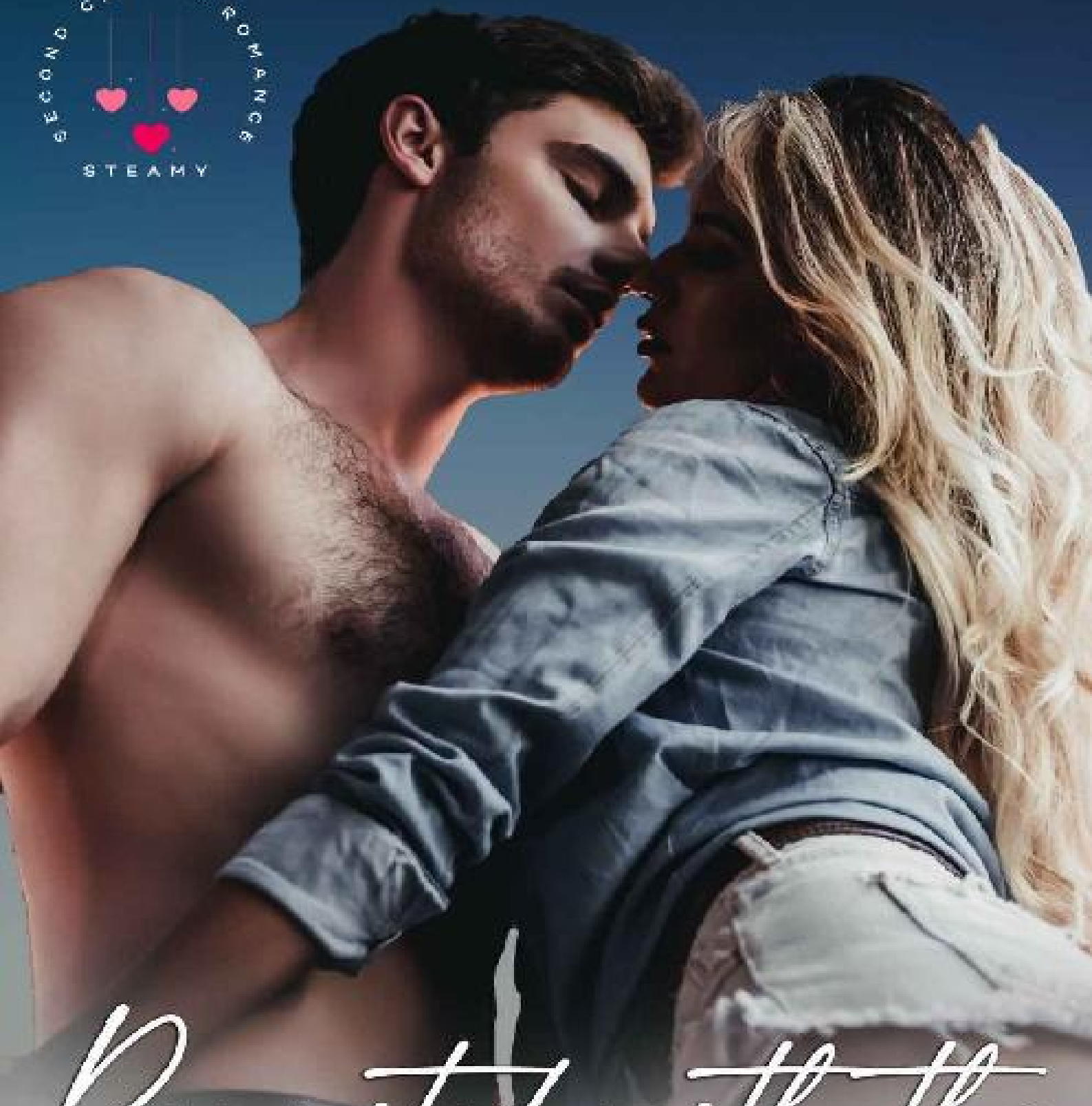


SECOND CHANCE
ROMANCE
STEAMY



Reunited with the
SOLDIER

MADDOG SECURITY SERIES BOOK TWO
A STEAMY SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE NOVELLA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
L E X I N O I R

REUNITED WITH THE SOLDIER

SECOND CHANCE SERIES

MADDOG SECURITY

BOOK 2

LEXI NOIR

CONTENTS

[About the Second Chance Shared World](#)

[From the Author about Reunited with the Soldier](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[More of the Second Chance Shared World?](#)

[Also by Lexi Noir](#)

[About the Author](#)

Reunited with the Soldier

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ABOUT THE SECOND CHANCE SHARED WORLD

Sometimes we have to let our soulmate go, but if they are the other part of our souls then they will find their way back to us.

That's what the Second Chance Series is all about. This series is for those that are rooting for their main characters and their second chance. Whether they have to work hard at it, prove that they made a mistake or whether they fall harder this time around, we give you happy endings that you will love.

Get ready for Sweet and Steamy in this Second chance series to see these couples trying to make it work this time around.



FROM THE AUTHOR ABOUT REUNITED WITH THE SOLDIER

Army veteran Kash returns home after being injured in combat. He's lost his sense of purpose and struggles to adjust to life as a civilian. Working for Maddog Security has definitely helped Kash, but there's something missing in his life and he's not sure what it is.

When he runs into his high school sweetheart Lauren, he's forced to confront the mistakes of his past and the feelings he still has for her.

As they rekindle their romance, they must navigate the challenge of a secret baby and learn to trust each other again.

When Lauren's past catches up with her, can Kash save her this time? Or has it all got too much for him and he's walked away - just like last time?



PROLOGUE

Nine years ago.

I park my car, my gaze on the beach, I don't have to look far, Lauren's standing there waiting, as she always is.

Fuck. I love her. I never thought it would be possible to love someone as much as I love her. She's everything to me but I know that I'm going to break her heart. I'm going to shatter every dream she ever had tonight, and I'm going to walk away without looking back. I hate that I'm going to do this and I wish I had another choice, but I don't.

I walk over to her, each step I take is heavy and filled with gut wrenching dread. I fucking love her. I don't want to see her cry, then again, I don't think I've ever seen Lauren cry. She's fierce but sweet and sexy.

"Hey," she greets me with a wide smile, but I notice that it doesn't reach her eyes. "Is everything okay?" she asks with a furrow between her brows. "You don't seem yourself."

"Baby," I begin, my voice etched with anguish.

"Kash," she says, stepping closer to me. "What's going on?"

I shake my head. "Lauren—"

Her eyes flash with pain, almost as if she knows what's about to happen. "Lo, you always call me Lo."

I sigh. "Baby, I'm so fucking sorry."

She pulls in a shaky breath. "You're leaving, aren't you?" she says so matter-of-factly.

I nod. "I signed up to the military, my bus leaves at six this evening."

She wraps her arms around her stomach and turns to look out at the sea. "So all that stuff you said last night was bullshit?"

"No," I growl. "Fuck no. You think I lied about loving you?"

She keeps her gaze directed at the sea. "How long have you known that you'd be leaving today?" she asks quietly.

I don't answer, I know that no matter what I'll say she'll be pissed. I fucked up. How do you tell the girl you love that you're leaving? How the fuck do you do that?

"So you knew you were leaving but you still fucked me," she says bitterly. "What was it, make sure you took Lauren's virginity before you left. One last hurrah?"

I spin her to face me, not missing the anger and pain in those gorgeous emerald eyes of hers. "It's not like that. Not at fucking all, Lo, you are the only person I've ever loved, will ever love. Joining the military is something that I want—need—to do."

She shakes her head. "So you're leaving, that's it. No discussion. Nothing? Did you ever think to tell me about it? Hmm, you've listened to me for the past six months talk about plans. Plans for the both of us once we graduate. Instead you

should have been honest from the get-go. Not once did you ever mention that you wanted to join the military, Kash. Not once.” Her nose scrunches up and she steps back from me. “Do I even know you at all?”

Fuck. This is so much worse than I had ever imagined.

“Tell me you don’t think that’s true?” I growl as I step forward and pull her into my body.

“What the hell am I supposed to think, Kash? You’re leaving and this is the first time I’m hearing about it. What else do you think I’d believe?” She glances down at our feet and I hate this. I fucking hate every second of this.

I sigh. “Baby, look at me,” I whisper, but she shakes her head. “I’m asking you please, look at me.”

She raises her head and I’m hit with those gorgeous emerald eyes of hers, filled with pain and tears. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she whispers. “Why did you make me want everything just to snatch it away?”

“I’m so sorry,” I repeat. There really is no excuse for not telling her. “It’s something I’ve dreamed of for years, something I’ve aspired to. I was afraid to hope in case it didn’t happen.”

“I was always the backup plan,” she says softly. “I get it, I really hope you achieve everything that you want, Kash.”

She pulls out of my arms and I know that right here and now is the very last that I’m ever going to see her again. She presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Be safe and more importantly, be happy, Kash.”

“You too, Lo.”

She gives me a sad smile. “I had my happiness, Kash, some of us weren’t lying about how we felt.” She takes a step backward. “You were my safe space,” she whispers cryptically. “Goodbye Kash Henderson.”

She turns and walks away, as much as I want to go after her, I can’t, I’m leaving today and chasing after Lauren will just make me leaving all that much harder.

I slide my hands into my pockets and watch as she walks away, moving toward the end of the beach. I know that she comes here a lot when she wants to think, when she wants to be alone. I swallow back the pain as I watch her sit on the sand, her knees pressed against her chest and her arms wrapped around her leg.

I’ve hurt her.

I’m a fucking asshole.

I walk back to my car, every step that I take is painful. She never deserved this, fuck, she deserved a whole lot better than me.

I CLIMB onto the bus and take a seat by the window. I can’t stop my gaze moving to the crowd outside. To the families of those who are here saying goodbye to their loved ones. My sister Kayla wanted to be here but I told her not to. I’ve said my goodbye to her, I don’t want to do it again.

I scan the crowd once again, my chest tightening when I don’t see her. Not that I blame her for not being here. Lauren deserves so fucking much more than the shit I heaped on her today. There’s no reason for her to say goodbye to me.

The bus driver pulls away from the curb, the feeling of dread sets in, I feel as though I've made the biggest mistake of my life in leaving Lauren behind.

Fuck.

ONE



LAUREN

Nine months later

“No, please stay away from me. Not today, I don’t need this today.” I whisper in the darkness. I hate my stepfather, Frank. He is a nasty piece of work and I don’t know why my Mom doesn’t leave him. He hits her and he started hitting me a couple of years ago. I managed to hide it from everyone, but recently his beatings have been getting a lot worse.

His drinking has been horrendous and when he drinks he beats Mom, and if he hasn’t had enough beating her then he comes to my room and kicks and hits me.

I have a secret, one that I know is going to come out very soon. I’m pregnant. And I’ve not told anyone. No one. Not even my Mom. The night Kash and I slept together before he left for the military. It was like his last thing he needed to tick off his to do list before he went away. One—sleep with Lauren—check. Two—break Lauren’s heart—check.

I’ve not spoken to him since he left, it’s like he wanted a clean break. I haven’t told him I’m pregnant and if I have our child then I don’t want him to be involved at all. I don’t need his money or his pity and I certainly don’t need a would-be dad who pops in every few months. Nope, that’s not what I

want or need. I want to have my child and then I want to get as far away from here as possible.

I've told my Mom that Frank beats me. She told me to stop arguing with him and I told her that it's not that that triggers him, it's his drinking. I try to stay out of his way and some weeks I can stay away from him for days, but the closer I am to having this baby, the more I'm at home and within reach for when he wants a punching bag. Baggy clothes have helped me to keep it hidden, but I know that I am over my due date so I need to just get through the next couple of days and then they will induce me.

My back is hurting today and I've stayed in my room out of everyone's way. I don't know what is going to happen next, but I know that the last thing I need is for Frank to come into my room tonight.

The pain gets worse as the hours pass and I can't hear Frank anymore. I wonder if I am in labor? I need to get to the hospital to find out what the pain is and what I should do about it.

I take my baby bag that I have packed from under my bed and I throw it over my shoulder. I open my window, which leads onto a small balcony where I have the ladder so that I can climb down into the garden. Kash used to use this ladder to come and see me and I think of the irony of using it now.

Just as I'm about to climb out of the window, Frank storms into my room and slams my door against the wall. "Where the fuck do you think you're going? Get back in here, you're not going anywhere." He pulls my bag and I land on the bag on the floor.

"Stay down there you bitch. I'm sick and tired of this family. You all think you can do what you like and you don't

listen to a word I say.” He kicks me in my side and I feel nauseous. The pain in my back is getting worse and I want to puke.

I roll into the fetal position to hide my stomach and protect my baby, but he keeps kicking me. In my side, back, stomach and head. I puke on the floor. “You dirty bitch, you are going to get up on your feet and clean that up. You’re disgusting, it’s no wonder Kash left you here on your own. You’re not worthy of love.”

His words break me apart, my fight leaving me. I just hope that if I make it out of this attack alive, that my baby does too. He stops kicking me and leaves the room. I sob before I puke again.

It’s quiet for a few minutes and I breathe again. When I slowly sit up I pull up my top to rub my stomach. “I hope you’re okay in there, baby. Mommy loves you and she’s going to protect you.”

I don’t see or hear Frank come back in the room, but when he grabs my shoulders and drags me across the floor, I know that I am in a world of trouble.

“You’re pregnant? You little slut. Here I thought you were innocent but all this time you’ve been opening your legs for everyone. Is that why Kash left you because you were pregnant with another guy’s child? You dirty whore.” I’ve never seen him this angry. “How are we going to be able to afford another mouth to feed, it’s already a shit show in here. We don’t have enough money to feed just us and you want a baby.”

He kicks me in the stomach, directly at my baby. “Get off me you bastard, don’t you dare fucking kill her.” I fight back with all my might. He kicks my arm when I protect my

stomach and the pain rushes through me and I know that it's broken. He keeps kicking me and all I can think of is losing my baby. This is the one person who I love unconditionally and who I want to love me back. As long as I have my child's love I can do anything in life, right?

As he keeps kicking me and my baby, I drift into a state where I don't know what's going on around me. All I know is that I am in pain. Lots of pain. The pain in my back is worse, the pain in my ribs, arms and everywhere else is excruciatingly painful and I want this to be over.

I'm vaguely aware of someone screaming from my door. But I don't know what is going on and why they are screaming.

"Get away from her you sick bastard," I hear someone yell.

Frank moves away from me and I feel someone take me into their arms. They're soft and smell so nice. I know it's not my Mom. She is frail and always smells of alcohol and cigarettes.

"Hey, Lauren, it's Bailey from next door. We heard some screaming and shouting. You had your window open and we could hear it. The ambulance is on the way."

"Thank you. My baby?" I reach down and touch my stomach, trying to feel if my baby is moving or not.

"Lauren, I'm sorry, but there's too much blood there for the baby to have survived."

I cry, sob into her arms. She holds me tight like I wished my Mom did for years, but she didn't. I've been starved of love and have only had Kash's love and even that was taken away from me.

I hear a lot of people in my room and then I feel someone touch my arm. I flinch. “Lauren, I’m the EMT and I’m here to take you to the hospital.”

“Save my baby, please save my baby.” I can’t even open my eyes because they are swollen shut.

“We will do everything we can to save you and your baby. We will make sure you don’t have to come back here ever again. We will look after you.”

They strap me to the stretcher and when they lift me I move my head towards the smell of Bailey. “Can she come with me?”

I hear my mom shout, “I want to go with her.”

“No. I don’t want you anywhere near me. You’ve never protected me against him.” I scream.

“I didn’t know you were pregnant,” she shouts before she starts sobbing.

“You didn’t need to know she was pregnant,” Bailey says, taking my hand. “I’ll be with you every step of the way, Lauren.” I squeeze it as hard as I can to say thank you.

In the ambulance I’m listening to the noises around me. One of them is the doppler to listen to the baby’s heartbeat. Every time I’ve had it checked it’s been really loud. Why isn’t it loud now?

“My baby? Is my baby okay? I can’t hear the heartbeat.” I try to move my arms to touch my stomach, but I can’t. “Why do you have my arms tied to the gurney?” I sob. “I need to feel my baby.”

Bailey is sitting in front of me and she takes my hand. “Lauren, you are in a lot of pain, you have many broken bones

and you need to calm down. They are doing everything they can to keep you and the baby alive. Tell me about the baby. Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?"

"It's a boy. I love him already. He's been the only one keeping me here. I can't lose him, Bailey. I just can't." I can't stop sobbing when she rests her head on my chest and holds me the floodgates open.

We arrive at the hospital and it's like all hell is let loose. My heart rate spikes, I start fighting and I hear Bailey crying. "You need to do something. We need both of them to live."

Someone else in the ambulance is on the phone or talking to someone. "We've a young mother, lots of broken bones, in active labor, eight centimeters dilated, her waters have broken, she's lost a lot of blood so we don't think the pregnancy is viable anymore. She's seizing and if we don't get her into an OR soon then we might lose her too."

I take everything in and hope that if they can't save both of us that they let both of us die, at least then we will both be together in heaven.

As they pull the gurney out of the ambulance, Bailey squeezes my hand. "Lauren, I am not leaving until you come out of surgery. I will be here and I will look after your baby boy when he's born."

"If he's born," I mumble just before I slip into blackness.

TWO



Present Day

“Good Morning,” Kayla says as I wrap my arms around her.

I’m out of the military, it wasn’t something I had planned on doing, but when I was injured during our last tour, I was no longer able to be in the field. Thankfully, I was able to medically retire. Now I’m home and I’m eager to start my new life. Today, I start my new job, working for my best friend and brother-in-law, Maddox.

Maddox left the military almost three years ago now, he and my sister have been happily married for four years now and I know that he was desperate to be home with her, especially as he almost missed the birth of their first daughter, Erin. He knew his mind wouldn’t be solely on the field when he’d be gone, so when the chance came, he left and he started Maddox security. A firm which I, along with four of our other team mates, are now employed at.

Our last tour was the worst, we lost a brother, and almost lost a few more. None of us made it out without scars, the majority of us having been medically retired.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” I say to my sister. From what Maddox’s told me, Kayla doesn’t spend time at the office, he doesn’t want her near it. He’s still not over her being taken by her ex. I don’t blame him, the thought of Kayla being gone is a thought I don’t want.

She glances away and my gut tightens. “Kayla,” I sigh. She’s worried about me, I feel as though she’s expecting me to break. It’s not going to happen. It infuriates me that she does it and it’s one of the reasons that I haven’t been coming around as much as I would.

She bites her lip as she glances behind me. “What are you doing here, baby?” I hear Maddox ask. “You know what I said.”

“I know but—” she begins.

It’s been three months of this, her watching me, waiting for me to fall. “Christ, Kayla. I’m capable of taking care of my fucking self. Will you just quit it?” I snarl as I turn away from her, glaring at Maddox as I do. I know that when he catches up to me, he’s going to be pissed that I spoke to his wife that way. It doesn’t matter if she’s my sister. She’s his wife, the mother of his daughter and unborn child.

I hear their muffled voices but continue into the conference room.

Jimmy, Logan, Miles, and Forde are already here. All four men are my brothers, they served alongside Maddox and I.

“Everything okay?” Jimmy asks, his brows knitted together as he glances at his cell. He’s been off the past few weeks. He’s still doing rehabilitation, he was shot in his thigh and was close to losing his leg. He’s lucky that he’s alive, let alone that his leg is intact.

“Yeah, about as good as you,” I reply as I take a seat.
“What’s going on?”

He shakes his head, his jaw tight. “Nothing.”

Lies, but whatever. I get it. Sometimes we don’t want to talk about it.

“Dinner tonight?” Miles questions. He’s the newest member of our team. Miles joined when Maddox left, and he’s still trying to get his bearings. Trying to figure out where he fits. He shouldn’t worry. He’s one of us.

“Sure,” I reply, knowing that I have nothing better to do.
“Where?”

Maddox Security is in San Jose, which meant Maddox, Kayla, and I upped and left Los Angeles and headed to San Jose. I can’t lie, having a home near the beach is a lot better than expected. It’s going to be a small commute each day, but it’s more than worth it.

“I saw there’s a bar in town that looks good. It’s called The Traveller’s Friend.”

I shrug. As long as there’s good food, I’m happy. “Sounds good.”

Everyone nods in agreement. It’s not even nine in the morning and we’ve already sorted where we’re having dinner. Right now, a coffee would be great.

Maddox enters the office, his jaw set, and his gaze on me. He’s pissed. Yeah, we’ll get in fucking line.

“Gentlemen, welcome,” he begins. “We’ve a stack full of cases that need to be prioritized. Jimmy, until you’re cleared for duty, you’ll be working from the office,” he tells us. “Now, we’re trying to find a secretary, but none have so far been able

to stick it out so far. So until then, we'll have to make the best of it."

I nod, drumming my fingers on my thigh. I'm anxious to get started. The meeting runs for over ninety minutes as Maddox runs through each case individually, we try to separate the cases that need to be top priority and what could be on the back burner. It's shit, but with there only being a handful of us, we can only do so much.

"Kash," Maddox says as we're leaving the conference room. "I understand that Kayla's pushing you, but don't speak to my wife like that again."

I glare at the man that I trust beyond anyone else. "When your wife stops treating me like I'm going to break, I'll back off, until then, keep her out of my way. I'm dealing with enough shit without Kayla acting as though I'm going to fucking hit rock bottom."

His expression immediately changes. "You're thinking about her," he says, it's not a statement but a fact.

My jaw clenches so hard that it's a wonder my teeth aren't broken. Lauren. The woman that I let slip from my grasp. The one I walked away from. It's been nine years since I last saw her and I've thought about her every day. I made a mistake in walking away. I should have found another way. Found some way to have both her and the military.

"Leave it alone, Mad, I'm not talking about it." I turn on my heels and storm out of the room.

I have no idea how she's doing. I fucked up. I just pray that she's happy.

“FIRST DRINK’S ON ME,” Maddox says, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet. I’m shocked that he’s even out with us tonight. He doesn’t want to be away from Kayla too long.

“All the drinks are on you,” I tell him as I take a seat.

“Gentlemen, I’m Gwen, I’m your server for this evening. Can I get y’all started with some drinks?” the petite blonde asks.

“Beer please,” I ask, and the rest of the guys ask for the same.

“No problem, I’ll put that order in with the bar staff, it’s busy tonight, but Lauren will ensure you get your drinks quickly. Can I get you some food?” she asks, looking around at us. “Or would you like a few minutes to look over the menu.”

I quickly order some food and while the other men are doing the same, I crane my neck to see if I can see the woman at the bar. It’s the same reaction every time I hear the name Lauren. It’s instinctive, a gut reaction. But just as always, I don’t see her.

It doesn’t take Gwen long to bring us our drinks. While the guys talk, my mind drifts to a place it usually goes. Lauren, I’ve been wanting to find her since I got home. Now that I’m working at Maddog, I’ve more access to information than before. It wouldn’t take me long to uncover where she is. But there’s something in me that’s stopping me. What if she’s happy and married? I don’t want to upend her life, I already hurt her once, I won’t do it again.

“You good?” Maddox asks once we’re finished eating.

I shrug as I get to my feet. It’s time to go home. I need to get the fuck out of this headspace before I end up searching for her. She deserves peace. “Been thinking a lot.”

He nods. “Look brother,” he says low so that only I can hear him. “From everything you’ve told me, she was the one for you. I have no doubt that you were both young, but from what I get, you still love her. You’re never going to rest until you find her.”

I run a hand through my hair. He’s right. I won’t be able to put it behind me until we find out if she’s okay.

A husky laugh captures my attention and I glance over at the bar. My gaze collides with a very familiar set of emerald eyes. The same ones that have invaded my every dream for the past nine years. Her face pales as she sees me, her mouth parts and she swallows hard, unblinking as she stares at me.

“Fuck,” I breathe.

“Brother?” Maddox grunts, his body on alert.

“It’s her,” I say, unable to quite comprehend that the woman I want is standing in front of me. “Lo,” I whisper.

“Shit brother,” he says. “Go,” he tells me. “Go talk to her. I’ll call you later.” He slaps me on the back and his words are all the encouragement I need.

“Lo,” I greet with a smile as I take a seat at the bar.

She glares at me, the shock already worn off and the anger is in full force. She’s even more gorgeous than I remember, her body fuller, her hips wider, breasts heavier, and her hair longer. She’s beyond beautiful.

“The hell are you doing here, Kash?” she asks with a raised brow.

“Got done with the military and now working not far from here. You look good, Lo.”

“Lauren,” she corrects. “I stopped being Lo the day you left me behind,” she spits. “Now, do you want a drink, if not, get the hell out of here.”

“A beer, please,” I say, not willing to leave yet. No. I fucking finally found her. My gaze moves to her hand and I don’t see a ring on her finger. Hope sparks within me. Maybe, just maybe there’s hope?

She places the beer in front of me and our hands touch, electricity shoots through me and I hear her sharp intake of breath. Even after all this time, the spark is still there. I still want her, I still love her. She may not be the Lo that I left behind, but somewhere behind the anger, she’s still my woman.

I made the mistake of losing her once, I’m not going to make the same mistake again.

THREE



LAUREN

“Oh my god,” I say to Gemma. “Fuck, no, not now.”

“What’s wrong, Lauren?” She reaches out and touches me.

I jump. “Over there. The good looking table.” I nod my head at the gorgeous men that we’ve all been laughing about and drooling over.

She looks. “They’re really nice, not rowdy like I thought they would be.” She looks at me. “Are you okay, Lauren, you look pale.”

I shake my head, oblivious to everything and everyone around me. My head feels light and I hold onto the counter to stop myself from fainting onto the floor. I might have cleaned it this morning, but I still don’t want to end up laid on it.

“That’s Kash.” That’s all I need to say. She knows my story and she knows what I went through nine years ago. Gemma has been a great friend and I don’t know what I would do without her.

“Do you want me to throw them out?” Her face hardens and I can’t help but smile at her.

“No, but thank you, you’re like my personal bodyguard.” I don’t look in his direction and turn to grab a glass for a drink.

“Lo.”

No one else knows me as Lo, not since he left me for the military. I've been Lauren to everyone since then.

I spin my head to see where it came from and I'm bombarded by his beautiful eyes and his smile.

"The hell are you doing here, Kash?" I stare at him and hope he crumbles under my glare.

"Got done with the military and now working not far from here. You look good, Lo."

"Lauren. I stopped being Lo the day you left me behind." I'm trying to control my voice, but I can feel it's shaky. "Now, do you want a drink, if not, get the hell out of here."

"A beer, please." I pour him a beer, hand it to him and that's when I feel the connection that we always had. The sparks of electricity travelling through my veins whenever he touched me. Fuck, what does that mean. I don't need this complication in my life, I've finally been able to settle down and start over again. I haven't lived in fear for such a long time. But seeing Kash has reopened all my wounds and brought my memories crashing back down.

"Take for that beer, I'm going on my break. And don't let him follow me." I storm out from behind the bar and make my way upstairs to the kitchen area. I need to breathe.. I can't believe he's here. Kash is here. Fuck.

After ten minutes, Gemma comes to find me. "Are you okay?"

"Did he leave?" I plead, my eyes filled with tears.

"No, he waited for a while and then went back to his table. They are all still down there. I just wanted to check on you. Do you want to go home?"

“God no, I need the money, you know I do. I can’t let a blast from the past upset me. I’ve cried enough tears over him over the years, I don’t want to give him anymore.”

She pulls me into a hug and slaps me on the back after squeezing me tight. “Come on then, you need to get back down there and show him that he doesn’t affect you, even if he does.”

“He doesn’t know about Elijah. I don’t want him to ever know about Elijah. He can’t take him from me.”

“You need to calm down. He doesn’t have any right to take him from you, Lauren. Take some deep breaths and let’s go back downstairs. The quicker you get down there, the quicker it is to get home and hug Elijah. You’ll feel better then.”

I know she’s right and I make sure my make up isn’t smudged and then I head back downstairs to serve at the bar. I’ve worked here for about four years now and they are so good to me and Elijah.

I can see Kash and his friends at their table. They seem to be really good friends and they are forever man hugging, fist bumping and laughing. It’s good to see him with his friends, and I have to admit he looks fucking incredible, the military was good to him by the looks of it.

But, I don’t want to talk to him or see him again. This is my one night to drink in everything that is Kash and then I don’t want to see him again.

When my shift is over, I glance over at Kash’s table. It’s empty, they left about fifteen minutes ago and I’m happy about that. I didn’t want Kash to come over and talk to me when they were leaving. It’s bad enough he knows where I am, I

hope he's just passing through. I don't know how I would feel to see him every night at work, I would need to find a new job.

I need to get home to Bailey and talk to her about what to do. Bailey has become the mom and best friend that I never knew I needed. After that night when she took me to hospital she hasn't left our sides. When Elijah was born, I needed to go into surgery to repair my broken bones, shattered ribs and repair some of my organs. Bailey looked after Elijah until I was well enough to hold him and feed him. I moved in with her and then after my step father was put in prison, we left town together.

She looks after Elijah at night when I'm working and I have him to myself during the day when she works. She bought the local bookstore and she loves working there. Myself and Elijah go down there often to look at the books. I've even sat down and read some of them to the other kids who are in the shop.

After grabbing my jacket, I step outside of the bar and that's when I see the dark figure leaning against the wall.

"Hey, Lauren, wait."

"No, I don't have anything to say to you, Kash. You walked away from me, remember." I walk back to my car, hoping he walks in the other direction. But I should have known, Kash was always pigheaded and did what he wanted. That's how he left for the military, right?

"I just want to talk. Please, Lo."

I spin around and stare at him, the anger is brimming just under the surface and I can feel that I am getting ready to explode.

“I told you, it’s Lauren. You don’t have the right to call me that anymore, Kash.” I stomp my way back to him and poke him in the chest. “You left me at a time when I really needed you, but you were just looking out for yourself, you didn’t give my feelings a thought. Did you?” I poke him.

“No, I didn’t and I’m really...”

“Don’t fucking tell me you’re sorry. I don’t want to hear it. You didn’t even write to me, you could have written and explained and I would have waited for you, Kash. Didn’t you realize that? I would have waited for you.”

He pulls me into his chest and I fight to get out from under his arms.

“I’m sorry, Lauren. I know I was selfish and I’ve regretted it every day since. I’ve not stopped thinking about you. I still love you. Always will.”

I manage to push off his chest. “Shut up. Shut the fuck up. You don’t have the right to tell me how you feel. It was always about you. Did you stop to think for one moment, how that split second affected my life? No, you fucking didn’t, because if you did you wouldn’t have walked away from me at that time.” I walk back to my car and open the door.

He steps up next to me. “Lauren, I just want some of your time to talk to you and explain everything to you. Please, I’ll beg if you want me to.”

“I don’t want you to beg. I didn’t beg you to stay because I knew there was no point. So don’t beg me to hear you out, Kash.” I put on my seat belt and go to close the door but he holds it open. “Kash, let me close the door.”

“No, I won’t close this door until you agree to meet me for coffee to talk things out. As friends.”

I laugh. “Friends don’t leave you when you need them the most.” I can feel those pesky tears and I don’t want them to fall in front of him. “Please let the door go.”

“Lauren, you know we both need this, for closure, if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t know what the fuck I want. My life has been good these last few years and now you show up and turn it upside down all over again.” I thump the steering wheel with my hands and jump when the horn sounds.

“All I’m asking is an hour of your time.” He looks like he’s desperate and I love that he feels like that. That’s how I felt when he left me.

“Kash, I need to think. You coming back into my life has confused me and I need to process what is happening. Please, let me process it in my own time.” He lets go of the door and I drive off without looking back.

As soon as I get home I rush up the stairs to Elijah’s room. He’s fast asleep. My heart stills, he’s safe. I walk into the room and kiss him. I stare at him for a while and he looks just like his dad. Like Kash.

When I get back downstairs, Bailey is there with a cup of coffee for me, as she does every night. “Here you go, you look like you need it. Was it busy tonight?”

We sit down in the armchairs and I take a sip of my coffee before looking at her. “Kash turned up tonight in the bar.”

She gasps. “No fucking way?”

“Yeah, it surprised both of us being so far away from home.” I hold the cup in my hands and warm them up.

“Did he talk to you?”

“He tried but I didn’t want to talk. I need to process that he’s here in town and he doesn’t know about Elijah. I don’t want him to take him away from me, Bailey.”

She puts her coffee down on the table and walks over to me. “Baby, he won’t take him away from you, he can’t do that.”

“Are you sure? He’s going to hate me anyway for not telling him.”

“How could you tell him when he didn’t write to you? He made it clear it was over between you and you would have felt that he was only with you because of the baby. Don’t beat yourself up, Lauren.”

“I know, but what if he finds out and wants to meet Elijah, what am I going to do then?”

“Then we will sit down and discuss it. You are not alone, remember I am always going to be here for you.” She kisses me on the head and then sits back down.

“I don’t know what I would have done without you in my life, Bailey. It was the worst night of my life but I got the two most precious people in my life that night. You and Elijah.”

“I’m just sorry that I wasn’t there for you before that night. I wish I’d known you better and could have helped you through your pregnancy and gotten you out of there before he hurt you both.”

Tears slide down my face as I remember the feeling that night that Elijah wasn’t going to make it. “I just thank God every day that he brought us together. You’ve done more for me than my parents ever did.”

“You’re family to me, Lauren. I’ll do anything for you.”

“Help me get through this with Kash, that’s all I’m asking for right now.”

“I will.”

FOUR



KASH

I'm sitting at the bar, watching as Lauren moves around it, serving customers and shooting the shit with the regulars. She's got smiles for everyone but me. I hate that I hurt her. I fucked up. I made the stupidest mistake of my life by walking away and never contacting her. It was beyond stupid. Lauren was the only person that I have ever loved and now she hates me. I did that.

I want her back. I want to have her in my life and in my bed. I want everything with Lauren. Seeing her again yesterday just solidified how much I've missed her. I'm not stopping my mission to get her back. The thing about her being angry, it means she cares. She wouldn't be pissed if she didn't. It means that I have a chance to make things right.

"What are you doing here, Kash?" she asks as she stops and places a beer in front of him. "I told you, I needed to think."

I look at the woman who's always been on my mind. Always been the person my thoughts drifted to when times get tough. She's my one regret. "I came for a beer," I tell her as I bring the bottle to my lips.

She narrows her eyes at me. "Sure," she drawls. "Seriously, Kash, you're not helping things. You have no idea

what the hell I went through after you left, but you didn't give a fuck, though. You ran away, did everything to ensure that I'd never be able to find you. Yet, when I want peace and time, you're here." She shakes her head and moves away to serve another customer.

Fuck. I've really fucked up. More than I had even realized.

What the hell happened after I left?

I sit at the bar, watching her for the next few hours. She doesn't say much to me, but I see her gaze move to my direction every few minutes to ensure that I'm still here. That's progress. I just hope that we can sit down and talk, hash out the past, and move forward with the future.

"I'm going on break, Gem," she tells the other server who quickly waves her away and continues serving the guy who's been sitting there longer than I have.

I slide off my stool and follow Lauren out the back to the break room. "Kash, seriously?" she whispers, her eyes wide and her shoulders slumped forward.

"What happened after I left?" I ask as I step into her space. "Lo, baby, what happened?"

She shakes her head, tears in her eyes. I can't take it, I pull her into my arms and I'm surprised when she doesn't fight me. "Lo," I growl. The feeling of having her soft body against mine is making me crazy. My cock is rock hard and I want her. Christ. I want to be so deep inside of her that I ache.

She looks up at me through her lashes and breathes deeply. "Kash."

That's all I can take. I slam my lips against her. Fuck. She tastes better than I remember, so much better.

“Lo,” I growl, my hand sliding into her hair and tugging it back. She gasps and I take advantage, sliding my tongue into her mouth and taking everything that I have missed in the past few years.

The moment our tongues touch the air goes static and something changes. We’re pulling at one another’s clothes, the passion builds between us and within minutes I have her pushed up against the door, her legs wrapped around my waist, and my cock at her entrance. I don’t hesitate, I thrust deep into her.

I groan long and hard as her snug heat encases my cock. Christ. Nothing is better than this. Nothing is better than my Lauren. Fuck. I’ve missed her. I continue kissing her, unwilling to stop.

“Lo,” I growl, not able to get enough of her. I wish I’d locked the door when we came in here, but it’s too late now.

She releases a low moan, her arms tightening around me. “Kash,” she whimpers.

“Yes,” I grunt as I begin to move. Thrusting inside of her like a man possessed. God, it’s been too fucking long.

She throws her head back and moans. The sexy sound comes from the back of her throat and it’s one that I want to hear a fuck of a lot more.

I hammer into her, my cock pushing into her tight warmth. “So fucking tight.” I grunt with a grin, and start nipping at her jaw. My lips got to her neck and I begin to suck. She comes un-fucking-done, bouncing on my cock, her nails clawing at my back. Fuck. I fucking love that.

She cries out as I sink my teeth into her flesh, her pussy contracting around my cock. “Lo, fuck,” I growl. my pace

relentless, brutal, as I fuck her with abandonment. She's so fucking beautiful. I can't believe that I've found her again. I'm not going to lose her. Not again. Never again.

I pull my face back from hers and look at her, the drunk with lust heavy eyes, the swollen lips with smudged lipstick, not to mention the thin sheen of sweat on her face just add to her beauty. "So fucking beautiful."

She swallows hard, her eyes bright with need. "Please, Kash," she pleads, throwing her head back. "I'm so close, make me cum, please."

I tighten my grip around her hips as I feel my spine tingling, she's not the only one that's close. "This isn't a one time thing, Lo, I'm not going away," I tell her. There's not a chance in hell that I'm walking away. She's all I have ever wanted.

"Hmmm," she whines, not really listening to me. "Please," she groans.

I keep my thrusts hard and deep, rotating my hips so that I get deeper inside of her pussy. My balls tighten and I know there's no fucking way of holding it off any longer.

She releases a strangled moan as her pussy convulses around my cock, flooding me with her juices. God, she's so damn tight, I hammer into her, my cock ready to burst.

Her nails runs down my back as she cries out my name. That's enough to send me over the top, I pound into her. "Fucking amazing," I snarl as my cock swells in her pussy, I piston my hips, pushing into her twice more, before exploding inside of her.

We're both breathless, my legs feel like Jello, but I stay upright, holding onto her. God, she's so fucking beautiful.

“I shouldn’t have left you,” I say to her.

She bites her lip and glances away, but not before I see the tears brimming in her eyes. “No, you shouldn’t have.”

“I fucked up, Lo, I’m so sorry.” I brush my hand along her face, pushing away the stray strands. “Forgive me.”

She doesn’t say anything and I get it. I’ve hurt her. I really fucking hurt her and she needs time. I just don’t want her to walk away.

“Tomorrow,” she whispers. “Tomorrow we can talk,” she says.

I pull out of her and help her to stand and quickly fix myself, pulling up my pants and fastening the zipper, she does the same, getting her clothes straightened and fixing her hair. “I’ll be there, just give me the time and place.”

She blows out a breath and gives me an address. “It’s my home address, Kash, come at eleven.”

I nod. “I’ll be there,” I promise her.

She gives me a twisted smile and nods. “I’m going to finish my break now, Kash, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Dismissed. Fuck.

I press a kiss to her lips and thankfully she doesn’t push me away. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Lo.”

She smiles. “Tomorrow.”

I walk out of the break room and head toward the exit. Tomorrow can’t come quick enough.

I KNOCK ON THE DOOR, my heart pounding. From the outside her home looks neat and tidy. It's a small home, but I know that Lauren would make it homely.

The door swings open and there's Lo, wearing a white tank top, denim cut-off shorts, and her feet bare. So fucking beautiful, she takes my breath away. "Hey," she says softly. "Come on in."

I follow her into the house and I'm right, she has made it homely. It's cute and from what I remember, matches Lauren to a T. She leads me toward the sofa, her teeth biting into her bottom lip, her hands wringing together. Christ. "Lo," I say low. "Don't be nervous."

She takes a deep breath. "Okay," she whispers. "I'm just going to say it," she says. "You have a son," she rushes out. "We. We have a son. He's eight and he's amazing."

I stare at her in disbelief.

The fuck?

We have a son?

FIVE



LAUREN

I've been awake half of the night thinking about what happened inside the breakroom. I should never have let him fuck me like that. But it was like I was young and innocent all over again. All he had to do was call me Lo, and I was a goner.

Why the fuck did I invite him to the house? I haven't even told him about Elijah. Would it have been better to tell him somewhere else? Now I'm regretting my decision.

When we woke up this morning, I got Elijah dressed and got him to school. I think I was on autopilot, but I needed to get him out of the house before telling Kash that he's a dad. What will happen? Will he be angry because I didn't tell him? Will he try to take Elijah away from me? If he thought I was harsh last night, then he has seen nothing yet. Watch me protect my child. I won't lie down and let anyone walk all over me again. Never in a million years.

The doorbell rings and I know I don't have any more time to think about it. I just need to take a deep breath and let him in.

When I open the door, I stumble a little. How could I forget how handsome he is? This man took my heart with him and I've never been able to get over him. "Hey." I open the door further for him to come in.. "Come on in."

He follows me into the house, and I catch him looking around. I bite my bottom lip and wring my hands together. I'm so worried about what is going to happen.

“Lo,” he says quietly.. “Don't be nervous.”

I take a deep breath. “Okay,” I whisper. “I'm just going to say it,” she says as she tries to look in my eyes. “You have a son.” I can't believe I just spurted it out. It was hanging over us and he needed to know. “We. We have a son. He's eight, and he's amazing.”

Kash just stares at me, and I don't know what is going to happen. Is he angry? Does he not believe me?

“Kash, say something.”

He looks at me. Then he looks around the room. “We have a son and you didn't tell me?” Oh okay, so he's angry. Well, I've faced enough anger over the years, so I know he's entitled to be angry at me. But he's the reason I didn't tell him.

“And when was I supposed to tell you? After you left? When you didn't give me an address where I could get hold of you? When, Kash? When?” I'm angry and I'm pacing up and down the room. Eight years of pent up anger at Kash is all ready to come out.

“When did you find out you were pregnant, Lo?” At least he's still calling me Lo. Things can't be lost.

“I found out about two months after you left. I was heartbroken and thought I was just sick, but then when I realized my symptoms, it was too late.”

“I would have come back, Lo. I would have been there to raise our child.” He turns to face me.

“And I would have been the target of all your anger if I made you come back. I tricked you into leaving the military or whatever else you could come up with. That’s not who I am. You broke my heart, so I wasn’t going to tell you after that. I needed to get over you before I could cope with what was happening to me and my body.”

He moves closer to me, but I take a step back.

“Lo. I’m not going to hurt you.” He moves closer again.

“You said that years ago, and you did the worst thing you could have done to me. You walked away when I needed you the most.”

“What happened after I left, Lo? How come you’re here, halfway across the country?” He reaches out and takes my hand. I can see he is angry, but he still wants to touch me. Maybe there is hope after all.

“I think we need coffee or something stronger for me to tell you what happened.” I walk into the kitchen and he follows me and sits at the island. I make him a coffee and he smiles when I pass it to him.

“You remember how I take it.” It’s a statement, not a question.

“I remember everything about you, Kash.” I stand facing him, leaning against the other counter.

“Then you can remember how good we were together, Lo.”

“I do, and I remember how long it took me to pick up the pieces of my broken heart, Kash.” I stare him in the eye and he smiles.

“Feisty, just as I remember. Tell me what happened.”

After taking another sip, I tell him about my father beating me every night when he was drinking. Even when Kash was there, he just didn't see the bruises.

“Are you fucking kidding me? He was hitting you and you didn't tell me?”

“I didn't want you getting into trouble for standing up to him. Anyway, I managed to hide my pregnancy from him. I did everything I needed to do, but I did it on my own.”

I take another drink and stare at the wall behind his head. There are pictures of Elijah on there and they ground me for a minute.

“The night I went into labor, my lovely step dad beat me to a pulp. I was black and blue and he kicked my stomach over and over again. I lost a lot of blood and I thought I was going to lose the baby, too.”

“Wait until I get my hands on him.”

“The last I heard, he was in prison, but he is due out at some stage. I couldn't live anywhere near where he would find me. I was planning on leaving that night and he caught me before I got away. He heard me talking to the baby and that's when he started kicking my stomach. I really thought I was going to lose my baby, or even my life. Luckily for me one of my neighbors, Bailey, heard me because I had the window open ready to jump out and leave. She came into the house and took me away with her. She got in the ambulance with me and helped deliver Elijah. Then she helped me move away. She lives here with me. She helps me with Elijah so I can work and get some money for us. She works too, so I look after him during the day and she looks after him at night. It works.”

I finally dare to look up at him, and his face is full of anger. He's red in the face and it looks like he wants to punch something.

I step away from him. I don't need to be near someone when they explode. I've seen enough of that to last me a lifetime.

“Lo, don't move away from me. I would never lay a hand on you in anger.”

When I look up, I see he has tears in his eyes.

“I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you. I'm sorry he did all those things to you. I know that I can never make up for what he did and for the fact that I wasn't there for you when you needed me. I let you down and I'm so sorry for that.” He hangs his head in shame.

“You didn't know. But you can't blame me for not telling you, Kash, when you left, you made it clear that you weren't going to contact me again. What else was I supposed to think?”

“I know, baby, and I'm so sorry.” He moves closer to me and gently puts his hand on my cheek. I flinch slightly. I'll never get over Frank beating me and it affects me when someone is close to me and they move suddenly.

“Lo, baby. Please. I won't hurt you.” He pulls me into his chest and I sob. I sob for the last nine years of my life and what could have been.

“I understand why you left and I will be forever grateful for Bailey helping you and looking after our son. Fuck, our son. I can't believe we have a son.” He shakes his head. “It's going to take a bit of getting used to. When can I meet him?”

I pull away from him. Staring at him, I say, “Not yet. He doesn’t know about his father. I told him that his father is in the military and he doesn’t know anymore than that. I don’t want him to be brokenhearted until I can trust you. You can’t meet him.”

“You know you can trust me with your life and his. I’m not walking away this time, Lo. I’m staying here in town and I’m going to be there for Elijah.”

I notice he doesn’t say anything about me. Can I have a friendship with Kash? Every time I see him I know that I’m going to be wishing I could have more. I’ve never stopped loving him, even though he broke my heart. He’s always been the one for me, but I’m not going to give in that easily.

Can I see this man with our son and not want more? I don’t think I can answer that truthfully right now because my emotions are all over the place. I don’t know what is going to happen, but it looks like Kash is all in and wants to meet Elijah soon.

SIX



KASH

“Tomorrow,” she says, her eyes still filled with tears. “Tomorrow you can meet Elijah and we’ll go from there.”

I blow out a breath as relief washes over me. “Thank you.”

She gives me a tight smile. “Don’t hurt him, Kash. I can deal with you breaking my heart, but not his.”

I step forward, this time she doesn’t back away. I pull her into my arms, she’s tense, but it’s progress. “No matter what, Lo, I’m not going anywhere.”

She nods. “I hope so,” she whispers as she takes a step backward and I instantly miss her being close. “Tomorrow you can spend time with him. I don’t know how to go about telling him about you. Do you want me to explain who you are, or would you like to spend time with him first?” She’s so nervous, wringing her hands together and glancing at the floor. “I don’t know what to do.”

Christ. She’s gutting me. “Whatever you want to do, Lo, I’ll follow your lead.” She knows him best and will do whatever is right for our son.

God, I have a son. Leaving Lo was the hardest decision that I ever made, but back then I thought it was the right one. I was wrong and because of my actions; I lost the woman I love

along with the birth of my child. Christ. I can't believe how much I missed.

"I'll tell him who you are before you meet," she says with a smile. "I want to be open and honest with him. I think if the tables were turned, it's what I would want."

"Thank you," I say, unable to keep the grin off my face.

I'm going to meet my son and I can't fucking wait.

"I'll text you a time and a place, is that okay?" She glances at her watch and then sighs. "I'm sorry, but Elijah and Bailey will be home soon and I'd like to explain it to Elijah before he sees you."

That's something that I understand. It's going to be a tough conversation. I can wait twenty-four hours. It also gives me time to find out everything I can about her asshole step father. I don't give a fuck if the bastard is in jail. He put hands on her and had been for years. He almost killed her and my son. That's not something that I'm going to forgive or forget.

"Text me, Lo," I say as I press a kiss against the corner of her mouth, feeling her tremble beneath me. "I'll see you tomorrow," I promise her.

"Tomorrow," she repeats softly. "Bye, Kash."

I flash her a smile as I walk out of her house, my footsteps lighter than before. I have a lot to work on, not only building a relationship with my son, but repairing the one that I have with Lo. I want my family and I'm not a man that gives up easily.

It takes me around forty minutes to drive to Kayla and Maddox's house. I need to talk with them, Kayla because she'll skin me alive if she's the last to know about Elijah and Maddox because the man's my best friend and the only one I'll

trust with the knowledge of what happened to Lauren when I joined the military.

My sister opens the door with a big smile, but there's still hurt in her eyes. I owe her an apology. "Hey Kash, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

I raise a brow and flash her a smile. "Can't a man come and see his sister and apologize for being an ass?"

She laughs as she pulls me into a hug. "Of course, I'm sorry for being overbearing. I'm just worried about you. I'm so happy to see you."

"You're worried about me, but I'm fine."

She purses her lips as she stares at me. "I know that look in your eyes, what's going on?"

"Where's Maddox?" I ask as we walk into the living room. "It's best I tell you both together."

She pauses mid-step. "Kash, what's going on?" she whispers.

"Trust me, I'm fine and you're going to be happy about the news."

She releases a harsh breath and nods. "I'll go get him," she tells me and goes off in search of her husband.

It doesn't take long before both of them return wearing matching concerned expressions. "Kash, what's going on?" Maddox asks, pulling Kayla into his arms.

"I found Lauren," I tell them and see Kayla's face light up. "She's in town, she has a son."

Maddox grimaces and Kayla's expression falls.

"My son."

“What?” Kayla screams. “Are you serious?”

I nod. “She found out a few months after I left that she was pregnant and had no way of contacting me,” I tell them wanting to ensure that they don’t feel the anger that I did when Lauren first told me—I shouldn’t have been angry, but it was an instant feeling, then the pain and dread set in when she told me that she couldn’t contact me. It was my fault my son grew up without me.

“Holy shit,” Kayla breathes. “I have a nephew. When can I meet him?”

I laugh, I knew she’d react this way. My sister adored Lauren and I know that she’ll continue to. She’ll make it easy on her when we’re settling into our lives together. “After I do. I only just found out. You were the first person I came to tell. I’m meeting Elijah tomorrow and Lauren’s going to tell him I’m in town.”

“Where does he think you were before?” Maddox asks.

“In the military, she didn’t tell him anything other than that. She said she didn’t want to hurt him.”

Kayla nods. “It was probably the best thing. It’s got to be hard wondering where your father is all the time. But you’re here and you’re going to be an amazing father, Kash. Just don’t push too hard.”

My brows knit together. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She shares a look with Maddox before explaining. “You like to do things at your pace. Don’t stand there and tell me you haven’t already thought about ways to get Lauren back and make your family complete?” she says with her hands on her hips. “I know you, Kash, I know that you’ve always loved Lauren. But this is a child, your child, who doesn’t know you

and has a life of his own. It's not going to be at your pace, but his and Lauren's. Push them and you could end up losing them."

I run my hand through my hair. Christ. She's right. "Their pace," I say and hope to fuck that I can survive that long. I've missed Lauren, she's all that I ever thought about. All I ever wanted.

Kayla smiles. "I can't wait to meet him and see Lauren again. When you're all ready, let me know and we'll throw a BBQ, just a small get-together for everyone to get to know one another. It'll be relaxing for everyone."

I nod, grateful to have my sister in my life, even if she does annoy the ever-loving shit out of me on a regular basis. "Thanks, sis." I turn to Maddox. "I have Intel on that case we were discussing this morning," I say and watch as he doesn't miss a beat.

"We'll go to my office," he says, pressing a kiss against Kayla's head. I follow behind him and the second he closes the door he turns to me. "What's going on Kash?"

I run my hands through my hair and tell him everything that Lauren told me today. "He almost killed her and my son, Mad, I want to know where the fucker is and what he's doing."

Maddox's nods. "I'm on it."

Within ten minutes, he's reading through the hospital report of the night that Lauren gave birth.

"Fuck, Kash, how the fuck did she survive?" he sounds tortured.

I read over his shoulder, reading the report and my stomach flips. "I don't know, fuck, I have no idea."

She lost so much blood, there was so much damage done to her face and body that the reports stated that they weren't able to determine the full extent of her injuries for hours after she was admitted because there was so much blood.

“We'll find him, Kash and we'll make sure that fucker comes nowhere near Lauren and Elijah.”

I nod. “He should rot in jail for what he's done,” I growl. But I'll kill him if he comes near Lauren again. I don't give a fuck. I have the training to do whatever is necessary to ensure that he'll never touch her. Fuck, I'll do the time too, as long as she's safe.

“Are you nervous about tomorrow?” Maddox asks.

I shake my head. “No, I'm excited. I just can't wait.”

“Take it all in, seriously, soak in every single second of it all.”

I plan on doing just that. I want a life with my son and my woman. It's going to take time but I plan on getting Lauren back and I want to spend as much time with Elijah as possible. I want to know everything about him. Absolutely everything.

Fuck, I can't believe that in less than twenty-four hours I'm going to be meeting my son.

SEVEN



LAUREN

I didn't sleep last night. I can still feel Kash's lips on mine and I keep rubbing them, wanting the feeling to last. I tossed and turned, thinking about Elijah and having to sit him down and talk to him about Kash. Just thinking his name sends my stomach into turmoil. If it was just me I would let him stay with me and I'd love to be reconnecting with him, but I have to think about Elijah and what he needs.

At breakfast, Elijah asks, "So, what are we doing today, Mom?"

"I need to talk to you." I look up as Bailey walks in. When she got home last night, I told her everything, she held me while I wept and she sat me down and told me that I do need to tell Elijah and that he would be okay about everything. I hope that's true. Bailey smiles at me and nods her head.

"What about? What did I do wrong this time?" Elijah rolls his eyes and looks up at Bailey. "Do you know what I did?"

She laughs. "You didn't do anything wrong. Your mom just has something she needs to talk to you about."

Elijah looks over to me. "Are you sick, Mom? Do you want me to play doctors on you?"

I laugh. “No, baby. I’m not sick.” I take a deep gulp of air and just go for it. “I want to talk to you about your dad.”

His eyes light up. I never talk about his dad, so I can understand why he’s excited. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine, Elijah. He’s in town and he wants to meet you.” I hold my breath and wait for his response.

“When? Now?” He runs to the door.

“Elijah, come back here. No, not now, he is coming over later to meet you. Are you okay with that?” I touch his arm.

“Yes, I am. All my friends have both a mom and a dad and I’m the only one who doesn’t. I told them he was in the military and that we don’t know when he’s coming home. Tommy said that he should come home every year and that he probably didn’t want to know me and that’s why he’s not come before now.” Elijah talks fast, like he’s trying to say everything at once.

“That’s not true, Elijah. Your dad is going to love you so much. I didn’t know where he was in the military so I didn’t have a way to contact him, but I bumped into him the other night and he was here last night so we could talk about you. He’s very excited to meet you and I think he’s a bit nervous too.”

“Nervous? Why? I’m his son.” He looks confused.

“Because you’ve been without him for so long, you might not want a dad in your life.”

“Mom, that’s silly. Of course I want my dad to know me.” He looks at me like that is the strangest thing I have ever said.

“Okay, I will text him and let him know. Then we need to finish breakfast and tidy up. Are you good with that?”

“Absolutely.” He eats his breakfast and then scurries away to tidy his toys away. I hear him singing, “I’m meeting Dad today, Dad today,” in the *I’m going to the zoo, today*, music.

I look up at Bailey. “He seemed to take that well. I just hope he likes Kash as much as he should.” I grab the plates and take them out to the kitchen.

Bailey collects the rest off the table. “He will, from what I remember Kash was a lovely boy, I’m sure he’s an even better man. How do you feel about having him in Elijah’s life? You’ve made all the decisions for him and now you are going to have to consult someone else before making decisions. How does that sit with you?”

I never thought about that. “It will be nice to not have the full responsibility, but I’m hoping it might free up some of my time and that it will make life easier. He’s staying in town you know. He’s started working at Maddog Securities and he lives here now. That means we’re going to see him around a lot.”

“Yeah, but how do you feel about having him in your life again? Are you ready for a relationship, or is this purely a friendship where you share Elijah?”

I take a few deep breaths. That thought didn’t occur to me either. “When I saw him, however angry I was, the strongest emotion I felt was that I still love him. I never got over him and all my feelings have rushed to the surface. It’s like I can’t be near him without all my feelings taking over.”

“That’s because you were so in love with him. Let him build a relationship with Elijah before you make any rash decisions. See how good he is with him and then you can let him into your life.”

“You’re right. I just needed to hear it.” I smile at her and we finish cleaning up the breakfast plates.

“I’ll take him upstairs, so that you and Kash can talk when he comes over and then bring him upstairs to Elijah’s room and he can meet him there. That will feel safer to Elijah.”

“Good idea, Bailey, thanks.” I step closer to her and hug her. She is the mother that I never had and I love her so much. I’d hate for anything to happen to her, I don’t know what I would do.

AN HOUR later Kash knocks on the door. I know it’s him, because I just watched as he got out of his truck and swaggered up to the front door. I remember watching him walk before, I’d stand behind him watching his ass and thick thighs as he moved. God, I want him so much, but I need to keep my emotions in check. Today is about him and Elijah.

“Hey, come in,” I say as I open the door to him.

He steps inside and kisses me on the cheek. “Good to see you, Lo. I’m nervous and I’m worried I might say something wrong.”

It’s only then I look at his face and see the fear in his eyes.

“He’s going to love you, Kash. I know he will.” I close the door behind him and he brings his hands to the front of him. “I bought him a little something, but I don’t know what he’s into.”

“He is into everything and I know that whatever you give him he will cherish it. He’s wanted to meet you for a long

time. He's nervous today because he's worried you might not like him. That scares him a lot."

"That would never happen, Lo. I know that I am going to love him so hard. I thought about him all night. I thought about the things I'd love to do with him and hope that I can do some of those things soon."

"Are you ready to meet him?" I look up at him. I just want to kiss him and help him with his nerves. I take his spare hand. "Let's go meet your son."

His palm is sweaty, he wasn't lying when he said he was nervous. We go upstairs and then stand outside Elijah's room.

Kash looks inside and see's Elijah playing with Bailey. I watch his face as he looks Elijah over. "That's my son?" His voice is quiet and I see tears in his eyes. I hate myself for keeping them apart for so long.

"It is, come on, let's meet him." I step inside the room. "Elijah, I've got someone here who wants to meet you."

He turns and his eyes light up when he sees Kash. He jumps up and runs over to him and jumps into his arms. I don't know who is more surprised, me or Kash.

"Hey, buddy." Kash holds him tight. "I'm so happy to meet you. What were you doing there on the floor?"

"I was so excited to meet you that I didn't know what to play with first." He squirms and Kash puts him down. Elijah grabs Kash's hand and pulls him over to his toys. "Help me choose."

Kash moves with him to the toys and they both sit down. Kash turns to Bailey. "Thank you for looking after Lo and Elijah for me. I owe you so much."

Bailey reaches out and pat his knee. “No, you don’t, they are family to me and I look after them.” She leans in close and whispers, but I hear what she says, “Don’t you dare break either of their hearts or you will have me to deal with, right?”

He smiles at her. “I love you already. I won’t hurt them, ever again. Either of them.” He looks at me, smiles and then turns his attention back to Elijah.

Bailey joins me at the door. “He’s more handsome than I remember.” She laughs. “I see how keeping him in the friend zone thing is not going to work out for you.”

I nudge her with my elbow and I can’t stop staring at my two boys. If my ovaries were ever to explode again, it would be now. I feel so emotional I know that I need to get out of this room.

“Boys,” they both turn to face me. “I’m going down to make some lunch for you all. You stay up here and play. I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

“Okay thanks, Mom,” Elijah says and turns back to the toys, his attention on me gone.

“Thank you, Lo.” He looks at Elijah and then back at me. “You did such a great job with our son.” He smiles and then he turns his attention back to Elijah.

I watch them for a couple of minutes and know that I am forgotten. I go back downstairs with Bailey and make a cup of coffee. I need caffeine before I think about lunch.

“How do you feel?” she asks.

“I’m happy for Elijah. I feel a little jealous that he’s just walked into his life and Elijah dismisses me quickly.” Bailey laughs. “It’s not funny. I’m not used to sharing him with anyone else but you.” I pout.

Bailey laughs. "I know. But did you see how happy he was? I love that look on his face. He's happy his daddy is home. No questions asked, just wanted to meet him."

I ponder what she says.

"How do you feel about him being in the house?" she asks.

"I don't know, but I do know that he is going to be in Elijah's life forever. He won't shirk his responsibilities or anything. I know him and I know that he loves hard. Elijah is going to be a well loved little boy. His family is amazing and I can't wait for him to meet any cousins or to have grandparents. His life is changing as we speak."

"That's not what I meant. I can't wait for all of that too, but I want to know how you feel about having Kash here."

"I don't know, Bailey. I love him. I always have. Can I go back to him? I don't know. What if we split up and Elijah is hurt, I have to think about him over what I feel myself."

"No, you don't. Yes you have to make sure he's happy, but you need to consider what you want. From the look on Kash's face, I think he wants you back. You just need to decide whether that's what you want or not." She smiles and touches my arm. "I'm going, I've got some things to do. I'll call you later."

She pulls me into a hug. "I love you, Lauren. Don't ever forget that."

She leaves and I have a few tears, she's right I do have some things to think about.

After my coffee, I make lunch and call the boys down.

I hear them before I see them. Kash has Elijah on his shoulders and they are running down the stairs. I have visions

of Kash falling and Elijah hitting his head. But when I look at Kash, I see he has his hand firmly on Elijah and he is in control of what he is doing.

They both sit at the table, next to each other. “I’m starving Mom.” Elijah reaches out for me to fill his plate.

I’ve made his favorite, lasagna. I know Kash used to like it too, so I was hoping it would break the ice a little. I didn’t need to worry about that. Kash looks like he has been a dad forever.

I fill Elijah’s plate and they tell me all about the games they were playing, the toy that Kash brought over and the two of them don’t stop talking.

Kash ends up spending the whole day with us. We went for a walk with Elijah to the playground so he could show Kash where he plays. When we get back, Kash follows me in.

“Elijah, it’s bath time and then bed.” I look at him. He usually tries to stay up later, but tonight he surprises me.

“Great, can Dad help me?” I look at Kash who has tears in his eyes that he wants him to help and that he called him Dad like it was normal.

“Of course I can help you buddy, if your mom says it’s okay.”

I nod my head. “Of course it’s okay.” We go upstairs and run the bath.

I’m sitting downstairs with a glass of wine in my hand when Kash comes down. “He’s asleep.”

“Great, thanks.”

He sits next to me on the couch and pours himself a glass of wine that I left on the table for him.

“I had a great day, thank you so much. You have done a remarkable job, he is the nicest kid I’ve ever met.”

“Is that because he’s yours and you’re biased?”

“It might be,” he laughs and I join him.

After taking a sip he reaches out with his hand and places it on my cheek. “Lo, I don’t want to leave. I want you so badly right now. But I want you to know that I want us to be a family, a real family. I’ve always loved you, I never got over you. You’re the woman I love and want to spend the rest of my life with.”

“I don’t know. It’s too soon.”

He moves closer to me. Then he kisses me. I kiss him back of course. When he pulls away, he says, “Tell me that didn’t feel right. Tell me that didn’t make your heart flutter, because it made mine.”

I have tears in my eyes, “It made mine flutter too.”

He kisses me again and I climb on his lap, straddling him. He grabs my ass and pulls me closer to him, he’s hard and I can feel it rubbing between my legs. I made him like that. I did.

“I missed you so much, Lo. I need to feel you. I need to know that you are willing to give us a go. I want my family, Lo.”

“I want that too, Kash. Just don’t break our hearts. I nearly didn’t survive my broken heart, but I know I won’t survive if you break him too.”

He moves me so that I am lying down on the couch. “Lo, I will never break your heart again and I wouldn’t do that to

Elijah. He is ours. I feel so much emotion for him already and I love you for giving him to me.”

His eyes are searching mine, looking at me to give him permission to do what I know he is going to do next. I nod my head and smile at him. I need him as much as he needs me.

Before I can speak he has taken my clothes off and he is looking over me. I see his eyes darken as he takes in the scars on my body. “Kash, don’t look at them.”

“I can’t help it, Lo. I get so angry when I think about him hurting you. It’s a good job he’s in prison because I don’t know what I would do if I ever saw him again.” He kisses my stomach and I watch as his hands rub it. “I can’t believe Elijah was in here and I didn’t get to see it.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m the one who should be sorry, I left you to that monster. What I meant was I would have loved to see you round with my child. I missed that.” He kisses my stomach again and then moves down between my legs. He pulls my lips apart and before I know it, his tongue is pushing inside me. I moan and arch my back, it feels so good to have him between my legs.

“You taste just like I remember, Lo. Your pussy was my favorite thing to eat.”

I blush even though he can’t see me. I was always embarrassed when he talked dirty to me.

“I need to be inside you, Lo. I can’t wait, are you ready for me?”

I look up at him. “I’m always ready for you to be inside me, Kash.”

He takes his cock and pushes inside me, deeply and I moan. “Kash, that feels so good. Fuck.”

“You fit me perfectly, Lo.” He leans down and kisses me. Then he rubs my clit. “I need you to come before me. I need to hear your whimpers as your orgasms rush through your body, Lo.”

As he flicks my sensitive nub with his thumb, he leans over and sucks one of my nipples into my mouth, when he bites down gently it sends me into a spiral. My body comes apart and I have never had an orgasm like it. It’s like my body was waiting for Kash to come back.

“Fuck, you’re squeezing me so tight, Lo. I love it.” He thrusts in and out a few more times before he stills and comes inside me. I don’t even think about talking to him about condoms right now, I just want to bask in the light that he has brought back to my life.

“Lo, I love you. I always have.”

“I love you too, Kash.”

“I don’t want to let you go, Lo, but I don’t think it would be good for Elijah to find us like this in the morning.” He starts to laugh and I join in. This is what our relationship was always like, we were always laughing and joking. it’s what comes naturally to us.

“Then we had better move upstairs.” I look him in the eye. Yes, I’m inviting him to stay the night.

“You sure? How will Elijah take it that we are in bed together? I can leave before he gets up if you want.”

“Let’s just see how it goes. He’s going to have to see us together sometime soon isn’t he?”

“He sure is Lo, I don’t intend to leave either of you ever again.”

EIGHT



Two months later

“Are you sure about this?” Lo asks as I drive us toward Maddox and Kayla’s house.

She’s nervous, I don’t know why, my sister has always loved her and now that she’s in my life, Kayla’s been dying to have me bring both Lo and Elijah over so she can meet her nephew, but I’ve been putting it off, wanting to spend as much time with my family as I could.

“Certain. Relax, Lo, everyone’s going to love you.”

She nods, her eyes wide, and her teeth capture her bottom lip. I hate that she’s nervous, but there’s nothing I can do about it. Once she gets into the house she’ll be fine. “How is Kayla?”

“She’s fine, she’s excited that you’re coming. She’s been begging me for the last month to have you and Elijah over. So don’t be shocked if she hugs you and doesn’t let go. She’s kind of crazy.”

Lo laughs softly. It’s a sound that I love to hear. Nothing sounds better than her happiness. “She’s always been that way. She loved life and lived it to the fullest.”

That changed for a while when she was with her bastard of an ex, that fucker, Brian, was an abusive asshole who turned her into a shell of who she was. Thankfully, she managed to escape from that relationship, but it didn't stop the bastard tormenting her. But then she found Maddox, the two had a weird start to their relationship, having met one night, got black-out-drunk and then got married. Surprisingly, they're perfect for one another and their marriage has gone from strength to strength.

We arrive at my sister's house and I'm not surprised to find Kayla waiting at the door before we're even out of the vehicle. She's bouncing on her toes with excitement and I wonder just how jittery she's been today. "Holy hell, Kash, he looks just like you," Kayla says, her voice filled with awe.

Lo laughs. "Yep, he's Kash's mini-me. I do all the hard work and he comes out looking like his dad."

I fucking love that she's finally calmed her ass down and is no longer nervous. She walks up to Kayla and the two of them hug. I see the affection each of them have for the other and I know that Lo's going to be okay. I wasn't worried that my friends and family would treat her badly, I'd never stand for that. I was worried that she'd be so withdrawn that she'd not be able to enjoy her time here.

"Kayla, meet Elijah. Honey, this is your auntie, Kayla," Lo says as she introduces the two of them. She ruffles Elijah's hair with a soft, fond smile.

"Well hey there, Elijah, it's so lovely to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you from your dad," Kayla says with a grin.

"He did?" Elijah's voice is filled with disbelief.

Kayla nods. “He did. He’s so proud of you, he tells me you’re an amazing artist. I’d love to see your sketches sometime?”

I watch as my son swallows hard and gives her a short sharp nod.

“Excellent, whenever you’re ready, there’s no rush. Now, are you ready to meet everyone else or would you prefer to come to the kitchen and get a drink?”

Fuck. I love my sister, she’s the shit. She can see that it’s a lot for both Elijah and Lauren, and she’s trying to make them at ease.

“Let’s get drinks,” I say, knowing that Lo’s trying to work up the courage to meet everyone.

It’s got to be hard for both Lo and Elijah, up until recently it was just the two of them and Bailey and now, they’ve got a whole ass family waiting to meet them.

I put my hand on Lo’s back and she sinks into my side. “Told you, baby, Kayla fucking loves you.”

She rolls her eyes. “Language, Kash,” she admonishes me. “I’ve managed to keep my son from using profanity for years, I don’t want him going to school swearing,” there’s absolutely no heat in her words at all, she’s smiling from ear to ear. She’s happy.

“Yeah, Kash, language,” Kayla says with narrowed eyes. With Erin getting older and speaking, both Maddox and I are having to watch what we say, especially as my niece likes to copy what me and her dad say.

We enter the kitchen and Kayla sets about getting us drinks. “Where’s Erin?” I ask, usually my niece is attached to Kayla’s hip. The only time she’s not is when her dad’s around.

Kayla laughs. “With Maddox. She’s making him play with her dolls right now. Not only him but all of the Maddog team.”

I shake my head, only my tiny little niece could have five grown men wrapped around her finger.

“This I have to see,” I say as I take Lo’s hand and pull her with me through the house and out into the backyard where the guys are sitting around the table talking while holding different dolls in their hands. The funniest thing about it all, is that Erin’s not playing with them, in fact my little imp of a niece is lying on the trampoline, fast asleep.

“I’ll bring her to bed,” Kayla says softly. “Please don’t tell them that she’s not playing, I want to see how long it takes them to realize.”

I shake my head at my sister. She’s crazy and I know that once Maddox finds out that his precious daughter is asleep, he’s going to be pissed that we never told him. He’s a good dad, one of the best and I know that he’ll do whatever it takes, to ensure that my sister and nieces are loved and cared for.

“Guys,” I say once Kayla has escaped with Erin. “This is Lauren and Elijah,” I introduce them to the guys and watch how easily they get along, just as I knew they would.

I take a seat and pull Lauren onto my lap as I join the guys in their conversation. Maddox gives me a look, one that tells em that he’s still working on finding out where the fuck her step-father is. It’s taking us a lot longer than either of us had anticipated, but we’re not giving up. I need my woman and child safe and that means doing whatever it takes to do that.

I keep Lauren close, unable to keep my hands off her. As the time passes she slowly unwinds and by the end of it, she’s

fully at ease with everyone. Elijah on the other hand, instantly was put to ease and was talkative.

“Thank you,” Lo says once we’re home and Elijah’s tucked up in bed. He fell asleep in the car on the way home and I carried him to bed and Lo stripped him of his clothes and put pajamas on him. He didn’t wake once.. “I had the best time and I know that Elijah did too.”

I pull her into my arms and press a kiss against her lips. “Baby,” I growl, grinding my thick cock against her stomach. “You’re family, you’re everything. I wanted you around my people. I trust them a hundred percent, if I didn’t, I wouldn’t have you around them. Trust me, baby, they fucking love you and Elijah.”

She sinks into my embrace. “I love you, Kash.”

I run my hand through her hair. “Never fucking doubt it, Lo. I love you with everything I am. There’s never been a time when I haven’t loved you.”

Her eyes widen and she pulls in a ragged breath. “Kash,” she whimpers.

I slam my lips down against hers, needing to taste her. She releases a low moan in the back of her throat, one that’s muffled from my mouth. I swallow it down and slide my tongue past her lips and take everything from her. I love this woman more than anything. I need her more than I need air. With her my life is complete. I fucked up years ago by walking away and I knew the moment I did that it was the worst decision of my life. I lived to regret it. I’m a lucky son of a bitch for being granted another chance and this time I’m never letting go.

“I’m staying,” I tell her. “I’m not going anywhere, baby. Tonight, tomorrow, the next day, the next month, the next year. My ass is here with you.”

She nods, that beautiful soft smile on her lips. “You’re home now, Kash,” she whispers.

I grin, my hands sliding around her waist, under her sexy as hell summer dress, and feel the bare skin as I slide my hands to her ass and I lift her into the air. Her legs wrap around my waist and her arms twine around my neck. “Take me, Kash, I need you.”

I don’t have to be told twice. Whenever I’m around Lauren I’m horny as fucking hell. It’s like being a teenager again. I can’t get enough of her and I don’t want there to ever be a time when I’m bored. She’s all I’ve ever wanted.

Our lips are practically fused together as I walk toward our room, Lauren’s clawing at me, I can feel the heat from her pussy against my pants. “Are you wearing panties?” I growl as I enter our room and close the door behind me.

She gives me a sheepish grin. “I am,” she whispers huskily.

“Show me,” I grunt as I lie her on the bed.

She doesn’t hesitate, she sits up, reaching for the hem of the dress and pulls it over her head. She’s completely naked other than a tiny scrap of material that she calls panties. It only covers her pussy and that’s it. Christ. She’s so fucking sexy.

“What do you want Lo?” I ask as I unsnap my pants and let my cock free. It’s fucking aching with need to be inside of her.

She licks her lips and smiles as she crawls on the bed toward me. “I want you,” she says thickly, as she runs her

tongue along the side of my cock, before taking me deep into her mouth.

“Christ,” I growl as I grip her hair and close my eyes. The feel of her mouth around my cock is driving me insane. Fuck, she’s good at this. She swallows hard and I groan as I push deeper into her mouth. I hear the slight gag and pull back, but Lauren’s not having any of it, she reaches around, gripping a hold of my ass cheeks and pulling me into her, my cock juts against the back of her throat and she gags again, this time swallowing around my cock as she does.

My eyes practically cross at how fucking amazing she feels, my cock swells and I know that it’s not going to take much longer until I cum.

“Release me,” I growl. “I want to cum inside of you, Lo, not in your mouth. Lie on your back and show me how fucking wet that pussy of mine is?”

Her eyes are wide and alight with pleasure. She scrambles backward, lying on her back, she opens her legs and I can see her glistening pussy on display. She’s ready for me, she’s so fucking wet that I can’t wait to sink my cock deep inside of her. My cock weeps with pre-cum and I strip down out of my clothes, taking the time to have my cock calm the fuck down before I blow my load as soon as I thrust inside of her.

I position myself on top of her, she pulls her legs around my waist as my cock sits at the entrance to her pussy. “Fucking love you, Lo.”

She gives me that beautiful smile. “I love you too,” she moans as I thrust deep inside of her.

My eyes close and my head falls back at the feel of her pussy clenching around my cock. She’s snug and warm. So

fucking perfect and made just for me. Lauren is mine.

I begin to move, my thrusts slow and deliberate, I want her to come before I blow my load. She's clawing at my back, her body moving in sync with mine as I punch my hips in a steady rhythm.

Every thrust into her is perfection, her tight pussy clenching around my thick length. There's no fucking way I'm going to be able to hold off my longer, she feels too fucking good.

I pick up my pace and thrust harder, faster, and more intensely than before. I can feel the tell tell signs of my impending orgasm moving through my body. Christ. I need her to come.

"How close are you?" I growl, needing to know just how tight she's wound up.

"So fucking close, Kash, so, so close."

"Good," I snarl as I thrust my hips hard and faster, gritting my teeth as I bring my hand to her clit.

"Kash," she cries as her body tightens, her head flies backward and her body bows. She detonates, her pussy flooding my cock and convulsing around my length.

"Fuck," I snarl. "Fuck, fuck fuck."

I continue to pound into her, trying to reach my own climax. My cock swells and I thrust once—twice—thrice before I bury myself to the hilt inside of her and cum long and hard. "Lo," I growl as I do.

Nothing is better than Lauren, and I know that my life is complete now that I have her back. She's it for me and I'm going to marry this woman someday soon.

NINE



LAUREN

Four months later

MY LIFE HAS CHANGED since Kash walked back into it. And I mean drastically. Since we had the BBQ at Kayla and Maddox's house, I've gotten to know the couple along with the rest of the Maddog Security team.

Kayla is like the sister I've always wanted and never had and I can't thank her enough for what she does for me.

I don't work in the bar anymore. I was asked if I wanted to work for Maddog Securities as a secretary and I lept at the chance to work days and have my nights for Kash and Elijah. So now I work with them and I love my job. I get to boss all those alpha men around and it makes me smile to see them doing what I want. Kash always tells me that one day they are going to realize what I'm doing. But until then I'll still have my fun . Thank you very much.

Kayla looks after Elijah during the day while I work and he is so happy to have other kids to play with. He is a different person, happy all the time and he loves when either I or Kash collect him. I wasn't sure how he would bond with Kash, but I shouldn't have been worried at all as they are two peas in a pod.

“Hey, earth to Lauren, where are you baby?” Kash taps the desk.

“Sorry, I was miles away thinking about how my life has changed so much since you walked back into my life.” I smile at him.

“For the better I hope.” He leans down and kisses me.

“Absolutely, I don’t know how I did it without you for so long.”

“Well, you don’t have to do it any longer without me. I’m not going anywhere, there is nowhere I would rather be than with you.” He leans in closer to me, looking around the office. “I have to stay later than you today, but I want you laid out naked on the bed when I come home. Elijah is sleeping at Kayla’s tonight, we have the house to ourselves and I want to feast on you. Then I want to fuck you until you can’t take anymore.”

My breathing increases, my heart is doing somersaults and my face is flushing. I’m still not used to Kash talking dirty to me, especially at work.

“What do you say, Babe, are you in?”

I nod my head. “Yes please.” My eyes are wide open and my love for this man is overwhelming. I can’t lose him again, I don’t think I would survive.

He smiles and kisses me chastely on the cheek. “Till later, baby.” Then he turns on his heels and walks back to the conference room. I think of it more as a battle room. They have pictures on the walls of their next jobs and a white board with pictures and scribbles all over it. When they are in there, they can be there for hours, so I know Kash won’t be home too

early. That will give me chance to make some dinner for after he's eaten me out and fucked me.

It's another hour before I finish up. I knock on the door to the boardroom and walk inside. "Guy's, I'm leaving. I'll see you all in the morning. Don't stay too late." I smile at them all, but it's Kash who I stare at. He knows why I don't want him to stay too late.

"See you in the morning," the guys say and Kash winks at me.

I close the door behind me and leave. In the car on the way home, I have my music blaring and I'm smiling because I'm so fucking happy. I stop at the convenience store to pick up some wine and then drive home.

It's strange not collecting Elijah from Kayla's. He's stayed there a few times, and I'm kind of used to spending time with just Kash on those nights. When I pull up to the house, I get a cold feeling rushing over me. It's strange because it's the middle of summer and it's fucking boiling outside.

I get out of the car with the bottle of wine in my hand and unlock the front door. I turn and look around just to see if someone is following me, but there's not one there. So fucking strange. It's only when I walk into the kitchen that I realize why my hairs on my neck were standing up.

I drop the bottle of wine and it smashes at my feet.

"You always were a klutz, Lauren." My stepfather stands in the middle of my kitchen staring at me.

"I thought you were in prison?" I manage to say, but I'm not sure how I do.

"I got out two weeks ago. It took me a while to find you, you moved a long way away and I see you had your baby. Is

he disabled? After all those kicks you took to your stomach I was hoping he would be.” His voice is monotone and scary.

My mind is mentally working out my escape route, but there aren't many options and I'm sure he's faster than me. He is a lot more muscly since he's been in prison.

“You put me in prison, Lauren, you need to pay the price for that.” He stalks over to me, ignoring the sticky mess on the floor.

He grabs my hair and makes me look up at him. “Did you miss me? I missed you. But the thought of you kept me sane in prison. Because I know that I wanted to finish the job. I want to make sure that you suffer for all the years I had to endure in that godforsaken place because of you. And you know a man has needs when he's been in prison so long. I didn't touch you there when you were younger, but now it's all bets off.”

“You disgust me,” I scream, punching him as hard as I can when he still has my hair in his hand. “Let me go, Kash will be home soon.”

“Kash? That dirty toerag who left you when he found out you were pregnant. He's good for nothing. He's not going to save you sweetheart. No one is. Where's your bastard child?”

“He's not coming back, he's away for the night. You won't get near him.”

“Shame, I wanted to make you watch me as I killed him. He should have died that night along with you, but you outsmarted me and I won't make the same mistake again.”

His fist comes out and punches me in the face, my head wants to bounce back out of the way, but he has my hair tightly wrapped around his fist that I can't move and so I feel the force of his punch. I scream.

“God I’ve missed that sound.” He punches me in the stomach.

I’m scared for my life. I’m thankful Elijah is at Kayla’s so that he doesn’t have to witness the abuse I know I am going to get. I know Kash will be home later, but he might not be home in time. I don’t want him to see what Frank is going to do to me. I hope he remembers that I love him and will do so until my dying breath. There is no doubt in my mind that Frank is going to kill me. I need to give in to it and hopefully, it will be over quickly.

He pulls my hair and drags me down to the ground. My knees fall onto the broken glass, cutting into my skin, and causing a searing pain. But I don’t cry out. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much he’s hurting me.

“You’re an ungrateful slut. I gave you everything you needed. A house with a roof, a nice room and food on the table and you repay me by sending me to jail. I’ve had a lot of time to think about it and now is time for me to take it all back.”

He pushes me down on the ground, again in the broken glass and I feel the glass cutting into my body in multiple places.

He kicks my side, my legs, my shoulders and then he kicks me in the head. I remember that hurt the most the last time and it’s the same this time. I try not to whimper but it’s hard when everywhere hurts. I want to fight back, but I know he’ll like that and I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing how bad it hurts. He drags me along the floor by my hair and then he kicks me some more. I don’t know how long he’s kicking me for, but the pain is escalating and I can’t stop myself from screaming.

“You fucking bastard, you are going to hell.”

He laughs. “Sweetheart, I’ve been in hell for years, nothing can be worse than that. The thought of killing you this time has kept me going and they let me out for good behavior.” He laughs. He knows that he is never good, there is always a hidden agenda for him.

“Well, if you are going to kill me, get on with it. Do it.” I yell at him, wanting him to stop talking and just get it over with. I think of Kash and Elijah and I know they will be okay as long as they’re together.

He kicks me, punches me, and rips off my trousers. Is he going to rape me too? I need to switch off mentally and I wonder if there is a way for me to end this myself. I have pieces of glass sticking out of me, maybe I can take a piece of it and cut my wrists, or my jugular? That would work, right?

“You’re a slut and whore,” he says as he is on his knees punching me everywhere.

When he punches me in the head, I feel the darkness begin to take me. I never got the chance to end it myself. I just hope Kash and Elijah will be okay without me.

“Lo, Lo,” I hear. My mind must be playing tricks on me because I can hear Kash. Maybe this is what happens when you are on the brink of death. Maybe I can hear him so that I will always remember him.

Another blow to the head and darkness takes me away.

TEN



KASH

“Never seen you happier,” Maddox says with a grin. “Knew she meant something to you, I just didn’t know how much she meant. I’m happy for you, brother.”

I smile broadly. “Knew I fucked up, Mad, knew it the moment I boarded that bus. I had made a commitment to the military. I thought I knew better. I thought the distance between us would have been too much.” I shake my head. “I fucked up. Lo is stronger, a hell of a lot stronger than I gave her credit for. She’d have been with me from the beginning.”

He nods. “True, but we can live with regrets, they do us no good. What you and Lauren have got, it’s special, just like what I have with Kayla. You both have all the time in the world to make up for the years you lost.”

I push to my feet. “Exactly, that’s what I’m planning on doing tonight. You good to have Elijah for the night?”

He rolls his eyes. “That kid is the shit. Besides, if I sent him home to you, I’d have my wife on my ass. She adores Elijah and loves spoiling him. Trust me, Kash, we’ve got him, no need to worry. Go spend the night with your woman.”

I’m looking forward to it. I love my son, I’ll do anything for him, but some nights it’s good to just be Lo and I. Tonight is one of them. I love my woman and I’m planning on

spending the rest of my life with her. I'm going to ask her to marry me—not yet, I know that she's still a little hesitant to take big leaps in our relationship—but I want it all with her.

Driving home is a blur, it's like auto pilot, something you do every day, it comes naturally. I drum my fingers on the steering wheel as I get closer to our street, the song playing in the background isn't something I recognize but it has a great beat to it.

I pull up to the house and realize that I'm whistling the tune to the song that was playing on the radio.

I get to the door and hear groaning, grunting, and crying. My brows furrow together. What the fuck is going on?

The front door is slightly ajar, using my foot I kick it open and shock hits me as I see some fucking man kneeling on the ground, punching Lauren over and over again.

“You're a slut and whore,” he growls.

My feet come unstuck and I rush at him, my anger hitting boiling point as I push him off her and start pummeling the asshole myself. I have a feeling this bastard is Lo's step-father, the fucker who hurt her when she was a teenager and who tried to kill her and our unborn child when she was in labor.

Every inch of anger that I have felt since she told me what happens, flows through me and I beat the fucker, just as he has done to Lo.

I get to my feet, my chest rising and falling as I stare at Lauren. Her beautiful face is bloody and battered. I move to her, dropping to my knees. My heart racing as I reach for her pulse at her neck. “Lo, Lo?” I call out, needing her to open her beautiful eyes and talk to me, but there's nothing. Just a faint pulse.

I reach for my cell and call an ambulance, all the while begging Lo to open her eyes. The 911 operator tells me that there's an ambulance and police on en-route and they'll be with me shortly.

"Lo," I whisper. "Baby, come on, please, open your eyes."

Nothing. She doesn't move, doesn't blink. She just lies motionless on the floor.

The EMT's and Police officers rush into the house not long afterward, the cops ask me questions, her step-father is passed out on the floor from the beating he got. He's lucky that's all that happened to him. If I weren't worried about Lauren, I'd have continued to pound the shit out of him.

The police officers ask me lots of questions and I know that it's protocol but Christ, I need to focus on Lauren and ensure that she's okay.

The EMT's pull Lauren onto a gurney and start to treat her. My heart is beating wildly in my chest as she still doesn't move through all the poking and prodding they do.

"Sir," the cop says. "We're going to need to take your statement."

I nod. "I know, but I need to go to the hospital. My woman's unconscious and I'm following the rig to the hospital. I'll answer any questions you have from there. Okay?"

The guy gives me a sympathetic look. "You good to drive?"

I breathe a sigh of relief, he's not telling me to stay back and let her go ahead. "I'm good. As I said, I'm happy to answer any questions you have at the hospital. Am I free to go?"

He nods. “Go, I’ll be right behind you.”

I race out of the house, just as the EMT closes the back of the ambulance rig. I slide into my car and start the engine. I feel wetness on my cheeks and realize that tears have been falling down my face. I don’t give a fuck. Lauren is everything. My absolute everything. I can’t lose her.

I call Maddox on the way to the hospital. He tells me that they’ll meet me there.

I’m pacing the floor, it’s been hours and nothing. No one has updated me on Lauren’s status. I’m losing my fucking mind.

Kayla and Maddox arrived with the kids, Elijah is sitting upright, his eyes red and puffy and he’s watching the door, his gaze not wandering from it. My boy is terrified and he’s not said a word since they arrived. Bailey is here, she arrived home and came to the hospital in floods of tears. I’m an ass, I completely forgot about her. I should have had someone call her, but I didn’t think. I can’t imagine the fear she felt pulling up outside the house and seeing all the cop cars.

“Just want to let you know,” Maddox says low as he comes to stand beside me. “That asshole has been placed under arrest here at the hospital. From what my attorney has said, he’ll be going down for a long fucking time. Of course that’s after he’s been released from hospital. He’s got a broken eye socket, broken nose, and a couple of broken ribs.”

I turn to him. “I don’t give a fuck what injuries that asshole has. I should have killed him. Had I done, then when Lo wakes up, she knows she’ll be free of him.”

Instead, that bastard will serve his time in prison and then come out again and no doubt try to find her. Something that I'll be ensuring never happens again. He'll never touch Lauren again.

An hour later and the doors open and a doctor walks out, he searches around the waiting room, glancing at all the families that are here awaiting news of their loved ones.

"Family for Lauren Jacobs?" I hear the doctor ask and my feet move toward him. I turn to Bailey and see that she has her hand pressed tightly to Elijah's. They're waiting for me to find out the news and give it to them. I'm so grateful to Bailey for keeping him seated. I don't want him to hear bad news.

"Is she okay?" I ask and he nods. "Is she awake?"

"Lauren sustained multiple injuries, she's lucky that the only break she had was her wrist. She's had to have multiple lacerations stitched up, so she'll be bruised for a while as those heal. She also has some bruised ribs, she'll need to take it careful for the upcoming weeks until they're healed."

"Why was she unconscious?" I ask, needing to understand why she wouldn't wake up.

"Lauren's head took multiple blows and it's the body's way of recovery. She's okay, she's still a little groggy. But she's alive as is the baby."

I blink at his words. Baby?

"With Lauren being fourteen weeks pregnant, we've been worried about the effects the beating she took would have on the fetus, but the baby is strong and from the scans we've done, healthy."

"She's pregnant?" I rasp.

The doctor's brows furrow. "Yes, I thought she knew. She's fourteen weeks. Would you like to see her?"

I nod. "Please," I say as I turn to Elijah. "Mommy's awake, shall we go and see her?"

My boy's face lights up and he runs toward me, his tears falling down his face. "Yes," he cries.

I hold him to me and we move toward the room that Lauren's in. The minute we get into the room, Elijah's running toward her. I stand back and watch as he gently holds his mom.

I'm a lucky bastard. I could have lost her today. Her and the baby, instead, I get to see the happiness she has when she holds our son.

Fuck. I love her. I love my family and we're adding another addition to it soon.

My life is blessed.



EPILOGUE

LAUREN

One year Later

I can't believe Elijah is ten today. It's been ten years since I held him for the first time. I'm so fucking emotional, but I love him more than anything. Elijah doesn't realized that he saved me. I could have taken a worse beating or even died, but because I knew that I had to protect my unborn son, I fought harder than I have ever fought before.

Kash is curved into my body and I press back onto his hard erection. "Morning, babe," he says as he grabs my stomach and pulls me closer, if that is even possible. His fingers reach down and slide through my lips. "You're wet for me as always." He pushes a finger inside and then two. I moan. He knows how to wake me up.

"I want to fuck you slowly babe." He moves so that one of my legs is over his.

"What are you waiting for? A fucking invitation?" I'm hormonal and want him to fuck me before the kids wake up and I know it won't be long. Elijah has been waiting for this day for so long.

Kash laughs as he pushes his cock deep inside me, groaning as he does. “You feel better every day. Your pussy fits my cock perfectly.”

“Kash, now!”

He takes my hint and fucks me slow, then hard. I need him so much. I rub my clit, knowing that I need to get off as quick as possible because we have a busy day ahead of us.

“Are you touching yourself, babe? You know how much it turns me on when you rub your clit.”

I continue rubbing. “Kash, I’m going to come, you’d better be close. I want us to come together, it’s my favorite way.”

He’s thrusting hard, lifting my leg to get deeper. “I’m not far off you babe, I know that when you clench your muscles around my cock I am going to explode too.”

He fucks me hard another few times and then I let out a roar, “Kash.”

He laughs, “I’m with you babe.” And he thrusts one or two more times, even though I am squeezing his cock tight. He explodes and I feel his hot cum shooting inside me.

Kash kisses my neck and then pulls out of me, rolls me over and kisses me hard. “I love you, babe.”

The door opens suddenly and I hear, “Mom, Dad, it’s my birthday. I’m ten.”

We both laugh, that was close. But those stolen early mornings are so important to us.

Kash sits up in the bed and then pats it for Elijah to sit on the bed.

“I’ll go get Emilia,” I say as I get out of the bed and walk into the nursery. I think about the beating my step-father gave me. Once again i was pregnant, but this time I didn’t know I was. Emilia has been a blessing and I love her so much. I see the love Kash has for her too, but that doesn’t diminish the love he has for Elijah, even though he wasn’t there for the first nine years of his life.

This is his first birthday with Elijah and I know he has pulled out all the stops to make this special.

I bring Emilia back into the bed with us and Elijah crawls over and kisses her. “Good morning, baby,” he says and I think how much he sounds like his father.

Kash brings up some presents which were under the bed for Elijah to open and I thank my lucky stars for putting this man in my life and even when he was away from me I knew I still loved him. We found our way back to each other and that means so much.

After the mad morning of opening presents, pancakes for breakfast and getting dressed for the party, it’s time for us to open our home to our family and friends.

Bailey came over earlier to help get everything ready. We may not be blood related, but she is family to me. My only family. I know something isn’t right with her, she’s been sick recently and she’s very withdrawn. I make a note to speak to her about it tomorrow. Today is all about Elijah. We are having a cookout and everyone is coming to town.

“Hey, Bailey, can you grab these and take them out to Kash, he’s grilling today. You know what men are like with their grills.” I hand her a couple of plates with steak and chickem on them.

“Yeah no worries.” She turns to leave.

“Bailey, we are going for breakfast tomorrow. We need to talk. I’m worried about you. You’re my family, my best friend and the closest I have to a mother. I need to look after you as much as you need to look after me.”

She smiles and then comes over and puts the plates down. She hugs me. “I love you, Lauren. Let’s talk over breakfast, today is for Elijah.”

She pulls away and then grabs the plates to take them out to Kash. I watch the way she walks away and I can see that some of her confidence has disappeared, I hope no one hurt her because if they have then they will have me to deal with.

THREE HOURS LATER

The kids have been playing in the pool and now all of Maddog Security are in there playing a game of polo. They are so competitive it’s hilarious to watch. The kids are all rooting for the side that their fathers are playing on and I can see the competitiveness has been passed down a generation.

Just then Jimmy walks in. He’s always late. “What did I miss?” He says taking his shirt off and jumping into the pool to join his fellow Maddogs.

Bailey walks out with two cocktails. One for me and one for her. She sits next to me. “It’s been a great day, Lauren. I feel at home with these guys. They’re my people too.” She looks at the pool. “Who’s the extra guy on this team? ” She points to Jimmy who has his back to us.

“Oh god, that is Jimmy. You haven’t met him before and he’s always late. He’s been out on assignment out of the country for a few months. He just came back today and it was a surprise for the other Maddogs.”

“Jimmy?” She looks panicked.

“Do you know him?” I’m confused. Bailey is staring at him and he must have sensed her stare because he turns around and his eyes lock onto hers.

“Bailey?” he says at the same time she says, “Jimmy?”

I look between the two of them as does everyone in the pool. Jimmy gets out and grabs someone’s towel and walks over to Bailey. But Bailey is too quick for him and she is already in the house.

Everyone is staring at them. How do they know each other and how do I not know about her and Jimmy? Something has obviously happened and she’s not told me about it. Maybe that’s what she was going to talk to me about tomorrow at breakfast. I move closer to the house, I need to make sure she’s okay.

All I can hear is shouting and I can’t understand any of it. I don’t want to interfere, Bailey will reach out if she needs me, I’m sure of it.

Kash comes over to me and pulls me away. “Leave them, I’m not sure what’s going on, but if they wanted us to know then they would argue out here.”

“I know, but she’s been there for me and I want to be there for her.”

“I know you do, Lo. But she has to come to you first, remember that.” He’s so right. I kiss him.

Just then, Jimmy rushes out of the house, grabs his clothes and disappears through the gate that he appeared through not even an hour ago. He doesn't say anything to anyone, just leaves.

Minutes later, Bailey comes out crying. "I'm sorry, I don't want to spoil the party. I need to go home."

I hug her. "I'll come see you for breakfast tomorrow, then we can talk about it. Two heads are always better than one, right?"

She nods her head before going over to Elijah and Emilia and kissing them both, then she, too, walks back out the gate that Jimmy went through minutes earlier.

I turn to Kash and he shrugs his shoulders as does everyone else. Kayla comes over to me. "I'm sure it's fine. He's been out of the country, maybe they met years ago or something. All of these guys have histories they don't talk about."

"I know, I just hate to see her hurting."

Kayla pulls me into a hug. "Love you, sis."

I smile, she always calls me that now.

I hear someone clinking their glass. "Can I get your attention?" Kash says. "As you know Elijah was born ten years ago today. Happy birthday son." He kisses Elijah and he beams from ear to ear. "Thank you for coming to celebrate his special day. But I want to acknowledge his mom and the most important person in my life, Lo. She was amazing all this years that I was absent and I hope I've made it up to you since, babe."

I nod, not able to speak.

“So I thought it was only appropriate to tell you, Lo, that I want to spend the rest of my life loving you, Elijah and Emilia, and any more children we have.” He winks at me. I watch as he goes down on one knee and holds out a ring for me. Is he serious? I can barely see him because of the tears in my eyes.

“Will you make me the happiest man alive and marry me so that we can spend together forever?” I nod my head. “Lo, I need the words, babe.”

“Yes,” my voice comes from nowhere. “Yes.” He stands up, slides the ring on my finger and kisses me hard.

“Eww gross,” Elijah says and we pull apart, laughing.

Everyone around us claps, cheers and whistles. “I love you, Lo.” Kash kisses me and I lose myself in him.

All of our friends are here and I am so happy, I am worried about Bailey and whatever that was with Jimmy, but not even that can stand in the way of my happiness right now. Elijah, Emilia, Kash and I have a group hug. “I love you Kash, with all my heart.”



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When relaxing Lexi loves to sit back, enjoy a nice glass of Disaranno and catch up on the lasts Grey's Anatomy.

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