren't going to say anything? I felt ganged up on, and I didn't like it.

"What the fuck?" I spat out, in not my best moment. I swear, when adrenaline piques, the ability to spew a good argument somehow drains from your body.

Mattias dragged a big hand down his face, sighing. It was an irritated reaction, but he wasn't apologetic immediately like I guess I'd expected. Hell, I didn't even know what I expected anymore.

"You guys." That's all I said. It wasn't a question, just a sad little statement. Then I added, "you guys seriously don't have anything to say? No one is sorry?"

At that, both of their faces started to curl up tight in the center, wrinkles splaying across their foreheads, their brows pulled together. Si's mouth fell open, but it took him a few moments to find words.

"We aren't sorry for having a moment, no." His voice was calm, like the surface of a wind-less water. And it made me so angry, I wanted to splash in his calm. It was probably easy to be calm and chill when you were the one in on the secret kiss.

"A moment?" I repeated; because I really didn't know what to say. I felt left out, yeah, but also... terrified. I never thought Mattias could be with a man; I didn't know his scale slid that far. And knowing that I walked in on their first kiss and didn't find it timid and awkward was truly terrifying.

What if they wanted one another more than either of them wanted me?

Mattias pulled me against his chest. It was against my will because I was so angry I didn't want to be touched, but I couldn't open my mouth to fight it. I was afraid to cry.

I had to be strong, stand my ground.

He stroked my hair, and I was grateful that no one spoke for a minute because I sorted through the chaos to find the right words. Or the words that would best explain the moment.

Stepping back, I told the truth because I could never regret doing that.

“I was surprised by the kiss.” I stuffed my hands into my jean pockets to prevent myself from playing with my hair, or any other mindless fidgeting. “Really surprised.”

Mattias spoke in such a soothing tone that even though the words themselves were unexpected, they made me feel good. Like being wrapped in a warm towel after getting out of a cold pool.

“Princess,” he started, guiding us towards the bed in the center of the room. We all sat, me between them. They each rested a hand on my inner thigh, and I couldn’t deny the way I tingled in response.

Mattias held my gaze.

“We can talk about it. We can write a list of rules. We can do that if that’s what you want.” His lips lifted on the edge in a small smile. “But if there’s real trust and real love,” he draped a hand over his chest to make a point, “and I believe there is... well, do we need limitations?”

Silas wiggled his palm on my leg, and I turned to face him. He looked nervous.

“The more we share, the more we have. But a love like this, one that ebbs and flows between the three of us, there’s no room for fear and jealousy.” He gripped my knee tightly, and heat spread through my thigh. “Trust me, okay?”

Mattias matched the movement, catching my bouncing knee in his hand.

“If we’d jumped apart and tried to grovel like dirty dogs, then you’d have something to worry about.” Fuck, that made sense. It makes *a lot* of sense. My mouth went Sahara dry again.

“Well,” I started, “I...” I tried.

“Sometimes it will be our season,” Si said softly, placing his other hand at the small of my back. “And other times, the three of us will share a season.” A warm tingle spread through my chest, and desire zipped down my spine, settling at the apex of my thighs. “Same for the two of you,” he finished, barely nodding his head across my lap to where Mattias sat.

“The important things are trust and love. There will be times when Mattias wants you all to himself. Maybe for days, even weeks. And when and if that happens, I’ll have enough faith in what we’ve built to know I don’t have to feel hurt or threatened.”

“Likewise, if my man wants time with our princess, who am I to keep you two from each other? You’ve bonded; you love each other. I may be a convict, but I’m not a fucking prick.”

The joke was sort of what we needed because it broke the tension, and we all laughed softly.

“The more we share, the more we have,” Silas repeated.

My head ping-ponged between them, and I drank in their nods of hopeful approval. I wanted to say *yes, I’m in. I get it, sign me up, I’m here, I love you both.*

Because all of that was completely true.

I *did* want that.

I *was* into it.

I did *get* the concept of sharing.

But could I really be on the *outside* of an intimate relationship? And what did Si just say... for days, sometimes *weeks*, maybe? I didn’t want to promise something that I couldn’t follow through with.

Maybe Silas and Mattias were just stronger than me. Maybe they’d have no problem being the outsider for whatever amount of time every so often. I knew I’d be okay alone—I was alone for a few years before I met Si after Mattias went away.

But being alone *with* them, I wasn't sure I could handle that. Selfish, I know, because I was willing to let either of them be odd-man-out.

"I don't know," I admitted, looking down at my lap. "I want to say yes with all certainty, but I don't know how I'll do, being... *left out*." It sounded so stupid. It was so stupid. And selfish too. At least I was being honest.

Silas nodded like he understood perfectly. And maybe he did, because like he'd said, this wouldn't be his first polyamorous relationship.

"You want to make sure you're a lock in the relationship; I get it. Let me tell you, this stuff only works if we all are *locks*."

That made sense, but I wasn't sure how to accomplish that. After all, anyone *could* promise anything. How could we tangibly agree to some level of promised equality?

Chapter 25

Silas looked at Mattias, and for a moment, I wondered how they could share so many silent conversations through looks after having only just met a year ago. Not to mention, they'd never had any private time face-to-face. And yet, they seemed like *a lock* already.

“Do you love Mattias?” he asked, which felt rhetorical, but as he nodded his head, wide-eyed, I knew he needed an answer.

“Of course. Forever.”

“And... Do you love me?” he asked, this time dropping the coaxing nod. I wondered if he knew I'd gotten the gist that this line of questioning was leading to a point or if some part of Si needed reassuring from me since Mattias was back.

“Of course. Forever.” I added, squeezing his hand. His eyelids softened, and he gave a quick smile.

“And you know I love you,” Mattias said. I turned from Si and found Mattias's dark eyes searing into me. He leaned in, his minty breath broiling my lips. Then he kissed me slowly, sweeping his tongue over mine, the tip dragging a line along the roof of my mouth.

“And I love you too, Gen,” Si added.

Mattias pulled back, his lips swollen, eyes dazed.

I turned back to Silas, dizzy from the dense emotions surrounding me. Si's blue eyes whispered for me to come closer, and when I did, he pressed his forehead to mine.

Slowly, his mouth settled on mine, and as we kissed, he groaned. The same guttural noise he'd made earlier.

With the hand they each had on one of my thighs, as if agreed upon earlier, they stroked my legs in unison.

Then Mattias's hand slid up my back, resting with a controlling yet gentle grip on my neck. With intention, he turned me to face him, and then he took my mouth with his, too.

Silas's hand kneaded my inner thigh, his pinky grazing my sex casually as he did. The feeling of being shared had my sex pulsing, and I knew then that I'd have to figure out a way to be okay with all of this. To be okay with the two of them being together, without me, sometimes.

Because *this* was the fucking hottest thing I'd ever experienced. And it wasn't an adrenaline rush type of thing that you got out of your system once you did it once, like skydiving. No, this was the start of a life-long addiction; I could feel it in my veins.

I was losing myself to the warm lapping of Mattias's tongue against mine, the back of Silas's knuckles dragging over my exposed midriff. Then, before I knew it, I felt the flick of my pants being opened. Just as though the sand had drained from an invisible hourglass, Mattias relinquished my mouth to Silas, giving him a turn.

He took it, replacing Mattias's hand with his own, at the back of my neck. My body hummed and quivered as their fingers touched against my skin. Feeling them connect didn't help the flood of arousal in my seam.

Silas kissed me, this time taking nips at the corner of my mouth before connecting our lips. As he did, Mattias's hand slid under the waistband of my panties. When his long, thick fingers discovered my bare and saturated pussy, he groaned.

Not just a noise to express how good touching me felt.

The noise he made caused me and Silas to stop kissing.

A grumble of pleasure so deep in timbre and so raw in emotion that he didn't even lift his gaze to see us staring at

him. He continued watching his hand move, trapped under the denim and cotton, his expression one of a desperate man.

I reached out and cupped my hand over his lap as Silas's hand traveled up and down my spine.

Mattias was so thick and hard in his black jeans. My mouth watered. Touching me, being with *us*—that's what had him like a steel rod. And it had been so long since I'd given him a release, since I'd tasted his orgasm just to drive him crazy, since I'd... well, *anything*.

"*Fuck,*" he gritted out finally, pulling his hand from my panties. "You feel so fucking good. You're so fucking wet."

Silas's hand left my thigh and took Mattias's hand by the wrist. Leaning across my lap, right in front of my face, he brought it to his mouth. Slowly, he wrapped his tongue around Mattias's glistening fingers, then sucked them onto his tongue with a pop.

In response, my nipples hardened and fireworks of heat spread through my jaw and cheek. My brain tingled at the edges as I fell down the rabbit hole, deeper and deeper.

When he'd licked Mattias's fingers clean, he released him but stayed leaning over me.

"Do you want to taste her?" Si asked, his voice rough and shaky. We all had a death grip on sanity, but I could feel the fatigue of holding on setting in.

Mattias nodded, and parallel to the way he wrapped his hand around my neck, Silas pulled Mattias forward.

Right in front of me, so close that I could smell my pussy on Si's breath, their mouths slammed together, fusing instantly. They were both moaning and groaning, and the noise escaped as the seal of their mouths broke from their wild tongues thrashing.

Mattias was now holding Si's neck, too, in what felt like a balance of power. Their other hands were now on my shoulders. I didn't notice when that happened because I'd been so lost in their kiss.

Kiss. If you could even call it a kiss.

They were going at it, hot and heavy, and the noises they were making made me think of sex way more than kissing.

It was *mouth sex*.

And it was hot.

When they stopped kissing, I was... *disappointed*.

It was almost funny, though, because not more than twenty minutes ago I was feeling threatened by this very thing. And now that it was happening in front of me, I was hooked. Overcome. Addicted.

But they rose to their feet, and so did I. Our eyes volleyed around, but when Si started toeing off his shoes, so did I. Mattias, too.

In record time, we were all completely nude, each of us standing in a pool of our clothes.

What we were about to do would change us forever and would marry us in a way, too. I knew it in my core; I felt it weaving into my DNA and becoming an invariable piece of my existence.

Strangely, I was completely ready.

Chapter 26

A warm tongue thrashed at my open sex, while another one moved up my spine. Ass up, face in the pillows, head in heaven, the two men behind me worshiped me.

That's the only word I can think of to describe it. *Worship*.

Every flick or glide of their tongue on my body was rich with adoration and weighty with power. And when I reached back and felt damp, warm skin under my palms, neither my heart nor brain cared who it was.

Because I loved them both, and they were both making me feel so fucking good. Better than even a princess deserved.

“Every night,” Mattias’s broken voice came from underneath me, and then I knew it was him who had been feasting on me. “I dreamed of fucking you. *God*,” he rasped, “I missed fucking you so bad, you have no fucking idea.”

I blinked my eyes open, though my lids felt like a million pounds of sand was resting on them. Tucking my chin to the top of my shoulder, with hazy vision I glanced back at them. Si was at my side, stroking himself while Mattias lay between my legs on his back. My eyes pinched as I strained to see, and before I dropped my face to the pillows again, I saw it.

Mattias’s wide, hard cock, veins pulsing up the stalk, the crown so pink it nearly looked purple. A bead of creamy white dripped from the tip, and my eyes followed it to a small pool of milky fluid on his belly.

“Touch yourself,” I panted, letting the down pillows swallow the throb of my brain. Because as much as my pussy

throbbed, my head did, too.

Alone, my love for Mattias was intense and all-encompassing.

Same went for what I had with Si; our love was *essential*.

The fusion of those loves proved to be a fucking gnarly concoction. Every single part of me felt as if lights I didn't know existed had been turned on. Bright, swelling needs burgeoned from inside me, and even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't have stopped it. Or myself.

Mattias grumbled and slid off the mattress like a mechanic from under a car. Then I felt four strong hands grip me and flip me, leaving me dazed on my back.

They stood in front of me, both of them keeping a fist wrapped tightly around the base of their cocks, motionless.

I let my eyes go to Mattias first because I almost still couldn't believe he was really out. He gave me a small wink, which made my pussy flutter. He had that same look in his eyes the night he took me to dinner for my sixteenth birthday.

Though Silas and I didn't share memories beyond a year, the look we exchanged felt as powerful, as poignant. Simply, it was "yes."

I know there would be plenty of times to relinquish power, to be a maiden to my knights, to humble myself to them, and be taken in any form.

Tonight was *not* that night.

It was our first time together, and after witnessing the most erotic of first kisses I'd ever seen, the pressure was on to give them both an experience just as hot.

Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, I used the elastic on my wrist to tie my hair back. They held themselves hostage to orgasm, still gripping their dicks—probably afraid of how close they were already. With the pulsing zipping through my clit at the moment, I felt the same way.

I motioned them closer and tapped their hands away, replacing them with my own. With both hands full of hot, hard

cock, I began pumping Mattias as I traced Silas's crown with the tip of my tongue. Sucking him into my mouth, he groaned, and his hips jerked forward. My eyes strained up... to Mattias. Jerking him in long, slow strokes, I'd never felt him this hard. His eyes never found mine, though.

He was watching my mouth for a bit, then his eyes crawled over the chiseled landscape of Si's torso before landing on his mouth.

Si had his bottom lip pinched between his teeth, his nostrils flaring each time I sucked him to the back of my throat. My eyes went between the two men, then down to their cocks. After a few minutes, all the looking around caused me to get dizzy.

I released him with a pop and kneed a pace over to be directly in front of Mattias. Licking my lips, I pressed a kiss to his shimmering head. Afterward I licked off the salty stickiness that remained on my lips. Then I bobbed down on his swollen shaft until I felt the urge to gag. But I fought it.

He shoved his hands through my hair, making my scalp burn. "Fuck yeah, baby, oh fuck, that feels so good."

"Don't come," Silas warned, and the words triggered some feral thing inside of me, I swear because the low hum that lived between my thighs *roared*.

I pulled back, letting Mattias's glistening cock slowly hollow my cheeks. Taking both of them into my fists again, I pumped just twice before releasing them.

Stroking my palm over my bare belly, I blinked up at them. Sweat marked their chests and glistened along their foreheads.

Mattias looked over at Silas while letting his hand pump his own length, root to tip. A drop of fluid bubbled over his grip as he held the pink crown tight, turning to Si.

"I gotta fuck our girl," he said. "But I want you to treat her while I do."

Silas shoved his hand through his hair, getting it off his sweaty face. He agreed with a single nod, and then Mattias assumed the position.

With his fists pinned to the mattress, he held himself above me. "I'm glad we're back together, in the flesh."

I nodded as a bead of sweat rolled down the bridge of his nose, broke free, splashing onto my chest.

"I'm glad we're all together," he said again as if correcting himself.

It would take some getting used to, considering neither Mattias nor I had ever dreamed of the situation, but we'd do it. We'd get used to considering *two people* instead of *one*.

I smiled; he rose up, dragging me to the edge of the bed. With my ankles at his shoulders and his big palm gripping my knees to his body, he plowed into me.

I remembered then what type of lover Mattias was. He fed those raw urges; he never smoothed his rough edges but rather focused his energy on making me feel a twisted concoction of dirty and delicious.

He sawed his hips between the split of my legs, tunneling his substantial cock in and out of me. I tipped my head back, letting my eyes fall shut. That's when Si's mouth latched onto my nipple. I howled in response, but my cry of pain quickly turned to a moan of pleasure as Si's other hand began to knead the opposite breast.

He pulled my nipple between his teeth and rolled it gently, causing me to squirm. My eyes fluttered open in time to see Mattias lower his hands to my hips, leaning over slightly. He held me down so my bucking didn't affect his fucking, and Si kept nibbling.

"I'm gonna fill this pussy up with my come," he growled over the sound of his hips slapping against my skin. Silas's gentle sucks of my breasts were merely ambient background noises. His hands felt rubbery when he gripped my thighs and shook me to his attention.

"Then our boy's gonna fuck you and fill you, too." He pulled his fingers down the sides of his mouth, flexing his jaw in a way the leader of a biker gang would when sizing up his

victim. My body shuddered, and my sex clamped down around the steel length still inside me.

“You’re going to be so fucking full of us; you’ll be dripping for a week.”

The breathy exhale that slid past my lips in response made both Si and Mattias smile broadly. I couldn’t help it. What he said, how he’d said it, the way they already were together—it was too fucking hot not to react.

I nodded my head vigorously, like a child agreeing to chores to get pizza. Anything, I could’ve said, I’ll do anything. Just do what you said you’d do. I didn’t say that part, though, because it sounded more desperate than sexy.

I was desperate, though. An hour ago, I was horny, yeah, and confused for sure. Now, though? I wanted nothing more than feeling their release spread through me, up my hips, tingling down my spine.

He gripped my legs more tightly and continued pumping, creating a rhythm that teased my g-spot as he ground his groin down on my clit. The perfect cadence.

Silas bit and sucked at one breast while keeping one eye peering down towards the place where Mattias and I fused.

“That’s right, baby,” he coaxed. “Feed on those tits.”

That’s right, baby. I heard it again in my head, and boom, my sex clenched around Mattias’s perfect cock, my spine curling as my release tightened and burned in my belly.

“I’m coming; I’m coming,” I gasped, almost unable to even speak. The orgasm was the most intense orgasm I’d ever had, easily. My pussy spasmed, gulped down Mattias’s rigid cock as he held himself deep inside me, to the hilt.

“Oooh yeah,” he ground out, teeth gritted. “*Fuuuuuck*, princess, that pussy is gonna make me pop.”

And then his hips juttied into me hard, one last time, before he froze. His eyes squeezed shut, and he turned his face to my leg, biting into the skin of my calf. Bursts of heat fired off inside me, and his balls pulsed and twitched at my bare ass.

“Ohmygod, ohmygod, *ohmygod*,” I panted, filtering my fingers through Silas’s hair as Mattias continued to shoot off inside me. My lower half felt so warm and full.

But then he pulled out of me, and I watched as a trail of our juices stretched between my sex and his.

“You’re up, baby,” he said to Silas. Fuck, my body had just had a marathon orgasm, and his use of just one word - *baby* - had me aching to do it again.

Chapter 27

Silas and Mattias switched spots, but not before they shared a sloppy, loud, open-mouth kiss at the foot of the bed.

“Oh my god,” I murmured aloud in response.

Mattias came to the edge of the bed and dropped to his knees, taking my mouth in a quick kiss first. Then he did what he’d told Si to do just a few minutes ago. He massaged my chest and suckled at my breast, wiggling his face against it every few seconds.

“I fucking missed these titties, too,” he said with a mouthful of nipple.

Then without warning, the thick head of Silas’s cock breached my wet sex. I squealed as he worked the widest part of him inside me. Then slowly, he sunk his entire length in.

“Fuuuuuccckkkk,” he ground out. “I can feel the come in there.”

Mattias said something but his mouth was full of me, so I couldn’t quite make it out.

“Feels so good,” Si groaned, picking up his pace.

He pumped hard between my legs, his sapphire eyes drifting from my face to Mattias sucking at my breast. Slowly down just for a moment, Si took Mattias’s hand from my tit and lowered it to my mound.

Getting the hint, Mattias buried his fingers in my slit, reaching down to feel where Silas was filling me. The three of

us groaned in unison as his fingers traced where my sticky, greedy sex connected with Silas's cock.

Si began fucking me faster, finding a rhythm that was uniquely him. And it worked because within just a few minutes of my clit being teased by Mattias and my g-spot being massaged by Si, I was ready to come again.

Si could see it in my eyes.

"That's it, Gen. Give it up. Come for me; you deserve it; you know you want to."

"Listen to him, princess. Come for us." Mattias's hushed urges smashed through the last bit of strength I had to hold out and come later.

My thighs filled with a tremble I couldn't control, and a halo of darkness wrapped itself around my brain, fogging my thoughts and ability to speak.

"She's coming," Silas announced, feeling my pussy clamp down on his length.

"Fill her up," Mattias urged, bringing his mouth to my throat. He bit and sucked, and it hurt. It hurt badly. But it made me come harder.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod," I panted again, and a shot of warmth spread through my insides. Attention on Si, I saw his eyes flicker shut as lines of strain spread up his neck. He stopped moving as the next shot of creamy hotness spread through me.

"Holy shit," Si gritted out, slamming himself inside me one last time. When the pulsing between us subsided, he withdrew himself from me slowly. With just the wide mushroom of his cock still in me, he smoothed one hand tenderly down my ribs. We shared a bleary-eyed smile because even in a throuple three-way, Silas was clearly a tender and intimate lover at heart.

My ovaries actually throbbed at the gesture. I pushed to my elbows as he left my body. Si stood over me, taking his time to absorb every inch of the moment. He studied my

spread, swollen sex, and his eyes went wide when the first of their release began to trickle out, down my ass, into the sheets.

Mattias, however, wanted to cuddle.

“Princess, I know you’re in a fucking daze, and it’s hot as hell, baby, it really is. But I gotta cuddle the fuck out of you right now because I just spent three years acting like a real fucking prick.”

Now that made my ovaries throb, too.

Fishing his strong arms under my boneless body, he cradled me to his chest as he kneed himself to the center of the bed. Before lowering me back down, he kissed my lips; brief, no tongue, but electrifying.

Mattias was back. Holy shit. We’d just had sex and... Silas, too. My heartbeat drummed in my ears, and I felt fortunate to be lying down, or else I would’ve been even dizzier.

Silas eventually took a spot on the other side of me after seeming almost unsure of who to lay with.

Once he settled in on his side, his face to ours, I teased him.

“You looked confused. You’re the pro here. If you’re getting confused, we’re doomed.” I giggled a little and didn’t specify that I was talking about our triad relationship. I didn’t need to. After what we’d just done, they had to be thinking about it.

I knew I was. Only now, more than ever, I was determined to make it work. Because that was hot as shit, and I fucking deserve that. Plus, I really do love them both. Seriously, with more than just my overstimulated brain and my hungry ovaries. My heart is connected to theirs. It’s true.

He reached out and ran the tips of his fingers up Mattias’s forearm, all the way to his shoulder. Then, lowering his hand to my chest, he dragged his hand over my collarbone, then cupped my cheek.

“I’m fucking so drawn to both you,” he said, and the husky tone he used made it sound more like admission than anything. He looked behind me, to Mattias, then met my eyes again. “I honestly can’t believe that I feel this way already.” He rolled his bottom lip under his teeth pensively, clearly choosing his words carefully.

“It took me a year and a half in my last relationship to really learn how to love and be loved equally.” He chewed his lip a little, staring at the hollow of my throat in an unfocused daze. “It’s not easy to learn if you have an ego of any kind. It took me a while.”

He shifted a little, and the sheet slid down a bit. The pink cap of his erection peeked out of the sheets. He was hard, already? I licked my lips as he continued his story.

“But with you guys. It’s like, I don’t know.” His blue eyes honed in on me. “You have reservations, I know, but believe it or not, what happens in this room can sometimes be trickier to navigate than the rest of it.” He looked back at Mattias again, and he smiled softly in response to whatever expression he got. “But the three of us in here? Fucking amazing.”

“It really was,” I admitted, smiling. “Or, we really are, I think.”

“And it feels right. There’s no ego here. At least, I don’t see it.” He pushed up onto an elbow, propping his head on his open palm. His eyes darted back to Mattias. “And I heard about everything you’ve done for her and continued to do for her while you were locked up. Hell, you drove her to me, for *her sake*.” He stretched out those last two words like fresh taffy. Shaking his head incredulously, his eyes went a bit wider than normal. “I’m just saying, it feels right, and that’s why I paused. I want and love you both. Equally.”

Well, hell, if my ovaries weren’t on fire before, they were streaking the halls holding torches and screaming now.

Mattias’s arm stretched over mine to give Si’s bicep a little squeeze. Then, he yawned.

“This bed is too comfortable.”

I used the restroom to brush my teeth and clean up. Then Mattias took his turn in the bathroom, and while he did that, Silas filled us each a glass of water. We stood peppered around the room, drinking our waters until Si collected them and returned them to the kitchen.

Silas turned off the light, and without planning or thought, the three of us climbed into bed. Mattias slept in the middle.

We didn't have a group exchange of I love you's before we dozed off, but even in the darkness, I could see that Mattias had linked hands with both of us.

Chapter 28

“Family dinner tonight,” I announce, pushing into the house from a morning out running errands. My long hair got tangled in the wind, and I regretted wearing it down when I was at my first stop, the farmer’s market.

As I spent seven dollars buying fresh produce for tonight’s dinner, my heart pumped a little harder. Because I used to eat only if Mattias *stole* food, and now there was a surplus of income that allowed me to buy home-grown, organic vegetables from a blonde named Cheyanne.

It was Sunday afternoon, so neither Mattias nor Silas were working.

The day after his release, Silas took Mattias back down to Tilt 2. Then, every time after, when Silas went in for his normal work shift, Mattias went, too. When he went in after-hours for random things—the alarm triggering, a shipment needed to be signed for, stuff like that—he took Mattias.

I say he took Mattias, but I should really be saying, Mattias *ran* after him.

His parole officer didn’t need to tell Mattias he needed to find a job because, after the first week of tagging along with Silas, he was employed.

Tonight, a month after his release, Michelle and Angus were hosting us for our first family dinner. Maybe we don’t share DNA, and maybe we don’t all have the same last name, but we were more family to one another than many actual families. And what did last name sharing mean anyway? I

have the same name as my parents and yet they've not been much more than sperm and egg donors.

With everything that had happened with Mattias's early release, I'd been missing Angus. Michelle, too. Family dinner sounded so perfect, and we'd settled into living together pretty close to perfectly, too.

Two men does mean all those stereotypical man things that I want to say they didn't do because they're hot and glorious and unicorns of their species, but nope. They shave and don't wipe up the sink. There are always wet towels on the floor. And there is always some sort of sport, outdoor event, or fight on the television. But they're my chaos, and I wouldn't be complete without them.

I dropped the bags to the floor with a thunk.

"Guys?" I called, rinsing my hands at the sink. I patted them on my thighs and peered out the sliding door to see if they were in the yard.

A few days ago, they'd started building a raised bed for us to grow vegetables. I didn't have a green thumb, and I don't think Mattias did, either. But we'd learn from Silas.

When I didn't see them out back, I padded my way down the hall and toed open the bedroom door, making sure to be quiet in case they were napping. In a house of nappers, we were ballerinas on eggshells. It's not cool to ruin a good nap.

But they weren't there either. Just as I was reaching into my back pocket for my phone, I heard the front door open, two familiar voices bouncing into the kitchen ahead of me.

I couldn't ignore the fact that even though I'd expected them to be here and they weren't, there was no part of me that questioned or worried. Call it personal growth, call it love, I don't know. But I was proud to be a person I truly wasn't sure I could be.

"Hey," I smiled at them, opening my arms for an armful of men. If you've never been hugged by two sexy as sin guys at once, I *highly* recommend it.

Five years from now, I'm sure my body won't tingle and throb like a junior high girl scoring a slow dance with her crush. But for now, it does. And I'm enjoying it. *Thoroughly.*

In just a few weeks, their two unique smells had merged into a cloud of musky man, and dear god, it was hard to resist.

Last night I'd stayed out late. Not just late for no-fun me, but actually late. Until three in the morning. A few weeks after release, Silas said that he and Mattias would love for me to help out at Tilt 2.

I knew that "we want you to work with us" also meant "we don't want you working at a strip club anymore," but honestly? Neither did I, and they'd put a considerable amount of thought into their speech so that it didn't feel like a sexist or controlling thing.

I'd grown tired of the job working the entry booth at the club years ago. What started as extra cash to help me buy things I didn't want Mattias buying me ended up being my main job. All other jobs proved seasonal, or there weren't enough hours for everyone, so last in, first out. The job that hung around was always Envy.

I didn't grab the opportunity to work at Tilt 2 with both hands. While I'd rather work there than Envy, I had fears. Don't shit where you eat, and all that.

We all get along, but you know that expression, less is more? What if less is more, and what if working together on top of living together and sleeping together is too much? Too much more and not enough less?

Then again, the three of us weren't normal, were we? Outside of the fact that "normal" usually translated to two people, Mattias and I definitely didn't have the cookie-cutter upbringing that most did.

While Silas had a far better upbringing than us, when he decided to start his own business and live his life (including loving who and however many people he wanted), a lot of the support of his family and friends fell away.

Turns out, we were all injured. Cracks, bruises, aches. The three of us were hurting. And I thought when Mattias found me; my hurt would end. And... well, it did. Kind of. Then he went away. And I met Si. Though I fell in love quickly, still, the other part of my heart was still in a cage.

It wasn't until the three of us were together did we realize that we weren't whole. Being together had finally completed us.

I took the job at Tilt 2 and was slowly learning books and inventory. Si had Mattias resurfacing boards, waxing surfboards, and in general, doing anything and everything at the shop that required work with his hands; that's what Mattias had wanted to do.

Si was still the face of the business, engaging with customers, giving good advice, recommending products, and giving tips to beginners. Everyone loved him, and because we all had our own tasks while we were in the same building together, we actually didn't spend a ton of time together at work.

Lunches were staggered, so were breaks. But just being in the same place together, going to and from work and home together... It feels like the security and love I'd been missing as a kid.

Mattias had the same cracks as me, and our new throuple relationship did well to cement over those flaws for him, too. Si, who seemed to be the only person I'd ever met who wasn't riddled with childhood traumas and unfortunate life circumstances, seemed to thrive off the dual love and approval from us. He never said it, but I think he needed that circle of comfort to make up for the people in his life not believing in him and his dreams.

"We didn't want to wake you up," Si said, kissing the top of my head. Mattias pressed a wet kiss to my cheek, and we settled in at the table.

"Thanks. It was fun, but I'm so tired. I haven't stayed out late like that in months."

“Late,” Mattias said, popping his eyebrows. I guess nearing sunrise made it early instead of late. I shrugged. “I woke up for the day two hours after you were home.”

It’s true.

Once I’d managed to rinse off my makeup and tie my hair into a loose braid, I climbed over the two mountainous men and slipped between them. I remember settling into a deep sleep only to be rolled into a warm dip once Mattias got up.

“You think you’ll be conditioned to get up at 5 in the morning forever?” Si asked, filling a kettle full of water. I settled into the table and enjoyed the sight of Silas making us each a cup of pour-over. Even at three in the afternoon, we all needed coffee. Si never asked if he could make it or if we wanted it; he just did it for us. That’s how we operated. Never ask, always include.

“I don’t know, man; it’s hard to shake.” Mattias took a seat across from me and glanced back at Silas, who was already working on the second cup. After pouring the water over the grounds on the second cup, Si turned to face us, gripping the counter behind them.

They grinned at one another, then grinned at me.

“You wanted to know where we were,” Si said, his smile eating up most of his face. God, his smile always made me want to smile. And Mattias’s smile had similar effects. So there we were, the three of us smiling like fools at one another.

“Yeah,” I replied through my smile, “so tell me already. Where were you?” I pulled a chocolate milk from the fridge and twisted off the lid, loving the milk-bubbly sweet first sip.

We’d talked about taking a vacation together. Maybe Hawaii. Somewhere with clear waters and blue skies, warm sand, and no responsibilities. Did they plan a trip for us? I rubbed my palms together excitedly but didn’t take a guess. I’d rather it feel like a surprise.

The room fell quiet as Si slid three piping hot mugs of coffee across the table. Mattias took a calm sip of his, and so

did Si. Their calm, unhurried nature, which normally brought me peace, now fueled the excitement in me.

“Oh my god,” I huffed, “please don’t drag it out!”

They chuckled, deep and satisfying, a noise that flitted around inside me, leaving me warm and sated.

With just a look between the two of them, there was an exchange of thoughts. On their feet, they reached over their heads, grabbing their shirts at the neck. Tugging them off, they clutched the balled-up material to their chests.

“Okay,” I said, my expression puzzled. “I’m really confused.” Maybe this is their way of making me guess that they need tans, and those tans should come from the beach? But as I was on the cusp of asking, they let their fists drop, stealing the fabric from their chests.

Right over their hearts, they each bore ink. Pink around the edges and a little glistening from the Vaseline that had been applied after, my mouth fell open as I stared at their matching tattoos.

The first for both of them.

Mattias never got inked because we never had the money. Piercings were his way of expressing himself. Silas seemed like the type who’d have a band around his arm or something, but surprisingly he didn’t.

I was surprised that they’d both decided to get tattooed since I hadn’t really heard either of them mention it. Like, ever.

Then I focused on the design, my eyes flitting back and forth between the two bare chests exposed to me.

They didn’t just get tattoos.

They got matching tattoos.

My eyes warmed, and my chest tightened, forcing a tight knot up to my throat.

“You were a princess when I found you. And you were my princess for years. Then you were our princess,” Mattias said,

his voice low and controlled. The hairs on my arms stood straight up.

“But now you’re our Queen,” Silas added, with the same serious tone.

I felt unsteady as I rose to my feet, but managed to close the distance to get to them. In black, reds and traces of yellow was a playing card. The Queen of Hearts.

Mattias reached into his pocket as I traced the edges of the ink on Silas’s chest, letting the warmth spill down my cheeks. He handed me the card.

“We took it in to get it exact. It’s from the first deck I taught you on.”

I had to just keep blinking because the tears kept falling, and words felt too hard to speak.

“Do you like it, Gen?” Mattias asked, resting his hand on my shoulder. He squeezed, and it sent a flash of heat up my spine. Si reached out and swiped his thumb across one cheek, then the other. I swallowed thickly and nodded.

“Did you hear Si?” Mattias asked, feeding one of his large hands through my hair, the weight of my head instinctively falling into his palm. I nodded again, still too overwhelmed by the gesture to speak. “You’re our Queen, baby. Forever. It may just be ink, but it binds us.”

“This only works with you,” Silas added, his hand now working at the base of my spine, kneading in a heavenly way.

Though I’d grown comfortable with the idea of sharing, their matching tattoos told me that they understood my deep-seated need to feel secure and involved. It didn’t take Freud to know that I had major abandonment issues because of my childhood but the fact that they put something permanent on their bodies just to make me feel good?

I almost couldn’t believe I was so lucky. I almost couldn’t believe this was my life.

Almost.

Chapter 29

“This afternoon is all up to you, Queen.” I heard one of them say, but by that time, my thoughts had grown fuzzy and began blending with the hiccuped beating of my overflowing heart.

They took me by the hands and led me down the hallway to our bedroom.

Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, they left me standing before them.

It was hard to keep my eyes off the freshly-inked commitment to us, but the longer I stared at the thin black lines and the hollow eyes of the Queen, the more powerful and confident I became. Their tattoos had me brimming with the power that only true emotional security could bring.

My toes tingled, and I drummed my fingertips on my thighs, forcing my gaze up to theirs. Mattias’s melted chocolate eyes sparkled darkly, and Silas’s sapphire eyes looked like a tumultuous sea.

Swallowing despite my mouth’s complete lack of moisture, I cleared my throat.

They’d done this for us, but mostly for me. And all of me appreciated it.

“What do you want, Gen?” Silas asked as his fingers spread open against the bedspread. Mattias’s hand did the same, and their pinkies connected.

What Silas and Mattias did when they were alone together, I didn't ask. Because I trusted them, but that also left me unsure if they actually had sex or just fooled around. But if tonight was one of my nights, where I was at the helm, I wasn't going to waste an opportunity to steer into new, unexplored waters.

I folded my arms over my chest, which caused my spine to straighten. Their eyes were locked on mine and I realized, despite my nervous belly, I appeared confident and held their attention. I held the power. The Queen ink made it into my field of vision again, and my belly went warm.

"I want you to fuck each other," I said calmly.

"What do you want for *you*?"

The smile that slowly crept up my lips must've looked villainous. It *felt* villainous.

Unfolding my arms, I cupped his cheek in my palm. With my thumb swiping across his bottom lip, his mouth opening to the touch, I whispered my response.

"That *is* for me."

My sinister smile kept spreading, and so did the urgent heat between my legs.

I remembered walking in on their first kiss, how passionate and erotic it was. Seeing the first time having sex? And yes, I knew it was because, I was learning from Si, throuples have to talk about everything.

I draped a hand over my chest, trying to tamp down the erratic excited beating. This was going to be so hot.

Silas got to his feet, and when I looked at Mattias, I realized he hadn't moved. His eyes were studying the lines of striation in the hardwood floor. Maybe he wasn't ready for this step? Or maybe he'd never be comfortable going all the way with Si?

Though the air was thick with arousal, I couldn't keep going if he wasn't right with the situation. The way Silas read

me like a book, it seemed that Mattias was a book to him, too. We were his personal little library, apparently.

“You do what you’re comfortable with this time,” Silas said to Mattias, his fingers getting lost in Mattias’s silky black hair as he shoved his fingers through his hair tenderly. It was something being inside of a tender moment, sharing those feelings with another person. But witnessing a tender moment between the two of them was intense.

My stomach knotted as I watched them work through their first trial in what I’m sure would be many trials between the three of us. I know whatever Mattias would decide would be the best for us all, and we would respect and understand. But I didn’t anticipate Mattias already knowing his limits.

Finally, he placed his palms on his and huffed out a breath, signaling the finality of his thinking. Looking up to us, he gave a small smile.

“This was something I didn’t give when I lived in the cage,” he said, his voice controlled as he explained. “A lot of guys wanted to give it. I even took some shots to protect it.”

Silas nodded him on, wanting more of his story. But imagining Mattias locked in a cell with real fucking criminals and degenerates preying on him twisted my guts like a blender.

“If you’re not ready, we wait.” Silas takes a seat next to him on the bed, dropping his arm behind him. I can’t see it, but I know he’s rubbing his back slowly because Mattias’s stress begins to melt as Si’s shoulder moves.

Then they face one another, and the butterflies in my belly go crazy. My nipples harden, and I’m pretty sure my eyes darken, too. In all of five seconds, they are sharing a demanding and needy, open-mouthed kiss.

With their hands each gripping the back of the other’s head, they finally separate their mouths with a wet, breathless pop.

Silas whispers into Mattias’s mouth, both of their lips pink from the friction. Mattias’s eyes study Silas’s, and after a moment of digesting his words, he nods, and they kiss again.

This time it's quick but forceful, and their attention returns to me.

Silas rests a clenched hand on Mattias's knee as he tucks his golden hair back behind his ear.

"We'll get there," he says to me, keeping his reassuring grip on Mattias. "If now isn't the time, that's okay, we'll get there." Then he turns to Mattias and shoots him a wink so full of excitement and possibility that it makes me wet, and it's not even meant for me. "And when we do," he shakes his head, still with that corrupt little twist in his lips, and lets out a low whistle. "You will be begging me to make up for lost time."

I feel my eyebrows raise at the comment. I know Silas is experienced in being with both men and women, but I'm realizing now that Si gets something from being with a man that I can't give him.

I mean, sure, I could wear a strap-on and peg the man, but that's not how Silas operates. An empathetic and deeply emotional lover, I know Silas wouldn't be sated with being pegged. Just imagining it makes my shoulders wiggle in a cringe, just a little.

He gets something from giving a man a prostate orgasm as much as he does receiving one. And it's not just the orgasm. It never is with Si.

His hands need to roam over broad muscle; his fingers need to feed through coarse male body hair, his tongue needs to lap at the salty precome that forms as a sign of arousal. He thrives off the feel of his chest pressed to a strong, alpha back. Feeling himself flex and pulse inside another man, while rough timbre and deep tones call out moans of pleasure to him.

It's the entire experience that he needs.

And the same way I didn't feel whole while Mattias was locked up, maybe Silas didn't feel whole without a male lover, too.

I could get lost in the rabbit hole of our newfound perfection. Because coming up a poor, white-trash orphan

made perfection and happiness seem as likely as winning the lottery.

But I don't get lost in that. Because Mattias and Silas are now on their feet, stripping completely naked.

A chaste glance at their bare chests reminds me that right now, it's my time.

"I just want to watch you two for a while," I tell them honestly, settling into a chair in the corner of the room.

The chair that catches once-worn jeans and sweaters put on too hastily during cool mornings now bears my eager and very turned-on butt.

I play with the ends of my hair, my fingers grazing my breasts through my sweater as I do. I can feel my hardened nipples as I watch them do something that I can only describe as a suggestive sizing up.

Mattias closes the small gap between them, and as if choreographed, Si tilts his head just enough to expose the fleshy column of his tanned neck.

And it begins.

Chapter 30

Mattias sinks his mouth into Si's warm flesh, and I watch Si's bright blue eyes disappear in a flutter of eyelids and lashes. Mattias's mouth makes quiet suctioning noises against Si's body as he carves a trail of kisses down from his neck to his collarbone, then chest.

Si rubs Mattias's shoulders and filters his fingers through his hair, his hands never stopping. He touches, he feels, his eyes stay tightly closed as he loses himself in being devoured by Mattias.

I'm so turned on just watching and listening that I have the strongest urge to slip my hand down the front of my jeans and touch myself. Wanting this experience to last, instead, I decide to strip down and watch completely naked in the event I get the urge to tag in or join. I mean, the chance that won't happen is growing slimmer and slimmer by the moment, especially as Mattias's lips work their way through the thatch of hair atop Si's groin.

Both of them are hard, Mattias's cock bobbing between his spread thighs as he crouches now at Silas's feet. Si is so hard he's almost mauve, and from my vantage point, I can see the thick bead of precome glimmering at his slit. He's standing erect between his belly and Mattias's face as he strokes Mattias's hair back.

From the groin, his lips begin to travel up Silas's thick shaft, dropping wet kisses every few seconds.

I never thought I'd take pleasure in watching two men, but here I am. Burying my hand between my legs, which are now bent and spread, heels on the seat of the chair.

Mattias's palm is vast, his fingers strong with lumped muscles making them extra masculine. When it wraps around Silas's straining cock and still looks large, that's when I start to unravel.

He pumps a strong fist up Si's dick, and I wiggle my fingers around my clit, the sound of my wet pussy grabbing their focus for a minute. The noise garners a glance from both of them. Silas winks, but like a man on a mission, Mattias turns back to the cock in his face.

His lips part, and he takes Si onto his tongue, closing his mouth around him. Si groans, something wild and fierce, which causes Mattias to bob down on his length. First time giving head, and the man takes it all like a fucking champ, pressing his lips down to Si's body.

"Holy shit, baby," Silas growls, tipping his head forward to examine the place where they're joined. He strokes Mattias's cheek and then rubs his other hand over his bare chest, tweaking his own nipple.

Mattias is nearly silent as he sucks Silas, bobbing on him with a rhythm so masterful that Silas looks like he wants to shoot off after just a minute.

My hand is still moving around between my legs mindlessly as I watch Silas's Adam's apple slide like molasses down his throat as he swallows a hot, heady breath.

"Ohmygod," he pants, eyes closed, one hand now wrapped around Mattias's neck. "That feels so good. Like, too good." He tips his hips back, but Mattias leans forward to keep him in his throat. I bite the corner of my mouth, and my hand works a bit faster.

Si pulls him up by the controlling hold he has on his neck, and their mouths smash together. So do their erections. I lose myself to the noise of the fused mouths as I watch their meaty cocks slide together. Silas's length is glistening, his precome

leaking like a faucet down his shaft now. Mattias's hips grind into Si's, his cock veinier and angrier looking than I've ever seen it. The wide, capped head of him smears through the arousal on Si's belly as they come together in a tight hug.

Si tips his head down to look between them, and at the sight of Mattias's cock rubbing around his belly, he groans something fierce.

"I'm close," he pants, draping his large hands on Mattias's shoulders. He pushes him back, forcing distance. A string of arousal webs between their cocks. Then he walks to the nightstand to retrieve a bottle of lube. Mattias and I watch as he squirts some into his palm, tossing the bottle to the bed before he rubs his hands together.

He grins at Mattias, and his cock strains and flexes between them as he reaches back behind him. His fingers disappear between the seam of his ass then he rises to his toes for a moment before his hand reemerges.

Climbing onto the bed on his back, Silas slowly lies down in the center of the mattress.

Mattias is holding his cock by the base but begins jacking himself slowly as he walks to the edge of the bed. Silas lifts his knees, planting his feet firmly into the mattress. Then he spreads his knees further apart, leaving him completely exposed to both of us. Completely vulnerable.

Kneeing onto the bed, Mattias positions himself between Silas's legs and begins to lower himself. Once they're chest to chest, they begin kissing and whispering. I hear words of reassurance, but not from Mattias. They're *for* Mattias. Even though Si is clearly going to bottom, he's making sure Mattias feels safe and heard.

It's sweet, but it works like fire to my already frenzied pussy. I rub a little faster, feeling my impending orgasm wiggle its way up my spine, dripping into my veins. It's close now.

Si reaches down between their sinew and positions the swollen cap of Mattias's cock at his entrance.

Mattias's hips begin a careful sawing.

Si moans, but no one moans the way Mattias does. Like he's fucking for the first time. And in a way, he is.

The raspier his moans—*oh fuck, baby, you feel good*—the harder I rub my very swollen and very wet pussy. Mattias grips both of Silas's knees, keeping his legs spread tightly apart. Si's head alternates between lost in the sea of pillows and jerked up, chin to chest, dying to see where he's being filled. After just a minute or so, I feel the tell-tale heat low in my belly, the pulsing in my pussy, the tingle running through my limbs.

When Si reaches for his cock, which lies like a steel pipe against the blonde hair along his belly, Mattias knocks his hand away.

“What do you like?” he asks in a pant. Both of them are all heaving chests and broken breaths. Sweat rolls down Mattias's back, and it glistens on Silas's hairline.

Silas's head falls back into the pillows with a rough exhale as Mattias closes his fist around Si's length.

“That,” he pants, eyes closed, “just hold it.”

Mattias's hips keep moving, but he changes his rhythm, and is now alternating between slow, nearly hollowing strokes. Then he holds himself deep and draws delicate circles with his hips, doing something to Silas's secret spot that makes him still, stop breathing, and just lift his hips to the feeling.

With his hand firmly holding Silas's cock, Mattias continues to fuck him. The sound of his heavy, full balls swinging into Si's bare ass sends me over the edge, and my orgasm unravels.

“I want you to come,” Mattias grunts, thrusting forward again, this time stilling while completely inside Silas. “But you're running out of time,” he admits, with a small chuckle and slight shake of his head.

Silas lifts his head one last time to study the place they are joined. Before he drops it back down, he groans at the sight.

“Go hard,” he advises, Mattias still holding Si’s dick.

Mattias doesn’t have to be asked twice. His hips start moving at lightning speed, and within just a handful of thrusts, Silas is the first to reach no return.

“Ohgodyes,” he pants out in a streak that sounds more like one word than three. Then white-hot pleasure streaks across his belly, up his chest as Mattias holds Si’s cock through release. At the same time, my thighs slam together like a bear trap as my orgasm rips through, temporarily stealing my vision and ability to breathe.

When I lift my head and clear through the insanely hot erotic fog, I see Mattias’s head tipped back, his balls tight and throbbing.

“That’s it,” Si urges from below him. “Let me have it.”

Mattias moans through his orgasm, stroking Si’s softening cock as he does. And before he pulls out, he moves his fingers through the stickiness and turns to me.

“Come get a taste,” he tells me, and I do.

I suck on Mattias’s fingers, my mouth puckering at the salty fluid he gives me. Still trying to recover from his orgasm, Silas clears his throat, drawing our eyes to him.

“What can we do for you now, Gen?”

Strangely, though I wasn’t touched by either of them or involved in any way, I feel completely sated. I could come again; we could have sex, we could. But I have nothing to prove.

“I’m thinking we’re going to be late to Michelle’s place but I still need to shower.”

Silas pushes to his elbows, and Mattias pulls out of him, his cock covered in milky stickiness.

I look down at the bristled blonde hair on Si’s belly and over at Mattias’s groin. “After *you both* shower.”

They laugh, and so do I.

As I stand in the kitchen fifteen minutes later, waiting for Silas to find his shoes so we can go to our first family dinner, I smile.

Laughter, smiling, love, sex.

I'd finally been dealt a hand I wanted to keep forever.

Epilogue

Three Years Later

“**Y**ou sure about that?”

Angus folds his arms across his chest, unimpressed with my line of questioning.

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

I give him an upside-down smile and a small nod, the unspoken equivalent of fair enough.

He cocks his head to the side the way teens dramatically do.

“What?”

I shrug.

“Aunt Gen, just tell me. What?”

Aunt. At some point, he’d taken it upon himself to start calling me Aunt, and even though Michelle and I were of no blood relationship, I didn’t mind. In fact, I liked it. I liked knowing you could create your own perfect family, no matter what cards had been dealt to you.

I take a sip of my water and lazily drag my finger around the top of the glass, tracing the opening.

“Oh my god!” he laughs, setting his hands on top of the table, making my water bounce. “Tell me! Stop torturing me!”

“Alright,” I say with a wide broad grin, the same grin Mattias gave me all those years ago when we started this.

I pick up the deck of cards and shuffle in packets, then spread them out across the dining room table. Michelle has, at this point, set her phone down and given the trick her full attention. She always acts like she isn't interested, but when it comes to exposing the secret, she's gum on my shoe. I couldn't pull her off if I wanted to.

Amidst the blue and white ornate card backs, there is one single red card.

Angus's hands go to his head, where he pulls at the ends of his hair in frustration.

"It's not a duplicate deck," I repeat the fact I'd uttered to him just a minute ago when he'd tried to figure out the trick after the first few times.

I tap the red card, and he slides it out of the grouping, flipping it over to expose its face. It's black ten of clubs. The same card he selected at the beginning of the trick as I shuffled the deck.

"So my choice wasn't random?"

I shake my head.

"You know this by now, Ang. The person thinks they're choosing, but it's all predetermined. I have a duplicate ten, one with a blue back and one with a red back. I keep them together, then when I'm packet shuffling, and you say stop, I turn over the bottom of the deck where I've kept the second ten, making you think you chose it." I stack the cards in a quick swipe and lean back. "The packet shuffle is crucial in movement, which detracts from their critical thinking, and it makes them believe you're actually shuffling."

"It's never a shuffle," Michelle says, shaking her head in delight. She's a whore for these tricks, and I love it.

"Nope, it's not. It's always just an illusion."

Angus scratches thoughtfully at the side of his jaw. "But I did choose the first card, right?"

I nod my head. "Yep, that first one is just to be able to show the red card. I keep the red card at the very bottom of the

deck, with its blue-backed twin underneath it. Then when I put your card back in the split deck, I put it between those two. Then I do a fold flip, holding the red-backed card behind yours tightly. So when I flip it in my palm, you think your card has the red back. But really, my card is just right behind it. Then I slip them back and—”

He waves his hand. “Okay, okay, I got it. I didn’t realize that this was more sleight of hand than actual cards.”

I purse my lips, and when he doesn’t react, I twist them to the side and drop my elbows loudly to the tabletop.

“Angus, card tricks are only sleight of hand because magic isn’t real.”

Jokingly, he sticks fingers into his ears and sing-songs I can’t hear you. He may be fourteen, but the kid loves tricks and fantasy and refuses to believe that magic doesn’t exist. Same with Santa, and Michelle still fills his stocking like she did when he was nine.

“How long did it take you to get good at the trick?” Angus asks, clearing our plates from the table.

“A year for just that one trick to be so smooth, no one could see it was just an illusion.”

It’s family-dinner Sunday.

That’s a thing we made regular after Mattias got released years back.

And in three years, we’ve only ever missed two Sundays of getting together. And that was because one time, we were on vacation.

Yep, Silas surprised us on our official “one year of throupledom” anniversary (his phrasing, not mine) with a trip to Cancun. We tanned in the sand, drank ice-cold Coronas, and slept a ton. We went through two huge bottles of sunscreen and lube and came back sore and happy.

The only other time we missed family dinner was when we attended Angus’s Eagle Scout ceremony.

Michelle leans back in her chair, watching Angus rinse plates over the large kitchen sink. He slides them into the dishwasher without complaint and pops in a dish detergent cube before turning it on.

“He’s just so happy to not hand wash; he does the dishes now without me having to ask,” Michelle says, noticing that I too, am watching Angus.

“He’s a good kid,” I say, realizing I sound like a ninety-year-old rather than the twenty-five that I actually am. Something about watching the kid grow up makes me feel so much older, even though I was really still just a kid, too. “You’re a really good mom.”

Michelle smiles but rolls her eyes a little, too. Because it’s hard for people like us to take compliments. It’s deeply rooted inside of us that because we came from nothing, we deserve nothing.

“Seriously, you are. And I know we’re like sisters now, but there was a time when you felt like a mom to me, too. And I love you for everything you’ve done for me. In case I’ve never said that.”

Her eyes grow misty, so she rolls them extra hard, staving off the emotion my words have brought on. “Okay, now you’re just trying to make me fuck up my lashes,” she said, laughing. Then, before rising, she whispered “thank you.”

The back door slid shut as Michelle’s new boyfriend Marcus went out back, to the patio.

Michelle was now a part-owner in Envy, after our boss Michael had some money-management problems. Michelle, who had been taking accounting classes at the community college in the mornings, offered to step in and get things in control. She didn’t want to be paid; rather, she wanted half the place.

I was surprised when she told me Michael agreed, but when I’d begun to learn some of the details of just how deep he was in it, it all made sense. Because without Michelle’s help, Michael could have very well ended up in prison.

In the last year, Julisa and Roxanne had even come to a few family dinners. Julisa was in a much healthier place, no longer drinking and no longer with the same guy. She'd enrolled in beauty school and seemed to be thriving, insisting on giving me and Michelle sets of fake lashes in exchange for reviews on her new website.

They'd gotten a place together a couple of hours outside the city, and Roxanne was in a healthy, serious relationship. They were doing good.

Sadly, the other girls—Grace and Casey—I'd lost touch with. I'd tried to find them on Facebook and Instagram, but once I got into White Pages lookup territory, I started to feel pretty stalkerish.

I hadn't changed my name. If they wanted to find me, I was in the same town that they used to live in, too. I was also learning that relationships could be cyclical, family or not.

It had been years since we'd heard from Esteban, and while we'd love to hear from him, we didn't stress it. We knew when it was time for our paths to cross again that they would. All in good time. When it was meant to be.

And maybe Grace and Casey were both just temporarily part of my story, the way I could have just been temporary in theirs. I'd hoped not, because I cared about those girls even though we'd lost touch. But sometimes, patiently waiting is all you can do.

"I'm going to my girl's place for a while, okay Mom?" Angus said after he'd wiped down the counters and lit Michelle's favorite Clean Linen candle that sat in the center of the island.

Michelle made a show of looking at her watch then thinking, which had me stifling a smirk with the back of my wrist because both Angus and I knew she'd say yes. And not because she wasn't tough—when she had to be, she was. But because she adored Angus's girlfriend, they were young and conveniently—they lived next door.

Next door, in a nice home. Next to Michelle's nice home.

Because taking over half of Envy finally gave her a decent-sized income. One that allowed her to get out of those god-forsaken apartments and into a nice home. A home that a stereotypical cookie-cutter white family would live in.

Granite countertops and an air conditioner, not just a window unit. It had natural stone floors and a garage so nice; I would've killed to live in it years ago.

It felt weird to say I was proud of her since I was younger, but still, I told her when she'd let me.

Pretending to reluctantly agree, Michelle nodded and accepted Angus's kiss to her cheek on his way out. I got one, too.

"Passed Ang on our way up the walk; he said he wasn't sneaking out," Silas says as he and Mattias come through the front door a few minutes later. Though it's been a year since he cut his long locks, my heart still does a happy flutter in reaction to Si shoving a hand through his short hair.

Mattias dips over my shoulder and kisses my cheek, letting his lips linger near my ear when he pulls away.

"Missed you, Q."

My hand rests on top of his over my shoulder long enough for a hot second before he's gone, taking a seat across from me, next to Michelle. Si slides into the empty chair adjacent to me, where Angus was sitting.

"What'd we miss?" Mattias asks, stealing a grape from the plate of fruit centering the table.

Sunday dinners sometimes end with Mattias and Silas needing to walk off the excess food they eat. Call it being pleased to have an abundance of food or surplus of love, but all of us do pretty well gorging ourselves at the end of each week.

We leave full, in all ways, and then I usually go home and get crammed in *that* way.

Well, I used to. For the last few weeks, though, I haven't.

“Not much. Just taught Angus another trick, then he went to his girlfriend’s house.” I drummed my fingers along the tabletop, feeling a bit anxious now that they were back because this Sunday dinner was slated to be a little different than most.

Silas cleared his throat. Then Mattias did, and the nerves made me clear mine, too.

“Don’t tell me; there’s another man going to come through those doors, and the throuple is growing into a quadruple.”

She grinned broadly at her own joke, and I don’t know how hard it was for the guys, but choking back my grin was very hard.

But I managed.

“Oh my god,” she gasped, draping a hand over her agape mouth. “Are you guys seriously becoming a quadruple?” Her eyes were wide when they darted over to me, and I exercised great restraint not to grin, or laugh, or correct her notion. Then she looked to the center of the table, a pensive expression on her face.

“Wait, I’ve never heard anyone say quadruple. Is that what it’s called, or is there some other freaky name for it?”

Now THAT was hard to not laugh at, but I managed.

“Quadfuckle,” I deadpanned, taking a sip of my hot tea as if it were the most natural word I’d ever spoken.

“Quadfuckle,” she repeated slowly like the word was in a hard-to-pronounce foreign language. French, maybe.

Then, like the family she is, she raised her arms in a shrug. “Okay, well, bring him out.”

That was our collective breaking point. Mattias busted out first, and Si always laughed when Mattias did. He had one of those deep, organically contagious laughs that was nearly impossible not to at least make you smile. And watching the pure confusion drip from Michelle’s face sent me into deep laughter, the kind that made me want to pee my pants.

“What?” she asked, her head bouncing between the three of us. “I said it the way you said it, so I know I didn’t mispronounce—” she trailed off, took a moment, then narrowed her eyes on me.

“Hey, you little asshole,” she started, forcing her lips to stay in a thin line as a grin threatened to take over. “Quadfuckle isn’t real, is it?”

I was full-on blotting the corners of my eyes now, and Silas had drawn his chair closer to start rubbing my back.

“I mean,” I started, having to take a break to force air into my burning lungs. I blew out my cheeks and huffed out a steadying breath. “I’m sure a four-person relationship is real and out there, but no, the word quadfuckle was just to fuck with you.”

“I can’t believe you bought that shit, Michelle,” Mattias said, shaking his head as the last of his laughter finally settled.

“I loved that you just embraced it, though,” Silas said, and then all of us quieted in a wave of appreciation.

“Me too,” I added.

“Same,” said Mattias.

Michelle rolled her eyes, the way she diverted well-deserved positive attention. “So,” she said, desperate to take the attention off herself, “there’s not really another guy on the front porch?”

I shook my head.

“I mean, if there were, and he was hot, I’d consider the quadfuckle,” Si said with a shrug.

“Hot isn’t enough anymore, man. If he wipes up the sink after he shaves,” Mattias said, making eyes at Silas. Raising his hands in accepting surrender, Si nodded.

“Guilty, I’m not trying to deny that.”

“He’d have to be tidy as fuck.” Mattias tapped his chin playfully in thought. “And be good at baking because us three don’t have it going on for us in the baking department.”

Si snapped, then pointed wickedly at the invisible idea. “That, definitely that, too.”

“Mmm,” I agreed, “a hot guy who can make good cookies? Sign me up.”

Michelle knocked a closed fist to the table. “Focus.”

I nodded. “Okay, right. No, there isn’t a guy on the porch we’re going to introduce you to.”

Michelle nodded, a slight look of disappointment on her face knowing the commotion was just a joke. “Then, if it’s not four of you, what is it?”

Mattias reached for my tea and took a sip. “There will be four of us.”

Silas reached over the table and took Michelle’s hand in his. “We just don’t know yet if it’s a boy or a girl that’s joining us, Aunt Michelle.”

“Stop,” she shouted back almost instantly. Like, seriously, the last syllable fell from Si’s tongue, and she was on her feet, squealing stop repeatedly. Then the tears as she yanked me to my feet and held me tight.

“You’re pregnant,” she whispered tearfully into my ear.

“I am,” I confessed, “twelve weeks. We waited until it was safe to tell anyone. You’re obviously the first person we told.”

“Obviously,” she repeated in a broken, wet-sounding sob. Then we stood apart, and she looked between the two men as she wiped the corner of her eyes, her mascara not surviving the emotional news nearly as well as she was.

Which wasn’t well at all, so you can imagine how that mascara looked.

“Wait,” she said, sucking in a breath. “I don’t really know exactly how it works, you know, in the bedroom.” Her cheeks flushed a little, and that made Mattias grin, Cheshire-style.

“Don’t tease her,” I smacked him in the chest, which made him show palms in surrender.

“Fine, fine,” he agreed as Silas draped his arm over the back of my chair. I sat back down to finish the conversation, and Michelle did, too.

“You want to know whose baby it is, right?” Silas’s fingertips mindlessly kneaded into my shoulder as he spoke, and it soothed my nerves.

“Yeah, I mean, if it wasn’t planned—” Michelle was cut off by Mattias.

“It was planned.” Using two fingers, he pinched around his mouth. “Everything we’ve done since I got locked up has been planned. Everything.”

“Oh,” she said, then turned to me, trying to disguise the look of hurt on her face. “I didn’t know you guys were trying.”

Silas reached for her, extending her the hand that was on my shoulder. “We didn’t know what was going to happen, and we didn’t want other people’s hopes and expectations on our shoulders.”

She snorted, but her expression softened. “Yeah, I definitely would’ve started to buy onesies and make a list of baby names.”

“So then you see why we felt like we needed privacy,” Silas responded smoothly, stroking the top of Michelle’s hand. “Because we were all pretty nervous. I mean, do you know how perfect it all has to play out to actually get pregnant?” He threw his opposite thumb into his chest. “I do. Because I watched an entire docuseries on it on Netflix.”

Michelle’s lips twitched. “Yeah?”

He nodded fervently, and Mattias joined. “We did.”

She turned to me. “And did you watch it?”

I waved my hand down. “Nah, they got it.”

She laughed at that, and so did I, and it brought a fresh wave of tears for us both.

“You’re going to be a mom,” she said. “And you’re going to be so good at it.”

“Thank you,” I whispered hoarsely.

Then, doing what she did best, she redirected our teary focus back to the question that started it all.

“So, if it’s planned, who’s the father?”

I nodded across the table to the man who rescued me at thirteen years old. To my first love. Silas replaced his arm around me.

“The stupid thing about laws is that they don’t make exceptions for real life. So while I can marry Mattias and Gen can marry me, the three of us can’t really do anything legally.” Lifting his hand, Mattias and I did the same, exposing the silicone rings we’d been wearing since our six-month anniversary.

“We can wear these, and people who know us know that we have a husband and a wife, and she has two husbands.”

“But legally, it’s nothing,” Mattias added.

“So until the law gets cool, we decided we’d make a path for ourselves legally as best as we could. That started with a legal marriage between Gennedy and me, so she and the baby have access to my insurance plan, life insurance, and the business if anything happens to me.”

“And,” he continued, “Mattias will father our kids. This one, maybe more. Maybe all.”

“We all have a legal stake in it, as close to marriage as we can get,” I said, shrugging.

Michelle was impressed and settled back into her chair, wiping at her damp, pink cheeks. “You guys make me proud; you know that?”

“How so?” Silas asked, looking genuinely puzzled.

“Well,” Michelle admitted. “I kind of thought this was a kinky sex thing that would fizzle out, but I’ve never ever in my life been happier to be wrong.”

Silas had mock-offense on his face. “You think I’d live with two people just for good sex? I’m pretty, Michelle, but

I'm smart, too."

She grinned and waved him off. "Come on, that's what most people think, too. I'm just telling you the truth."

I nodded because I knew what most people thought. And I cared absolutely zero. Because caring what other people thought was a luxury I never had, and I wouldn't start now.

"But you guys are like, forever." Her smile drained away slowly. "Hell, I don't even have that with one man, and you have it with two."

"This one may last," Mattias added, nudging her gently.

"Yeah," she nodded off the moment of weakness. "So, when are you due?"

I snorted. "You won't believe this, but I'm due on Angus's birthday."

She made a noise of surprise, then it faded. "That would be fun, but babies rarely come on their actual due date. I mean, it's unlikely, but it can happen."

"I think he'll come on his due date. I kind of live by 'it's unlikely, but it can happen.'"

If living with and having the baby of your first and longtime love while also living with and being married to your new love isn't unlikely, what is? How about all that plus working together—all three of us—for years on end with no problems whatsoever. In fact, we'd even expanded the business, opening Tilt 3 in a new location outside the city.

From a scared child of drug-addicted abandoners to a business owner with an abundance of love and money in her life, I'd definitely categorize myself as Unlikely, but it Can Happen.

Maneuvering myself into this perfect life feels like the best sleight of hand trick I've ever performed.

I'm glad this one isn't just an illusion.

THE END

Meanings

Gennedy

a name given to those both noble and generous in nature.

Mattias

Gift of God

Silas

Wood; of the forest

Reviews

I hoped you enjoyed this story. I have to say, it was damn fun writing it.

Thank you for taking a chance on me and thank you for reading my book.

Your feedback and opinion matter to me! If you have a minute, can you kindly leave a review on Amazon?

[Release on Amazon](#)

Much appreciated! And THANK YOU again!

Daisy

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