



FRIENDS YESTERDAY.
LOVERS TODAY.
SOULMATES FOREVER.

SOMEONE
Like You

HEARTS ON HOLD SERIES BOOK ONE

OLIVIA M. JONES

SOMEONE LIKE YOU

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Someone Like You

Olivia M. Jones

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Oliviamjonesauthor

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*For everyone who supported
and believed in me when I didn't
Thank you.*

CHAPTER ONE

Elyse

“WHERE ARE you with the risotto and sea bass, Elyse?” my executive chef, Dave, screamed out over the line to get my attention.

“Two minutes on the sea bass and stirring until the liquid absorbs into the risotto, chef,” I yelled over the loud kitchen ruckus. After taking the sea bass out to rest, I stirred the risotto until the broth evaporated.

“Make it quick. This is the last table to be seated,” Dave said, watching my steady movements before checking on the other staff. “The quicker, the better.”

I’d been working at Eleven for about two years. I came in as the underdog but quickly proved everyone wrong. My passion for cooking came from my mom, and even after her death nearly twelve years earlier, everything I did was because of her. I’d been cooking since I was little, fascinated by how people can speak through food—the best language. I had recently taken it more seriously after working a few bullshit jobs that didn’t promise growth. Eleven was a major improvement, an upscale steakhouse on Main Street—one of the busiest streets in Pasadena. A typical night for us was a long waiting list, all seats taken. But I preferred that.

Coming to work had kept my mind off how badly my life had shifted three months prior, when I’d caught my fiancé in bed with my best friend of five years. I’d been put in a position that I never thought I would find myself in. Jason, my ex of three years, had blamed me and my busy work schedule, not understanding that I had to bust my ass to support both of us after he’d lost his job. He’d spent his days drinking, wanting me to stay home with him, but I couldn’t be with him every second of the day. And he hated me for it. I should’ve

seen the red flags, but I thought he loved me. Guess I was wrong.

When we'd first started dating, I was the happiest I had been since my parents died. After their car accident, I had to become a parent at fifteen, missing out on a normal childhood to take care of my younger sister. But when I met Jason, I felt alive again. Our relationship moved quickly, but it felt right. And now, I was alone in an empty house by myself, wondering what I could've done to avoid all the pain, embarrassment, and unhappiness.

Since Jason and I had split, I'd been working my ass off, trying to prove to Dave that I was a viable candidate for the sous-chef position that had recently become available. I'd put everything on the back burner for Jason, and now, I wanted to improve myself and my job. I had devoted myself to work.

After Jason, I didn't believe I even knew what fun was anymore. Well, I had fun when I cooked because it cleared my mind, but it wasn't the same. I was still young, only twenty-six, and had so much life left to live, but I'd chosen to isolate myself from the world, at least until the pain wasn't so fresh.

Once I plated the entrée, I set it on the line and called out for a server. "Last order out!" I shouted, tapping my hands against the stainless steel.

I loved the kitchen at Eleven because management kept up with the appliances, making sure the staff had the best of the best. The kitchen was split into different stations—deep-frying, grilling, sautéing, and the ovens. In the middle was what we liked to call inventory, housing pans, plates, knives, and anything else needed to run a high-end kitchen.

"Yeah, but we still have to wait for everyone to finish eating and leave," Alex, the other nighttime chef, said, releasing her long, brown wavy hair from her chef hat.

Alex and I had worked together for some time, building a great work friendship. We'd tried to meet outside of work, but those plans usually fell through.

I shrugged, exhausted. “Which means we have more time to clean.”

I looked around at the mess from tonight’s service. *It never ends.*

“Just tell me what the fuck I can do to fix this, fix us,” Jason said, looking at me with his sunken blue eyes after putting his shirt back on. He looked rough; his spiky beard traveled down his neck and his dark hair longer than it had ever been. He had always been thin, sometimes smaller than me, but all the drinking added a few extra pounds—not in a good way.

I got in his face. “Do you love her?” I asked, trying to push the very words out of my mouth.

Alana, my best friend, the girl I had confided in and been there for since college, slept with my fiancé. In our fucking bed. I had all kinds of chaotic thoughts running through my head. My skin burned with rage, and my heart beat so fast that I thought I was going to pass out.

“No!” he yelled, his voice strained. “What the hell kind of question is that, Elyse?” He spoke to me as if I had done something wrong, apparently forgetting that I was the one that had caught him cheating.

“Just fucking tell me!” I shouted at him, pushing his hand out of the way, as he tried to grab me. “How long has it been going on? And don’t lie to me, Jason.”

I never thought this would happen to me. I did everything for him—got a house in my name and took care of all the expenses—and here I was, asking him how long he’d been sleeping with my best friend.

He took a while to respond.

“I asked you a question,” I repeated, trying to calm myself down. My throat dried as I prepared myself for his answer. Either way, it hurt because I trusted him so much. I always thought he would take care of my damaged heart. Instead, he had damaged it himself.

Jason stepped back and paced in a circle. “A couple of months,” he stated, aggressively running his hands through his hair.

The air between us grew silent until I laughed. Hysterically too. It was the only thing that made sense from the atrocity that had just come from his mouth. God, he was pathetic. I bent over and grabbed my stomach, trying to catch my breath. When I rose to his level again, I watched his Adam’s apple bob in his throat as anger washed over his face.

“A couple of months?” I repeated, raising my hand to slap him. But he stopped me. “You fucking pig! How could you do this to me after everything?”

He cocked his fist as if he wanted to hit me but held himself back. Why couldn’t I have found out sooner that he was an asshole? It would’ve saved me so much pain and heartache.

I pushed him as he backed into the nightstand. Once he got himself together, he shouted, “You told me to be honest!”

I stepped away, shaking my head in disgust. “What the fuck am I supposed to do? We are supposed to get married in less than seven months, Jason. Married. I booked the venue and got my wedding dress, and you fucking cheated on me? Do you have any idea how that makes me feel?” I roared. “What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Elyse, I love you,” he said, trying to grab me again. “I’ll make it—”

“Get out of my house!” I shouted, pointing toward the door.

When he didn’t move quickly enough, I leaped toward the front of the room and began opening all the drawers and tossing his shit to the ground. I didn’t realize how fast I was moving until a mountain formed on the floor.

“What the fuck, Elyse?” I heard Jason punch the wall, cursing under his breath. “I live here. Where the hell am I supposed to go?”

“Maybe Alana’s. Your parents’ place,” I suggested, slamming the wooden drawers closed. “Either way, it’s not my

problem. I just want you to get out of my house. Now.”

I tried screaming, but it came out more like a broken cry.

“I’ll let you know when you can get your shit,” I mumbled.

“What are we going to do about the wedding? Please let me fix this,” he begged.

“The wedding is off.”

Alex shook me from my thoughts. “A few of us are going out for drinks after work. You’re welcome to tag along,” she said.

I shook my head and blinked rapidly, trying to pull myself together. I felt dizzy from the heat and the stress.

“I have a date, and it will be rude to cancel. Sorry,” I lied, something I’d been so good at lately.

“A date? I thought you just—”

“Don’t,” I stopped her. “My date is with Merlot. At home.”

“You always say that,” Alex snickered. “We miss you.”

“Next time. I promise.”

Needing a second to cool off before breaking down my station, I stepped into the walk-in freezer and leaned against one of the racks. Being near deep fryers and ovens all day was like working in a sauna. Sometimes it was hard to focus and even breathe under all that heat.

I closed my eyes, feeling a crisp, chill breeze hit my skin. My heartbeat slowed as I took long inhaleds and exhaleds. I needed the energy to get through the rest of my shift. Just as I felt myself relax a bit, the door slammed open.

“This ends today,” my younger sister Alyssa said, waving her hands around before walking closer to me. Alyssa had worked as a server at Eleven for a year, ever since I got her the job. Restaurant success seemed to run in the family, because she was good at her job when she wasn’t arguing with someone. She wasn’t rude; she was the kindest person I’ve ever known, but she sure had a mouth on her.

I paused, scratching my temple, as I waited for her to tell me what the hell she was talking about. I stared at her for a second, confused.

“You hear me talking to you, Elyse Marie?” she called out, crossing her arms to her chest.

It's serious. She used my middle name.

I looked helplessly into her big green eyes; she got them from our father. She took most of his features while I inherited my blue eyes from my mom. To most, we resembled each other, but we could always see our differences. Alyssa's blonde hair was longer than mine and curly, and she had flawless, tanned skin. And although we'd always been close in size, I was a few inches taller than she was. Despite our age gap, with her being twenty-two, we were still close.

“Am I missing something?” I asked, too tired for mind games.

“*Are* you missing something?” she snapped, throwing her arms up. “Every first Friday, we get drinks. Considering what happened, I let this slide for a few months. But not tonight. It would help if you were around people, sis. Stop doing this to yourself. For me?”

She finally inched her way to me and huffed loudly, her rosy cheeks puffing out as she exhaled. I sighed, dropping my shoulders.

“Word gets around quickly here, doesn't it? Besides, Lyss, I'm tired. I told Alex next time. Please, just let me sleep, and I'll be better tomorrow. Promise.” I grabbed her hand, hoping it was enough for her to let me go this one time.

“You're such a terrible liar,” she said.

Damn. I thought I was at least decent.

“Everyone knows that ‘sleep’ to you means drinking a bottle of cheap wine, eating Ben & Jerry's until you cry, and then tossing and turning for the rest of the night. You can't bullshit me, so you're going. I don't really care what you say,” my sister hissed, changing the tone of her usually high-pitched voice.

“You can’t make me,” I snickered. “You forget that I’m the older sister here.”

“One drink, and I *promise* you can go home,” she whined, begging even louder and more obnoxiously. I wanted to shoot her down, but unfortunately, I knew my sister, and she was relentless.

“Fine. One drink, then I’m going home,” I caved, rolling my eyes as I huffed and puffed. “I hope you know I hate you.”

“The feeling is mutual. See you shortly.” She blew a kiss before strutting out of the freezer, her long hair following.

I fell against the rack, tangling my hands in my messy blonde hair. I knew if I’d stood there a second longer, I wouldn’t have had the energy to finish my shift.

Two hours later, my coworkers and I sat in a booth at a bar across the street from Eleven. The old bar consisted of wooden tables, a jukebox, and pictures of the staff in their twenties. The owners, Ben and Charlene, had run the bar since they were married ages ago.

Alyssa and I had started this tradition last year as a way of letting loose. We never hung out in the kitchen because we were always busy, so we celebrated with drinks after work.

I toyed with my straw, casually sipping my rum and coke, while everyone else conversed about nothing that mattered—work, chef being a pain in the ass, and the long hours.

“I overheard Dave going off on your little boyfriend before we left,” Alex said to me as she tossed back her beer.

I arched my eyebrow. “He is *not* my boyfriend. What happened?”

“He has the world’s biggest crush on you, Elyse. You can be his sugar mama!” she teased. “But anyway, he wanted to request a day off tomorrow, but chef said the notice was too late. Dave’s been meaner than usual this week.”

Ricky was the youngest chef at Eleven, but he was talented and knew what he was doing. It *was* true. He'd always had a crush on me, but he was twenty, and I hated men. Nonetheless, everyone thought it was funny to pick on me about it.

Before I could say anything, Alyssa yelled over the music, "Everyone, shut up! Let's all drink to celebrate Elyse finally coming out of hibernation. Yes, it was my doing, and yes, you guys can toast to me instead." She grinned at me from across the table.

All gazes fell on me as I faked a smile and tightened my lips. *Well, this is awkward.*

"We're all happy you came out tonight," Chris cheered. He loved cooking, but he would tell anyone his dream was to become a burlesque dancer. Or a stripper, if it had come down to it. "And Ricky just tweeted about how pissed he is that he couldn't make it tonight. Sucks being young."

Does it, though?

I looked down at the wooden table, swirling the liquor in my cup before taking a long sip. I'd finished the drink and hadn't even realized it. I hoped everyone would forget about the toast idea. The last thing I wanted was attention on me. Luckily, the subject changed quickly.

Alyssa laid her head on my shoulder. "I hate seeing you like this. You've always been the strong one, and I need you. I know this pain won't go away soon, but I want to be there for you like you are for me."

She was right. I was the older sister, and it was my job to set an example. But I wasn't doing a great job of that.

"Not to be nosy, but I need you too, Elyse," Alex teased, glancing over my shoulder. "You've been a real bitch lately."

The rest of the table laughed.

"Thanks, Alexandra," I barked, using her actual name before peering down at my sister. "I'm sorry, Lyss. You're right, and I'm going to change how I've been acting."

“Aren’t I always?” She lifted her head off my shoulder and flipped her hair back.

“You’re so much better than a low-life piece of shit that impregnates your best friend. Like, come on, really? Cheers to the start of somethi—”

“Wait,” I interrupted “*What* did you say?” I rolled my neck toward her as my breath caught in my throat, making it impossible to swallow.

I wasn’t sure if I’d heard her right, but the feeling in my chest was unbearable, like someone had just stabbed me right where my heart should’ve been. But I had lost that a long time ago.

Alyssa broke eye contact, her eyes roaming around the bar. “Uh, I-I, w-what I meant was—”

“Alana’s ... p-pregnant? By Jason?” My voice strained, and my vision went fuzzy.

I shifted in my seat, completely turning toward her. I’d already felt horrible, but this was the worst kind of pain after my parents’ death. I had felt it when Jason cheated, and for three months, I’d been trying to come back from it, but there it was again. And it fucking hurt out of this world.

“It could be *anyone’s* baby,” she said hesitantly, trying to reassure me as she shrugged her shoulders and chuckled. “Elyse, don’t do this. I shouldn’t have said anything. Me and my big-ass mouth.”

“You were going to keep that from me?” I muttered, my voice cracking. “What the hell is wrong with you? You picked now to keep a secret?”

As the tears built up in my eyes, I stared at her. Jason wanted a baby, and we’d talked about it a few times. I wanted to wait until I had my career set, because I was the only one working. Having a child was expensive, and I didn’t want to be the type of mom that worked all day with a newborn at home. I suggested we wait until after we tied the knot, but it wasn’t enough. I wasn’t enough.

Now, he was having a baby with my best friend. My fucking *best friend*. Well, *ex-best friend*.

I saw the pity and regret in my sister's eyes. My coworkers grew silent, unsure of what to say, because I'd never even told them what happened between Jason and me. I wanted to keep what was left of my business to myself. I couldn't catch a break, no matter what I did or changed in my life.

I slipped past Alyssa and ran toward the exit as she called out for me. When I scrambled into my Toyota, I rested my head on the steering wheel and felt the tears gush down my face, unhindered. I didn't want him or this to get to me, but I was so fucking sensitive. I never used to be this way. That was supposed to be *my baby*. *My life*. *My husband*. Just when I'd thought everything could get better, it had gotten worse.

Without thinking, I grabbed my phone and unblocked Jason, reading his last message about the stupid fucking ring. He wanted it back, but I had been ignoring his broke ass. After some contemplating, I sent him a text.

Me: For months, I tried to understand what I did wrong to lose everything like this. I kept blaming myself, but it was you. I was about to be your wife, and you chose my best friend to have a baby with. I hope she's stupid enough to fucking support you, asshole. I hope you rot in hell, you sick bastard. I'm pawning the stupid ring.

I regretted sending the message as soon as I hit the button, and I pathetically prayed it would somehow get lost. I slammed the phone against the steering wheel before throwing it into the passenger seat in frustration. I knew it was stupid to show him that he bothered me, but I wanted him to feel my pain. I wanted him to know that I knew about Alana and how much of a dick he was. I hoped karma would give him what he deserved, and I wanted the front row seat to watching his life unfold.

I heard my phone ringing and saw that it was Alyssa. I wasn't in the mood to talk, nor did I know what would come out of my mouth. I'd never been the crazy type, but lately, I wasn't sure who I was anymore. I had so much anger inside; I

was always so damn mad. Maybe that was why no one wanted to be around me. I ignored the call and started the car.

When I finally calmed down, I drove home, speeding through the evening Pasadena traffic. As I pulled into my driveway, Jason hopped out of his car, which was parked by the curb. *God damnit.*

I slammed my door shut. “My text was not a fucking invitation to my house. You need to leave!” I barked, my voice ten times deeper.

He’d cleaned up himself, cut his beard and his hair. But his clothes were still wrinkled as hell, his shirt dotted with wet patches. *God, he’s probably fucking drunk.*

“I’m not fucking going anywhere,” Jason said, catching up to me, but I kept my back turned. “You had me blocked for months and haven’t been home, and I want my goddamned ring. It’s my mothers, and *you* called the wedding off.”

His last words slurred, and I could smell the alcohol fuming off his skin. I stopped and stared at him.

“Oh, yeah? And guess why I called the wedding off, Jason?” I scoffed as I continued walking.

He grabbed my arm, jerking me toward him.

“Get the hell off me and go home. You’re drunk! Call a cab.” I yanked my arm away from him.

“I’m drunk because you kicked me out, broke up with me, and fucking ruined my life!” he shouted, spit flying from his mouth.

Are you fucking kidding me? I ruined your life?

“You’re making this *my* fault?”

I matched his energy, making him understand he couldn’t play the fucking victim like he usually did. I quickly lowered my voice, realizing how late it was and knowing I had neighbors. “I have nothing to say to you anymore. You need to leave my house now, and I’m not asking again, Jason.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you give me my fucking ring. You’re not going to pawn something that belongs to my family,” he yelled, poking my forehead with his finger. He clenched his jaw as darkness clouded his eyes.

“So you can give it to your pregnant girlfriend?” I spat, going back and forth with him like a teenager. I should’ve stopped, but he was pissing me off. “The one that was a mistake, right?”

Why did I even send that stupid text? And why is he just now worrying about the ring?

Jason pushed himself toward me as he got in my face, staring at me with wide eyes. “What does it matter to you? It’s not like you gave a damn about anything but work,” he snickered, grinning. “Oh, you don’t like being alone, do you? That’s what this is about.”

“That’s not fair.” I shook my head, trying to keep my resolve. “You took everything from me, and all I ever tried to do was make this work. I worked my ass off, and I’m the problem. Fuck you.”

He laughed as he watched me fight my tears. “You don’t know how to be with anyone. I have needs, and you failed to meet them because you wanted to fucking cook. Your food isn’t even that good. You just want pity all the time, and I’m not doing it. You made me do this. I cheated because of you. You should learn how to be a better girlfriend.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I hate you. I hate you so fucking much for what you did and said to me. You never loved me. I was easy for you, and you used me, but that’s okay. Karma will bite you so hard in the ass, and when it does, I hope it makes you realize the damage you’ve caused. You finally have a job, being a father, you fucking asshole!” I yelled in one breath as I ran up the steps to my front door.

“Get my fucking ring!” he demanded, ignoring everything I’d said. “Before I get it myself. I don’t have all night to listen to your bullshit.”

“You’re not allowed in my house,” I replied.

Jason scoffed, “Try me.” He attempted to push past me, but I blocked his way, holding my ground.

I didn’t want to give up the ring because it reminded me of what could’ve been. But that part of my life was over. I probably should’ve pawned it sooner. Or never sent that stupid text.

I yelled for him to stop, but instead, he yanked me back and pushed me to the ground. When I hit the concrete, I drew a sharp breath in, feeling my skin scrape against the gritty sidewalk. I was too shocked to say anything and too angry to feel the pain after the first few seconds. I couldn’t believe he had put his hands on me, someone he had once wanted to marry. The thought made my eyes well up, and my vision went blurry. Within seconds, the tears escaped freely.

I kept my head down, watching my tears fall to the ground. A mess of watery, snotty mascara spilled over my hands and thighs. I heard Jason jiggle the doorknob, cursing under his breath when he found the door locked. Within seconds, he stalked down the steps and stood over me.

“Why are you still playing fucking games? Get my shit *now*,” he barked, louder.

“It’s in my car—the glove box,” I whispered.

“Everything okay out here? Is there a problem?” An unfamiliar voice joined the conversation, but I didn’t bother looking up.

Heat rose in my cheeks. It was too much—too overwhelming. Everything I was feeling came crashing down, flowing through my body. I’d had enough.

Jason cleared his throat. “Even though it’s none of your business, I’m just getting what’s mine.”

My messy hair fell over my face. I remained stuck to the concrete.

“It becomes my business when you’re yelling loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear and then shove someone smaller than you—let alone a woman,” the unknown man shouted back.

“Unless you’re going to do something about it, fuck off.”

“Sounds tempting,” the guy replied, mid-laugh.

I wasn’t sure what the hell had gotten into Jason. He’d never touched me or spoken to me like that.

I listened to my car door slam before the sound of Jason’s footsteps disappeared. I remained quiet until the unnamed stranger was standing above me.

“Here, let me help you up,” he said, offering his hand.

He smelled clean. Freshly showered clean. Light cologne. I inhaled his masculine aroma, trying to pull myself together.

“Are you okay? I’ll get help if you want to do something about it,” he spoke again, his deep voice ringing in my ears.

When I finally found the courage to stand, I kept my head low, inspecting the blood on my hands. My skin had scraped open, but I was too numb to feel anything.

I closed my hands and muttered, “I’m fine.”

My cheeks burned, and I didn’t bother pushing back the blonde mess of hair that was now covering my face. I cleared my throat, trying to play it cool by avoiding all questions. I had no idea where he’d come from, but I appreciated him more than he would ever know.

“Well, I just moved in next door, and if you need anything ___”

I cut him off. “I-I don’t. P-please, just—I’m fine.”

I avoided eye contact and headed towards my door without saying another word.

CHAPTER TWO

elyse

“UGH,” I groaned, rubbing my aching temple, hoping the mild headache would magically disappear.

I rolled onto my back with another groan, last night’s absurdity still fresh on my mind. I was shocked my throat didn’t ache from all the screaming. Needing some time to get back on track, I called Dave to take the day off, and he forced me to use some of my many vacation days after realizing I’d been working for a month straight without any days off. I wasn’t sure how I was alive. My body had given me signs to take it easy, but I pushed through the exhaustion until I was mentally, emotionally, and physically drained.

I slowly removed myself from my bed, standing in place as I looked at the minor scratches on my hands. I couldn’t believe Jason had put his hands on me. I hated him, and I hated myself for ever loving him. For almost giving myself to him.

I took a deep breath and headed to the bathroom to shower. Every bone in my body ached, and I felt like shit. The second I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I resented what I saw. My blue eyes were red and puffy, with dark bags underneath. My mascara was smeared down my face—and probably on my pillow. The pattern of my tears was stained against my pale skin, and I didn’t even want to talk about my hair. It was horrible. I’d have cringed if I saw myself walking down the street.

“What happened to you? You look terrible,” I mumbled to myself, picking at my skin. *Pathetic.*

As I stripped out of my work clothes, I laughed at myself, turning the water on the highest setting. *Why am I letting a man do this to me?* I was so much better than this. I was so

much better than wasting tears and spending a shit ton of money on cheap wine every day. Well, sometimes it was not that cheap. *Don't judge me*, I snapped at myself.

I promised myself not to let the latest news weigh on me and kill my mood. If Jason was happy, I could be too. I would prove to myself, him, and anyone else that I didn't need a man to be happy. *Fuck men*.

No, I didn't listen to *Let Him Go* podcasts while I stood in the shower. Okay, I did, *I'm lying*.

After my shower, I towel-dried my hair and threw on an oversized, mauve sweatshirt that hung off my shoulder, showing my gray lace bralette. My naturally wavy hair dangled down my back as I traveled downstairs to start my day—what would hopefully be a very positive one. My phone rang as I started brewing a pot of coffee. It was Alyssa.

“Hello?” I answered, holding my phone between my shoulder and cheek while scooping coffee grounds into the filter.

I'd planned to keep busy so my mind didn't drift off. This was my do-over. Even though I expected nothing to change overnight, I still had faith.

“Are you mad at me?” my sister asked, on edge from my “episode.”

I shouldn't have gotten upset with her and left without saying anything. She'd tried to protect me from the truth, and I'd stormed out.

I stopped in place as my shoulders dropped. “I'm really sorry, Alyssa. I'm sorry about everything—how I've been acting and how I treated you. Last night made me realize that I've been out of line, and I want to be happy.”

Even with the confidence in my voice, I didn't know if she believed me because I'd been saying the same thing for a while. But it would happen.

“Well, what happened last night?” she asked.

“I don't want to talk about it. I want to forget it. Forever.”

I started the pot after pouring in the water. Freshly brewed coffee was always my favorite scent in the morning, reminding me of home because my parents were avid coffee drinkers. I'd never been big on the stuff, but sometimes I'd brew it to make myself feel better. And it worked every time.

Alyssa exhaled loudly. "I feel like you never talk or confide in me anymore. And I know I have a big mouth sometimes, but promise me you're okay. And that you're not thinking about offing yourself or something."

"I promise," I assured her, hoping that was enough. "In the meantime, I'm going to be productive and try not to sleep all day. Maybe I'll go shopping, exercise, or go for a drive?"

"You don't work today?"

"Chef gave me time off because I've been working nonstop lately."

"No. He gave you time off because you've been acting a little ... crazy, sis," she clarified. "Well, I really wanted to say you've been acting like a bitch, but I'm trying to be nice here."

I laughed, listening to Alyssa launch into her thoughts about mental health. When she'd graduated with a degree in psychology, she assumed she had all the answers. She told me everything I already knew, which was to stop isolating myself from everyone. I didn't mean to, but I had a habit of keeping things to myself.

As Alyssa continued her psychological ramblings, I gathered the trash from my kitchen.

"I just wanted to make sure you weren't mad at me."

I forced a small smile. "I could never," I answered, trying to juggle two large bags with the phone on my ear.

I stepped outside and walked to the end of my lawn to toss the bags in the trash cans at the end. As soon as I turned around, I stopped in place, my mouth wide open. My sister kept calling my name, but I was unable to tear my eyes from my shirtless neighbor, who appeared to be working on part of his porch.

I watched his muscles flex in his back when he bent over to grab a tool, oblivious to me watching him like a desperate housewife. With his back towards me, I couldn't see his face, but his body—*God, his body*. I muttered unspeakable things under my breath as I ogled my new neighbor.

“Elyse? Can you hear me?” It sounded as if she'd started tapping her phone. “Something must be wrong with this damn phone. Fucking water damage.”

I finally registered my sister's words and laughed loudly, remembering her telling me about dropping her phone in the toilet the week before and how she'd attempted to fix it with a bag of rice.

My neighbor turned toward me, squinting as he covered his face from the sun with his hand. Once our eyes connected, I forced a nervous smile and waved—like a dumbass.

I fucking waved. I was so stupid. *Okay. Why is he walking over here?*

“I'll call you back,” I mumbled.

As soon as I ended the call, I looked away for a second while this God of a man jogged over to my lawn. I had to keep myself from staring, but it was a lot harder when he was standing in front of me. He smelled of spice, the musky scent traveling up my nose within seconds.

I lifted my head to adjust to his six-foot-tall height and stared into his bright, hazel eyes, beaming with the morning sunlight. They held little specks of green, like flowers sprouting up in the summer. His eyebrows were thick and darker than his sun-kissed hair, which curled in a beautiful mess above his expressive eyes. A beauty mark rested under his left eye, hair dotted his jawline and under his nose, tattoos decorated his arm.

“You there?” I finally heard him speak, and it matched the voice from last night. His voice was almost soothing, the type you could listen to all day.

“I'm definitely not staring,” I said, watching the drops of sweat roll down his well-developed frame.

His skin was perfect and tanned, highlighting the sweat that hung from his waist and the dusting of hair trailing south into his pants. I couldn't take my eyes off him, and it felt wrong. Not only was I sexualizing a man I didn't know, but part of me still believed I was unavailable. But I was as single as they come.

"I said that out loud, didn't I? God, I'm so awkward." I felt my cheeks get hot as I realized what I'd said. When my eyes reached his face again, an innocent, sexy smirk appeared on his lips.

"I didn't hear a thing," he shrugged, swinging his arms open.

I glanced at the ground and smiled.

"I'm Tyler," he spoke again, adjusting his stance.

He had faint dimples in his cheeks that appeared when he flashed his pearly white smile.

Ugh, he's so attractive.

"Elyse," I introduced myself before looking at his house, which resembled mine—two stories with a mix of bricks and stones, only my house had a beige finish, and Tyler's was gray and white.

"You just move in?" I asked.

He glanced back, looking at his place. "Yeah, yesterday. I got a good deal on it," he said proudly, rubbing his hands together.

"Wow. That house has been empty for a while."

"Are there any ghosts or murders that I should know about?" he asked curiously, narrowing his eyes as he looked down at me.

I didn't know if it was good or bad having such an attractive neighbor.

"I heard it's pretty haunted. That's probably why you got a good deal," I revealed, with a devilish smile and a little laugh.

I pushed a piece of my hair behind my ear. Watching his eyes roam over my body, my heart pounded violently against my chest. I clasped my hands like a small child as he gazed intently at me.

“Sounds exciting,” he said, his eyes lighting up.

“I think you may have had too much sun.”

Tyler laughed, placing his hand on his chest. “Maybe. How’s the neighborhood? Anything I should know about?” he questioned, looking around.

I loved the area because it was quiet, safe, and child-friendly, even though there were barely any kids in the area. There was a park down the street, but most people only took their dogs there.

I used my hand to shield my eyes and pointed across the street. “Uh, Mrs. Daniels, the house across from yours, she’s an older widow and loves, and I mean loves, young guys. She’s an extreme flirt, but she’s a very sweet woman. I bake for her sometimes because she loves pecan pie.”

I laughed, and then pointed to the house next to his. “Your neighbors, the Bauers. They think they’re better than everyone on the street, but they’re nice in their own way, I guess. Want me to keep going?”

“No, I think I got it.” I melted at the soft calm of his voice. “What kind of neighbor are you?”

“Nothing exciting happens on my end,” I said, hesitating. “I’m sorry about last night. I’m not crazy or loud, and I’m sorry you had to see that.”

I didn’t want him to think I allowed that kind of behavior at my home. I hoped he got the picture.

“No need to apologize,” he said, clearing his throat, his voice getting deeper. “I don’t care about the noise, but he shouldn’t have put his hands on you, no matter the circumstances. Ex?”

“Something like that. I would shake your hand, but you seem pretty ... occupied.”

I glanced at the black residue on his palms.

“Is this what you do?” I asked, trying to make conversation.

“I’m a jack of all trades,” he proudly answered, resting his arm on my mailbox.

“Well, because you seem to know what you’re doing, I have a few things you can fix in my house, if you’re up for the task,” I suggested nervously, assuming he’d kill the thought.

“I don’t work for free.” He smirked. “But we can work something out.”

Mind ... stay ... out ... of ... the ... gutter ...

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” I said with a shaky smile. “Oh. Wait here a second.”

I held my finger to his chest before jogging back toward my house. Even though I didn’t have much to offer, I wanted to welcome him to the neighborhood. I grabbed a small dessert container from my refrigerator. I returned outside, holding the plastic to my chest.

“What’s this? My payment?”

I stood close, feeling my cheeks warm as I handed the small tub to him.

“I want to prove that I am and will be a great neighbor. Oh, and also to welcome you here,” I admitted, not trying to stare.

Tyler grabbed the cake from me, brushing his fingers against mine. I quietly gasped at the shiver that shot down my spine. I looked at the ground and sucked in my bottom lip. I stepped back, waiting for the feeling to pass. The passing contact had taken me by surprise. I hadn’t felt anything like that in a while.

I gulped and bit the inside of my cheek. “Disclaimer, I made this cake a few days ago.”

“You want me to think you’re a good neighbor by giving me an old cake?” He laughed and eyed the chocolate mousse cake.

“You won’t be complaining when you try it,” I said, tooting my own horn.

“Why is that?”

“I’m a chef. You’re in luck, I promise,” I gushed for no reason. *Stop being so weird, Elyse.*

Tyler stayed quiet for a second and rotated his jaw. “I think I know a way you can pay me back. You know if I help you with your house.”

“And what is that?”

“I’ve always wanted a personal chef, but I won’t take advantage of you. I’m just tired as hell when I get off, and I don’t eat.” *So, maybe he is single?*

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” I said.

He winked and jiggled the container I’d given him. “When should we start? I’m starving, by the way.”

I would’ve loved to have chatted with him all day, but my phone kept ringing. It was Eleven.

“I’ll let you know,” I said, leaving the conversation without looking back.

Even though I might not know Tyler, he was a breath of fresh air. His humor made me smile again, but I knew it was too soon to make any judgment. When I closed the door, I debated not calling Eleven back. But I did.

Fuck my life.

A few hours later, I ended up at work on my day off. Dave had forgotten about a rehearsal dinner, and two staff members had called in sick. I should have said no, but part of me felt terrible about the crisis. Plus, I wanted to prove my flexibility for the new sous-chef position. Dave continually thanked me and apologized for calling me in after he’d demanded I take some time away this morning.

We had a plate up for more than a hundred people for a family that had rented out the restaurant for the evening. Cooking for someone's special night meant a lot to me, even though it made me a little sad that I hadn't gotten the chance to plan one of my own. Fortunately, I didn't have time to dwell on that sad reminder, as I needed to focus on the meal requested—salmon, grilled asparagus, and lemon herb couscous. After a few hours, I was running around like a headless chicken and sweating buckets.

“Chris, that's raw. Look at it,” I said, taking the fish off the drying rack with my tongs and rotating it next to him. “Did you sear it?” I kept my eyes on my skillet to make sure the salmon didn't burn.

“I know how to cook, Elyse,” he snapped back, succumbing to the enormous pressure of working in a reputable restaurant where perfection was demanded.

I brushed off my frustrations. “I know you do. But just make sure your pan is superhot before trying to sear. And it's only four minutes on each side. You got this.” I smiled, trying not to be a moody bitch—but to no avail, apparently.

Chris slammed his tongs down. “I need to smoke. There's way too much shit going on right now,” he yelled.

I jumped out of my skin, backing away as he stormed off, leaving his salmon in the pan.

“Chris, you can't just—” I cursed under my breath as I focused on my tasks and began handling his responsibilities.

I desperately pushed back the panic rising in me. Everyone was doing the best they could, but the pressure was draining.

After the last meal was delivered, the night ended with a beautiful rose petal panna cotta with lavender-infused shortbread. The decadent dessert was a client favorite, always highly requested.

When the last plate went out, I threw my hands up and breathed a sigh of relief.

“We survived. Great job, guys,” I said to my coworkers before meeting the gaze of my little sister as she strolled into

the kitchen.

“I’ve been watching you tonight,” Alyssa said, arching her thin eyebrows and sliding behind the line. “Who are you? And what have you done with my sister?”

I stopped cleaning and gave her my attention. “First, I want to apologize again for everything. I’ve been a ticking time bomb, Alyssa, and I realize I need to take better care of myself. I’m not sure how long that will take, but I’m willing to try. And I told you the next time you saw me, I’d be better.”

My sister waited a second before pulling me into a hug. “I love that for you. You’re not lying, are you? Did you meet someone?”

“What?” I gasped. “No. I’m not getting involved with men any time soon. I’m going to focus on me and my career.”

“Sure,” she said with a knowing smile.

CHAPTER THREE

elyse

“WELL, THAT’S MY HOUSE,” I said, coming to a stop in the dining room. “Do you think some of these things can be fixed?”

Tyler smiled as he leaned against the doorframe. Jason had neglected a lot since we’d lived together. The basement steps were on the verge of buckling. Some of the windows had a few gaps. And the basement was a mess. To my surprise, Tyler had offered to redo it as soon as he saw it. *How can I say no to that?* I’d thought. Apparently, he liked to stay busy.

“It’s not bad. I expected it to be girly as hell in here,” Tyler laughed, towering over me. “I have a lot of free time until I start my next project. So, if you’re up for it, I can start immediately.”

He beamed, wearing a black crew neck that strained against his abs, fitted jeans that revealed strong legs, and sneakers. His hair looked even better than yesterday. Today, it was combed back in style.

“I’ve needed a change,” I said, rubbing the palm of my hand. “And we can start whenever you want. I took some time off work and won’t be doing much.”

I was proud of myself for taking the first few steps toward change. On the bright side, I could decorate my place the way I wanted, making it as girly as possible. *Well, maybe not that girly.*

“How are your hands? You good?” he asked, sauntering over and putting his weight on the glass dining room table.

I adjusted my stance and dropped my hands to my sides. “They’re fine. Thank you.”

Luckily, he didn't say anything else. He'd probably picked up that I didn't want to talk when I hid my hands.

He ran his fingers over his faint beard before reaching down to pull out his phone. "I'll take your number, and we'll talk schedules, yeah?"

As I recited my number, I watched his fingers glide across the screen. I blushed for no reason when I heard my phone chime after he had texted me to save his number.

"What do you do? Everything?" I asked with a playful grin and a little laugh.

"I guess you can say that. I'm versatile, but I'm mainly an architect."

Thoughts of a shirtless Tyler working on buildings invaded my thoughts. I wanted to laugh at my desperation, but it didn't hurt to imagine. Being that attractive came with baggage, and I didn't need any more of that, especially when I had enough to deal with on my own. I wanted nothing to do with men, no matter how handsome they were.

"That's impressive. What made you get into that?"

He glanced around the near-empty dining room that held only a glass table and four matching chairs. Pictures of my family were hung on the surrounding walls. Even though I never ate in the room, I loved the simple layout and minimal decorations.

"My dad," Tyler said with a smirk, bringing his eyes back to me. "He taught me everything I needed to know. I got my degree, and here I am. What about you, being a chef and all?"

"My mom. She inspired me when I was little, and then I realized cooking was my passion." I smiled at the memory.

While other girls had been playing with dolls, or doing whatever else they preferred, I wanted to cook. I loved trying new things and being my mom's little sous-chef.

Tyler stepped closer and tightened his lips. "And I can't wait to be the judge of that," he said, just as the doorbell rang.

I narrowed my eyebrows and made a face at him, wondering who the hell could be at my door.

“I can go,” he offered, sticking his hands into his pockets. “I don’t want to interrupt if you’re having company.” I gave him an uneasy look.

“I’m not even sure who it is.” I turned around and headed to my front door. “I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

Impatient, loud knocks soon replaced the sound of the doorbell. I opened the door.

“God, it took you long enough,” Alyssa sighed, rolling her eyes before she pushed her way in. “Surprise! I’m off work and got bored.”

She shrugged out of her jean jacket, revealing a floral-printed dress. Her hair was curly and pushed back, a break from her having to wear it up all the time at work.

“Lyss, what are you doing here?” I asked nervously, still standing by the door.

I knew that the second Alyssa saw Tyler in my dining room, I would never fucking hear the end of it—not with her mouth. As I turned, she headed toward the kitchen, which was connected to the dining room.

“My only friend is my sister. So, here I am,” she said. “Why? Are you busy or someth—”

She paused, then screamed dramatically. *Here it comes.*

“Elyse, why is there a really attractive guy in your dining room? And why didn’t you tell me? I thought you weren’t dating for a while. Liar!” Alyssa shouted.

I sucked in my bottom lip and shook my head, dumbfounded, as Tyler laughed.

“Are you single? If so, please tell me you’re the one banging my sister, because she’s been in a very scary good mood,” she said, pausing to catch her breath. “Do you have a brother? I’m kidding. I have a boyfriend.”

God. She talked a mile a minute, and I could only imagine the look on Tyler's face as she continued her verbal ambush.

I ran into the room, mid-laugh. "Oh my God. Alyssa, it's time for you to take a walk or something." I glanced at him, watching his face changing colors. "I'm sorry."

She scoffed. "I will gladly go outside if you're planning on having some al—"

"Enough! Lyss, please. Tyler is helping me fix some things in my house. That's all," I interrupted, shooting her a look. *Please stop fucking talking,* I pleaded with my eyes.

"I'm sure he can also fix a lot more things, starting with your attitude, Missy." *Fuck me.*

I awkwardly cleared my throat and gulped. Tyler laughed, probably thinking the entire conversation was hysterical.

"I should probably go. I'm supposed to be meeting someone anyway," he said, glancing at the gold watch on his wrist. I was sure that was code for meeting a woman.

I exhaled and palmed my forehead. "Yeah, I'll walk you out, and Alyssa, stay here," I said, raising my voice like a mother talking to her child. That was exactly what she was—a child.

"I'm so sorry. She has no filter!" I apologized as soon as we were outside. I shook my head and blew out my cheeks. "This is so embarrassing. I need more friends. Or, in this case, a new sister."

Tyler laughed through his nose, grinning. "I'll be your friend," he offered, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I would like that," I said honestly.

Maybe he was just what I needed in my life—something new and refreshing.

He dropped his arms to push a piece of fallen hair away from his face. "This should be interesting."

"How so?"

“I’ve never really been friends with a woman before,” he said, slowly inching his way down the steps.

I leaned against my front door and smiled. “There’s a first time for everything, right?”

I wondered why he’d never been friends with a woman, figuring it was probably because they wanted to fuck him or the other way around. Maybe he was just looking for a change, really wanting to be friends with me.

“I don’t know when the rest of my guys are coming. So since we’re going to be friends, I may need company. And as my friend, you can’t get annoyed if I get annoying,” Tyler joked and took another step down.

“You’re not a murderer, are you?”

He shrugged. “I mean, not that I know of. That could change, though. But why would a murderer tell you they’re a murderer?”

“Okay, you have a point. That’s not creepy at all.”

“Tell me about it. You should see the body I have in my bathtub right now.”

I rapidly blinked my eyes.

“I’m joking. Chill,” Tyler said with a chuckle.

“Yeah, I’m watching you, creep,” I said with a fake scowl.

He flashed a smile and stuffed his hands back in his pockets. “Good. I’ll see you around.”

I stood there as he walked across the lawn to his house before I stormed back into mine.

“Alyssa! Have you lost your mind?” I asked, as she made herself comfortable on my ivory-colored sectional couch. “Are you *trying* to embarrass me?”

I didn’t want to give Tyler the impression that I wanted to sleep with him. My sister’s hair fanned over the armrest as she nonchalantly scrolled through her phone.

She blew a raspberry. “No. Have you? He’s hot. What are you planning on doing? Spending the rest of your life working twelve-hour shifts ... alone?”

“If I have to, yes. I just broke up with my fiancé,” I stressed, plopping down on the couch by her feet.

“Yeah, *three* months ago,” Alyssa pointed out, abruptly sitting up as her phone dropped to her lap. “It’s okay to have fun or even just to have sex. Who cares? You never used to yell at me like this, Cruella.”

“I’m not yelling.” I lowered my voice. Shit, maybe I was. “But don’t *do* that. He probably has the wrong idea.” I laid against the cushions with a huff.

“And that’s your problem. You care too much about what other people think. Think about how fine he is and what he can do for your attitude,” she said, batting her eyelashes at me.

I hadn’t stopped thinking about that. Because he was gorgeous. And seeing him every day was going to be a challenge, but two attractive people could still be friends. I looked away so she couldn’t see me blush.

“He’s fine in a friendly way,” I shot back.

“Bullshit, Elyse,” Alyssa playfully shouted, smacking the couch. “Bullshit.”

I brushed her comment off. “Are you done? We’re done talking about this, and don’t do that again,” I warned, grabbing the remote to my TV.

“Elyse! Elyse! Wake the hell up, lady,” my sister yelled as she shook me from my accidental nap.

We typically spent our days off catching up on new shows or reruns that were unable to watch during the week. If Alyssa wasn’t hanging out with me, she was either with her boyfriend, Cory, or her annoying roommate, Natalie, whom

she had met at her second job at a coffee shop, the one she had quit after a few days.

As for me and my other friends? I had a best friend, Alana, until ... you know. I didn't talk as much with my other good friend, Lena, because well, adulting. Sometimes I had forgotten to pick up the phone and call, but that was part of life, right? With working and paying bills sucking up most of my time, having a night out came last. At least for me.

I slowly sat up. "Shit. Did I fall asleep? What time is it?"

Alyssa stood up and put her jacket on.

"I did too. But it's almost ten, and I have work tomorrow," she said, making a face as she slipped into her shoes.

I didn't want her to leave. I wished she would stay the night, but I understood she needed to get back home. She lived closer to the city than I did, in a cute little apartment that she'd shared with Natalie for almost a year.

I pouted and rolled my eyes.

"That's your 'you want me to stay' face, huh?"

"Is it obvious?" I asked, scrambling off the couch.

Because I accidentally fell asleep, I knew I wouldn't sleep much that night. And if Alyssa stayed, we could watch movies all night and bullshit just like old times.

"Just a little," she smiled, walking toward the window to look outside.

I straightened up the pillows and turned the TV off.

"Oh, Tyler's meeting with someone alright," she said smugly.

I turned around and watched her peering through the blinds. I didn't want to spy on him, but my curiosity got the better of me. I joined her at the window and peeled back the blinds to see him with a brunette on his porch, hugging and feeling each other up. He cleaned up nicely, wearing a navy blue button-down and jeans. Suddenly, he pushed the woman up against the front door.

Not even seconds later, he gripped her ass through her tight dress and stuck his tongue down her throat. He seemed eager for more, trying to find the doorknob, as he continued his hungry kisses. I felt terrible for watching them and invading his privacy.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I said, backing away from the window.

I wanted that kind of excitement in my life, but I couldn’t fuck a stranger. I’d tried the one-night stand thing before, and it didn’t work out for me. A little bit of jealousy shot through me as I thought about the fun he would be having tonight. I couldn’t remember the last time someone was that eager to sleep with me.

“Tyler sure knows how to have a good time,” Alyssa said, stepping away from the window and winking at me as she grabbed her keys off the counter.

I thought about Tyler naked and quickly tried replacing that thought with something else.

Moldy food.

Dave naked. Ew ...

“Maybe he does,” I muttered.

“Damn it, sis,” she said, standing at my door and shaking her head. “Should’ve slept with him when you had the chance.”

I scoffed, “Had the chance? I’ve only known him for a few days.” I turned off the lights in my living room.

“Okay? He probably just met that girl like ten minutes ago. Your point?”

I met her at the door and hugged her. “No. We’re new friends. He said he has never been friends with a woman before, and now he will be. That’s my point.”

“Probably because he’s fucked them,” Alyssa laughed and rubbed her hand down my back.

Maybe. “Good night! Let me know when you get home. Love you,” I said in one breath, pulling away to open the door for her.

CHAPTER FOUR

elyse

Tyler: Sorry to text you so soon, but I'm bored. Are you home?

Me: Do you see my car? Idiot.

Tyler: Oh. We're those kinds of friends. It could be in your garage, smart-ass lol.

I HELD my phone in my hand and laughed as Lena cruised down the long highway. The day was bright, and everyone was out, probably with the same idea we had. Needing a girls' day, I'd finally called Lena and she picked me up to head to the nearby mall.

Me: Relax! I'm kidding. I'm hanging out with a friend today.

I glanced up when Lena asked, "Who are you texting over there that's making you laugh like that?"

She looked at me with her round, forest green eyes as her long, dark hair blew in the wind. Her thick eyebrows matched her voluminous black hair, and small freckles dotted her fair skin.

Lena and I had met a couple of years ago at a reunion thrown by Jason's family. She was dating one of Jason's cousins at the time. We remained friends after they broke up because we got along so well.

I shrugged one of my shoulders, watching traffic from the passenger window.

"My new neighbor. He's asking me questions about home stuff," I fibbed, hoping she wouldn't ask more questions.

Lena reminded me of Alyssa—just calmer. But she was just as damn crazy.

Tyler: Damn, no invite?

Me: I didn't think you wanted to go shopping and get your hair done. Maybe next time?

Tyler: You won't know until you ask. I do need a touch-up. But I'll hold you to that.

I shook my head and tucked away my phone for good, giving Lena my undivided attention. Unfortunately, she continued to badger me about Tyler until I finally caved and shared the super short version. We were two neighbors helping each other. I also didn't mind that he saw me for me and not some sad girl that hides from the world.

“Friends with the guy next door? That's a fucking novel waiting to happen. I'd read it too.”

She laughed, gripping the steering wheel of her blue Nissan as pop music played in the background.

“A novel I'm not trying to be a part of,” I snickered. “Men and women can be friends. Besides, I'm not ready for anything yet, and you know that.”

As Lena circled the mall to find a parking spot, she cursed in Vietnamese, her road rage taking over. “Yeah, yeah. We still need to talk about everything like you promised. And it's going to happen whether or not you like it, E.”

I rolled my eyes, knowing she wouldn't take no for an answer. Even though we hadn't talked in a while, she knew what had happened.

When she threw the car in park, I unbuckled my seatbelt and said, “Because I'm done with that part of my life, Lena.”

She scoffed at me and connected our arms as we walked to the entrance of the upscale shopping center that covered three city blocks with eateries, shops, salons, and a movie theater. The mall was outdoors, making the shopping experience even better under the warm afternoon sun. I really needed this girl time.

“I missed you, you know,” she said, gripping my arm tighter. “I would not have driven down here for just anyone.”

You know I'm lazy and hate driving.”

I leaned my head against her shoulder. “I know you love me, and the feeling is mutual.”

“You know what I love more than peanut butter and sex?”

Peanut butter and sex? Really?

“I have a feeling you're going to tell me,” I said, watching her smile mischievously and halt in front of a little boutique.

“Clothes,” she exclaimed, dragging me inside.

She wasn't lying. I had never seen her wear the same outfit twice, aside from her nursing scrubs.

“Come on! Don't stand there looking like a lost puppy,” she ordered.

The shop was cute, organized by color, with mannequins wearing unique, beautifully fashioned dresses. Even though I had been to the mall hundreds of times, I'd never stepped into this store because I didn't believe it was quite my style—not that I had a specific style.

“I'm not buying clothes today,” I said, rubbing the smooth fabric of a dress between my fingers. “I don't need anything right now.”

She ignored me, thumbing through the racks and pulling out items for me to try on. I frowned, glancing at the clothes in my arms and wondering if some of the stuff was actually for her. Some of the dresses were short—really short—leaving as little as possible to the imagination.

“You're at a mall, for Christ's sake! You're not in a committed relationship anymore. So, I don't want to see you walking around in yoga pants and a bun for the rest of your life.”

I glanced down at my outfit. Okay, I had yoga pants on, but I'd paired them with a cute shirt and sandals. And my hair was *not* in a damn bun.

“You're trying these on.” Lena pushed me in front of a three-way mirror, grabbed the heap in my arms, and handed a

dress to me.

I laid the short sparkly dress against my skin, trying to get a feel for it. I rotated my body in the mirror and playfully gave my ass a little pop. I didn't even have the dress on, and I felt amazing—something I hadn't felt in years.

Jason never noticed or even commented when I did anything different with my hair or wore a new outfit. I justified his silence, telling myself men like him didn't pay attention to things like that.

“Beautiful,” Lena said, standing behind me. She gently cupped my hair from behind and draped it in front of my shoulders.

“I haven't worn anything this short in years,” I muttered, letting the dress drop from my body and into my hands.

“That was the past, E. You're young, and you're allowed to look great.”

“What do you expect me to do with all this?” The pile of clothes she returned to me was huge and heavy in my arms.

“I don't know,” she said, pushing me into the dressing room and finding two separate stalls. “Dress up on your days off? Go out? Hell, I would even drive out here to take you. Anything to break you out of this rut.”

Lena lived in San Bernardino, more than an hour away from me, which was probably one of the reasons why we'd drifted apart in the first place. If getting out of bed was a challenge for me, making an hour-long drive to visit with a friend was damn near impossible.

She'd just admitted she was lazy and hated to drive, yet she offered to travel all this way to take me out for a few hours. To make me feel better. I deserved to have fun, right? I shouldn't allow my lack of confidence ruin my life or make me afraid to wear something new. I was *not* going to be that person.

“Okay,” I said before stepping into the empty stall.

She abruptly stopped and stared at me with wide eyes. “Did I hear that right? You don’t want to argue about it?”

“Let’s just try these on!” I laughed.

A few minutes later, I stepped out of the confined room and modeled a rose gold, knotted dress that barely reached my thigh. The material was satin and felt like butter on my skin.

“What about this?” I asked as Lena crept out of her stall.

“You’re buying that dress,” she exclaimed, posing against the door. “Is this sexy or what?” She spun around in the dress she’d tried on.

She knew she could make anything look sexy. She was the girl that exuded confidence, making even the strongest of men beg for her attention.

We tried on a million more dresses, not paying attention to the time or how many dresses I actually liked until we hauled our stuff to the registers. Other than the possibility of getting my hair done, I hadn’t planned on buying anything special. I should’ve known Lena would pull me out of my shell.

After hitting a few more stores, we entered a salon, where I finally had my blonde hair colored a little brighter before being cut and layered. As I ran my fingers through my freshly cut tresses, I felt brand new. Alive. Bouncy. And I loved it. Lena had her naturally wavy hair straightened, making her look like a goddess.

As we headed toward the mall exit, Lena’s eyes lit up at the sight of a bondage-style teddy on display in the Victoria’s Secret window. She said the lingerie “called to her” as she dragged me inside.

“If that’s not me, then I don’t know what is,” she said, rummaging through the rack and holding up a set.

It looked kinky, and I had no idea what the hell she planned to do in that thing. Well, I knew, but damn. Lena shared way too much information with me—things I wished I never knew, like her being a submissive or something. However, I admired her bravery for trying new adventures in the bedroom.

For unknown reasons, I didn't hop on the lingerie bandwagon. As I glanced around the store, I noticed sexy outfits that sparkled, were crotchless, or were covered with tiny bows. I breathed in the sweet, soft fragrance of the store and smiled to myself.

"I assume you already have everything in here," I joked, following her to a different section.

"Yeah," she scoffed, looking through a drawer in her size. "But you can never have too many panties. And something tells me you don't have enough—lingerie, that is."

Before I could reply, a redheaded employee popped up beside us. "Hello, I'm Anna. Do you ladies need help with anything?"

"No, thank you," I declined politely.

"Yes," Lena barked and stood up. "This one needs something sexy, and I'll pay for it. Thanks, Anna."

I gasped in shock but said nothing. Instead, I followed Anna around as she pointed out items that would look nice on me. In the end, I had chosen a red, lacy teddy with a plunging neckline and sheer flyaway skirt that barely covered my ass. Even if I didn't have anyone to wear it for, I could always wear it to bed to boost my self-esteem or something. That was how I saw it anyway. I felt stupid thinking I needed it for someone anyway.

After the much needed girls' day out, Lena dropped me off at home before rushing to her late shift.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be much help or hang out longer!" she yelled from the open window on the driver's side. "If I don't beat traffic, I will lose my job. I love you!"

"I love you too, and it's okay," I said with a bright smile as I stood at the end of my lawn with my shopping bags pooling at my feet.

Just as I reached down to grab a few bags, Tyler pulled into his driveway in his all-black jeep, beeping his horn at me. I laughed as he signaled me to wait. I shook my head, brushing my hair away from my face, when he appeared beside me. He

smelled stronger than usual—a mix of fabric softener and body wash.

Dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, and sneakers, he looked ready for the gym—not that he needed it. I met his eyes, feeling my mouth go dry. The energy he radiated was powerful, sucking me into his natural charm.

“Were you following me?” It was the first thing that came to mind. I noticed his hair was glossy and shiny, possibly wet. Maybe he had just gotten out of the shower. My grip on the handles of the shopping bags tightened at the mere thought.

“You didn’t invite me, so no,” Tyler replied with a smirk. “Nice hair, by the way.”

I choked, trying to fight off the blush that colored my cheeks. His unexpected compliment not only made me smile but also made Jason look like even more of a shitty person.

“Thank you,” I stammered sheepishly, looking away and hiding my face. *Don’t do this, Elyse.*

When I glanced at him again, his eyes spotted the bags in my hands and the remaining ones on the ground.

“Did you buy the whole mall?” he teased, picking up the ones on the lawn and grabbing a few from my hands.

“My friend forced me,” I answered, heading toward my front door.

“I thought you didn’t have friends?”

“I have you and one other person who’s not my sister, but she lives an hour away.”

After unlocking the door and pushing it open, I set the bags on the couch and stretched out my cramped fingers. Tyler gave me a goofy smile and arched an eyebrow.

“What?” I blurted out, waiting for him to stop staring. I hated the awkward silence.

He leaned forward, the Victoria’s Secret bag hanging from his pinky finger.

“Someone’s planning on having a little fun,” he said, clearing his throat with a wink.

I snatched the bag from his hand and hid it behind my back.

“That’s none of your business,” I snapped, setting it on the couch. “Besides, I’m not the only one who saw your little meeting the other night.”

My stomach growled intensely, and I headed toward the kitchen to grab some food.

“So, you were watching me, yeah?” he asked, following me and stopping at the entrance.

“No,” I said, opening and closing the refrigerator before turning around. “Well, I mean, I had to make sure my neighbor wasn’t a creepy killer. Us females have to have each other’s backs, you know?”

“Well, I wouldn’t keep spying on me if I were you. You might not like what you see.”

Did I like what I’d seen last night? No. But it wasn’t my place. He was allowed to do whatever—or whomever—he wanted. He was right. I shouldn’t spy on him. Yeah, he was sexy and sweet, with the chiseled body of a Greek God, but he was also my neighbor. And new friend.

I gulped and sucked in my bottom lip.

“Bye, Tyler,” I said, laying my hand on his chest and pushing him back. “It’s time for you to leave.”

Damn. He was hard as a rock. I quickly pulled my hand back and chuckled nervously.

“What kind of friend are you?” he joked playfully, brushing back my newly highlighted hair. “I guess I’ll see my way out then, huh?”

I laughed and leaned against the wall as he let himself out. My stomach rumbled again, and I wished he had stayed. When I cooked, I preferred to make something for two. Maybe I wanted company. Either way, I could be friendly because he’d

helped me with my shopping bags, and he hadn't tasted anything of mine yet. *That didn't sound appropriate.*

With a resigned sigh, I jogged to the front door and swung it open, noticing he hadn't made it very far—which didn't make sense, considering he only lived thirty feet away. Then again, he seemed to be playing on his phone.

“You hungry?” I shouted, leaning my head against one of the pillars in front of my house with my arms folded.

He stopped in place, put his phone in his pocket, and smiled.

“Damn, I thought you'd never ask, even after I helped you with your bags.”

I clicked my teeth and watched him trot back to my house. His smile was fucking priceless.

“Wow. I just thought you were being nice,” I said as he walked through the front door. *Yes, please. Let yourself in.*

“I'm a very nice guy. Feels like I never left.”

I playfully rolled my eyes and darted toward the kitchen, running through some dinner ideas in my mind. I wanted something quick and easy, but I also wanted to impress him. The last thing I wanted was for him to think I was a bad chef and then cancel our deal.

“So,” he said, leaning back against a chair, cocking his legs open and folding his arms to his chest, “what's on the menu, chef?”

“What are you feeling? I can go fancy or simple,” I said.

He leaned forward, setting his elbows on his thighs as he stared at me. My heartbeat picked up as my eyes met his.

“I don't know. Honestly, when you saw me outside, I was trying to figure out what I wanted.”

I hummed. “Well, what's your favorite food?”

“Don't laugh,” he warned. “Breakfast. I fucking love breakfast. No matter what time of day it is.”

I met his gaze as my mouth dropped wide open. “Seriously? My parents used to make us breakfast for dinner every Friday after school because it was my favorite.”

I smiled at the memory, running my thumb across the gold pendant necklace my mom had given me on my tenth birthday.

“My dad thought something was wrong with me because I loved eating breakfast twice a day,” he confessed. “Something about breakfast for dinner tastes so much better.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Have you ever tried eggs benedict? It’s almost like an open-faced egg sandwich on an English muffin. I promise you’ll like it,” I said, throwing my hair in a ponytail before washing my hands.

“I haven’t had it before, but I wouldn’t promise just yet.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“That I’ll be the judge. And I don’t lie.”

After turning the oven on low and placing a pan on the flame, I scooped butter into the skillet before separating the egg yolks from the whites. I added a pinch of vinegar and lemon juice, just like my mom taught me, to give it acidity.

Usually, I would blast music, but this was a good opportunity to learn more about him. The conversation so far was surprisingly nice and easy and brightened up my day even more.

“So, where are you from?” I asked, perfecting the creamy and rich hollandaise sauce. I used to hate eggs benedict when I was younger, but now it was one of my favorite dishes.

“I’m from Florida—Palm Beach—but I moved here for work. You?” he answered, standing inches away from me as he watched.

The name sounded fancy, like it was a nice place to have grown up. I hadn’t had a chance to travel much, but I wanted to. I had barely seen everything in Pasadena, much less the rest of the world.

“I’m from California but lived in Ontario for most of my life. I miss it sometimes,” I admitted, quickly whisking the eggs over boiling water.

We’d relocated when my mom accepted a promotion. As kids, my sister and I loved it. But as I grew older, I’d wanted to return to California and start a life. Even though we had family in the Ontario area, Alyssa and I had lost touch with most of them after our parents died.

“Why did you move?” Tyler asked, looking at the pictures on my refrigerator. Most of the photos featured Alyssa when she was much younger. She was the cutest little thing ever. She was also a tomboy, needing to be near our dad all the time.

“A new start.”

“I hear that.”

I continued cooking, stealing glances at my new friend. “What kind of work are you doing here?”

“We’re planning on designing environmental houses in a few neighborhoods, but I’m trying to take on my own projects.”

I could hear the excitement and passion in his voice when he talked about his work. I put the finishing touches on the sauce and started on the bacon and ham. He clearly loved his work—and bacon. As soon as he saw the package in my hands, he firmly instructed me to add as much as I could, which led me to believe he ordered takeout most of the time.

“You’re the real deal, Tyler.” I smiled at him as he moved closer toward me. “Can I see some of your work?”

He laughed. “That depends on you and how good your food is.”

“That’s fair.”

I playfully pushed him back as he invaded my personal space. He dramatically fell into my fridge and gasped.

“Since we’re friends, what should I know about you? Or what do you want to tell me?” he asked, returning to the chair in the corner.

“Um, do you want the truth? Promise me you won’t tell a soul, and I mean it,” I said, giving him a serious stare.

“I promise.”

Once I had the muffins on the griddle, I turned around and whispered, “I’m not really a chef.”

“Then what the hell are you?” He laughed, not taking me seriously.

Hell, I didn’t take myself seriously, but since he liked games, I could play a small one.

“I work for the government and professionally kill people. I’m dangerous,” I revealed, dramatically lowering my voice and cautiously glancing around the kitchen.

He gave me a cheeky grin, wetting his lips and nodding seriously.

“Should I worry, Elyse?” He hummed and leaned back in his seat.

Damn. I loved the way my name rolled off his tongue, and I wouldn’t mind listening to it over and over. It didn’t help that his voice was unexpectedly deep.

I cleared my throat and nodded. “You should be scared, actually. If anyone found out I told you, they would kill you.”

“Your hitma—*hitwoman* secret is safe with me.” He pretended to zip his lips. “Besides you working for the government and my death, what else should I know?”

I took the muffins off the griddle and set them on a plate as I started to poach the eggs.

“Uh, okay. My full name is Elyse Marie Acklin, and I’m twenty-six, a Sagittarius. I went to culinary school, and now I’m a chef, working my ass off to get this sous-chef position at my job. I love eighties and nineties movies,” I admitted, wondering why it was so hard to answer this type of question. “I have a little sister, Alyssa, who says whatever she feels, even if it’s embarrassing. I’m a dog person, love the color black, and I like cheap wine and good-ass food. Your turn.”

Tyler tapped his hands on the table. “Tyler James Sullivan. My friends and family call me Ty or Sully, and I’m an Aries. My birthday is April first, and I’m twenty-seven, close as fuck to thirty. I have no siblings, but I’ve always been close with my dad. I love traveling and have been out of the country a lot. I’ve been with my company for a few years. I want a dog because I hate cats. And I used to be a badass kid.”

“Your birthday is on April Fool’s Day?” I teased after plating up our breakfast. “I’m so going to get you good.”

I thought it was hysterical, but Tyler had no expression on his face. Having a birthday on a day made for jokes must have sucked.

He shook his head. “You’re not. I’m used to everything people throw at me.”

“But I’m not people,” I protested, shrugging my shoulders.

“I’ll have to see that for myself.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Tyler

I HATED MOVING.

Growing up, my dad and I had always been on the move—kind of how I was now. I had lived in four states over the past two years, but I'd finally settled down in Pasadena, California. When I was eighteen, I headed straight to the US Navy after high school graduation. During my deployment, I'd traveled to parts of the world most people dream about—Jerusalem, Dubai, Singapore, and more. It hadn't been easy, but I had found my love—and career—in architecture, in which I'd gotten my degree through the military.

I got a good deal on a house, figuring fixing it would make an excellent project. And the neighborhood was nice and quiet, just like Elyse had mentioned. Other than Mrs. Daniels—the older woman with a fetish for young guys—giving me some cookies, I hadn't met anyone else on the street.

I'd been in the house almost a week now, and I still hadn't unpacked anything. This was the first time in a long time that I'd been on my own, and it felt kind of weird. Getting back into the swing of things was a lot harder than I expected. Maybe that's why I enjoyed hanging out at Elyse's place; hers felt so much more settled than mine.

I ripped open the first box in the living room and pulled out a framed picture of my late wife, Jordyn. The photo was of us on our wedding day. *Maybe I ought to unpack this tomorrow*, I thought to myself. It was late—the sun had already gone down—and I knew I should be heading to bed soon anyway. I stared at the picture in my hands. I'd tried forgetting about that night two years before, but the memories flooded my mind.

“Baby,” Jordyn whined, looking over her shoulder while patting her hands on her hair. “Why would you take me to such a nice restaurant when I look like this? I’m in my work clothes.”

She pouted as she waited for my answer from across the table. I never believed a damn thing she said when she complained about her appearance, because in my eyes, she always looked beautiful—even when she was wearing her purple nursing scrubs.

Damn, she was fucking beautiful with no effort. Her dark brown hair dangled past her shoulders, and her full, soft lips were painted in her signature color red. I loved the way she smiled, her cranky attitude when she didn’t get her way, and the way her right eye twitched when she was either excited or afraid.

The woman had some sort of spell over me, because she could never do anything wrong. I fell in love with her the day I met her, and I’d promised I would love her for the rest of my damn life.

“Jordyn?” I said, interrupting her silent tantrum.

I’d managed to snag a reservation at one of the best restaurants in Palm Beach. No one, except for celebrities and other influential people, could walk in and be seated in less than ten minutes. It was always at capacity, with long-ass wait times, and reservations were booked months in advance. So I immediately jumped when a spot opened on Valentine’s Day—a day we both hated with a passion. Every day should be Valentine’s Day when you’re in a relationship. And I’d tried to make Jordyn smile every single damn day.

“And I thought we agreed not to do anything for this stupid day!” she said grumpily, placing a hand on the table.

I laughed a little. “It was the only night I could get a table, but you look beautiful, baby,” I said, making her smile even bigger.

Flowers and white candles decorated our table, per my request when I’d secured the reservation. Due to the romantic

holiday, the restaurant was unsurprisingly filled to capacity with parties and other couples laughing, eating, and bantering.

“I guess that’s cute or whatever,” she said, blowing me a kiss and winking. “I love you for always doing stuff like this for me, even though I complain.”

Although we’d been dating for a little over a year, being in the military had taught me that life was too short not to take risks, and living on the edge wasn’t so bad. After all, I was known to make dumbass decisions. So why stop now?

“Jordyn?” I repeated, covering her hand with mine.

“You didn’t tell me you loved me back,” she complained, not letting me get my words out.

“You know I love you. But I have to ask you something.”

I was nervous, sweating up a storm. I rarely grew nervous, but when I did, it was a hard zone to break out of. I tapped my fingers against the table, building up my courage.

Jordyn took a sip of her water and nodded. “Anything.”

“If I ever asked you to marry me ... Would you?”

I wanted to see her reaction, even though I knew she wouldn’t say no. I just knew her.

She gasped, covering her mouth with her hand, and her eyes widened as if she’d seen a ghost. Then she shook her head and waved a hand around.

“Shut up! Don’t play like that.”

I clicked my teeth, scrambled out of my seat, and knelt on one knee before her as she watched me with her curious brown eyes.

“Tyler, honey, I know you’re pranking me, because that’s what you do,” Jordyn said, trying to reel back her excitement. “I know you would never propose on Valentine’s Day.”

She was right to an extent. I loved joking around with her, and I’d taken the reservation without too much thought. But it was now or never. And I wanted now. I wanted to be with her.

I pulled out a tiny black box and slowly opened it, revealing a small diamond ring. She nearly fell out of her chair, gasping loud enough for the entire restaurant to go silent and focus their attention on us. She didn't even blink or move for a few seconds.

"Everyone's looking," Jordyn whispered, laughing awkwardly. "Like seriously, they are looking right at us."

"I don't care," I muttered, with a goofy grin. "Jordyn, will you—"

"Yes!" she interrupted and shot up from her seat. "Oh my God. Hell yes, I will marry you."

Everyone in the restaurant burst into applause as we held onto each other tightly. I felt her rapid heartbeat against my chest, never wanting to let her go.

"I figured you'd say that," I said cockily, rubbing a hand down her back.

Jordyn pinched me and frowned slightly. "Are we too young for something this big?"

"I know what I want, and I don't care how old we are," I vowed.

"Damn, Sully, open the fucking door, man."

I broke out of my thoughts, hearing loud knocks on my door and my partner, Miguel, yelling. I shook my head, placing the photo back in the box. My crew wasn't supposed to arrive from Florida until later in the week.

I pushed the door open to see my guys—Miguel, Kyle, and Will—standing on the porch in the dark, checking out the neighborhood. The oldest member of the team by a few years, Miguel was married with kids. He kept a serious eye on the rest of us and reminded me of my dad. They were powerful men who got shit done and didn't sugarcoat a damn thing.

Kyle was the party boy, searching for fun all the time. I loved a good time as much as the next guy, but not as much as Kyle. He really took it to another level. Every now and then,

he became a little pushy and spoke without thinking, but for the most part, he was a good man.

Will also had a military background, leaving after four years and learning most of his skills from his years in the service. He was probably the most laid-back one of the group.

“You looked surprised to see us, Sullivan,” he said, slapping hands with me.

I’d arrived ahead of them because I’d needed to finalize the paperwork on the house. They had no reason to be here this early, but it was damn good to see them.

“You know, I was hoping it was this girl I met,” I joked, pushing the door open and joining them on the porch. “But I guess this will do.”

Miguel pushed his shoulder-length, curly hair back. “Damn, you in the fucking suburbs and shit,” he said, looking around at my new neighborhood.

The area wasn’t that big of a change for me, because I practically lived in the suburbs with my dad and then with Jordyn. I liked it, and I imagined myself staying for a while to get myself back together.

“Man, it’s not that bad.”

Before Miguel could reply, Kyle interjected, “Damn. Who the hell is *that*?”

I followed his eyes, and they went straight to Elyse, who was standing on her porch talking on the phone, oblivious to us staring at her. I did a double take. The porch light made her skin glow, and her wavy blonde hair blew in the evening wind. Her denim cutoffs showed off her long, tanned legs, and the neckline on her oversized, white shirt hung off her bare shoulder. I couldn’t deny that she was absolutely gorgeous.

I didn’t realize how hard I was staring until Kyle shoved my shoulders. “Did you hear me?”

“Uh, yeah,” I swallowed, clearing my throat and running my hands through my hair. “That’s my neighbor, Elyse.”

I glanced over again to watch Elyse wrap her arms around her chest and head back inside her house.

Miguel leaned against the side rail that I'd fixed in the first few days of my arrival. "Damn, are there any more houses for rent around here?"

"Bro, don't you have a wife and two girls? Get the hell outta here," Will said, taking a sip from the water bottle in hands.

"Elyse," Kyle said, as if committing her name to memory. "Tyler, I'm staying with you for a few days."

His face always lit up with excitement when he spotted a beautiful woman. Shit, mine probably did too, but I was hell-bent on remaining friends with her. Even though I hadn't spent much time with her, I knew she was a good girl, and I didn't want to fuck that up for her.

"Leave this one alone, Kyle," I warned.

He snickered and waved his hand around. "Why? You fucked her already, didn't you? You always take the good ones."

I smirked because I didn't "take" the good ones. He just had trouble talking to women without shoving his foot in his mouth first.

Miguel nudged me and chuckled. "You should've seen your face when she stepped outside. You're all over this one."

"Shut the hell up," I said, scratching my head and playing it off. "She's gorgeous, but we're just friends."

I knew the guys didn't believe me, because I couldn't be friends with a woman, especially when I hadn't wanted anything serious. When Jordyn had passed away two years before, my heart simply shut down, and my mind wandered into some of the darkest places I'd been. I had no desire to get that close to someone ever again.

Even after two years, the shitty feeling was still raw. It burned inside me. And I'd never been the type of person to open up either. Jordyn had been my entire life. She'd stood by

me through everything—the good and the bad. Losing her changed everything, and I honestly didn't wish that kind of pain on anyone.

What bothered me every single day was that I couldn't fix my life. I fucking fixed everything. I wasn't okay two years ago, and I wasn't much better now. I played it off well, knowing I didn't want to return to the dark places again, but at least I found a distraction in meaningless sex.

I didn't make promises. I didn't do breakfast in the morning. I didn't ask for phone numbers or even give out mine. I just wanted sex. Nothing more. Because nothing more led to feeling nothing at all.

“Let me know when you stop bullshitting. In the meantime, I'm going to find the bathroom,” Will said, slipping past me and inside my house.

“I'm not doing anything with her,” I repeated, taking a deep breath through my nose and rolling my neck. “She seems like she gets attached quickly, and you guys know I don't want a relationship. It would be too fucking messy, with us being neighbors and shit. And besides, I think she's going through some shit herself.”

Miguel pushed me out of the way and headed inside. “Alright. Now, what the hell do you do for fun around here? I don't have Lauren breathing down my back, so let's drink!”

“Great job, Tyler,” Kelly, my new boss, said. “Please leave your sketches and models in my office.”

I finished pitching the new houses for Leed certified houses, explaining the benefits would be reduced energy, water usage, and construction waste, among other things. Even though California has a high greenhouse ranking, one of Kyle's ideas fit perfectly with my designs. Although I didn't mind getting my hands dirty, my strength was in designing, planning, and construction detailing.

I gathered my materials and flash drive and walked out of the meeting room.

“Fucking show off,” Will joked, tapping my back as he walked past me. “You don’t even know how to spell half the shit you said in that meeting.”

“Shit, I probably don’t, but to Kelly I did,” I said with a laugh. “And I have always been good with the ladies.”

“Or so you think,” he said as he disappeared into the break room.

If I was being completely honest, my presentation wasn’t the best, but Kelly laughed and smiled the entire time. I felt pretty fucking good and couldn’t wait to set up some of my work materials at home.

As I dropped off the pitch ideas and designs in Kelly’s cluttered office, I noticed the framed photos of her husband and kids among the piles of paperwork littering her desk. My previous supervisor was a demanding hard ass, but Kelly and the rest of the staff here were laid-back and easygoing.

Located downtown in an immensely tall sky-rise, the primary office occupied multiple floors and was about a thirty-minute commute from my house. The second I pulled into my driveway, Elyse walked out of her house in her chef uniform, a long-sleeved white jacket that buttoned on the side and covered her neck. She wasn’t wearing any makeup, and her typically bouncy hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

Our schedules seemed to clash, as we kept meeting like this—coming or going. As soon as I parked, I sauntered across the grass to find her waiting for me by her car.

“You clean up nice,” Elyse complimented me, her eyes roaming over my outfit. Today, I’d worn a short-sleeved black shirt, burgundy slacks, and black loafers. My normally tousled hair was combed back to match my newly trimmed beard. “Hot date?”

“More like a presentation,” I said with a confident smile. “Nailed it, by the way.”

“Impressive. I want to be just like you when I grow up,” she said in a super sweet voice.

“Ah, and here I was thinking you were the impressive one, chef. But you’re right about one thing: I’m not too bad to look at, either.”

I dug my hands in my pockets, watching her throw her purse over her shoulder as she smiled nervously.

“I don’t want to go to work today,” she whined, turning her rosy lips into a frown. “I need a miracle, because a few days off isn’t enough.”

My heart softened a smidgen. Maybe it was the soft light on her face. Or the little freckles on her top lip. Or her big, bright smile that could melt anyone.

“Alright, what’s the restaurant’s number?” I asked, grabbing my phone from my pocket and tapping my passcode on the screen.

“Why?” she asked, a mixture of suspicion and curiosity in her voice.

The day was sunny and nice, and I liked not sweating the second I stepped outside. I loved California weather because it was not nearly as humid as Florida. I couldn’t imagine life as a chef, being trapped in a hot kitchen for hours on end. The job had to be tough, especially under the constant pressure. But for some reason, I had no doubt she handled it like a pro.

“You said you don’t want to go to work,” I said. “I’m calling in a bomb threat. So, the number?”

Elyse gasped and pushed my phone away.

“You could get in so much trouble if you did that or if anyone heard you say that,” she muttered, cautiously looking around.

We were the only two outside, aside from Mr. Bauer being attacked by his own sprinklers. And still, he paid us no mind.

“You’ll be my accomplice then,” I said, arching my eyebrow. “You ready for that? They might check my phone

and see your name. You should know that, working for the government and all.”

Elyse shrugged and looked at me as she batted her long eyelashes.

“You’re right,” she said, pointing an index finger at me. “If my boss and staff piss me off tonight, I’ll text you to call it in.”

“So, you okay with being my partner?”

“Tyler, they have kitchen jobs in jail, and I probably won’t have to work that hard,” she said, walking around me to the driver’s side. “But orange isn’t really my color.”

I leaned my arm against the hood of her car as she put her chin in her hands. “I think you’ll be fine. We could match.”

“We can be the friend version of Bonnie and Clyde, bomb threat edition.”

I laughed. “Let’s do it.”

“As much as I would like to keep you company, I have to go, or else I’ll get the cold shoulder from my boss,” she said, opening the door as she threw her purse in the passenger side of her gray Toyota.

“I can handle it,” I said, tapping my knuckle against the hood of the car. “Just need the green light.”

“You just think you can handle anything, don’t you?”

“Just about.”

After I watched her leave, I tapped my phone against the palm of my hand and headed back to my house when I heard a familiar voice call out my name. I turned to see Mrs. Daniels waving at me.

“Can you come help me out, honey? I can’t get this window open.” She winked, running her free hand through her long, gray hair as she wiggled her tiny body.

CHAPTER SIX

elyse

AFTER WORKING three long twelve-hour shifts, it was finally Friday. Because the restaurant had a full staff, Dave literally pushed me out the back door early, and I wasn't going to question that. But because I was dedicated to my work, I offered my help to anyone else on my way out. They all refused and tattled to Dave, who opened the door for me.

I pretty much had the rest of the afternoon to myself, with the sun still out. But all I wanted to do was shower and watch movies. I had absolutely no motivation, considering I woke up at the butt crack of dawn for work. But at the same time, I had no other plans. My life became an exhausting routine of waking up to the same thing every day.

After finishing a nice, long bath, I fashioned myself in my pink robe and collapsed on top of my bed. Just as I grabbed the TV remote, my phone chimed.

If it's my work, I'm going to fucking scream.

Tyler: Get dressed.

Me: For what?

Tyler: I've been sitting in the same spot for eight hours, and I need to do something. We're going to buy the stuff I need to start your house.

I rolled my eyes as I glanced between my phone screen and my comfy bed. Why did Tyler's needy ass want to buy supplies today? Why?

Me: I'm sleeping! You're the expert. Go by yourself, I trust you.

Tyler: Don't make me come get you. It's Friday. Stop being lazy.

Me: Oh no, my eyes are closing ...

Tyler: I know how to pick locks. I'm on my way.

Me: Fine. I'll be out soon.

After dropping my phone somewhere on my bed, I buried my face in the pillow and pounded my fists against the comforter. *Why can't I be rude?*

I should have ignored him and left him hanging. He was a smart guy; he would've figured something out. I didn't know anything about tools, so walking around a hardware store sounded boring. But I owed him because he was fixing my stuff and renovating my basement.

With a resigned sigh and getting a small second wind, I pushed myself off the bed and headed toward the closet. The loud sound of the horn on Tyler's jeep made me jump out of my skin and pull the first thing from my closet.

Hearing beep after beep, I hurriedly slipped into a rust-colored floral print dress that frilled around the bottom of my thighs. Throwing on a pair of sandals and teasing my hair a teeny bit with my fingers, I cursed at him as he continued to honk the damn horn because I hadn't had time to throw on any makeup.

I wanted to look somewhat presentable without giving him the idea I was trying to impress him. Because I wasn't. After all, he had seen me heading to work without makeup. I wondered if he found me attractive. Because I knew for sure he was the most attractive person I had ever seen.

Another beep. I had no doubt a neighbor or two would complain about his annoying habit.

To piss him off, I took my time heading down the stairs before finally wandering outside. Tyler glared at me with tight lips, watching me walk deliberately and exaggeratedly slow.

Ha! Joke was on him.

He opened the passenger door for me from the driver's seat.

"I would've closed the door for you too, but you took too damn long," he said, playfully shaking his head as I closed the door. "Women."

I set my purse to the side and scoffed. "Maybe if you didn't beep like a damn maniac. You distracted me."

I briefly wondered if he drove like a damn maniac too. But then again, Alyssa was the worst driver in the history of driving. The last time I was in the car with her, she almost hit an older man who had the right of way. She swore up and down that she did—she didn't. The kicker was, I was the one who taught her how to drive.

While Tyler focused on the road, I caught a glimpse of him from the side of my eye. With one hand gripping the steering wheel, he leaned back, his biceps poking through the sleeves of his off-white shirt. Every crease and line in his abs showed through the shirt—even his nipple. I switched my vision from the road to him every so often, sucking in my bottom lip.

"Distracted?" Tyler mocked, checking for passing cars in his mirrors. "Don't you like to have fun on Fridays?"

As I stared out the window, watching the other cars on the highway, I realized I couldn't remember the last time I'd gone out on a Friday.

As I turned toward him to answer, I caught him studying my legs. The wind nudged the hemline of my dress up a bit, exposing more of my skin to him. I quietly cleared my throat, feeling my body warm as I hastily pushed my dress down.

"Sometimes I go to the bar with my coworkers. That's fun," I said before realizing how pathetic it had sounded.

My smile disappeared as I twirled my hair in my fingers, desperately wishing I hadn't said it. Going to the bar with my coworkers was fun, but then again, all we talked about was cooking.

"Jesus, princess," he said, rolling his neck and glancing over at me. "What the hell kind of fun is that? You better be

glad you met me.”

The pet name made me blush slightly. And the way he sounded when he called me “princess,” ugh. It was fucking hot.

“Baby steps,” I muttered, turning my head the opposite way.

Tyler’s face lit up like a Christmas tree when we finally arrived at the hardware store. He truly lost his shit, immediately jumping out of the car as if he’d spotted his favorite boy band in the parking lot. I chuckled, watching him rub his hands together excitedly and smile so brightly that I got goosebumps. He was always chipper and in a good mood, but this was different. I was seeing him in his natural habitat.

He stopped in front of the entrance and turned to face me as he clapped his hands down on my shoulders.

“You ready to see my neck of the woods?” he asked, brushing away strands of my hair behind my back.

I stared into his eyes too long, blinking all over his face and his perfect, silky skin.

“I don’t think I have a choice,” I murmured, resting my hands in the creases of his extended arms and loving the warmth of his skin. *Step away, Elyse.*

“Nah, you don’t,” he said, dropping his hands and pulling away to enter the large warehouse-looking building.

The inside was painted gray and seemed endless, with soaring high ceilings, bright lights, and tools and supplies galore. The array of different colored plants in the front was a delicate touch. As we walked, I noticed the store was filled with the smell of wood.

Jason rarely picked up a tool unless he needed to hammer a nail into the wall. My best fixes involved tape—so much tape.

“I hope this place isn’t shit. I had to Google it,” he said, glancing around.

“It’s cute how excited you get over tools.”

“The same way you get about cooking?”

“I guess so,” I said, shrugging and grabbing an oversized cart. “So, where to, boss?”

Watching him touch and explain everything fascinated me, as we walked through aisle after aisle. He tried to describe the purpose of some tools, but mostly everything he said went in one ear and out the other.

I still had fun, laughing at him when he playfully pushed the cart around and accidentally crashed into things. Or gently nudged the cart into my waist to make me walk faster.

I left him in the nail section when I headed for the bathroom. Fortunately, he was in the same spot when I returned, reading something on the back of a box. I grabbed a drill from a nearby display, suppressing a giggle.

“Do you need this?” I blurted out, running up on him.

He dropped the package and turned around to find me aiming the drill at him as if it were a gun.

“Shit!” he exclaimed as I gently pressed it to his chest, making him laugh.

“What’s so funny?” I scowled as he picked up the fallen box and threw it into the cart.

“You,” he said, leaning so close I could smell the mint flavor of his gum. “And no, I have three of them. Also, that’s not how you hold a gun.”

“Oh, yeah?” I returned the drill to the display at the end of the aisle. “How would you know that? Do you have one?”

Even though I had never touched a gun before, I thought about getting at least a gun license for some sort of protection.

“I was in the navy for four years,” he said after a few seconds of silence.

So many questions immediately flew into my mind. Did something happen to him during his deployment? Was there information he couldn’t share with anyone? Was he ever sent

on super-secret missions? Was now the right time to ask my questions?

“What job did you have in the service?” I asked, crossing my fingers. It was the safest question.

“I was a gunner’s mate and often taught people how to shoot. So, I can be the one to tell you that you were holding the drill wrong.”

I didn’t ask any more questions as we continued to pick up supplies. Being the expert he was, he even saved measurements on his phone for when we needed some wood cut. We joked around while we waited, acting like bratty kids. I was having a good time—in a fucking hardware store on a Friday night.

“It wasn’t so bad, huh?” he asked about fifteen minutes later as we stood in line at the checkout registers.

He towered over the Pepsi cooler, using it as an armrest. I rolled my eyes and scoffed.

“Tyler, we’ve been in here for over an hour,” I said, making a face. “Not that bad. Right.”

With only two customers ahead of us, the line was slow as hell. Yeah, I didn’t have anywhere else to be, but this was not my scene.

“How did I forget the most important thing? I’ll be right back,” he said, walking away before turning back. “Don’t talk to strangers.”

I smiled, watching him disappear, and wondered why I felt different when I was around him. Sure, he was a fun guy with a laid-back smile and easygoing nature, but I’d never had this type of connection with any guy. So easy. I blamed my lack of a social life and my inability to confide in my friends other than Alyssa and Lena.

As I leaned my elbows against the cart and dropped my head, I heard a familiar voice call my name.

“Elyse?”

I froze in place, debating whether I should even turn around and answer the last person I had expected to hurt me so deeply. On some level, I knew this day would come, because we lived in the same area and shopped in the same locations. I just wished the day hadn't come so soon—or ever.

I took a deep breath and slowly lifted my head. Even though Alana stood behind her cart full of building supplies, I noticed her small belly straining against her tight shirt. Her ginger-colored hair was still straight, and her deep blue eyes carefully watched me.

“Get away from me, Alana,” I hissed, lowering my voice and glaring at her.

She reached her pale, dainty hand out for mine as I pulled away.

“And don't touch me,” I snapped.

“Can we talk?” she pleaded. “Just for a few minutes. Please?”

I didn't want to hear anything she had to say. We'd been best fucking friends for years. We'd stood by each other through some real shitty times.

My skin burned with rage, and my pulse beat against my flesh. My hands gripped the metal bar of the cart as I tried to control my breathing. I bit down on my lip, trying not to laugh, because this shit was hysterical.

“There's nothing more that you could possibly say to me that I don't already know, Alana,” I said in a low breath. “You're a lying, backstabbing bitch, in case you forgot. You must've lost your mind. Maybe it's a pregnancy side effect.”

Alana angrily sucked in her pink lips and took a second to get herself together. “I-I deserved that. I know I hurt you, and I will never forgive myself. It was a mistake. This shouldn't have happened, because you're my best friend. You always will be, despite what I've done to you. The first couple of times, I was drunk—”

Seriously? She's losing it.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” I laughed, feeling a burning sensation in my eyes. “It wasn’t just a mistake to me, okay? You were going to be my bridesmaid, and you helped me pick out my wedding dress. You fucking took *everything* away from me, and I was always there for you—when your parents divorced, when your dad got sick, when you almost lost your apartment. I was there. I would have given you the fucking clothes off my back, and you knew that. And that’s why you took advantage of me. “

I guess I’m losing it too.

Alana gasped and pitifully looked down. “I want to explain everything to you, if you’d just listen to me. I didn’t mean to hurt you, but Jason and I were both in a bad place.”

She started crying, probably hoping I would feel bad for her.

“Anything else you’d like to tell me about my fiancé, since you know so much?” I massaged my temples, stepping forward with the line. “Oh, *ex-fiancé*, thanks to you.”

A few customers stared at us, but I didn’t care. I could barely stand to look at her, even if she was fucking pregnant. Alana’s special talent was making everything about her.

“Jason and I were both in a bad place.” They were hurting. But what the fuck about me? Who gave a fuck about my feelings?

“The first couple of times, I was drunk.” Jason had revealed the affair went on for months. So, was she drunk all that time?

“Elyse—” she tried again.

“I got you a water because I didn’t want you yelling at me about not getting you one too,” Tyler interrupted with a laugh.

I quickly stared at the floor, feeling the tears well in my eyes. But I held it off well. I didn’t want him seeing or knowing this part of me, and I desperately wished Alana would just walk away. Everything I had been working on had completely vanished, and I felt like I was drowning inside my

own body again. No matter what I did or said, I couldn't break free. And it was a fucking shitty feeling.

“Uh, who are *you*?” Tyler asked, glancing between Alana and me.

“No one important,” I said, looking away. “Excuse me.”

Before either one could say another word, I jogged outside, my head spinning and my face wet with tears. Why did seeing her and hearing her stupid excuses cut so deep? Why did she have to be there during my first trip to a hardware store? Why today?

Jason's proposal, our discussions about babies, and everything in between swept through my mind as I raced toward Tyler's jeep. I had been so damn blind to every red flag that had furiously waved in front of my face. I had been so naïve and stupid, believing every single lie. My dumb ass had supported him like his damn mom. No wonder it had been so easy for him to cheat.

When I got to Tyler's car, I leaned against the passenger side door and took a deep breath. Clasp my arms around my stomach, I sobbed and took a deep breath. I wanted to remain positive. I wanted to believe in myself. Most people needed closure in this type of situation, but me? I never wanted to see them again. I just wanted to be fucking happy.

“Elyse!”

I opened my eyes, furiously wiping away the tears with the back of my hand, as Tyler approached with the cart full of supplies. Even when I dropped my head to avoid his gaze, I still felt his eyes burning through me, waiting for answers.

“What happened back there?” he asked, running his hands down my arms.

“Nothing. Do you need help to put everything in the back? I'll pay you back when we get home,” I said, clearing my throat and playing it off. “I'm sorry I bailed.”

Please let it go.

“It didn’t look like nothing to me. You’re crying, and don’t worry about the supplies right now.”

I let out a long sigh. “Tyler—”

He cut me off. “I told you not to talk to strangers.”

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. “Should’ve listened.”

He still didn’t let me go. His hands gripped my shoulders and his eyes looked deeply into mine. I hated the sad look on his face. I didn’t want or need his pity. Besides, I cried when I was frustrated.

“Who was she? That girl?”

“I told you.” I tried pushing out of his hold, but he overpowered me.

Tyler scoffed at my stubbornness. “No, you told me ‘no one important.’ I don’t think that answered my question.”

“Exactly.”

He stepped back and rotated his jaw. “You know that’s not going to work. Don’t shut down.”

“Tyler,” I said, shaking my head and turning toward the door.

I laid my forehead against the warm window, hoping he’d get the hint that I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want to explain anything to him. I just wanted to return to my bed and do what the hell I was supposed to be doing—sleeping. None of this would’ve happened if I had just stayed home.

“Please stop asking questions and let it go, please? I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Can we go home?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

elyse

MY MIND CONTINUED to torture to me when I returned home from the hardware store. As soon as Tyler parked in his driveway, I ran off without saying a word.

Seeing Alana had reminded me of what I could've had, but now, I wondered if I'd really wanted that. Had I really wanted that with Jason? My mom once told me to never give myself to a man unless I was fully happy. I desperately wanted to be happy and have purpose, and maybe that was why I ignored the obvious.

I wanted what my parents had. The way my dad looked at my mom was priceless, heartwarming. He probably would've been disappointed in me if I had settled down with someone like Jason.

To rid my mind of the memories still floating around, I started baking. I had no idea what I wanted to make, but I didn't care. My hands mindlessly pulled everything out—mixers, pans, spatulas, flour, chocolate—and went to work.

But my damn thoughts became louder and louder, and I couldn't focus. I was a hot mess, suddenly forgetting how to even fucking bake.

“Agh!” I shouted to no one, leaning against my kitchen island and cupping my hands behind my neck as I stared at the mess and gave into my thoughts.

Is there something wrong with me?

Was I not good enough?

Am I going to be alone forever?

Our wedding would have been less than four months away. But now, instead of counting down to tie the knot, Jason was counting down the months until his new baby arrived. He fucking destroyed me.

With a sigh, I pushed myself off the counter and started cleaning up the mess. *How did so much chocolate get on the damn floor? Fuck.* I swiped the back of my hand across my forehead, when, suddenly, the doorbell rang. I frowned.

Ignoring whoever was at my door, I continued to clean until I heard loud knocking. Whenever I wanted company, no one was around, but when I needed space, everyone wanted to be in my face.

I stalked toward the front door and swung it wide open.

“What the hell is on your face?” Tyler asked, narrowing his eyebrows.

I laughed pathetically. “I-I got into a fight with the flour, I guess.”

“You look like shit.”

He leaned against the door frame, flashing me a witty smile as I rolled my eyes.

“Wow,” I gasped flatly. “Way to make a girl feel nice.”

Just as I turned to head back to the kitchen, his hand shot out and gently grabbed my wrist. Without a word, his thumb softly circled around my skin as he guided me in front of him. *Oh, God.*

“You’re coming out with us tonight,” he said, dropping my wrist and cupping his freshly shaved jawline.

“With whom?” I scoffed, making a sour face. “No, I’m not.”

My rotten attitude would definitely make him and his friends—whom I didn’t even know—miserable.

“My friends got here the other day, and they want to go out,” Tyler said, shrugging, as he watched me with a twinkle in his eye. “I know you’re going through something you don’t

want to talk about, but I know this isn't the right way to go about it. I'm trying to, you know, be a friend."

I opened my mouth to turn down the invitation, but he cut me off. "Say no, and I'll bang on your door all night. And don't think I'm lying."

"I'll just call the cops. Do you have an answer for that one?" I spat, putting my foot down.

"No, you won't," he shot me down. "You're not a snitch."

I whined about not being in the mood to go out, but he stubbornly begged and listed several good reasons that I should hang out with him and his friends.

"I'm not leaving until you say yes," he barked, giving me a blank stare, as if he was trying to intimidate me. "And take that fucking look off your face. It's not working on me."

I sighed, glancing down at the dress I had worn to the hardware store, and thought about how much I still needed to get done.

Ah, fuck.

"Where, Tyler? And can I invite my sister?" I gave in exasperatedly.

"Clubhouse," he answered with excitement, crashing his fist into the palm of his hand. "And invite whomever you want."

If Lena hadn't lived an hour away or wasn't always working, I would've asked her too.

"Now, go get that shit off your face. I'll see you there," Tyler said, flashing me a smile as he disappeared through the front door.

I immediately grabbed my phone to call Alyssa, knowing she wouldn't say no to a night out, especially when she had the night off. Because if she couldn't go, I wouldn't go.

“Don’t touch!” Alyssa slapped my hand when I tried to touch my hair.

My sister didn’t want my first night out as a single woman to be with me looking like I had just rolled out of bed. So, she treated me like a doll, curling my hair, painting my nails, and doing my makeup.

I fidgeted in my seat, excited to see myself, because it had been so long since I’d worn makeup. She sprayed my hair, held my chin, and ran some lipstick across my lips.

“Almost done,” she murmured as I studied her perfect look for herself: bold red lips, smoky eyes, and straight hair.

“You said that twenty minutes ago,” I teased.

“Shut up. See, sissy, you’re beautiful.”

I turned and looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. “Wow.”

My eyelids were painted gold, my lips nude, and my eyelashes swept up and voluminously away from the center of my face. My hair was loosely curled, with a deep part flipping it over to the other side of my head.

“I don’t even look like myself. You did amazing, Lyss. Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, ever. Now put some clothes on.”

She slipped into a silver, sequined, short strapless dress that sparkled in my bedroom light and ran her hands through her hair. She looked a fashion model, and she knew it.

I smiled like a proud older sister. “You look incredible.”

“And you do too. First, promise me you’ll have fun tonight. I miss how things used to be, how you used to be, and I’m sorry I keep saying that. But it’s so damn hard to get anything through your thick-ass skull.”

“I saw Alana today,” I admitted as I stood in front of my closet, scanning the selection of dresses.

I'd thought about keeping the incident to myself, but I knew Alyssa would either knock some sense into me or knock me out of my bitter mood. I needed her help to move on. I knew if I stayed home, I would wallow in sadness and wonder how everything had gone to hell.

"What?" she shouted, her eyes wide with shock. "What happened? Did you hit her? Shit, I would've."

I laughed. "She's pregnant, Lyss. And it sucked so damn bad. She wanted to talk, but I didn't. Not anymore. The hell would she even say to me?"

I slid into a white, silky, off-the-shoulder dress that barely skimmed my thighs and featured a plunging neckline—one of the many dresses I bought during my shopping excursion with Lena.

Catching a glimpse of myself in my full-body mirror, I ran my hands over my hips as words failed me. I couldn't believe I was looking at ... me.

"I know it's going to hurt, and you know what? I'm going to be here every step of the way," Alyssa said, reaching for my hand and squeezing it tight. "I can't imagine what you went through, but don't make this your life, Elyse. You're the strongest person I know, and even though you don't think that, I look up to you. You can do this."

If my younger sister had faith in me, maybe I should too.

"I needed that," I said, returning the squeeze. "I keep telling myself that mom would kill me for how I've been acting if she were here. I got this."

She cupped the side of my face. "Now believe it and finish so we can drink."

An hour later, Alyssa and I were in the bar, sucking down liquor.

“Four tequila shots, please,” Alyssa yelled to the bartender, placing cash on the wooden counter.

Located in the heart of the city, Clubhouse was one of the most popular nightclubs in Pasadena. We remained on the lower level, because the second floor was reserved for VIPs to discreetly request strippers that would do anything for the big spenders. Maybe it wasn't that discreet if even *I* knew what went on behind closed doors on the top floor.

People crowded the first floor, the music so loud that it vibrated the shimmery epoxy. Bright, colorful strobe lights danced around the jam-packed building.

I was surprised we'd found an open spot by the bar.

“Should we toast this time?” Alyssa asked, laughing and swaying in place to the music.

I flipped my hair behind my back and held up the first shot.

“We take these now, before I change my mind,” I said with a chuckle, clinking my glass against hers and drowning it.

The cold liquid traveled down my throat, burning my stomach instantly. I nearly gagged. I shook my head vigorously, causing my hair to smack me in the face. The last time I'd thrown back shots was in college. Now, I was more of a chill drinker, not wanting to feel like shit the next day.

“That was fucking horrible,” I said, watching Alyssa, who didn't even appear to be bothered by the taste.

“Oh, toughen up, buttercup!”

She handed me the second shot, which I immediately sucked down. Surprisingly, this one went down a lot smoother, and I started feeling pretty damn good. Not drunk, but just good enough to haul my ass onto the dance floor.

“Alyssa,” a male voice called out.

We turned to find a tall, muscular guy carefully watching us.

“Why didn’t I see you come in tonight?” he questioned, glancing at her before darting his sapphire-colored eyes in my direction.

I nervously met his gaze as I noted his heavily tattooed body, the short-sleeved black shirt, his baggy pants, thick work boots, and blonde hair. I couldn’t remember the last time someone this attractive had looked at me—like he wanted to devour me. How did Alyssa know *him*?

She hummed and arched her eyebrow. “Maybe if you were, you know, doing your job, guarding the door, you would’ve seen me. But no, we had to wait outside for twenty minutes.”

“There’s more to my job than standing at the door,” he replied, before peering over at me again. “Where’s Cory?”

So, he knew her boyfriend.

Alyssa annoyingly puffed her cheeks. “He knows I’m out. Mind your business, Caden.”

“Who’s this?” he asked, giving me his entire attention with a crooked, curious smile. I awkwardly smiled and pushed a piece of my hair behind my ear. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say this is your sister.”

Alyssa shot me a look. “She *is* my sister, dumbass.”

He extended his hand and flashed me a toothy smile. “Caden.”

“Elyse.” I slipped my hand in his.

“Wow. You’re beautiful. No wonder Alyssa’s been hiding you.” He squeezed my hand and didn’t let go until I pulled away.

“Nice meeting you, and thank you.”

“I’ll catch you around, Elyse,” he said, making a face at Alyssa but softly nudging her, as he disappeared into the busy crowd.

I faced the bar and gripped the edge, rocking my hips to keep my mind busy and letting the music travel through my

body. I couldn't remember the last time someone had hit on me. As for tonight, I didn't mind the random stares from the guys that were huddled around the bar.

I glanced over my shoulders, trying to spot Tyler, but at the same time, I didn't want to look desperate, like I was waiting for him. Well, I *was* waiting for him. What if he'd changed his mind? What if something had come up?

"So, how do you know Caden?" I asked, watching the bartender mix a martini.

"He's Cory's older brother," Alyssa said with a snicker. "Speaking of, he was hitting on you. If you don't give him your number, I will."

"Not looking."

"There is nothing wrong with having friends—or sex."

Of course. It seemed all she cared about was sex.

We talked and joked as we ordered more drinks. I gasped and jumped back when someone's fingers gripped my hips.

Was someone hitting on me *again*?

As I turned around, my eyes widened with shock to find Tyler looking just as surprised. He stepped back and swallowed so hard that I heard it over the loud music.

I parted my lips as my eyes roamed over his body. He wore black jeans that cut out at the knees and an off-white shirt paired with a leather jacket. His hair slicked back and his scent unfamiliar, woody and masculine, and different from the one I'd smelled on him before.

"Damn," he said as he openly checked me out. "Elyse, I didn't even know it was you."

Was that his way of picking up women in a bar?

He tried playing it off, but his touch made me feel and want something I didn't even know I craved.

"I was looking for you," I said quickly, filling the awkward silence between us.

Breaking our weird, intense eye contact, I stared at my sister, wondering when the hell she would interrupt us and relieve us from the chilly impasse.

We're just friends. Why is this so weird?

Tyler wet his lips and laughed through his nose. "You, uh, you look—"

I finally realized he had never seen me dress up before. Whenever we saw each other, I was either lounging around in comfy clothes or dressed in my chef's jacket. And I'd always been without a dust of makeup.

"Amazing, right?" Alyssa finally finished for him. "We didn't really properly meet the last time we saw each other. I'm Elyse's sister, Alyssa."

The second he took his eyes off me to shake her hand, I released a long breath and simply smiled.

"The one with no filter?" he joked, letting her hand go. "Nice meeting you."

My sister gasped mockingly. "You said that about me? You bitch, I have a filter."

"You sure about that?" I laughed as she playfully gave me the finger.

"No, but I'm sure about how you told me about Tyler's body and how you thought he was—"

I cupped my hand over her mouth at an incredible speed that amazed even me.

"I-I—she made that up," I stammered, feeling my face heat to a deep, deep shade of red.

Why had I wanted her to interject again? The awkward staring contest was more fun than *this* uncomfortable conversation.

"Please," I muttered, shaking my head and pulling my hand away.

"You're lucky I just saw an old friend," she said with a flirty wink. "Nice meeting you, Tyler. I will be back."

She took off into the crowd, leaving me alone with Tyler. His gaze fell on me again after a moment of silence.

“I’m happy you’re smiling now. It looks good on you,” he complimented me. “You look incredible, Elyse.”

“So, I look incredible because I’m dolled up and barely dressed?” I teased, wondering where his friends were.

Maybe guys didn’t stick together as much as women did.

“No. I-I mean, you look incredible all the time. Well, since I’ve known you,” he stammered uncomfortably, barely getting his words out.

Is he nervous?

“I’m going to shut up now.” He stepped into an open space by the counter.

I looked up at him through my coated eyelashes. “Thank you, Tyler. You do, too.”

“This is quite a difference from the flour fight earlier,” he joked, making me bite down on my smile.

“You just had to ruin it, huh?”

He waved down the bartender. “Maybe. And you shouldn’t be talking about your friend’s body like that.”

I swallowed deeply, my eyes wide from embarrassment. He knew what he was doing, and he succeeded in deflecting the topic. The few times I had seen him shirtless was enough to make me wonder what he looked like naked.

“That was before we became friends, so don’t push it. I would never.”

“I’m just playing. I definitely said some things about you before I met you,” Tyler said with a dangerous wink.

I sucked in my bottom lip and released it. “Hopefully, not bad things. I know we didn’t meet in the most ideal of circumstances.”

“Definitely not bad. Well, it depends on how you think about it.”

Oh, I'm thinking about it alright.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tyler

"AFTER THIS DRINK, I'm going to embarrass myself hoping to take that girl home with me," Kyle announced, pointing to a brunette in a skin-tight latex dress on the dance floor.

He sucked his bourbon back, giving him the liquid courage he desperately needed, and ran his hands through his light, espresso-colored hair.

Even though my friends and I had only been here for a few hours, I definitely approved of this place. Florida nightclubs were pretty wild, but here too, the crowd radiated energy. Everyone danced, some even jumped around, and the fucking women swayed to the music in barely-there outfits. Besides, they even hit on us too.

Fortunately, Miguel had managed to reserve a section because he didn't dance. He had no problem hanging back to watch the table—and the drinks.

"Man, I'm going to be the only one coming home with you," he said, adjusting his button-up shirt and earning a laugh from the group.

With a house in Florida and the other expenses that came with having a wife and two daughters, Miguel was crashing rent-free in Kyle's rental house. I didn't blame him one bit.

Kyle scoffed and looked over his shoulder again. "I'll leave the garage unlocked for you tonight. It might be a little too loud for your old-ass ears, bud."

"Caught Elyse looking back here twice," Will announced. Everyone focused their attention on me as I sucked back my whiskey.

Honestly, I kept looking at her too, when she was too busy to notice me. Just a few hours ago, she'd completely shut down, and now, no one could even tell. She danced with her sister as if no one was around. With her hands waving in the air and the hemline of her dress rising every so often, she looked beautiful as hell. And she probably didn't even know it.

Hell, I didn't even know, as I inadvertently hit on her at the bar. The curves and definition of her body—the one she always hid—caught my eye, and I thought I'd hit the jackpot. *Snap out of it, Ty.*

I had definitely been thrown off my game when she'd turned around.

I cleared my throat and bobbed my head to the loud music. “You sure about that?”

“She's pretty as hell,” Kyle said. “You'd be stupid not to take her home.”

“Guess I'll be stupid.”

“And Alyssa?” Will asked, rolling his neck back. “I'm about to walk my ass over there and get her.”

“She has a boyfriend,” I said, laughing. He shrugged.

“I'm just saying, she probably never had a man before,” he said, standing up and heading toward the girls, who were on the dance floor.

A few moments later, Kyle and I pushed our way through the packed floor. I grimaced a bit as sweaty bodies bumped into me and rubbed against me. For a few seconds, I believed the floor would collapse at any moment from all the jumping, dancing, and pushing.

“You look lame as hell dancing alone,” I yelled in Elyse's ear, approaching her from behind.

She energetically turned around and smiled brightly. “Then dance with me.”

Her hips swayed as she moved closer to me. She ran her hands through her curled hair, the strobe lights illuminating

her bright blue eyes. Everyone around her seemed to melt away.

Even though Will didn't waste any time chatting up Alyssa, he kept his hands to himself. He was gentleman, one who didn't chase another man's woman.

I yelled over the music. "Isn't that a little weird?"

She rolled her eyes. "You've never danced with friends before? Come on ... Please?"

Her alcohol tolerance surprised the shit out of me. She had a new drink in her hand every time I'd glanced at her. For someone so tiny, she could really hold her liquor.

Even though I had no idea how to dance, I couldn't say no—not to her.

"Fine, but only because I need the practice," I joked, moving my big feet a little.

Elyse grabbed my hands and placed them on her hips. Even if touching her was harmless, I hesitated at first, not trusting myself. I knew my friends would all give me shit about this later.

"Here," she said, placing her hands on my chest. "Let me show you. I don't bite."

She rolled her hips, swaying her body back and forth. I studied the way she moved and the big smile on her face. I simply held my hands on her hips, trying damn hard not to let them wander down the rest of her body.

When the beat changed, she turned around and closed the space between us, pressing her ass flush against me. She danced as if she didn't have a care in the world, letting her mind and body free for the first time since I'd met her.

When the song faded, she stepped forward and almost lost her balance, but I quickly held onto her hips tighter and held her back against me. Before I could say anything, Alyssa grabbed her hands and tugged her away from me.

"Did that dance make you reconsider being more than friends?" Kyle asked with a wicked grin.

“No,” I scoffed. “But it made me consider getting another drink. I’ll be back.”

I palmed his shoulder before shoving through the crowd. One quick look at Miguel told me he was fine, as his head moved with the beat of the music and his hand curled around a beer bottle.

When I made it to the bar, my eyes immediately locked onto a sexy woman sitting on a stool. To be fair, her eyes found mine first, silently inviting me over. Getting laid wasn’t my first priority when I decided to go out, but my dick stirred at the way the woman gazed at me with desire. *Shit.*

Other than one meaningless fling when I’d first arrived in California, I hadn’t been with anyone else. And right now, I could really use a distraction.

“Anyone sitting here?” I asked, strolling over to an empty stool beside her. I already knew the answer to my question.

She turned slightly, pushing a single strand of her long brown hair behind her ear, further exposing her face to me.

“Be my guest.”

When she fully turned toward me to pat the empty seat, I noticed her tits damn near spilling from her tight tank top. I dug my hands in my pockets and licked my lips.

After sitting down, I flagged down a bartender and ordered a whiskey.

I introduced myself as I sipped my drink. “I’m Tyler.”

She lazily swung her feet around, purposefully brushing against my leg.

“Veronica, but people call me Vee,” she said, fiddling with the strap on her shirt before pushing her hair back. “I’ve had my eyes on you all night. Bet you didn’t notice.”

“Are you here alone? I’d hate for your boyfriend to see you staring at me all night.”

I quickly threw back the rest of my drink, which didn’t faze me in the slightest. The liquid just made me want to get

the hell out of here even faster.

Veronica laughed and set her glass down. “No boyfriend. I’m here with friends, who seem to be having a better time than me.”

She tapped her red nails against the surface of the bar and gave me a mischievous grin. The woman had an air of mystery about her. I kinda liked it. She seemed like she didn’t want anything but sex and a good time. And I could definitely provide both.

“And why is that?” I asked, playing her flirty little game.

She touched her top lip with her tongue. “I wish I knew the answer. Help me?”

“You want to get out of here?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to ask that since you came over.”

I threw some cash on the bar, stood up, and held out my hand for her. Leaving her colorful drink unfinished, she quickly hopped off the stool and impatiently guided us to an exit on the other side of the club. My eyes followed her lush ass as my eyes roamed down to her sleek heels, which adding a few inches to her height.

The second I took my eyes off her and glanced around the club, I caught Elyse’s gaze. She was headed toward the bar but stopped suddenly when she spotted me. I couldn’t read the expression on her face as she watched me, and I wouldn’t have broken eye contact so quickly, but Veronica yanked me into her body as she leaned against the wall. My short attention span was immediately focused on the eager woman dying for me to take her back to my place.

A fight near the exit held up the line, forcing people to wait momentarily. Veronica didn’t seem to mind, as she nibbled on my neck and whispered crazy things in my ear. My hands grazed down her ribs and gripped her ass, making her gasp with surprise.

“If you don’t stop, the entire bar will get a show,” I said cockily as her hands slid up my shirt.

“Well, then take me somewhere.”

“Are you going to call me?” Veronica asked, sitting comfortably on my couch in the living room, as I walked downstairs with a towel around my waist.

I expected her to be gone by the time I finished showering, but she seductively bit her lips and teased her hair as she checked me out all over again.

Why is she still here?

Even though words weren't really needed, the moment we'd stumbled through my front door, we'd both agreed on what this was: *just sex*. Nothing more.

I yawned and shrugged. “Uh, yeah. I guess.”

“You guess?” Veronica shouted, rage storming through her dark eyes. “You don't even have my number, asshole.”

I didn't remember if she had given it to me, because, again, we'd barely talked. Just agreed this was just sex. And she was fucking wild as hell but all over the fucking place. She liked it rough, even busting my lower lip a bit during the evening. Why was I an asshole if this was just sex?

I didn't want her to spend the night. I didn't want a relationship. Did she believe I wanted more than sex just because I'd gotten off? Multiple times? Nope. I enjoyed sex, and that's all I needed. Nothing else.

Why do women believe men can't have sex without wanting anything more afterward? Men aren't that complicated.

I leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. “If it makes you feel better, give me your number.”

“Fuck off, you fucking asshole!” she yelled at the top of her lungs and bolted out the door.

Damn, that was unexpected. Jesus Christ.

After closing the front door that she'd left wide open, I fell back on my couch and scrolled through the messages on my phone. Even though it was almost three in the morning, I was wide awake and decided to bug Elyse with a text.

Me: Did you make it home?

Elyse: Super nice of you to let us know you were leaving. But yes, I'm stuck on my couch.

Me: That's my fault. When I'm with my friends, we just leave. I'll let you know from now on.

Elyse: Who says I'm going out with you again? Lol

Me: You gonna do me like that? You had fun and you know it.

Elyse: Isn't it rude to be texting someone else when you have company?

Me: You didn't just hear her telling me to fuck off? I'm pretty sure the entire block heard.

Elyse: No. At least I don't think I did. Why? What did you do?

Me: She got mad that I didn't take her number. It was nothing against her, but it was just sex. She knew that.

Elyse: Oh, boy. You one of those guys, huh?

Me: Lol. No. I don't want to get into the why.

Elyse: I understand that.

I ran my hands down my face after reading her last text. We were approaching some dark, dangerous territory, and I didn't want to talk about it.

Me: I can't sleep. You up for a movie night?

Elyse: Depends. What does your "movie night" entail?

Me: It entails you coming over here and us sitting on my couch while we watch a good movie. Like friends. We are friends, right? ;)

Elyse: Finally inviting me to your house. And here I thought our friendship was one-sided, Tyler. I'll bring the popcorn.

I sprinted upstairs, changed into a t-shirt and joggers, and ran my fingers through my damp hair. I kind of figured she would give me shit for inviting over her so late, but at least she hadn't immediately said no.

I wasn't sure why I'd said we should do a movie night, because I rarely watched TV. Maybe I didn't want to be alone. Maybe I wanted her company.

I flopped back onto the couch and grabbed the remote, when suddenly, Elyse knocked on the door.

"It's open," I yelled, not wanting to move my ass.

"This is the first time I've been in your house," she said with a little laugh, stepping inside and closing the door behind her. "I'm scared."

"Why are you scared?" I watched her wander around the living room before heading into the kitchen. "Make yourself comfortable."

My place wasn't anywhere near as comfortable and inviting as hers, but at least I'd unpacked the rest of the boxes.

When she returned from inspecting the kitchen, I noticed she was no longer wearing the dress from the club, which was a smart idea. She'd replaced it with a two-piece knit set, and the honey blonde curls in her hair had fallen and were dangling down the sides of her arms.

"I don't know ... Ghosts or bodies hiding here somewhere. No one knows I'm here," Elyse said with a small laugh, reminding me of one of our first conversations, and grabbed a packet she had left on the arm of the couch. "I'm wandering around because I figured you wouldn't pop my popcorn. So, what did you expect?"

She had a point.

"No, I wouldn't. You're on your own," I laughed, shaking my head as I watched her disappear into the kitchen again. "Is it what you expected? My place?"

I heard the microwave door open and close and the gentle beep of the button being pressed.

“What color are you painting?” she asked, avoiding my question. I heard her feet shuffle.

Plastic sheets, cans of paint, and a ladder sat in my dining room, but I hadn’t had a chance to start painting. Well, really, my procrastination took over whenever I had free time.

“Maybe black, or blue, I guess. What do you think?” I asked, leaning back against the couch.

Elyse plopped down beside me, tucking her long legs underneath her as she gently pulled the bag of popcorn open.

“I think both will look nice. I can help you!” she said with excitement and tossed a piece of popcorn in her mouth.

“You can do it. I’ll watch,” I joked.

She threw a piece of popcorn at me, and I tossed it into my mouth after picking it off my lap.

“I can’t believe I’m awake right now. Most people go straight to bed after drinking,” she muttered.

Was she still drunk? She appeared okay to me. And still as beautiful as ever. I grabbed a handful of her popcorn and laughed.

“Are you a lightweight?”

“It depends. Sometimes I am, and other times I sober up quickly. Are you? I guess not.”

“I don’t get drunk, unless I’m drinking to get drunk,” I admitted. “What do you want to watch?”

If we continued to talk, I had no doubt I would fall asleep to the sound of her light, sweet voice.

“*You* invited *me*,” she said with a playful smile. “Pick something before I fall asleep. I don’t care what it is.”

At least we are on the same page, I thought.

I remained silent for a second, trying to focus on finding a movie.

“Hey, Tyler?” she asked softly, laying her head on a cushion as she watched me scroll through the movie guide on

the TV screen. “Can I ask you a question? And you don’t have to answer anything you don’t want to.”

I nodded, waiting for her question.

“First, thank you for your service,” she said quickly before pausing for a moment. “But what made you go into the navy?”

The question didn’t surprise me at all.

“Well, first, thank you,” I said, thinking her hesitation was cute as hell. She was curious, but she didn’t want to offend me or make me feel uncomfortable. “And, uh, I was kinda going down the wrong path when I was younger. I was young and dumb, and my priorities were kinda fucked up. I figured the military would fix me.”

My mom had passed away when I was a kid, and I’d simply lashed out at the world for no fucking reason. I was a dumbass kid who hated being alone and hated everything around me. Unfortunately, my dad wasn’t around much because he worked long hours. Eventually, I realized no one deserved my wrath, and I decided I needed to make a change.

“You don’t need to be fixed, Tyler,” Elyse muttered. “But I’m sure there was a reason, and it takes a lot for someone to want to make a change. I wish I thought more like you.”

“Don’t wish that.”

“Did you like it? The military? Did you go anywhere interesting? I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer all of this.”

I stayed quiet for a few seconds, watching the curiosity and excitement in her eyes.

“After the first two years, I liked it. It was a job, but I had fun,” I admitted, naming some of the places I’d visited. “We mostly drank and partied in different states and countries.” I chuckled.

She inched a little closer, and I softly inhaled her floral scent.

“It sounds amazing. How did your family take it?”

“I always made dumb decisions. But it wasn’t too bad. I think they just let me do whatever at that point.”

She looked at me with a soft smile and shook her head.

“So, about this movie. I have an idea!” she exclaimed, still smiling.

“What’s that?”

“So, we’ll both close our eyes as you scroll down the guide, and then we’ll count to ten. Whenever we get there, we’ll open our eyes and watch whatever it’s stopped on. Deal?” she asked, turning toward the mounted television.

I smirked. “Deal.”

CHAPTER NINE

elyse

I AWOKE ABRUPTLY, feeling Tyler snuggle in deeper against the couch, and realized I'd fallen asleep on one end of the couch with my legs stretched across his lap. The moment his fingers softly danced across one of my ankles, he opened his eyes with a startled look.

“Good morning,” he said, groaning loudly and stretching out his arms and legs. His sleepy voice was raspier, deeper, and so sexy. I could seriously listen to him talk in that voice for hours.

“Good morning,” I muttered with a yawn, swinging my legs off him and sitting up to mess with my bed hair.

He yawned and cracked his neck as his heavy eyes watched me pull my hair into a messy bun. We stared at each other silently for a few seconds, either trying to find the energy to move or wondering what the hell to say.

I had to admit I had fun last night after his hookup stormed out of his house. We'd barely paid any attention to the weird, random movie on the TV as we chatted about random things—our favorite shows and movies, sports we used to play, random bruises, and Tyler's funny military stories.

He admitted he'd loved reading comic books when he was younger, the Marvel movies were his favorite, and he played baseball to follow in his dad's footsteps. On top of a minor sprain and a few dislocated joints, baseball had rewarded him with all sorts of bruises back then.

I stood up and rubbed my eyes, knocking a blanket I didn't know was covering me to the floor.

Woah, he'd laid a blanket over me? Wow.

He was definitely sweet. Even if we were just friends.

“Well, we just had our first sleepover,” I said with a laugh, stretching out my back. “We’re legit friends now.”

“I thought I was going to fall asleep first, but you fucking passed out,” he said, running his hands through his hair and making it stick out even more. “So much for a movie night.”

“I don’t even remember falling asleep, but thank you for the blanket.”

I chucked a throw pillow at him before picking up the blanket from the floor and folding it neatly. He stood up and stretched his arms above his head, causing his t-shirt to hike up and reveal a smattering of hairs traveling from below his navel and down into his sweats. I didn’t want to look, but I did. I fucking did.

“You don’t have to thank me, Elle,” he said, giving me a nickname no one had ever called me before.

I stared at him for a moment, waiting for him to say something else. But he didn’t. A nervous smile played across his lips, making my knees weak and my heart viciously pound against my chest. Was I attracted to him because he was so damn attractive?

“Elle? I’ve never heard that one before.”

“I don’t know where the hell it came from, but I get all my good ideas when I first wake up,” he chuckled, turning toward the kitchen. “You cooking?”

I was two seconds away from saying yes when my phone rang. I cursed under my breath, seeing Alyssa’s name on the screen.

“Fuck!” My phone continued to ring as my lips tightened. “I forgot my sister stayed at my house last night.”

“She’s going to have a lot of shit to say, since you slept here,” Tyler said with a mischievous laugh, following me as I headed toward the front door.

“Don’t remind me. But thank you for the sleepover. I had a pretty good time.”

I flashed a quick smile before leaving to deal with the devil.

And she-devil had a lot to say.

“So, let me get this straight,” Alyssa said as she sat across from me at a table at a nearby diner. “You left me in your house all night to have sex with the neighbor that’s your *friend*? Your *hot* friend?”

I sighed, ready to clear the air.

“I’m so proud of you. Tell me everything!” she squealed with excitement. I couldn’t even get the words out.

My eye twitched as I stared at her, wondering if she was fucking serious. She was still nursing her hangover, her eyes low and red, but she and I were both hungry as hell. After a super quick shower, we’d hightailed it to a small, family-owned restaurant near my place that served the best waffles in the city.

“I couldn’t sleep, and we just watched a movie,” I muttered. “We didn’t even touch. Not everything is about sex, Alyssa. I just think you have a problem.”

“You’re right. It’s not all about sex, but it sure helps pass the time, especially with someone that looks like Tyler.”

I frowned, wondering why she was still so excited about something that hadn’t even happened. Even though I didn’t keep everything from her, I knew I wouldn’t have told her if something *had* happened. She didn’t realize she has the biggest mouth in the entire universe. And if I told her, word would definitely find Tyler somehow.

My heart jumped for joy when our server arrived with our food. I hummed happily, as I poured syrup over my strawberry waffles.

“So, you haven’t even thought about it at all? Not even for a second?” my sister asked skeptically.

“If it makes you happy, yes. I thought about it, but it’s really not happening. That would make everything ten times harder, and we’re working on being friends. I don’t want to ruin anything. It’s nice just having him there, you know?”

After cutting up my waffles, I shoved a few pieces into my mouth and melted with happiness as Alyssa picked the blueberries and bananas off hers.

“I saw you guys dancing really close last night,” she pointed out.

I stuffed my mouth and took my time chewing to avoid answering her question. I remembered being a little tipsy and being pressed against him as he held my hips. Being that close to him drove me a little crazy, but all that had disappeared when he’d left with that damn girl. I assumed the sex had been crazy because his lower lip sported a decently sized scratch.

After a few minutes, I cleared my throat and said, “We were having fun.”

“Well, enough about Tyler.”

Thank God.

“Have you thought about dating again in general?” she asked, holding her fork in the air. “And don’t get defensive. I just want to know because we hardly ever talk about this.”

Probably because everything is about sex and men with you, Alyssa.

“I don’t know,” I admitted truthfully with a shrug. “I can’t see myself falling in love like that again. Shit, I don’t trust myself. I ignored so many red flags, naively thinking I’d found happiness. All anyone is going to do is hurt me.” I had the worst dating history. All my previous relationships had ended with me being cheated on. But none of them mattered because I’d been young and dumb. My very first boyfriend had been a twenty-year-old when I was sixteen. And he’d cheated when I’d refused to have sex with him right away.

“Not everyone is out to hurt you, Elyse. You just haven’t found the right one.”

There is no such thing, I silently disagreed.

“How do you even know that? If someone is the right one?”

“You just do. But every guy you’ve dated has sucked,” Alyssa said simply.

“You’re not wrong.” I laughed.

Even though I hadn’t been in many relationships, I had been cheated on too many times and could only conclude that something was definitely wrong with me. Maybe I was supposed to live my life alone. Maybe love wasn’t in the cards for me. And that was okay. Maybe.

“You remember that guy, Will, from the club?” she asked.

“Tyler’s friend? Yeah.”

“He tried hitting on me last night.”

I frowned. I had only met Tyler’s friends for the first time last night, but Will had kind of had a “nice guy” vibe about him. Surely, he wouldn’t interfere with other people’s relationships, right?

He’d definitely had the boy-next-door look, with his silky chocolate brown skin, closely buzzed black hair, and beautiful brown eyes. His smile was friendly and almost blinding, showing off his perfect white teeth. I’d remembered him being incredibly respectful. Why would he flirt with Alyssa when she had a boyfriend?

Tyler and his friends all seemed close like brothers, which I found sweet and endearing.

Alyssa noticed my frown and quickly clarified her statement. “It wasn’t creepy. It was really sweet, and I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“You have a boyfriend,” I said in a flat tone.

She was so not about to go down that road. Not on my fucking watch.

Her eyes widened with panic and surprise. “I’m not doing anything. Jesus! It was just cute. And smooth as hell. I don’t

know what's in the water in Florida, but damn.”

As we finished our brunch, I listened to her talk about her issues with Cory. She didn't share the full details, and I didn't press her. I figured she'd tell me when she was ready.

After brunch, we headed back to my place. On the way back, I noticed a message from Tyler.

Tyler: Chef, I still need that tour.

Me: I could've sworn your friends are in town.

Tyler: What are you trying to say?

Me: Have you ever been to San Diego?

Tyler: No, but if this is you inviting me, count me in.

Me: I go to a farmers' market down there. Want to keep me company?

Tyler: Again, count me in.

Me: When should we leave?

Tyler: The earlier the better. That way I can start at your house. I'm bored as hell sitting in the house. I officially start work this week.

Me: Anyone ever tell you how needy you are?

Tyler: Anyone ever tell you how stubborn you are?

Me: Bite me.

CHAPTER TEN

elyse

“SO, have you ever been to London?” Tyler practically yelled over the loud music playing in my car.

The trip to San Diego was about a two-hour drive, and I was speeding a little bit—okay, more than a little bit—because driving on the highway made me fucking nervous. Especially with all the traffic. Especially when more than half the drivers didn’t fucking pay any attention. Especially when the other half had no clue how to even drive.

Even though Tyler had wanted to leave early, he’d ended up running late. And now, my anxiety was through the fucking roof.

“What?” I gripped the steering wheel, easing on the brakes due to the slowing car in front of me. “No. Why? What’s in London?”

“Just wondering if that’s where you learned to drive. You know those lines are on the street for a reason. No wonder they say women can’t drive.”

I didn’t reply, because I knew how to drive. I stuck out my tongue at him, not allowing his stupid joke to dampen my mood. The day was gorgeous—perfect for roaming around my favorite farmers’ market. The area was nicer and more extensive than the shopping plazas at Pasadena, especially because all kinds of artists showcased their work. But my favorite thing about San Diego was always watching the sun set.

“Maybe if you turned this loud-ass music down, I could pay attention to the lines!” I shouted back, tapping the wheel to calm my stupid heart down.

As usual, Tyler looked devastatingly handsome. He wore a black shirt with two buttons undone at the top, ripped jeans, a beige windbreaker, and work boots. I'd just thrown on a flowy black dress with cutouts at the shoulders and sandals because I was aiming for comfort over style.

“So, the loud music stops you from seeing?”

Under normal circumstances, music soothed my nerves. But not today. Not when Tyler sat in the passenger seat, teasing me and attempting to make witty banter.

He reached for the volume knob, and I released a relieved sigh, but the asshole turned the volume up to the highest setting and bobbed his head to the beat of the song. I glared at him, hoping the imaginary daggers shooting out of my eyes killed him.

“Stop being so damn tense. Relax.” He laid his hand on my thigh and caressed it gently.

What. The. Fuck.

I sucked in a large breath of air and tried to focus on the damn road and not his stupid touch. Fire ran through my body at the simple way his fingers smoothly glided across my bare skin. Before I could react, he ripped his hand away and rubbed his palm on his jeans.

“I am relaxed,” I said, laughing awkwardly as I smoothly crossed into the lane for the San Diego exit.

“Prove it.”

A playful smile danced across my lips when I recognized the first few chords from *Don't Stop Believin'* by Journey. The song would always be one of my favorites because it reminded me of being in the car with Alyssa and my parents. It never mattered if we were on a road trip or a short trip to the store, everyone always sang along at the top of their lungs when it came on. Eventually, it became our family theme song.

“Strangers waiting ... Up and down the boulevard!” I sang loudly, not caring about being completely out of tune. This song was my fucking jam. “Their shadows searchin' in the night.”

Tyler chuckled, shaking his head and smiling widely.

“Streetlights ... People ... Livin’ just to find emotion. Hidin’ somewhere in the night,” he sang just as loudly as we both rolled down the windows to enjoy the moment.

“Am I still tense?” I teased, locking the car after we pulled into the parking lot.

“We’ll work on it,” he said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes as we walked toward the entrance of the farmers’ market. We spent the remainder of the drive singing other ’80s classic hits, which surprisingly eased my nerves and lowered my anxiety.

Multiple colorful tents lined both sides of the cement sidewalks that ran through the gigantic park. I loved shopping here because the produce and vegetables were not only fresh but also much cheaper than they were at supermarkets. Weaving in and out of the large crowd to look at the different vendors soothed my soul. I knew I was buying local and could probably find everything I needed.

“So, this is what you do in your free time?” Tyler asked, walking beside me and scoping out the various tables.

“Yup,” I said, peeking inside a blue tent that displayed a wide variety of homemade jams and jellies.

When I didn’t want to drag Alyssa with me, I usually shopped here alone, but it was nice having company. Tyler grabbed a jar of apple butter jam.

“Besides,” I said, playfully nudging his side, “if you want dinner, you shouldn’t complain.”

Tyler quickly paid for the jam, and we meandered over to another tent with fresh vegetables.

“Oh shit, you’re cooking? Count me in. What do I have to get?” he asked, watching me check a tomato for dark spots as he picked up an onion.

Just as he was about to study it, his eyes followed a random brunette walking past him.

“Or *whom* do you have to get?” I mocked under my breath, noting that women with dark hair must be his type.

I grabbed the onion out of his hands and handed my tomatoes and onions to the seller, who set them aside for me and handed me a small shopping basket.

“You’re starting on my house today, right?” I asked, pushing my hair out of my face.

“Uh, maybe. Tell me what to do.”

I huffed a bit, smoothing out the hem of my black dress after a small gust of wind sailed through the tent.

“Are you even listening?” I demanded, wondering exactly how long his attention span was.

Even with his easygoing and laid-back nature, I wondered if he felt a little out of place.

“Uh, yeah,” he said, snapping his eyes back to me. “Yeah, maybe I’ll start on your house today. Okay, what can I do?”

“You’re on potato duty. Can you handle that?”

“I can handle anything, Elle,” he said, biting down on his bottom lip as he flicked my nose with his knuckles.

He grabbed the empty shopping basket out of my hands as he confidently wandered off to the other side of the tent.

I preferred working with fresh products when I cooked, but I shied away from buying things that would go bad within the next 24 to 48 hours, in case I didn’t have time to use them.

After grabbing some peppers, fresh herbs, and other items, I chatted with the seller, Marcella, as she bagged everything for me. I smiled at the thought of Tyler taking the basket from me, wondering if he did that so I wouldn’t have to carry a heavy basket.

As I continued to talk with Marcella, I wondered what the hell was taking him so long. I’d only asked him to pick out some damn potatoes. I soon had my answer when I scanned

the tent and noticed him flirting with the brunette he'd spotted earlier. *Of course.*

He was a damn woman magnet. Even a few other women in the tent discreetly checked him out as he continued to flirt with the beautiful woman, making her laugh and blush.

I sighed softly and waited.

After the farmers' market, we walked around the boardwalk in La Jolla, because I figured he would appreciate the insanely gorgeous houses by the beach. The area never failed me to relax me, and each time I visited, I held onto the hope that someday I could afford to live here next to the calm, icy blue water and among cute shops along the wooden walk.

"I should've moved up here," Tyler said, checking out the designs and builds of the houses.

His eyes lit up with inspiration and awe as we walked.

"Then how would you have met me?" I asked, snickering and listening to the sand crunch beneath my boots.

"I would've found a way. But the weather is perfect, and the—" Tyler stopped in his tracks, gawking at a half-naked woman running past us on the strip. She wore teeny tiny shorts that I firmly believed weren't made for jogging and a matching teeny tiny sports bra that did nothing to support her tits.

I made a mental note to never go out with him again. Then I realized I might just be jealous. Was I?

"Pig," I mumbled under my breath. "The lady at the farmers' market wasn't enough?"

I immediately wished I could take the words back. I didn't want him to think seeing them together had gotten to me. *We're just friends*, I thought. But even though we were just friends, maybe I just wanted him to enjoy *my* company and pay attention to *me*—not someone else. I totally lied to myself. I was jealous.

“She was married,” Tyler laughed.

I scoffed and stopped walking. “That makes it even worse!”

With my arms folded across my chest, I rubbed my hands over my arms to bring some heat to my body. The breeze was vicious, making me regret not bringing a sweater or jacket, but apparently, it didn’t seem to bother anyone else around us. In fact, Tyler and I were probably the only two people in the crowd that weren’t wearing bathing suits or running attire.

“Chill. She was showing me some pictures of her newborn daughter and shit. It was really weird,” he admitted before he noticed me shivering. “You cold?”

Nope. Not when his eyes stared at me. Now, heat was rushing through my body. Why did one look from this guy completely screw with my head? Was this lust coupled with attraction? Could friends be attracted to each other?

I awkwardly turned around and faced the water. “Uh, no. I’m fine,” I lied.

A few seconds later, I felt him drape his jacket over my shoulders. I smiled, secretly glad he saw through my lie. As I took a deep breath, the smell of musky cologne hit my nose. *Ugh, can I keep this jacket forever?* I wanted to ask.

“Thanks,” I murmured, feeling a blush creep onto my cheeks.

“Why did you lie?”

Because he was standing behind me, I couldn’t tell what he was thinking or if he was fighting his own damn thoughts.

I shrugged, focusing on the small waves below. “I didn’t want you to offer me your jacket and be cold.”

“Don’t worry about me. It’s not that bad.” His hands found my shoulders and he began to massage some of the tension away. “Besides, how can you not relax at a beach?”

“It’s cold!” I whined as his strong hands continued to dig into my skin.

Holy fuck. Those miracle hands needed to massage my entire body for hours on end. When his fingers gently dug into my neck, a small moan escaped my lips and my eyes closed. Other than massaging, I wondered what else his hands could do to my body.

“Feels good, huh?” Tyler asked.

You have no idea.

“Really good,” I admitted softly as my mind continued to race straight toward the gutter.

“Just hire me. I’m good with my hands.”

I bet you are.

After inhaling the crisp air, I turned back for a moment and said, “No thanks. I’m not sure where your hands have been.”

His hands flew off my skin, and I desperately missed his touch. He made a face and clenched his jaw. *Had I just pissed him off?*

“Wow. Is that what you think of me?” he asked, turning me around fully to face him.

“Maybe.”

Whatever hurt or anger Tyler had been feeling quickly vanished when a woman with beautiful, earthy brown curls that framed her face and golden skin slowly walked past us, keeping eye contact with him. *Yeah, he has a thing for women with dark hair.*

I felt like a fucking tree as the two of them stared at each other like fucking teenagers. Finally, I turned back around to stare at the water, giving the woman magnet a moment to work his magic as I listened to the sound of his footsteps scampering away from me.

I scowled a tiny bit, focusing on the water and noticing the sun cast a glossy reflection on the shore. This place was to die for. Seagulls soared through the sky, squawking and landing on the sand in groups. A handful of people, primarily kids, splashed around in the water while their parents sat and watched under big beach umbrellas.

A few seconds later, I heard footsteps approach and stop near me.

“Didn’t go so well?” I asked, wondering why he’d returned so quickly. Did she reject him because she was in a relationship? But if she’d been in a relationship, then why had she stared at him as she’d passed him?

“She fucking thought you were my girlfriend,” Tyler mumbled, leaning back against the cement barrier. “She didn’t even want my number.”

He appeared disappointed and a little dejected. I was an expert on feeling like that—not feeling good enough.

“Did you tell her we were friends? Why can’t people understand that?” I rolled my eyes and shook my head.

He playfully bumped his shoulder into me. “You couldn’t have walked away or something?”

“You’re blaming *me*?” I practically shrieked at him as I gave him an incredulous look. “It’s not my fault you’ve got no game, Tyler.”

He laughed hysterically. “Oh, is that what you think?”

The witty comment on the tip of my tongue disappeared when he leaned closer and gazed straight into my blue eyes. His damn intoxicating scent sent my mind into a tailspin.

“You’re just not all that,” I managed to get out and added a casual shrug to prove my point.

“Alright then,” he said, pushing himself off the barrier and clapping his hands. “Let’s play a game, yeah?”

“What kind of game?”

“Let’s see who has more game. Whoever can get the most phone numbers in ten minutes wins. If you lose, uh, you cook dinner tonight.”

“Nope.” I furiously shook my head. “No, I’m not doing that. I’m going to make a fool out of myself.”

One, I didn’t even think I remembered how to flirt—it had been that long. Two, I would be embarrassed as hell if I

returned without any digits. With all the attention he'd received so far, he would easily win. Three, he was too excited about the bet and was probably competitive as hell. Four, was I really losing if I loved to cook anyway? Would it be a tremendous loss if he didn't cook dinner?

"I doubt it. Come on, Elle," he said, raising a thick eyebrow and making my heart swoon at the nickname. "I'm sure you could get anyone's number."

"And how do you know that? I haven't flirted with anyone in like three years."

"What are you talking about? You're gorgeous. If I didn't know you and you walked up to me and asked for my number, I wouldn't even ask questions. Hell, I would probably give you anything you wanted."

Anything I wanted?

His damn response made my cheeks burn again. Why did his honesty boost my confidence and tempt me into playing his stupid game?

"So, we're doing this?" Tyler asked, hopping around impatiently. "Sagittarians are supposed to be adventurous, remember?"

Taking my loud sigh as a yes, he grabbed my wrist and led me into the busy crowd on the boardwalk. He removed his phone from his pocket, signaling me to do the same, and we set our timers for ten minutes.

Shit, I was really doing this.

"Ten minutes. And no cheating," he warned as his eyes scanned the crowd.

"Hope you know what you want to make for dinner," I sang out with fake confidence.

As he faded into the sea of people, I slowly turned around, wondering where to start. Should I try finding lonely men? What exactly did a lonely man look like? I spotted plenty of men holding hands with women. Nope. And I definitely didn't

have the balls to approach a group of guys, even though I knew I could probably catch a few numbers.

As I thought of ways to approach a guy without sounding corny, I accidentally bumped into someone and started to face plant toward the ground, but strong hands caught my waist and pulled me back onto my feet.

Mumbling “thanks” and pushing my hair out of my face, I took a look at my knight in shining armor.

The world is on my side right now.

Or rather, my cute knight with a friendly smile, beautiful tan, thick dirty-blonde hair, and a muscled body made to surf every day.

“That would’ve ended badly,” he said, flashing a half smile at me as he pushed his own hair out of his eyes.

“Yeah, but I had you to catch me,” I said, laughing awkwardly.

Was I flirting? Or was I just pointing out the obvious?

As I was about to dissolve into an embarrassingly hot mess, I imagined Tyler being surrounded by a massive group of women just waiting to give their numbers to him. I didn’t blame any of them either, because I would jump his bones in a heartbeat if I were them. He wouldn’t even need to ask for my damn phone number.

“Yeah, you’re lucky,” the surfer guy said, holding out a strong hand. “I’m Jaxon.”

“You know what would make me even luckier, Jaxon?” I asked coyly, praying I looked somewhat sexy as my fingers lightly danced over his calloused and tanned hand.

“What?”

“Your phone number. If, you know, you’re single, like I am.”

Why did I just say that? Single, like I am?

“I’m impressed you asked for my number,” he admitted, taking my phone from my hands to input his number. “Most

girls wouldn't."

Are all guys this easy? He'd given me his digits when he didn't even know my name. He hadn't even asked any questions.

"Thanks, Jaxon," I purred, taking a step back. "I'm Elyse. I'll text you soon."

"Hey, don't you wanna talk or something? Or hang out?"

"Sorry, but I'm already running late to meet a friend," I said, impressed with how easily the lie rolled off my tongue. "But I'll text you later."

I scurried off, feeling more confident, and spotted a guy leaning against a wall outside a souvenir shop. He looked bored as hell, scrolling through his phone and ignoring the people walking past him.

After casually walking past him twice with the hope he would stop me, I needed to up my game.

"Excuse me," I said, hoping my crazy idea would work. "Do you know where the bathroom is?"

He pulled his attention away from his phone and quickly scanned my body, letting his gaze linger on my bare legs. He was tall with a lean build, and his black hair was short and spiky with silver tips.

I gave him my best flirty look, twirling my hair around my finger, chewing on my bottom lip, and acting somewhat shy. *Sex sells, right?*

"Straight ahead to the right if you keep walking down," he said with a friendly smile.

"Thanks," I said as I started to walk away. But after taking a step, I turned around and confessed, "I lied. I was too nervous to ask for your phone number. I didn't want to get rejected."

Did I play the "nervous honest" card right?

He blinked at me blankly and looked around, probably waiting for his friends to pop out and say, "Surprise!"

“Is this a joke?” he asked.

I shook my head, feeling my confidence drain a little. “I’m Elyse.”

“Jeffrey.”

I bit my lip again and nervously held out my phone for him.

“Sure. Why not?” he said with a sigh and a casual shrug.

Ten quick minutes and a ton of confidence later, I met Tyler at the same spot earlier, taking in his cocky smile as I approached with what I thought was a damn good poker face. I didn’t want to talk shit and then lose, but I didn’t want to give myself away either.

Even if I didn’t win, I was pretty damn proud of myself for stepping way outside of my comfort zone. Not to mention, I actually wouldn’t mind texting one or two of the guys when I decided to start dating again.

“I don’t know, Elle,” Tyler said with long, heavy sigh. “I think you’re cooking me dinner tonight.”

“Oh, am I?” I asked, playing along.

“Five numbers in ten minutes is a lot. That takes a lot of work and creativity, because women are making it harder these days.”

He scrolled through his phone, showing me the numbers, and then held out his hand for mine. I passed him the phone with a smirk.

I just won against Mr. Flirtypants.

“Seven!” he exclaimed in disbelief. His eyes were filled with disappointment, as if he’d never lost to anyone before. “You got *seven* numbers, Elle?”

After getting Jeffrey’s number, I’d taken my newfound confidence and balls to approach a huge group of guys

hanging out near some basketball courts. After I'd flirted and chatted for a few minutes, five of them had given me their numbers without a second thought.

I can't believe I don't have to cook tonight.

"Does that surprise you?" I asked, watching him check my phone a second time. "Men are getting dumber and dumber. Especially when a woman bats her eyelashes, licks her lips, and asks for their numbers."

He shook his head. "It doesn't, actually."

I narrowed my eyes at him, puzzled by his lack of a witty comeback. It felt nice to beat him at his own game and watch him sulk.

"So, what were you saying about dinner? I really like steak," I offered teasingly.

"Don't push it."

"Hey, I'd be open to giving you some tips."

As I laughed hysterically, he simply pouted and shook his head. Without a word, he grabbed my wrist and gently pulled me through the crowd.

"You done?" he asked bitterly.

Not at all.

"You can't take me being annoying now, huh?" I taunted, practically jogging beside him as he walked quickly toward the exit. "Maybe I should give you a taste of your own medicine more often. Are you feeling tense at all?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

elyse

A LOUD BANGING sound woke me from my precious nap. I slowly blinked my eyes open, grabbing my phone from the nightstand to check the time, and groaned when I saw the clock. I'd overslept the time I'd given myself. By two hours. *Shit.*

After Tyler had stopped pouting about losing the bet, we'd strolled through downtown San Diego and settled on a late lunch at a place called Dick's Last Resort, where the servers are, well, dicks. Instead of taking the staff's insults and letting them have their fun, Tyler fought back, which simply added fuel to their fire. The whole endeavor had been quite amusing.

When we finally returned home, the scorching sun, the late lunch, and the long drive back had me crashing onto my bed within minutes. I barely remembered Tyler telling me that he'd wake me up in an hour as he started work in the basement.

After stumbling out of bed, I followed the deafening noise to the basement and momentarily watched him drill into some wood planks. His muscles strained against his damp shirt. *Good God, he's good-looking.*

During my almost three-hour nap, Tyler had removed the old wood from the stairs, built a new frame, and finished most of the steps. To be honest, I wouldn't have minded watching him for the rest of the damn night.

When I noticed his biceps flex, I began toying with my bottom lip as I felt my insides stir. Fortunately, he was oblivious to my presence until he wiped some sweat off his forehead and looked in my direction. I quickly moved my hand away from my mouth and sucked in a large breath of air as he wiped his face with the bottom hem of his t-shirt.

Lord, have mercy.

“Thought we agreed on an hour, sleepyhead,” Tyler said with a grin as he leaned against the wall. I swore his sweat made his skin glisten and shine under the crappy lighting. Or maybe I was just horny as hell.

“And I thought we agreed you were going to wake me up.”

“I was, but I didn’t want to just walk into your room. Besides, I’d rather let you get some sleep anyway.”

“Thanks,” I said gratefully, cautiously stepping on the newly installed stairs and bouncing up and down to test the sturdiness.

I gauged the distance between the last completed step and the basement floor, thinking I could jump and land safely, but Tyler leaned forward and reached for my hand.

“Watch your step,” he cautioned, moving his hands to my waist as his fingers dug into my skin.

He lifted me off the last step as if I were weightless and set me down on the floor.

“Wow, Tyler. Such a gentleman. Who knew?” I teased, straightening out my dress.

“I guess you do now. What do you think?”

Dust, wood chips, and tools littered the floor, but I didn’t care. I knew this was part of the process. The previous owner had probably used the decently sized space for storage and left it looking a little rough and empty, which was why I avoided the basement whenever I could. The area had the potential to be a place where I could hang out and maybe host game nights.

“You’re doing amazing, Tyler. Thank you again for helping me,” I said truthfully. I looked at him nervously. “You know, you’re kinda growing on me. I thought I would be friendless for the rest of my life.”

“Friendless?” he asked, laughing. “I don’t have many friends either, besides the three that I go everywhere with—and you.”

I kicked a piece of wood. “That’s all that matters. For me, it’s hard to keep friends, I guess. My schedule clashes with everything, and I’ve lost so many people because of that. It’s exhausting and kinda makes me question whether I really want this position.”

I paused, embarrassed for confessing so much when we were still in the early stages of our friendship.

“How badly do you want this position?” he asked, grabbing another piece of wood. “And what is it?”

“The sous-chef position,” I said, leaning against the wall to watch him finish the remaining stairs. “Other than my sister, no one understands how important this is to me. It fucking hurts when people like my ex and Alana, my ex–best friend, see it as an obstacle and not an accomplishment.”

“If someone doesn’t support you, fuck them. Seriously, don’t entertain that shit because they don’t want to see you grow. You need to make yourself happy before you worry about other people.”

“I just feel alone sometimes,” I admitted. “But you’re right.”

“Shit, I’ll support you. You want to be the sous-chef? Then do it. But can I tell you what I learned about you so far?”

I nodded, waiting for his reply.

“You care too much about shit you don’t need to put your energy into. Stop being so hard on yourself and just live. You would never guess all the shit that has happened to me unless I told you, but I try not to let it define me.”

Shit. He was absolutely right. All my life, I had put others’ needs before my own. And I was too tough on myself. My own unhappiness stemmed from dwelling on things I couldn’t change, even though I’d feebly tried to.

“Do you ever feel alone?” I asked, noticing his shoulders drop and tense a bit.

“I’m always lonely. That’s why I bother you every day,” he joked.

While he finished up for the day, I thought I was helping by passing him tools, but eventually, he told me to stop.

“Tyler, whatever you do, please don’t burn my house down,” I begged as I gave him a tour of my kitchen to make it easier for his non-cooking ass.

After he completed the basement staircase, he was ready to start dinner, and he didn’t want my company. Said he’d feel nervous with me watching his every move. He wasn’t wrong.

“I got this. Let me take care of it,” he reassured me, guiding me into the living room and pushing me toward the couch.

I sighed, picking up the remote and flipping on the TV as he returned to the kitchen. Jason had expected me to cook because of my profession. But he had never once thought to make me dinner—or even a fucking sandwich. Even if the food had been complete shit, I would have loved the effort.

“Elle?” Tyler called out, breaking his twenty-minute silent streak as he peered around the corner. “I have a dumb question. Don’t laugh.”

“Depends on the question. No promises.”

“You said you like your steak medium, right?”

“Yes,” I said slowly, keeping an eye on him.

“Well, um, when I cook steak for myself, I usually cook the shit out of it because then I know it’s done. So how do I know if it’s medium or not?”

I studied his serious face, debating whether he was joking around or being real. When I noticed his jaw twitch slightly, I had my answer.

“I’ll check for you,” I said with a laugh, jumping off the couch and racing toward the kitchen.

“Didn’t I tell you not to laugh?” Tyler asked, blocking the entrance as I ran straight into his hard-ass chest.

My nose suddenly caught a delicious fragrance coming from the kitchen, and I needed to find out what he was doing. Even as I pressed my full weight against his hard body, he simply laughed, not moving even an inch.

“Move,” I said angrily, trying not to crack a smile. “Or I’ll hurt you.”

“Try me.”

As he rolled his eyes, I attacked him with tickles, dragging my fingers around his hips and feeling him flinch. Just as I was about to declare victory, he dropped down suddenly and tossed me over his shoulder as my bare legs dangled unladylike in the air. I prayed my dress still covered my ass as I playfully beat his back with my fists.

“Put me down! I’ll bite you!” I threatened.

He just laughed again as he headed toward the living room. “I like pain. That’s not gonna phase me, sweetheart.”

He stopped for a second, tugging the hemline of my dress over my thighs. *What a damn man.*

“Tyler! The steaks are burning!” I shrieked in horror. “And soon, my kitchen will be too!”

He immediately set me on the ground, and I raced around him to check on the food.

“Idiot. Men fall for anything,” I muttered, looking over the steaks in the cast iron pan. “Where did you learn how to do that? Do you always use thyme?”

A whiff of the various herbs fuming from the hot pan hit my nose, and my stomach growled. Everything looked good—way too good for someone who claimed he couldn’t cook.

When I turned around, Tyler shrugged his broad shoulders and looked away. “I taught myself. Why?”

Even though he avoided my gaze, I knew better than to believe him, especially when his jaw twitched slightly again.

His tell.

My body warmed at the sight of him perfectly basting the steaks. Nothing like a fine-ass man cooking and knowing what the hell he's doing. *Shit.*

“No way,” I said, pretending to be impressed and mad at the same time. I threw a balled up napkin at his chest. “Seriously? I didn't perfect that technique until after culinary school.”

“I googled it,” he finally admitted with a sigh. “I wanted to impress you. You're a damn chef, Elle.”

“That was so cute,” I blurted out without thinking. “But you don't have to impress me. I'll be fine with anything you make.”

“Now,” he said, grabbing my shoulders and turning me around the opposite way. “Get the hell out of the kitchen.”

“Okay, Chef Tyler.”

Tyler's loser meal turned out great, better than both of us expected. He was damn proud of himself, making sure the steak was cooked to a perfect medium. He threw a few potatoes in the microwave and sautéed some asparagus in butter and herbs. The meal was near perfect, and possibly only because he'd somehow found the perfect recipe on Google.

We moved into the living room with a bottle of wine as I sat on the couch and he plopped down on the floor in front of it. He flipped through a photo album he'd found on one of my bookshelves that featured pictures of me and Alyssa when we were kids. I sipped my wine, watching him laugh at the embarrassing photos.

Ever since my parents had passed away, I hadn't been able bring myself to open the book. Every time I'd thought about it, I became overwhelmed with emotion. My mom was more than just a cook; she lived by memories, always carrying a camera

with her. She had so many talents, and every day I desperately wished to be the woman she had been.

I fucking missed my parents. I missed how the house had smelled like freshly baked chocolate chip cookies and coffee when I got home from school. I missed how my family would go all out for the holidays. That was the main reason Alyssa, and I didn't celebrate the holidays that often—because the memories hurt too much. We knew they shouldn't, but people grieved differently.

Our dad, Richard, always joked around, turning serious situations into funny ones. And our mom, Alice, was the tough one with a sensitive side.

“You look like her,” Tyler said softly, looking at me and smiling. “Your mom.”

I finished my glass and poured another one. “My dad used to call us twins. Alyssa took after him more.”

“How much of an age difference between you both?”

“Four years, but she often acts like the older sister. Did you ever want siblings?”

“Sometimes, but I have a lot of cousins. So, I didn't really care,” he said, showing me a photo of my dad holding me upside down by my ankle over a shallow part of a lake. “Who's this?”

“Me,” I answered, suddenly remembering how much I loved when my dad did that—held me upside down by my ankles. Tyler laughed hysterically. “I miss that so much,” I said.

“It might be impossible now, but tell him to do it again. It might not be that funny, though.”

I looked down and chewed at my fingernail. “I can't.”

“Why?” he asked.

And I realized I hadn't yet told him that my parents had passed away. Alyssa and I rarely talked about them because we didn't think we could without breaking down into tears and missing them even more.

Actually, I knew I couldn't. Sometimes I wanted to talk to someone about them, but then my mind simply froze, keeping my memories tucked away. Even after eleven years, I still hadn't accepted that they were gone. I mean I *knew* they were gone, but sometimes I believed they would walk through my front door and that everything would return to normal. Again, I knew that would never happen, but I couldn't stop myself from wishing it.

I used to blame the world for taking not one but both of my parents away from me. They were my life. They had been so close to me. And now, I just had Alyssa.

"I lost my mom when I was ten," Tyler said softly, noticing I never answered his simple question. "I was in a bad place for years. My dad doesn't talk about her anymore. My stepmom, Diana, is great, but I always wondered how different our lives would've been if my mom was still around."

My heart hurt at his revelation, and my mind remembered something he'd said earlier in the day.

"You would never guess all the shit that has happened to me unless I told you."

And I would've never guessed the amount of heartache and pain he endured as a kid. I knew what he and his father had gone through.

"Tyler, I'm so sorry," I said, my voice straining a bit. "What happened? Shit. You don't have to answer that. Sorry. I'm grateful you trusted me enough to tell me."

He closed the photo album and sighed. "An electrical fire, I guess. My dad was watching me play baseball. And my mom was home sleeping because she was exhausted from working the night shift."

"I lost both of my parents when I was fifteen, and—" I stopped myself and noticed my breathing became labored. "I'm sorry, I—"

I wanted to comfort him, but I couldn't tell him about my parents without breaking down. I knew there wasn't a right

thing to say in a situation like ours, but I wanted to confide in him.

Tyler quickly stood up off the ground and grabbed my hands, squeezing them lightly. “You don’t have to talk about it, Elle. But I should go.”

I wanted to tell him to stay, but the words refused to leave my lips.

“Thanks for dinner and hanging with me today,” I said lamely, ashamed I didn’t have the courage to ask him to stay.

He pulled me off the couch, and we walked toward the door together.

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said in a low voice.

Without even thinking, I wrapped my arms around his neck and rested my head in the crook of his neck, feeling his heart pounding against my chest and the warmth of his body against mine. I noticed his hesitation as he gently placed his hand on my back and gave me a small squeeze, and I leaned into the hug to reassure him that this was what I needed.

Neither of us said a word for what seemed like an eternity as we stood at the front door and simply held each other close.

“My parents died in a car crash on their way to pick me up from a sleepover in the middle of the night,” I said softly. “I hate talking about it because it’s my fault. I got into a fight with one of my friends and didn’t want to be there anymore.”

Not even Jason knew the whole truth about my parents’ deaths. A drunk driver had crashed into their car on their way over. If I had sucked it up and stayed at my friend’s house, my parents would still be alive.

Tyler pulled away and stared into my eyes. “I-I’m sorry, Elyse. You didn’t have to tell me. I don’t even know what to say other than don’t blame yourself. I don’t know what happened, but it’s not your fault. That shit will kill you, thinking about it like that.”

“I do. Every single day,” I admitted, trying to control my emotions. “But I wanted to tell you.”

“You can talk to me whenever you want. It took me years to open up, so don’t feel obligated.”

“I’ve never told anyone this before. I was so mad at them for taking forever to pick me up, and my last text message was shitty.”

“Stop thinking like that.”

“Okay,” I muttered, watching him open the front door and walk outside. “Thanks for the hug.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?”

I nodded and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tyler

THE POUNDING of my heart intensified with each step I took towards my house. I'd had no plans to share anything about my mom with Elyse, but somehow, I'd felt comfortable enough to tell her. *Shit.*

Jordyn was the last person I'd talked to about my mom. She had been so understanding and attentive. The next thing I knew, I would probably confide in her about Jordyn, and I wasn't ready for that. What the hell was Elyse doing to me?

Being friends with her was already weird as hell for me because she was naturally gorgeous. Any man with eyes could see that. She was beautiful and charming enough to have snagged seven phone numbers from seven different guys within ten minutes. *Seriously.*

She was also funny. And stubborn as hell. Seriously gifted in the kitchen. Being around her seemed natural. And relaxing. I liked being friends with her, even if it was a little weird.

After walking into my house, I headed upstairs in desperate need of shower and ready to collapse on my bed. The day had been fun, but it had also been long. With the water still warming up in the shower, I returned to my bedroom, where I pulled my shirt over my head and started unbuttoning my jeans.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a little bit of movement outside my window. With curiosity getting the better of me, I peeked through the blinds. *Holy shit.* I could see straight into Elyse's bedroom because her blinds were wide open. Why hadn't I noticed this before?

But what had me staring like a complete pervert was Elyse standing in front of a full-length mirror, dressed in nothing but

a sexy-ass red lace teddy. *Fuck*. The lingerie fit her like a glove, showing off her curves and revealing miles of soft skin.

Her long, blonde hair danced softly against her back as she moved, checking out her reflection in the mirror. Her hands were splayed across her hips as she popped one hip out in a seductive position.

She honestly didn't realize how beautiful she was, which resulted in a lack of confidence. I despised her ex-boyfriend and whomever else made her feel like she wasn't worth anything, which was the main reason I'd made the bet with her earlier in the day. She needed a win.

As much as I wanted to be a creep and watch her all night, I forced myself to walk away and prayed a hot shower would erase any dirty thoughts that were still lingering. I told the guys the truth: Elyse was a good girl, and I had too much baggage. In the end, I knew I would unintentionally fuck over her somehow.

Why did some women lie to themselves, believing they could have sex without becoming attached? A minority of women possessed that special ability, but the majority either lied or thought too highly of their performances.

Also, sleeping with a neighbor was almost like sleeping with someone at work. The two simply didn't mix.

As soon as I finished showering and wrapped a towel around my waist, I collapsed onto my bed and noticed Elyse had closed her blinds. Hopefully, she hadn't caught me peeping on her like some teenage boy.

“Tyler!”

I glanced across the street to find Mrs. Daniels waving at me.

“Good morning, honey,” she shouted with a flirtatious wink.

“Good morning, Mrs. Daniels.” I greeted her, walking over to the edge of the boulevard but not stepping off it into the street separating us.

“Didn’t I tell you to call me Frieda?” she said with a laugh. “Mrs. Daniels’ makes me sound old.”

“Frieda,” I said with a faint laugh.

Elyse hadn’t been lying when she’d mentioned Frieda loved hitting on younger guys. But I honestly hadn’t minded the harmless banter between us.

“Have you had breakfast?” she asked coyly as she signaled me to cross the street.

I gave her my most disappointed look and nodded my head. “Next time?”

“I’m holding you to that, sweetheart.”

Even though I needed to start working on a design for a new law office downtown, I’d had some extra time this morning to work on Elyse’s basement before heading to work later in the day.

After eating a quick breakfast and throwing on my typical work clothes—jeans, t-shirt, boots, and a baseball cap—I’d headed toward Elyse’s place when Frieda had spotted me. As I now wrapped my tool belt around my waist and approached the door, I heard loud music blasting from inside.

Good, she’s up. I’d kind of figured she’d still be asleep after our late night. My fist pounded on the door a few times, hoping she could hear my knocks.

Hot fucking damn. As soon as she opened the door, I clenched my jaw tightly to keep it from falling wide fucking open. Knowing she’d just rolled out of bed and thrown on the first thing she could find, Elyse was still a vision. Her blue eyes shone curiously at mine. Her plump, pink lips creased into a smile. Sunlight danced across her face as she stood in the doorway, her long hair pulled back into a messy ponytail with loose locks framing her cheeks.

Instead of the sexy red teddy from last night, she wore a simple, pale purple sports bra and matching yoga pants that rested perfectly just beneath her navel, exposing her tanned and toned stomach.

Hot fucking damn. I cleared my throat and shook my head. The bra and yoga pants cupped every inch of her curves and haunted me in the process. Why did the fuck my fingers itch to yank her bra off her? *Ah, shit.* I really needed to get past these dirty thoughts.

“Hey,” she said, sounding out of breath and puffing out her cheeks to blow the tendrils away from her face.

“It’s ten, and you’re awake?” I asked, arching my eyebrow in surprise.

“I have company coming over later,” she explained, opening the door for me. “You left my kitchen a hot-ass mess last night.”

“Sorry about that,” I murmured.

I’d had every intention of helping clean her kitchen last night, but I’d needed to get out of dodge after our depressing conversation. If I had stayed, I probably would’ve told her my entire life story.

“It’s okay,” she said as she closed the door behind me.

“Finally getting some action?” I blurted out without thinking.

Elyse gasped as her face turned bright red. “Uh, no, my sister and her boyfriend are coming over. And Cory—Alyssa’s boyfriend—is bringing his older brother, Caden. Alyssa says Caden’s interested in me.”

Any guy not interested in her was a complete dumbass. Me included.

My eyes quickly roamed over the area; her house was slightly more organized than it had been last night. Her bookshelves were neatly arranged with an assortment of books, framed pictures, and little knickknacks. Candles and

plants had been strategically placed on the coffee table. And her couch was in a different place from last night.

My nose caught a whiff of chocolate chips cookies, and I wondered if she'd been baking while cleaning.

"You don't seem too happy about that," I said, watching her water a plant in the foyer.

"I'm really not interested in dating right now," she said with a sigh. "I'm trying to work on myself, I guess."

"I've been doing the same thing."

"Oh, really?"

I scoffed, heading toward the kitchen as she followed me. "Just because I like sex doesn't mean I'm not working on myself. Why should I punish myself even more? Take my advice. You might like it."

Elyse made a face as I opened the door to the basement.

"No thanks," she said, shaking her head. "I hope you don't mind my sister and the guys being here. But you can hang out if you want to."

"It's fine," I said, shaking my head. "I shouldn't be long, and I have to work later."

I headed down the stairs into the basement and began prepping the layout. The area wasn't terrible—I'd seen much, much worse—but a few minor fixes here and there would make it better. Much, much better. Like getting rid of the horrible shag carpet. And knocking down the random-ass wall that stood in the middle of the room.

When she'd first given me a tour of her place, I'd been ready to handle some quick fixes. But when I'd surveyed the basement, the offer to renovate had just spilled out of my mouth without a second thought.

Part of me felt drawn to helping her because I believed she didn't have anyone else.

After almost three hours had passed, I headed upstairs for a quick break, hoping she had a pitcher of water somewhere in the refrigerator. Plus, the air was barely circulating down there, and I needed a quick breather.

The sound of my work boots stepping into the kitchen made Elyse jump, spin around, and lean dramatically against the counter.

“You scared me,” she accused me, brushing a hand down her light jeans.

“Did I?” I asked with a smirk, noticing her change of clothes into a gray crop top tucked into her jeans. Her naturally wavy hair had been straightened. She looked casual and comfortable. Wearing little makeup, she still managed to light up the entire room.

She poured a bag of chips into a large bowl, plucking one into her mouth.

“I’m just here for water,” I explained, washing my hands in the sink. “I like your hair like that.”

“Like this?” she squeaked out shyly, twirling a long lock around her finger as she stood in front of the cabinet that held the drinking glasses. “I, uh, just straightened. Thank you.”

I stood in front of her and leaned closer, opening the cabinet door behind her and grabbing a glass. I could smell the mint from her breath and the fruity scent of her hair.

I winked at her as I pulled back with glass in hand and turned the faucet on, letting the water run cool. A small giggle escaped from her lips, and I gave her a quizzical look, wondering what the hell was so funny.

“Y-you have something on your nose,” she muttered, grabbing a napkin off the counter.

“Are you going to get it off?” I asked with a mock scowl.

“Duh,” she cooed, standing on her tip toes as she gently wiped the residue off my nose. “There.”

As she backed away and tossed the paper napkin a trash can, I said, “Now, let me help you.”

“With what?”

Without thinking and chuckling at her confused facial expression, I licked the back of my thumb and pushed it toward her eyebrow. I hated when my mom did that to me before I left for school. She always told me it was a normal.

Elyse figured out my move after watching my thumb head straight for her eyebrow for a quick nanosecond and then quickly dodged her head out of the way. I continued to chase her around the kitchen with my thumb in the air as she tried to duck, laughing out loud.

She fell against the counter, and I lightly pressed my body against hers, watching her squirm and struggle.

“Stop fighting it, Elle,” I said, chuckling as she tried to move her head around in a desperate attempt to escape.

“That’s so gross!” she yelled. Her small, warm hands pressed against my chest as she attempted to push me away.

I laughed even harder, not realizing that my body had closed gap between us and that one of my legs was wedged between hers. Just as she wrapped a hand around my wrist, I paused and stared into her eyes.

Elyse came down from her laughing fit and gave me a sweet smile that did something to my insides. Suddenly, the doorbell rang, catching both of us off guard. *That was close.*

I took a big step back and ran my drinking glass under the running water, looking through the window by the sink.

“I should get that,” she murmured and quickly walked out of the kitchen.

I gulped down the water in seconds and placed the glass in the sink. Everything in me wanted to kiss her, even though I knew it would’ve been a mistake. A huge mistake. The sound of multiple voices filled her house, and I debated whether I

should introduce myself or wait for Elyse to bring them down to the basement.

I decided to introduce myself because I didn't want to be rude. *Fuck it.*

When I stepped into the living room, I noticed two men standing in the center of the room. They were about my height, maybe an inch or two shorter, and both blonde. I guessed the younger brother with the Justin Bieber haircut was Alyssa's boyfriend, Cory, and the brother covered in tattoos was Caden. The one interested in Elyse.

"Tyler!" Alyssa squealed in surprise, noting my silent presence.

She rushed over to hug me, unaware of the scowl on her boyfriend's face. To kind of piss him off and because I was kind of an asshole, my arms lightly circled her waist and gave her a delicate squeeze.

His scowl quickly turned into a frown, and his eyes darkened. Yeah, he wasn't a big fan of his girlfriend having guy friends.

"Hey, Alyssa," I said, pulling back from the hug as she stepped back to introduce her boyfriend and his brother.

"This is Tyler," Elyse jumped in. "He's my neighbor, and he's helping me fix some stuff around the house. This is Cory, Alyssa's boyfriend, and this is Caden, his older brother."

Caden extended his hand first, shaking it with force, as if he'd wanted to intimidate me. Alyssa shot a weird look at her sister, probably thinking the same thing I was. What the hell was up with this guy?

"She has you working right now?" Alyssa gasped. "Dude, hang out with us."

"We brought beer," Cory said, managing a tight smile.

I shook my head. "Thanks, man, but I was just taking a quick break. I need to finish up here before I head out. You guys have fun, though."

“You’re no fun,” Elyse muttered, wrinkling her cute little nose at me.

“Yeah, what she said,” Alyssa agreed, making both of us laugh.

I headed toward the kitchen just as Caden suggested they start cracking open the beers. When I got downstairs, I continued to rip out the last pieces of flooring, throwing the parts into a pile in a corner. From pulling the flooring out to tossing it into a pile, I knew I was making a ton of noise. And I felt terrible about it. Just terrible. I smirked to myself.

“You want to know something?” I heard a voice and some footsteps in the kitchen.

I was sitting on the staircase in the basement, taking a break from the manual labor and snapping a few photos of the progress I had made. I couldn’t wait to start the design, especially once I finally installed the special software on my computer that I needed for it.

“Sure,” Elyse replied casually.

I’d guessed she was talking to Caden. As much as I didn’t want to eavesdrop—I’d felt bad enough spying on her through her bedroom window last night—I didn’t have anywhere to go to avoid their conversation. Shit was everywhere, and their voices floated through the floor into the basement.

“I’ve never stopped thinking about you since the night I met you at the club,” he admitted, making me roll my eyes and cringe.

For someone of his size and build, I’d imagined a deeper voice, but he had an unusually high tone.

“Really?” She laughed lightly.

“I want to take you out. Just say the word, Elyse. Stop playing so hard to get.”

Stop playing so hard to get? Was this guy for real? Toying with someone's emotions was something she would never do.

"I'm flattered, Caden," she said before trailing off.

"But?" he pushed.

"But I'm not sure I'm ready yet. I've been through some shit over the past few months. You seem like a good guy, but I'm just not there."

Good girl. She'd proved my point.

"I understand," he said with a heavy sigh. "But we could still go out, you know, as friends."

Dude was seriously begging.

"I'll think about it," she said.

"That's good enough for me."

An awkward pause extended into awkward silence, making even me feel uncomfortable.

"Uh, I'm going to check on Tyler. I'll be right back," she said hastily as I heard the doorknob twist.

I scratched my head and circled in place, trying to find something to make myself look busy. I picked up a hammer and concentrated on pulling a random nail from the wall, feeling Elyse's silent presence behind me.

"I feel bad you're down here working alone," she said, surveying the mess around me. "Can I help?"

"I like to work alone, Elle," I grumbled, turning around and finding her standing on the last step. "Besides, I don't want you down here hurting yourself."

"Oh, you think I can't do this?" she shot out with so much sass that I wanted to smile. "Think I'm going to break a nail and cry about it?"

I just shrugged my shoulders.

"I don't care what you say," she said, leaving the last step and walking closer to me. "But you have a partner now."

"No, I don't." I slowly gritted out the three words.

“Why?”

“Elle, you have a company. You don’t need to be getting dirty.”

Her offer to help was cute, but when I’d accepted the job, I knew I’d be working alone. I didn’t mind either. She really didn’t need to lift a finger.

Elyse remained quiet for a moment or two before her eyes met mine. “What if I like getting dirty?”

Jesus.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Elyse

“ALEX, you’re off scallops. This is the third time they’ve been fucking sent back,” Dave yelled, alerting everyone in the kitchen. “Elyse, switch stations with her. Now!”

I annoyingly dropped the cast iron and stopped basting my lamb rack. Although scallops are easy to cook, they require constant supervision. Alex was struggling with overcooking them, which ruins the delicate texture and turns them ice cold. Even though she knew how to cook scallops perfectly, the bad mood she’d sported coming into work had evidently bled into her cooking.

“Are the racks trimmed?” she asked with an exaggerated sigh, struggling to keep her composure.

I could see she wanted to rip Dave a new one, but working at an established high-end restaurant came with steep demands, requiring near perfection.

“Yeah,” I said with a nod. “I just finished the last order.”

The kitchen staff had worked in terror ever since the dinner shift had started tonight. Scared shitless of Dave’s sour attitude over the last few hours, everyone was on edge as he ordered switched positions.

Max, the expeditor, yelled, “Three scallops and two lambs for table five!”

“Got it!” I shouted.

“Got it,” Alex repeated.

Max helped maintain the flow from the time a server took a customer’s order to the time the dishes were delivered. His

position allowed servers to concentrate on other customers and tasks.

Once my pan was extremely hot, I sprinkled it with olive oil before placing the scallops. After lightly seasoning the tops, I expertly flipped them once I noticed a nice golden brown. I didn't peel my eyes off them for even a second.

As soon as I removed the scallops from the pan, I coated the center of a plate with a cauliflower puree and drizzled a light walnut and pomegranate butter for garnish. I carefully put all three plates on the line after the final touches and called out for Max.

"Speed it up, Jennifer," Dave ordered another kitchen staff member. "Table two has been waiting for twenty minutes. I don't want to take you off your station. Or kick you out of my damn kitchen."

What's up his butt? I wondered silently as I cleaned up my station and offered my help to others.

An hour later, with the last table served, everyone in the kitchen sighed in relief as they started the cleaning process. Although tonight hadn't been especially stressful for me, I understood how the others felt. The tension soon faded as Ricky, one of the younger chefs, flipped the music on in the background.

"Acklin!" Dave barked, walking swiftly into his office. "My office. Now."

What the fuck had I done now? Even my coworkers shot me nervous looks that did nothing to calm my own nerves. I felt like I was being called into the principal's office.

Giving my coworkers a shrug, as if to say, "I have no idea what's going," I wiped my sweaty palms down my chef's coat and took a deep breath. My heart pounded furiously with each step I took toward the office, knowing all eyes were on me.

My heart continued to race when I stepped into the office, surveying the huge mess of paperwork and different colored binders on his desk and around the floor. A huge calendar that listed important events was tacked to the wall beside his desk.

“Take a seat,” he muttered as he plopped down in his chair behind the desk.

I promptly sat my tushy in the first available chair in front of his desk. My mind raced. Was I in trouble? His blank facial expression gave away nothing as he leaned back in chair and folded his arms across his chest.

The fucker just stared at me in silence. I hated the waiting game. Especially in silence.

“I’m sorry about being behind and not helping Alex sooner,” I started nervously. “It took longer than I—”

“That’s not why I called you in here,” Dave cut me off. “You know I’ve been looking for a sous-chef. And because we have a high reputation to maintain, I won’t hand the job to just anyone. I want only the best. You understand that?”

I nodded my head vigorously. “Yes. Yes, I understand.”

My legs started to shake with anticipation, and my head felt a little light at his revelation.

“Don’t get too excited,” he warned, noticing my physical reaction. “I’ve been keeping an eye on you over the past few months, and you, by far, are the best cook here.”

I’m the best cook here? Shut. The. Fuck. Up.

“But I need you to prove yourself. I need to know you can handle yourself, the staff, and any emergencies that might happen.”

How hard was it to prove myself? I’d been doing just that ever since I’d learned about the position.

“I have the knowledge and experience to take on this position, chef,” I said, trying to control the excitement in my voice. “I won’t disappoint you.”

My feet desperately wanted to run out of the office and find Alyssa. *Stay calm, Elyse.* But how could I when I was one step closer to my dream?

“The restaurant just booked the rehearsal dinner for the governor’s daughter for next week,” Dave said, swinging his

head toward the calendar on the wall.

Holy shit! Next week? The governor's daughter?

“There’s no room for error, Elyse,” he continued, keeping a steady eye on me. “The family will have some special requests, but the rest of the menu is up to you. You need to create an extraordinary menu, show the staff how to perfect it, and run the kitchen the day of the event without my help. Do you understand?”

I nodded rapidly as my mind churned. Various recipes flitted in and out of my mind. “Yes, chef, I understand. I can do it.”

“One week, Elyse,” he said. “Don’t disappoint me.”

When he dismissed me, it took every inch of willpower I had to avoid running out of the office and screaming with excitement. I calmly and coolly walked out and then took a deep breath as soon as the door closed behind me.

As much as I wanted to rush into the kitchen and tell everyone the news, I knew I couldn’t. I didn’t want to get my hopes up. What happened if the rehearsal dinner was a complete failure? What if my extraordinary menu was just ordinary and dull?

Even though my insides were bursting with excitement and adrenaline, I had to keep the news to myself ... for now. But I would tell Tyler as soon as I got home. I needed to hear one of his pep talks. I had no doubt he would steer me in the right direction. Besides, I needed a test dummy.

I sat in my car and screamed for complete joy for a few minutes when I pulled into the driveway. Even though I reminded myself not to get too excited, I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face or slow down my racing heart. I had a legit shot at the sous-chef position.

The porch light outside Tyler’s house was on, and some light seeped through the cracks of his blinds, which meant he

was still up. And I desperately needed to share my good news.

I hopped out of the car, shaking my hair out from my ponytail, and anxiously and annoyingly knocked on his front door, hoping the other neighbors couldn't hear.

Within seconds, my stomach fluttered when the door swung open and Tyler stood shirtless, his chestnut hair all over the place and his shorts barely hanging onto his waist. I involuntarily took a step back and tried to focus on his tired eyes, but I fucking failed. I failed so hard. How could I not stare when his rock-hard abs and v-line stared right back at me?

“Ty, who is it?” A feminine voice floated through the air in the background. “Are you coming back?”

My once fluttering stomach dropped like dead weight when I noticed his swollen lips and his embarrassed smile.

With disappointment running through me, I turned to step off the porch. “I, um, sorry, never mind,” I stammered, pounding my fist into my hand.

I was jealous. Of the woman that got to kiss him. The woman inside with him.

“Is everything okay?” Tyler asked with a concerned look.

Fuck no.

“Yeah, I'm good. Of course. Why wouldn't it be?” I rambled quickly without a single coherent thought in my mind. “I just wanted to say thanks.”

We're just friends, I silently reminded myself. *We're just fucking friends.*

“Yeah, no problem. Anytime.”

He quickly looked over his shoulder, and I didn't know what made me feel worse—his female company or the fact that I couldn't share my exciting news with him. I really had no right to be mad with him. He was a grown man and could do whatever—or whomever—he wanted. I just needed to remind myself every so often. Or every day. Or multiple times a day.

“I’ll see you tomorrow or something,” I mumbled and shot down his porch steps in record time.

I didn’t even need to look back to know he’d already closed door and probably had his tongue down the woman’s throat by now. What the fuck was wrong with me? I didn’t want his gross tongue down my throat. Or anywhere near me. I just wanted to tell him the news. That’s all I wanted. So maybe I was jealous of the time the woman was spending with him.

Yeah, that sounded about right. I wanted to see the look on his face. I wanted him to be proud of me. I wanted to sit in his living room with a beer in my hand and discuss my extraordinary menu. That’s what I wanted.

As soon as I entered my dark, quiet house, a desolate feeling began to consume me. Why did I feel so betrayed? And sad? I had fabulous news that I was dying to tell someone. Unfortunately, calls to Alyssa and Lena went directly to voicemail.

Why was I always there for other people, but no one was around when I needed someone? Life really sucked sometimes. How had my life become so dull?

After a quick shower, I stumbled into bed and watched my ceiling fan circulate in the dark. The excitement and optimism that had coursed through me earlier were fading slowly into sadness—and probably self-pity. I’d fallen into a depression when my parents passed, but with some help from my friends and Alyssa, I’d pulled myself out and started living again. And I promised myself I’d steer clear of that dark route again.

The news of my engagement, which I’d celebrated with Alyssa and my friends, was probably the last time I’d had any good news to share. Everyone had been happy for me, but more importantly, they had been *there* for me. Especially when I’d found the perfect wedding dress.

“I think this is the one,” I squealed, stepping out of the dressing room in the bridal store.

The saleswoman held the train of the gown and followed behind me as I carefully made my way to the center of the room. Glancing at my reflection in the three-way, full-length mirrors, the mermaid-style dress simply mesmerized me with its heart-shaped diamond neckline and flared bottom. I honestly felt like a magical princess.

“Wow,” Alyssa breathed out slowly, wiping tears from her eyes as she stood up from the couch. “You look beautiful. I can’t believe you’re getting married.”

“You really think this is the one?” I asked as she rested her head in the crook of my neck. We stared at our reflection.

She nodded, carefully wrapping her arms around my waist, and hugging me. “I wish mom and dad could see you right now.”

A lump formed in my throat and my heart broke a little at the thought of our dad not being there to walk either of us down the aisle and our mom not being there to help us get ready.

“So, what do you think?” I asked, turning to face Alana, who remained on the couch with her legs crossed.

My best friend stared at me and smiled. “E, it’s gorgeous. Jason is a lucky guy.”

I turned back around to take another look at myself in the mirror and felt my heart swell with excitement. I held up my left hand, showing off the engagement ring, and shrieked, “I’m getting married!”

Tyler: Is it okay if I get some work done at your house? I see you’re not home and wanted to ask first. I’ve been on the computer all day. Need a change.

Me: Yeah. I left the key in the mailbox.

Tyler: That’s a sign of trust for someone that accused me of murder before.

Me: Lol. Maybe I just really want a nice basement.

Tyler: Whatever. I'm also sorry about last night. You didn't need anything?

Me: No, I just wanted to tell you something. That's all.

Tyler: I'll see you when you get off.

The second I tucked my phone into my pocket, Alyssa waltzed into the kitchen and stared at me silently.

“You need something?” I asked, keeping my head down as I diced a group of onions. As much as I wanted to share my good news with her, now wasn't the time or place.

“You're quiet today,” she said with a shrug.

“I'm fine, Lyss. I had a hard time falling asleep last night. And you never called me back, dummy.”

“Cory and I got into a fight last night,” she explained, rolling her eyes, and adjusting her black apron. “He wouldn't stop fucking calling me, so I turned my phone off. Sorry. Don't ask because it was stupid as always.”

“Well, now I want to know,” I teased, throwing the freshly cut onions into a container.

“What do you think of Caden?”

Of course. Caden. He seemed like a nice guy, but I couldn't imagine us being anything more than friends.

“What about him?”

“You know exactly what about him,” Alyssa accused mockingly. “So?”

“I don't know. I mean—”

“Here comes the excuse,” she said with an exaggerated groan of frustration.

“He's cute. Happy?”

She squealed with joy and bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. “Yes! Now, let's talk about dates.”

Shit.

When I returned home from running errands in the late morning, I spotted Tyler sitting on my porch and looking at his phone. Stacks of old flooring and wood were sitting on my front lawn. As I parked my car in the driveway, he tucked his phone into his back pocket and adjusted his baseball cap that appeared to be hiding his messy hair.

He was dressed in his usual work attire of cargo shorts and t-shirt, except the sleeves were cut out and the mid-day sun made his skin glow, highlighting every curve and muscle.

“How was work last night?” he asked, stepping onto the lawn.

I shrugged, meeting him on the yard and glancing around at the mess. I didn’t have any right to be mad at him, but I still wasn’t happy that another woman had hogged his time last night.

“Uh, it was crazy busy. Probably like it will be tonight.”

“Say the word, Elle,” he teased, waving his phone in the air. “I’ll get you outta there if you need some time off.”

I rolled my eyes and grinned. “Actually, I wanted to tell you something, but you were, uh, busy.”

“You still could’ve told me, you know. I mean I even asked if you needed anything. I think last night’s on you.”

“You were busy!” I gasped, my eyes widening at his putting the blame on me. “Really busy.”

“And I still would’ve listened.”

Yeah, right. Like he would’ve told her to leave so we could talk.

“So, what is it?” Tyler asked, cocking his head to one side.

Feeling the excitement from last night return, I couldn’t help but smile and bounce a bit as he studied me with impatience and confusion.

“I was kind of offered the sous-chef position yesterday,” I finally squealed, jumping up and down with enthusiasm.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed brightly, wrapping his arms around my waist and spinning me around.

I threw my head back and laughed, throwing my arms around his neck while enjoying the physical connection a few moments longer.

“That’s fucking amazing, Elle,” he said, setting me back on the ground. “I knew you could do it. I don’t put my faith in just anyone.”

“I don’t have the job yet,” I quickly clarified. “I have to prove myself first. I need to create an extraordinary menu for the governor’s daughter’s rehearsal dinner next Friday. The fucking governor, Tyler. I have about one week to come up with something, and right now, my inspiration is running a bit low.”

He furrowed his brows for a moment. “What are you doing tomorrow night? Do you have to work?”

I shook my head, mentally thanking Dave for giving me some time off to think about the menu.

“I really don’t have time to go out,” I hedged, wondering if he’d thought taking me to club would help.

His faith and support meant the world to me, but I didn’t have time to screw around. Hell, I didn’t have an entire week to screw around.

“Do you trust me?” Tyler asked, staring straight into my eyes.

“Why?” I eyed him suspiciously.

“Yes or no?”

I took a deep breath, trying to figure out what he had up his proverbial sleeve.

“Answer the question, Elle.”

“Yes,” I answered honestly, watching a huge grin cross his face.

What the hell was he up to?

“Six o’clock. Saturday. Be ready.”

“Ready for what?”

He simply shrugged, meaning he wouldn’t answer any of the questions flooding my mind. As he headed toward his house, he threw out one last instruction: “Oh, make sure you dress up.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

elyse

AT EXACTLY 5:55 p.m. on Saturday, I stared at my reflection in my full-length mirror, anxiety clouding my already jumbled and crazy mind. Even after begging Tyler numerous times for a tiny hint of what we were doing, I still had no idea what the hell we were doing and why I had to dress up.

On a more positive note, I felt incredible. A long, black, satin maxi dress with a slit that reached my lower thigh, and a faux diamond neckline flattered my figure and showed off a little more cleavage than I wanted. I fixed my hair into long, bouncy curls that draped over my shoulders.

Much to Alyssa's disappointment, I was never interested in makeup, preferring little to none. If I was going all out, she was my girl—the expert. But not only was she working tonight, I also hadn't mentioned my plans with Tyler for obvious reasons. In the end, I opted for a simple, natural look with a hint of makeup.

My heart nearly stopped when the doorbell rang. I threw on some black heels with a single strap before rushing toward the door and throwing it wide open without a second thought.

Holy. Fucking. Shit. We both stared at each other in complete silence for what seemed like hours. I was at a loss for words. I opened my mouth to say something nice, but nothing fell out, except for maybe a tiny, embarrassing gurgle.

The guy sure cleaned up nicely. He wore a Persian blue suit that highlighted his tanned skin, with a freshly pressed, white-collared shirt underneath. Dark shoes and a matching belt finished off his incredible, breathtaking look. His hair swooped to the right side, and the beauty mark sitting under his eye rose when he grinned at me.

His bright eyes darkened, searing into mine, as highly inappropriate thoughts ran through my head. Yeah, I was definitely jealous of the *time* that woman had spent with him the other night. Was I jealous that she'd touched the body I had been fantasizing about one too many times? No, of course not. Was I jealous of her pressing her mouth to his beautiful pink lips? Nope. Not at all.

Was it suddenly hot in here?

The nerves that fluttered around in my stomach now soared to new heights. Where the hell were we going? What the hell was he up to?

I had no doubt that I trusted Tyler, but I really trusted him to realize I needed to focus on a life-changing menu.

“Y-you—” we both spoke at the same before stopping and laughing awkwardly.

“Uh, do I look okay?” I asked nervously, smoothing my dress down with my hands. “Am I overdressed?”

The dress had been hiding in my closet since Alyssa's 18th birthday party. Her Hollywood red carpet theme had required suits and fancy dresses.

His eyes roamed over my body, lingering a little too long on my boobs before he blinked and shook his head.

“You look, uh, stunning,” he stammered. “You look perfect.”

“You do too,” I blurted out, feeling a blush creep onto my cheeks. “I mean handsome. Not stunning. Shit. You know what I mean.”

Desire and lust muddled any reasonable thought in my brain. *Someone can kill me now.*

He simply grinned and extended his hand. “We don't want to be late, do we?”

I reached for the black clutch that held my phone and lip loss before grabbing his hand and following him to his jeep.

The sun was trying to leave for the night, as an occasional breeze floated through the air. For a Saturday night, the neighborhood was relatively quiet, other than the sounds of a few dogs barking from a distance.

I smiled to myself when he closed my door and settled into the driver's seat. I'd always believed it was the little things that made a man attractive. And in Tyler's case, they were opening doors for me, sucking in his lip, mumbling the words to songs I would've never guessed he knew, and randomly running a hand through his hair.

"Tyler," I begged, turning toward him, batting my eyelashes, and pouting my lips. "Please tell me where we're going. Please."

"Are you begging?"

"Is it working?" I bit my lower lip.

"Not gonna work, sweetheart," he said with an irritating chuckle.

"You trust me, right?" Tyler asked once more as he parked in a pebbled parking lot.

We were about thirty minutes away from the city in the middle of nowhere. Literally nowhere, because other than what looked like a big, red barn, no other buildings were in sight.

About two dozen LED lanterns planted in the ground created a romantic walkway from the edge of the parking lot to the glass double doors of the building. Well-dressed couples and groups of people trailed into the country-style building as loud music boomed from inside.

An enormous banner hanging above the entrance congratulated Derrick and Michelle in big, black, fancy letters.

"Uh, Ty," I said, watching other people climb out of their cars and head to the venue. "Why are we at a wedding?"

Maybe he knew the bride or groom. But, somehow, my gut instinct told me that wasn't the case.

"It's not a wedding, Elle," he said, watching me blow out a huge sigh of relief. "It's a reception."

Fuck.

"I thought you didn't know anyone in town? Whose reception is this?"

He shrugged. "I don't. And I don't know."

I remained silent for a moment as he removed the car keys and adjusted his collar.

"So, let me get this straight," I said slowly. "We're dressed up for someone's wedding reception, and you don't know the couple."

"That's exactly what I'm saying," he said with a quick wink that I think made my black lace thong wet. *Oh, God.*

I knew he was spontaneous and lived in the moment, but I wasn't and didn't. I liked lists, plans, and schedules.

"You're not serious," I moaned, dropping my face into my hands and taking deep, slow breaths to prevent the oncoming panic attack.

I knew I needed to step out of my comfort zone, but not like this. This was way, way out of my comfort zone. Not to mention, if I'd caught strangers crashing my reception, I would be furious. What happened if we got caught?

"Think of it as acting," Tyler advised, looking relaxed as hell. "You'll be fine."

"I am *not* crashing a reception. Yes, I need inspiration, but not like this. Are you even listening to me?" I ranted, waving my arms around in complete despair.

"No," he admitted as he reached into the glove compartment. "Here, put this on. Tonight, you're my wife, Mrs. Carter."

I balled my fingers into a tight fist, but he peeled them back one at a time and placed a gold diamond ring in my palm.

My hand immediately closed again as I shook my head. I knew we were acting, but my emotions didn't get the memo.

"Are you scared?" he asked, noticing my lack of reply. "You're supposed to be a fucking professional killer. Where's your sense of adventure? Worst case scenario is you look better than the bride."

"What if something bad happens? What if we get caught?"

"Look at who you're with," he said proudly, puffing out his chest. "Nothing is gonna happen. I promise you. Get out of your own head and try to have some fun. Okay?"

He grabbed my free hand and squeezed it, slowly calming my jittery state.

"Okay," I muttered.

"Hey, don't leave me hanging. Put the ring on."

I opened my hand and slid the ring on my finger. So many questions whipped around in my mind as I studied the gorgeous ring that fit me almost perfectly. Had it once belonged to his mom? Although I wasn't an expert in diamonds and jewelry, I knew this wasn't a prop.

After exiting the car, I automatically slid my hand into his as he led the way up to the lantern-lit romantic walkway, casually following other groups of people. When we stepped inside the barn-shaped building, my heart stopped, and I quickly surveyed our surroundings. The layout. The guests. The music. The decorations. The flowers. *This* was the reception I had envisioned.

It featured modern touches with a hint of simplicity. I would've been a few months away from professing my love and exchanging vows with Jason. Sometimes unexpected changes battered lives with unpredictable speed and reasoning. Basically, life was unfair sometimes.

Especially now, as I gawked at my dream reception.

"Elle?" Tyler asked, nudging me gently with his arm. "Elle?"

"I-I'm sorry," I stammered, taking a deep breath.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Absolutely.” I plastered on a fake smile and metaphorically grabbed my balls as Tyler guided us further into the venue.

Although I would’ve never thought of a yellow, tangerine, and peach color scheme, the three worked beautifully together. From the bridesmaids’ pale yellow dresses to the flower arrangements and various decorations, everything was breathtaking. The combination of the hues made the setting warm and inviting, yet the tone still breathed formal and upscale.

The catering staff were quickly working to clear away empty plates on the round tables of eight draped with white tablecloths. A dozen or so people continued to dine at various tables as others either hit the dance floor or the open bar.

Even though the guests wore designer dresses and suits probably worth more than my two-week paycheck, Tyler and I blended right in with the increasingly drunken crowd.

“Do you want a drink?” Tyler asked as his eyes landed on the open bar. “We gotta fit in, right?”

“Don’t leave me!” I blurted out, latching onto his hand tighter.

His sincere smile made me melt as he tilted his head toward the bar and casually strolled over to the area. For an upscale and formal reception, the bar was packed, with only a single female bartender taking and making drink orders.

“At least the bartender is a woman,” he said, quickly checking out the young brunette behind the bar. “I bet I can grab her attention. What do you want?”

Of course, you can grab her attention, I thought sourly.

Her long, brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and the top three buttons of her white dress shirt were undone, revealing a good amount of cleavage. *More skin, more tips.* She was definitely his type. Pretty. Whatever.

“Do what you do best. Surprise me,” I said as he squeezed his way through the crowd, leaving me behind to study the guests.

I tried to relax and blend in, believing not every guest knew everyone in attendance. I mean, I could be a cousin’s plus one, right?

Just don’t take forever, Mr. Flirtypants.

“Waiting for a damn drink too?” a thirty-something-year-old woman with short, reddish hair asked, making a face at the long line. “This is just plain ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous,” I repeated in British accent, biting down on my lower lip to prevent myself from giggling.

Where the fuck did that come from? I’d always wanted an accent, and I guess now was as good a time as any to practice.

“I would probably have three bars at my reception,” the woman joked. “Maybe that’s why I’m still not married.”

I laughed politely at her joke. “I’m as sober as they come right now. Awful, right?”

“Yes, just awful,” she agreed, nodding her head. “I’m Jenna, and I don’t think we’ve met before. Were you at the wedding?”

Before I could reply, Jenna launched into grand details about the beautiful ceremony, especially the vow exchanges, during which everyone had cried. Apparently, a small orchestra had performed the most gorgeous music throughout the whole thing. And some white doves were released after the service. According to Jenna, the entire wedding had been simply perfect.

“Yes, of course,” I lied, with a perfect smile. “The ceremony was gorgeous. I’m Anna. Anna Carter. My husband is old friends with the groom, Derrick.”

Thank goodness my scattered mind managed to remember the names from the banner.

“My brother is friends with Derrick too. I wonder—”

“Babe, I see you’re finally talking to people,” Tyler said, gliding in at the perfect time and handing me a colorful mixed drink.

My eyes grew wide when his lips placed a soft, lingering kiss on my cheek.

It’s your fucking cheek, Elyse, I mentally scolded myself as I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“Sometimes I have to force my wife to speak to new people,” he continued after introducing himself to Jenna. “She gets so nervous around big groups of people. Right, honey?”

Asshole.

“I wouldn’t call it nerves, sweetheart,” I said with a smug smile, when I noticed his facial expression the moment I used my fake accent. “I’m completely fine. It’s a great crowd.”

I took a long sip from my strawberry mojito, which helped soothe my nerves.

“Babe, remember what the doctor said. You tend to get a little gassy when you drink too much. If you need to take your meds, I got them right here,” he said, patting the side pocket of his jacket.

Oh, the asshole just went there. As I felt my face warm to embarrassing shades of red, the douchebag stood there with a straight face and a smirk. And poor Jenna looked lost and out of place, not sure what to say.

“Speaking of pills,” I said with a bright smile and snapped my fingers, “you forgot to take your little blue pill. But don’t worry, sweetheart, I have it right here in my purse.” I patted my black clutch for emphasis.

Jenna coughed suddenly, covering her mouth with one hand.

“You know I don’t need a damn pill,” Tyler practically spit out, his eyes darkening.

“Oh, darling, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. You promised me a good night tonight. So, don’t get too cocky.”

I turned my head slightly to choke back a laugh after watching him suck in his lips angrily and take a deep breath. I really wanted to snap a picture of the priceless look on his face and then frame and hang said photo in my living room.

Two of his fingers tipped my chin up to make me focus on the darkness and heat clouding his eyes. “Do I have to prove to you right here and now that I don’t need a damn pill?”

Uh, yes. Yes, you need to prove it.

I shook my head, pushing his fingers away. “That’s bloody awful of you to say in front of our new friend here.”

“I, um, I think I’m going to check on my friends. You two have fun,” Jenna said awkwardly with a fake smile before scurrying away.

I nudged my arm against his and smiled cockily at him.

“You’re fucked up,” he practically growled.

“Should I remind you that you started it, honey?”

Tyler walked away but stopped to fire back at me. “Maybe if you used that sexy-ass British accent more, you’d be less annoying.”

“Bite me.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tyler

AS THE RECEPTION progressed with more drinking, socializing, and dancing, I stood off to the side with a glass of whiskey and watched Elyse awkwardly circle the tables, checking out the different foods and hopefully finding inspiration.

I'd seriously pulled the idea out of thin air because it had sounded good in my head. I was just happy that it'd worked out smoothly, judging from the way she smiled happily at me to the way she swayed to the music and expertly dodged the more drunken guests.

She looked like she truly belonged among the rich guests, dressed to perfection in designer suits and dresses. She looked flawless in that damn sexy as hell and sophisticated dress that hugged her body perfectly. Her curls bounced off her shoulders, following her every move.

Hearing my phone softly chime, I dug into my pocket and pulled it out to read a message from Will, saying he wanted to chill and grab some beers. I declined, sucked down the rest of my drink, and tucked my phone back into my pocket.

My eyes instantly latched on Elyse among the crowd, chatting with some random guy old enough to be her father. Wearing an expensive burgundy suit with slick, jet-black hair and a terrible fake tan, the guy drunkenly jabbered, expressing a clear interest in her.

However, the more he talked, the more she appeared uncomfortable, and the pink in her cheeks turned to red. From the way she side eyed me every few seconds, I knew she wanted me to save her. I knew she wasn't quite strong enough

to walk away from the idiot. *Eh, I'm going to let her sweat a little bit for the Viagra joke.* Yeah, I was an asshole.

A few minutes later, I smoothly slide my arm around her waist and planted my hand on her hip, pulling her close to me.

“Babe, I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” I said charmingly, kissing her forehead before taking a long look at the older gentleman gawking at us. “And who’s your friend?”

“This is—” That damn accent rolled off her tongue so easily. It was so sexy.

“Kelly,” he interrupted, extending his hand with an overconfident smirk. “You are?”

I scoffed, dropping his hand after giving it a firm squeeze, and stared at Elyse in mock surprise. “You didn’t tell him about me, darling? Tyler Carter. Her husband.”

I emphasized the last two words for his benefit.

“I was just telling your wife that she has a wonderful accent,” Kelly said. “I was just about to ask where she’s from.”

At the same time as I blurted out, “California,” Elyse answered, “Essex.”

“I was born in Essex,” she clarified quickly, snuggling closer to me. “But I loved visiting California when I was a child.”

“And how do you know the bride and groom?” Kelly asked, draining the rest of his drink.

“Tyler is very old friends with Derrick,” she jumped in.

Derrick? Very old friends?

Kelly simply nodded with approval, listening to her spin a fake tale about me and, apparently, Derrick, the groom, getting into trouble back in the day. After laughing charmingly in all the right places, he soon excused himself from the conversation.

“London? Again, that’s why you can’t drive,” I teased, pulling my arm away from her waist.

Elyse gasped mockingly and pushed herself away. “Don’t be jealous, asshole.”

“The older gentlemen seem to love you.”

“No thanks to you! You stood there like an idiot as I rambled on and on with my lie.”

I shrugged nonchalantly. “I knew you’d be fine.”

My heart skipped a beat when she moved closer and tucked a hand into the lapel of my jacket. “Guess what?”

“You got an idea for the menu?”

She nodded as her eyes sparkled excitedly.

“Let’s hear it,” I pushed gently. “But use your accent.”

“Uh, no,” she declined, removing her hand, and patting my chest. “No one has ever done anything this crazy for me before. I’m grateful you made me do this. I mean, uh, not make me, but you know what I mean. Don’t make plans for tomorrow, because I’m gonna need you to test some stuff out for me.”

“I’m glad I could help,” I said as she tensed visibly when a softer and slower song began to play. “What’s going on, Elle?”

She shook her head. “This song. I just love this song.”

“Then dance with me.” I held out my hand, and after a second of hesitation, she grabbed it, following me onto the dance floor.

With a light tug of her hand, I drew her toward me and rested my other hand on the small of her back. She rested her head on my chest.

I honestly hadn’t known how to dance until Jordyn forced me to take lessons before our wedding. Her family followed a special tradition, where the bride and groom performed a routine in front of friends and family during the reception.

I could never say no to Jordyn, even though I’d despised the lessons with my entire soul. But I’d fucking manned up, learned the steps, and carried out her family’s tradition flawlessly. When Jordyn and I learned we were having a son,

teaching him the routine for his wedding one day had been at the top of my list. Well, after showing him to build stuff and play all different types of sports.

I couldn't wait to watch him grow and be proud of him. I had so many things planned for us—the family—but they were taken away from me. Way too soon.

Elyse followed my lead when I broke away and spun her in a circle before dipping her gently. Her arm around my neck tightened, and I guessed she probably feared I might drop her. I wondered if she'd hate me or laugh with me if I "accidentally" dropped her. Knowing her, she'd hate me *while* she laughed with me.

I pulled her up from the dip and drew her close again.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" I murmured into her hair.

She shook her head. "Are we crashing a wedding next week? If so, I'm down. I had a really good time tonight."

I was about to reply but stopped when I noticed we were the only two people left on the dance floor. *When the hell did the song end?*

"Did you know we're the only two on the dance floor?" I asked, amusement laced in my voice.

She gasped and stepped back, watching the guests say goodbye and give quick hugs. A glance at my watch indicated it was still early as hell. These rich people seriously didn't know how to hang.

"Yeah, that's not weird at all," she said sarcastically.

"Ready to get outta here?" I asked, lifting my arm to escort her.

"Yeah," she said, smiling and looping her arm through mine. "Also, I think I'm getting a little gassy."

When we returned home, I walked her up to her house like a gentleman.

"Thank you again, Tyler," she said, lingering in the doorway as a slight breeze blew through her dress, exposing

her leg.

My hand formed a tight fist because my fingers ached to lightly caress the skin. I wondered if that small action would elicit a moan from her. *Fuck.*

“You don’t have to thank me,” I said, as she grabbed my hand. “Just keep trusting me because I like surprising you.”

She dropped the ring into my hand and closed it before giving me a sweet smile.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, dear,” she said in the fake accent that drove me insane before disappearing into her house.

How in the world did this woman manage to leave me fucking speechless? Why the hell was I gulping and clearing my throat for no reason?

“Jesus,” I muttered, ambling down the porch steps and heading toward my house.

That accent was going to get both of us into trouble.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

elyse

“DAMN, I feel like I’m here more often than I’m at my own house lately,” Tyler admitted, stepping into my kitchen shortly after my sweet request for his presence.

Ever since we’d crashed the wedding reception, a million different ideas and recipes had been coursing through my mind. Then I received the bride-to-be’s request that seafood and steak be the main dishes. Why was steak so highly requested? But I had free reign over everything else, including sauces, side dishes, desserts, and anything else I could think of.

My kitchen was a complete disaster. Almost every seasoning I owned was hidden among the many dishes, pots, and pans scattered about the island. Almost every appliance—stove, oven, electronic mixer, even my blender—was in use.

And I was a hot mess. Literally. Food on my face. Smears, swipes, and dribbles of food covered my t-shirt and pants. My hair was in a seriously messy bun—hopefully I’d be able to get out the knots when this was all through.

But I didn’t fucking care. I didn’t care about the mess. I didn’t care about my appearance. The menu was the only thing I cared about right now.

I scooped up a spoonful of my wine reduction and gently blew on it as Tyler stood next to me, waiting to taste my latest creation. I impatiently watched his face for any clues as he slurped down the liquid and licked his lips. He’d volunteered to be my official taste taster and offer nothing but the truth.

The concoction I’d just fed him was my third attempt—red snapper, a red wine sauce, and rosemary potatoes. The

combination of ingredients sounded amazing in my mind, but for some reason, the end result wasn't meeting my standards.

"I love it," he said finally. "Whatever that was, it was great."

I turned around to face the stove, feeling his chin rest on my right shoulder. "I don't know what I'm doing." I sighed. "The governor's daughter requested steak and seafood, and I'm scared this isn't enough."

"It's definitely enough."

I knew he meant well, but my gut instinct told me that I could do better. Much better.

"Lobster!" I shouted excitedly, whipping around to face him before realizing how close he was standing in front of me. So close our mouths could have easily brushed together if one of us had leaned forward a teeny tiny bit.

Despite my initial reservations about crashing the reception, I'd had a fun and amazing time—minus the old, creepy guy who blatantly hit on me. But what my mind kept repeating was dancing with Tyler. Who knew he could dance so well?

Being that close to him felt strangely intimate—but in a good way. Our fingers had laced perfectly together as I'd followed his confident lead, allowing him to twirl me around and dip me.

I doubted he knew how much that night meant to me, even after I thanked him a million times.

"What about lobster?" he asked, arching an eyebrow as he carefully leaned against the island.

And then an even better idea hit me. "Seafood platter! Lobster, shrimp, fish, *and* steak!"

Somewhere in my recipe books, I had written down some ideas for a classy, upscale seafood platter. None of my ingredients would be battered or breaded and then fried in a big vat of grease. Nope. Not classy. And the food definitely wouldn't be displayed in three- or even four-tiered dishes.

The more I thought about the idea, the more I loved it.

“I’m allergic to shrimp,” Tyler admitted. “So, sorry, I can’t help you with the shrimp.”

“You’re so useless,” I teased, with a mock huff.

He simply shrugged before stuffing his hands into the pockets of his sweats.

“Can I finish that?” he asked, nodding toward the fish dish that I hadn’t been particularly happy with.

I nodded and listened to him hum as he grabbed a plate and fork and began helping himself.

“Elle, this is so good,” he groaned after a few bites. “I’m so fucking happy you’re my neighbor.”

I chuckled and shook my head as I worked on a stuffing for the lobster. I started chopping rosemary and thyme, throwing them into a bowl as Tyler leaned against one side of the island and held out a bite of the fish for me every so often. I adored the fact that he didn’t stop me from working but knew that I needed the energy. *What a sweetheart.*

“I still want that date,” Tyler said, causing me to drop the spoon in my hands.

What? I gulped and froze in place. What about the brunette from a few nights ago? Wouldn’t he have been more likely to want to date her? He and I were just friends.

“Uh, what date?” I asked, hoping I sounded casual and breezy as I turned around to face him.

He waved my phone in his hand. *Oh.* “You got a text from Caden.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or hide.

“Right,” I said, grabbing my phone from his hand and reading the text. “Caden.”

Me: Is this a date as friends?

“So, you met this Caden guy at the club, right?” Tyler asked, finishing the rest of the fish dinner, and carefully setting

the empty plate in the sink.

Caden: Just say yes. You won't regret it.

"Uh, yeah, the night we all went out together," I replied, sneaking a glance at his message.

"Are you gonna go on a date with him?"

"Why are you asking?" I asked suspiciously.

"Isn't this what women do? Talk about dates and shit?"

I chuckled lightly.

"Yeah, I guess," I said with a shrug and continued to work on the stuffing. "We talk about looks, where a guy would take us, and whether we're gonna have sex with him."

"So, do you think he's cuuuuute?" he asked in a sing-song voice, pretending to twirl a piece of hair between his fingers.

I laughed. "Shut up. You really don't have to do this, Ty. I would rather be friends with you than most women anyway."

Thanks to Alana, my trust in women had been completely betrayed. The only girlfriend I truly trusted now was Lena. I sure as hell wasn't ready to put my trust and faith in another woman again.

"Why?"

"Women are just too much. They're either secretly jealous or feel like everything is a competition. I like being your friend."

"So, again, are you gonna go on the date?"

"You know what?" I said frustratingly, throwing the stuffing mixture into the garbage can because it tasted like crap. "Let's talk about you. What's *your* type?"

Tyler laughed and sat down as he watched me clean up my kitchen. "I don't have a type really. She would need to have a sense of humor because I love joking around. I don't want her to think I'm annoying or some shit."

"Too late," I mocked, rinsing out some pots in the sink before setting them in the dishwasher.

“Ha. She should have some confidence, know she’s pretty. Someone both beautiful and sexy. And, I guess, someone who was only mine. Fuck, I don’t know. What about you?”

His explanation didn’t explain why he didn’t date or why I’d never seen him with the same woman twice.

“I guess I would want someone who only had eyes for me and loved everything about me,” I admitted. “Someone who could make me laugh, brighten up my day, and just look at me like I mean the world to them. And straighten me out when I’m acting crazy.”

Tyler chuckled. “Straighten you out? What does that mean?”

“Don’t act stupid.”

“We’re allowed to talk, Elle,” he said, walking over and leaning against the counter beside me. “Tell me.”

Jesus Christ.

“Well, I-I mean. I don’t know how to say this—” I stuttered, unable to look him in the eye, as my cheeks immediately flushed.

“Spit it out.”

“If we’re arguing, or I’m mad about something, I tend to get, er ... I-I mean, I want someone that won’t argue with me but that will have—”

Tyler grinned and cut me off, “Spit it out.” I could no longer keep eye contact and focused my vision on everything but him.

“Fuck you?” he interrupted, and my eyes slowly found his again.

I was going to say “have sex with me,” but his words worked too.

“Am I right?” he asked quietly, arching an eyebrow.

Of course he was fucking right, and he knew it too, with his smug smirk that sent shivers up and down my spine and made my pulse beat erratically.

“Yeah,” I answered, focusing on transferring anything dirty in my sink into the dishwasher. “I get turned on during arguments. Well, not every argument. Kinda depends on the situation.”

Did I just admit that him? Shit. I did.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

elyse

FORTUNATELY, Tyler took off shortly after my admission, running some errands as I continued to work on the menu, reading recipes, writing down ideas, and experimenting with different flavor profiles for the remainder of the day.

He continued to pop in and out throughout the day to taste and comment on a variety of side dishes, like the Greek lemon potatoes or tahini-roasted cauliflower with pepitas and herbs or the crispy quinoa with kale.

And if I'd accidentally made too much of a dish, he simply packaged it in plastic containers and shared it when he saw the guys later that evening. They highly approved of the Greek lemon potatoes, which didn't surprise me. Miguel and Kyle thought the cauliflower dish was fine, but they thought it "tasted too much like an actual vegetable." Will loved it, but then again, he was into fitness and health foods already.

Tyler did all this without a single complaint and actually thanked me for keeping him and the guys from grabbing fast food. When Jason hadn't been complaining about my food, he bitched about the mess in the kitchen.

Tyler returned one final time, just around dinner time when I was putting the finishing touches on three new side dishes: baked zucchini chips, grilled corn and snap pea salad, and haricots verts with a warm shallot vinaigrette.

"Ugh, I'm so full," I said, making a face as I stood up from my chair. "The potatoes and the crispy quinoa made the list. I'm not sure about the baked zucchini chips."

"I think whatever ends up on the menu will impress everyone," Tyler said, patting his belly. "But I think the grilled corn and snap pea salad was my favorite."

“I think I’m going to make some cookies. Wanna help?”

“Elle, you’ve been in the kitchen all day,” he whined as he stood up and helped clear the table.

I held up my hands in surrender. “Okay, no cookies then. What about wine? And, hey, what’s wrong with my kitchen? It’s my favorite place.”

“You choose the kitchen over the bedroom as your favorite place?” He blinked at me blankly.

“Right now, yeah,” I tossed back, pretty much admitting my sex life was trash.

“Got beer?”

“Sorry,” I said with a small shrug.

I actually wasn’t that sorry, as I preferred wine over beer any day of the week.

“You’re forgetting that I live next door,” he said with a smirk.

After cleaning the kitchen and starting the dishwasher for the fourth time today, we headed over to his place for beer.

“Tyler, this is unacceptable,” I said, shaking my head as he immediately headed into his kitchen to grab the beer and I slowly meandered through the rooms.

Other than a couch and a mounted TV in the living room, the main level definitely looked like a bachelor pad. Beer bottles and cans everywhere. No pictures on the wall. No bookshelves. No personal touches. Nothing. Just emptiness.

“What is?” he asked, handing me a beer bottle. “Oh, you mean my house. Yeah, no wonder I’m always at your place, right? I hate being here.”

“What’s stopping you from settling in?”

He didn’t reply as he sat down on the armrest of the couch and watched me walk around the dining room area.

“How long has this paint been sitting here?” I asked, taking a long pull from the sour beverage. *Yuck*. How did men

drink this stuff?

“A few days.”

“Lies!” I shrieked, giving him an all-knowing smile.

He rolled his eyes. “A week tops.”

“You’re such a liar.”

I took another sip and winced. Seriously, why did people prefer beer? I grabbed his wrist and tried pulling him off the armrest, but of course, he wouldn’t budge. He just sat there with a smug smile and drained half of his beer, watching me continuously attempt to persuade him off the couch.

“It’s my turn to help,” I said. “We’re painting your dining room. Right now.”

He laughed and shook his head. “You must be drunk off that little sip because that’s not happening. It’s too late.”

“That’s your problem: excuses! Let’s go.”

I dropped his wrist and stepped into the dining room, grabbing a paintbrush among the supplies stacked in the corner. When he quickly snatched it from my hands, I started to unroll a clear plastic tarp to protect the floors.

“You gonna paint in *that*?” Tyler asked, pointing to my outfit.

Shit. I glanced down at my outfit, forgetting I was wearing a good pair of jeans and a low-cut, sunflower-yellow crop top.

I thought about my options. Obviously, I could head home and change, but I had no doubt Tyler would lock the front door the moment I stepped out. The other option was to stay and ruin a perfectly good pair of jeans and my cute crop top.

“You change your mind?” I asked suspiciously.

“Yes,” he said with a heavy sigh. “You seem pretty determined to paint tonight.”

Do I chance heading home to change?

“You painting in that?” he repeated.

I shook my head. “No. I don’t want to get paint on them.”

He held up a finger up, indicating for me to wait, as he sprinted up the stairs. About five minutes later, just as I'd laid the plastic tarp over the floor, he returned, having changed into a t-shirt and shorts. He handed me a folded t-shirt.

"You can wear this," he said, pointing to the bathroom door. "I don't care if you mess this one up."

I slipped into the bathroom and stripped out of my jeans and top, neatly folding them and setting them on the counter. I held out the large, white t-shirt in my hands before tugging it over my head. The shirt smelled of his cologne and dangled just past my thigh, covering all the important body parts.

I returned to the dining room, throwing my hair into a bun, and caught Tyler sitting on the floor in front of one of the white walls, painting huge dark blue strips on the wall with a foam roller. But when his eyes glanced in my direction, he stopped and stared at me, lingering on my bare legs.

"You started without me!" I blurted out with a fake pout.

"I'm saving that wall for you," he said with a snicker, pointing his roller to an empty white wall. "Don't fuck this up. I have to live here, ya know."

"*You* don't fuck up," I warned him, picking up a paintbrush and bucket of paint.

The dark paint would make the room look stunning and refined, especially with the right décor and furniture.

"Hey, Elle?"

"Yeah?" I asked as turned to face my blank wall.

"Before you sit down, will you grab me another beer?"

I rolled my eyes and sighed dramatically. "Lazy."

"Tyler," I moaned, dropping my paintbrush in the paint, and collapsing onto my back on the plastic-covered floor. "My arm is giving out."

We'd managed to paint two walls in about two hours, having just started on the open entrance area and the third wall. Even though my out-of-shape ass was tired, I wasn't giving up, because the two completed walls looked very nice.

He looked down at me with an amused grin. "But you're so competitive, remember?"

"Ugh," I groaned, pulling myself back to my feet, and picked up the paintbrush. "And I still am. I'm not giving up. We can finish this."

Five minutes later, my arm refused to cooperate anymore.

"Okay, I lied," I said, turning around after painting a few more big strips of paint on the third wall as Tyler finished the edges around the entrance. "I need a break. A long one."

A quick glance at the time on his phone indicated it was almost eleven. He sighed and dropped his brush in the paint tray before facing me. I stretched out my arms over my head, and he started laughing hysterically.

"What's so funny?" I asked, flailing my arms around. "Is there paint on my face?"

I ran one hand that was speckled with dry paint down my face, damn near smacking myself.

"Stop," he said with a laugh as he walked toward me. "You're making it worse."

Grabbing the hem of my shirt and temporarily forgetting I wasn't wearing my jeans, I wiped my face of the fresh paint smears.

"Asshole," I scowled, planting my hands on his shoulders, and pushing him back without any success. "You could've helped me."

"I did help you."

"What? When?"

"Right now." He slowly dragged his painted index finger down my nose as my mouth dropped wide open in shock.

I thought we could paint like two mature adults, but nope, this guy had just gone there. *Oh, he went there.*

Using all my strength, I tried pushing him again and he faltered a bit, taking a step backwards. That gave me plenty of time to lay my entire hand in the paint tray and slap it across his smirking face.

His hysterical laughter stopped, and his eyes darkened at the sound of my uncontrollable giggles. Oh, I needed to get a picture of my painted handprint across his handsome face.

“I need a picture,” I gasped, taking tiny steps backwards as he slowly prowled toward me. “Please. You look so cute. Paint and all.”

My small steps suddenly turned into a full-on sprint out of the dining room area, but one of his strong hands wrapped around my wrist and yanked me into his chest. *What the fuck kind of strength was that?*

I squirmed and wiggled, managing to turn around in his arms and feel his front pressed into my backside. The big brute held me tightly with one arm as the other reached for the brush.

“Tyler!” I yelled, struggling with everything I had against his one stupid arm that pinned both of mine against my chest. “Stop!”

“Or what?” he asked, waving the brush closer to my head.

“I swear I will kill you if you get any paint in my hair,” I warned, despite laughing so hard that my abs started to genuinely hurt. “You know, since I am a professional killer and all.”

I prayed he wouldn't paint my hair. That shit would take fucking forever to wash out.

“Are you trying to scare me, Elle?” he whispered, his lips barely brushing my ear and giving me goosebumps at the same time.

Thinking quickly, I shoved my ass hard against him, distracting him enough for him to drop the brush and loosen

his hold on me. I easily slipped away from him, reaching for the brush on the floor. *Sucker.*

Just as my fingers skimmed the handle, he wrapped both arms around my waist and one of my feet slipped on the slick plastic tarp. I was going down. And I was taking him with me. On top of me. And it hurt like hell.

Lying flat on my back, I winced in pain and tried to catch my breath as I felt the ripples of his laughter through his big, brawny chest. Ugh, I regretted taking him down with me. His hard-as-a-rock body was crushing my fucking airway.

“Shit,” he grumbled, slowly lifting his chest off mine and using his elbows to hold the weight of his upper body.

Suddenly, neither one of us was laughing or smiling. We were just staring at each other. The pace of my breath slowed, and my eyes blinked a few times as he used one hand to gently push some hair away from my face.

I didn't want either one of us to move or say anything. Being this close to someone was refreshingly nice and thrilling at the same time. His face was mere centimeters from mine, and I could smell the sour beer on his breath.

The hemline of my shirt was caught between my belly and his stomach. The thought made me clench my thighs together as my heart raced at a very unhealthy speed. Tyler must have felt my minor movement because he wet his lips and grinned softly at me.

As my vision blurred, the need between my legs ached for more and my lips begged to be kissed. He looked so damn good. I desperately wanted him to touch me. Be inside me.

As soon as I parted my lips and he lowered his face, the doorbell rang. Or at least I thought he leaned down. Was I imagining that part?

When the doorbell rang again, he jumped off me in record speed and grabbed one of my hands to help me stand.

Were we just going to kiss? That would've been the second time we'd almost kissed. Did that mean something? What was Tyler thinking right now?

But the biggest question that crossed my mind was: who the fuck was at his front door at this time of night? Was it a woman? Did he forget he invited someone over? God, this was fucking embarrassing.

Tyler went straight for the door as the doorbell rang a third time, and I shot off into the bathroom, pulling on my jeans.

“Kyle?”

“Hey,” his friend’s voice said cheerfully. “I didn’t think you’d be busy now, bro. That’s why I stopped by.”

Shit. I felt more comfortable in Tyler’s t-shirt, so I left it on and grabbed my top before stepping out of the bathroom. He didn’t seem to care what happened to the shirt anyway, so it was mine now. I crossed my fingers, hoping I could leave without dealing with any awkwardness. But then again, this was Kyle. He and awkward were basically best friends.

“Elyse and I were just painting the dining room,” Tyler explained as I appeared in the living room with a small wave.

“I thought you weren’t fucking her?” Kyle whisper-yelled, watching me from the corner of his eye. “You guys sure weren’t painting a minute ago.”

I wish he had been fucking me, I thought miserably. If Kyle hadn’t shown up, or if he hadn’t rung the stupid doorbell, would Tyler and I have kissed?

“What the fuck?” Tyler scoffed in disbelief and stared at his friend. “Why the hell are you peeking through my blinds anyway?”

That’s a very good question.

“Hey, bro, you’re the one that left them wide open.”

Fuck. Had he?

“Hey, Elyse,” Kyle greeted me with a smile. “How are you doing tonight? Oh, thanks, for the food today. I really loved the potatoes. They were really good.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, gripping my top tighter as I slipped past the guys at the door.

“For the record, he’s not fucking me,” I whispered in Kyle’s ear as I passed him. “We’re just friends, and I’m good.”

I power walked across our lawns without looking back or taking a breath until I closed the front door of my house and leaned against it with my eyes closed.

Holy shit. I needed a second. No, I needed a fucking minute. I’d almost caved to temptation. I kept reminding myself that I just wanted the physical connection because I hadn’t had sex in about four—maybe five—months now. And even longer for the mind-blowing and amazing sex.

With Jason, I’d felt like he just wanted sex for his own enjoyment. He hadn’t cared about how it had felt for me; he’d just wanted to find his own release. I’d often had to fake it with him, because he would feel some kind of way if I didn’t, even though he hardly cared. Everything was the same. Every time we had sex, I expected the same old positions and had to do all the work.

I just missed having a man’s hands and lips roam all over my body. I really needed to be touched. And now I needed to deal with this issue on my own.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

elyse

TODAY WAS THE BIG DAY. The rehearsal dinner for Governor Marshall's only daughter, Julia, and her fiancé, Hayes.

I stood in the center of the quiet kitchen and folded my arms across my chest as the rest of the staff stared at me.

"Does anyone need me to repeat anything?" I asked in a clear and demanding tone. *Yay me.* "Are we clear on stations?"

"Yes, chef," everyone said in unison as they nodded in agreement, knowing what was on the line. First, the restaurant's reputation. Alyssa had dug into Julia's social media accounts and discovered the bride-to-be didn't hesitate to bash anyone—or any restaurant—with pictures and posts. Her online criticism could set any highly reputable establishment back a month or two. That's how much influence she wielded.

Secondly, my ass was on the line. Forget about my promotion for a moment. If anything—or everything—went sideways tonight, I might lose more than a promotion. I had a good chance of losing my fucking job.

I looked serious and tough—well, I thought I did—but my anxiety levels were reaching epic proportions.

"We caught a break tonight," I said, not even cracking a smile. "The groom's family owns a little bakery, and they will be bringing in the desserts. So, that's one less thing for us to worry about. Got it?"

"Yes, chef." I loved the sound of that.

"Tonight's going to be busy and stressful. But just remember to breathe and keep busy. I don't care if you're

checking on your neighbor or even washing dishes, be productive. Work together as a team.”

“Yes, chef.” I *really* loved the sound of that.

“You guys know how to cook. So, nothing should be overcooked or cold. And make sure to taste every single thing you make. We’ve been through the recipes dozens of times, so let’s make tonight count.”

“Yes, chef.”

“If you’re unsure of anything—and I mean *anything*—run it by me. I will do my best to help you,” I instructed firmly.

I had confidence assigning Dean and Alex to the lobster dish because they worked well together. Even though Chris had the tendency to become overwhelmed in high stress situations, he loved working with herbs. And besides, the fish recipe was simple. I was certain he wouldn’t have a problem with anything.

I assigned myself, Ricky, and Sam to steaks, and a handful of junior chefs and relief cooks would help the station chefs.

Mom, please be with me tonight, I quickly and silently prayed as I prepped my station.

Alyssa wandered over to check on me. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I said, taking a deep breath.

I had pulled Alyssa and another server, Tia, from the front to help with plating, which I hoped would take some of the stress off the servers and the chefs.

Not to mention, my sister had an incredible eye for detail and deft hands for plating. I have no idea where she got that gift, but it just came naturally to her. She could make a plate of a hot dog on a bun with macaroni and cheese look high-class. After all, diners eat with their eyes first.

“Are the fruit trays complete? Are they in the banquet room?”

Alyssa nodded. “I just placed them in there.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling some relief run through me.

“Good luck,” she said before disappearing into the front area.

Some sous-chefs preferred to walk around the kitchen, observe the staff, and bark orders. I believed I could lead the staff by setting an example and working alongside them.

As the staff prepped their stations and the food, we received word the guests had started to arrive and were beginning to socialize over cocktails and appetizers that had been wisely premade and ready at a moment’s notice.

Aiming to impress and keeping with the fancy “surf and turf” theme, I started with smoked salmon, shrimp, and avocado bruschetta with a balsamic glaze. Prosciutto-wrapped persimmons with goat cheese were simple, tasty, and easy to eat during social hour. Ginger tuna kabobs were especially simple to create and packed a wonderful bite. I prayed the two last appetizers—polenta mushroom bites and balsamic-glazed grilled plums topped with goat cheese—satisfied any guest not thrilled with seafood or meat.

Because the beef had already been seasoned ahead of time, I just needed to focus on making sure my pans were hot and ready. My secret to working with steaks was removing them from the refrigerator about twenty minutes prior to cooking to avoid a cold center and an overcooked outside.

With the orders rolling in, I sighed happily, listening to one of my favorite sounds in the whole world: the sizzle of a piece of meat first touching the screaming hot pan. While reducing the fat and repeatedly flipping the steaks, I threw in garlic, thyme, rosemary, and a touch more oil for the perfect blend and flavor.

Even though I had perfected this recipe and completed it a few hundred times, I knew I could count on Ricky and Sam to match my results.

“Talk to me, Alex,” I yelled as I continued to dust the beef. “How’s the lobster? Are all the tails ready?”

For the lobster dish, we were using the tail, stuffing it with a mixture of lobster meat, shrimp, breadcrumbs, and herbs,

and then baking it. The recipe required perfection and attention to detail, but the end result would look—and taste—amazing.

“Most of them are cut,” she shouted back. “We have some shells in the oven now.”

One of my biggest pet peeves was the lack of communication in the kitchen, because without talking, mistakes happened. I needed to keep the lines of communication open tonight for everything to work out smoothly.

I kept pace with my orders, but I noticed Ricky struggling.

“Hey, Ricky, talk to me,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“I’m behind,” he cursed, sweat starting to form on his forehead.

No, please don’t fall behind, I prayed.

“They’re getting fucking cold. Fuck it, I’ll just reheat them. They won’t notice.”

“No!” I shrieked with horror and dropped my pan. “You can’t cook filet mignon, let it rest, and cook it again. Not only will the guests notice, but so will we. Go get new ones.”

Despite him being much younger than everyone else, he worked well under pressure and knew what he was doing—most of the time.

“That’s twelve fucking steaks,” he snapped, wiping his hands on his apron. “They’re all cold.”

Shit. I absolutely hated to waste perfectly good meat. Not only were the filets not cheap, but I also couldn’t serve them. My ass and the restaurant’s ass were on the line. We would be shredded to pieces if we served undercooked steaks.

“Go season the rest of that rack and then check on Alex for me,” I barked, grabbing his order. “Sammy and I will catch up.”

Luckily, Sam, an experienced chef, was doing just fine and didn’t have a problem with the additional orders.

“Alyssa!” I called out. “How’s plating going?”

“It would be good if Tia didn’t keep fucking up the plates and constantly being in my way,” she shot back with annoyance in her voice.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. Seriously?

“What the hell is wrong with my plating?” Tia demanded angrily.

“The point of plating is to make sure the plate is clean. Your plates are messy as shit.”

The server cursed in Spanish. “You don’t even work back here, so don’t give me fucking orders.”

Clearly, I’d completely overestimated what everyone could handle tonight. *Fuck me.*

“Each of you bring a plate,” I commanded, refusing to leave my station because I couldn’t leave Sam with a billion and one orders.

I bit my tongue after hearing Alyssa sigh heavily. In a matter of seconds, they each held a plate in their hands for my inspection. Alyssa was right. Tia’s plate was messy as shit. *Fuck me.*

“Don’t be rude. Not tonight,” I told my sister but sharply glared at the other server when she smirked triumphantly. “But Alyssa’s right; your plate is a mess. Listen to her, okay?”

Tia nodded meekly, and Alyssa mumbled an apology as they returned to the line to work on the rest of the plates.

Just as I’d tossed another batch of steaks onto the line, Alex stopped me. “Elyse, can you taste this? I didn’t realize there was a different topping for the lobster.”

With a clean spoon, I tasted the concoction of breadcrumbs, melted butter, and parsley, not too worried about the minor setback. The topping took less than five minutes to make.

“A little more parsley, and then it’s perfect,” I complimented before shooting off to my station. But I stopped

suddenly when I replayed her words in my mind. “Wait, so none of the lobster that already went out had the topping?”

“Not this specific topping,” she admitted. “We just sprinkled breadcrumbs over the top, not realizing there was a specific mixture.”

“Not realizing there was a specific mixture?” Seriously? In the final days of perfecting each recipe, I’d directed each chef to make the lobster dish for me and Dave, because it was the most complicated of the three. Although none of the chefs nailed the recipe, I knew they could with more practice. Another reason why I’d thrown Alex and Dean together—because they usually caught each other’s mistakes.

Why the fuck hadn’t Dean said anything? I didn’t have time to think about that.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself the error could be worse. So much worse.

“Fine,” I said slowly. “Just make sure to stick to this topping for the lobster, okay?”

“Yes, chef,” Alex said proudly, throwing more parsley into the pan.

As the night continued, Alyssa happily reported that the guests seemed happy with their orders. What was especially promising was that none were returned to the kitchen. Alyssa had also managed to help Tia clean up her plates before any of the servers took them out and quickly taught her what to do with the rest of the plates with minimal cursing.

As long as the guests, and more importantly the governor and his daughter, were happy, then I was happy. But I wasn’t. I was far from being happy.

Somehow, Ricky and a junior chef named Jennifer had taken over Chris’s station—whipping together the herb mixture for the lobster and working on fish orders as they rolled in—because Chris needed a cigarette break to clear his head.

A junior chef and relief cook stood in for me and Ricky, with Sam keeping an eye on them. After checking on the rest

of the staff, I returned to my station only to find Sam gone and the junior chef informing me that Sam had cut his hand and was at the first aid station. So, I had managed to leave a junior chef and relief cook in charge of the steaks for a few minutes. *Fuck my life.*

Probably making everything a thousand times worse—and driving me fucking crazy—was Dave occasionally walking around the kitchen before disappearing into the front area. He kept a great poker face, not giving me any indication of whether I was doing a good job.

How badly did I want this position? I reminded myself that not every night would be like tonight. I wanted this position so badly, but the stress and my coworkers' constant badgering of me had put me on edge for the entirety of the night.

“Elyse, can you try this? Does this taste right?”

“Elyse, can you fix this?”

“Elyse!”

“Elyse!”

“Elyse!”

As soon as I parked in my driveway, I couldn't stop the tears from gliding down my cheeks even if I'd wanted to. I'd stayed at the restaurant longer than I normally did, finishing and cleaning up after the rehearsal dinner that I'd tanked.

What the hell went wrong? Had I not taken this chance seriously enough? Should I have been tougher on the staff? Had my menu been too complicated? Had I given the team enough time to prep?

I thought I'd covered all my bases and had everything under control until it blew up in my face. The dream team of Alex and Dean unraveled later in the night as they argued over minute details. Chris had spent more time outside with his cigarettes than in the kitchen. With a bandaged hand, Sam had

been unable to crank out the steak orders with his normal speed and accuracy. At one point, Ricky had freaked out, forgetting how to cook fish, even after finishing a dozen plates. Even Dave hadn't said a word to me after the governor's family left.

Whatever hope I had vanished when I stepped out of the restaurant and headed home. I'd blown my shot at the sous-chef position, disappointing myself, my friends, and my family in the process.

I am such a failure, I wept miserably, leaning my forehead against the steering wheel. Jason was right. I am fucking pathetic.

With a huge sigh and whatever strength I had left, I scrambled out of the car and headed toward the house. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tyler leave his house and jog toward me.

"If I didn't know any better," he said, walking after me. "I'd think you were avoiding me. Hey, about the other night ___"

"Not now, Tyler," I grumbled, dropping my shoulders and stopping right before the steps.

"Hey," he said, staring straight into my eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Can we talk about it later? I-I just can't right now."

I was a sniffling mess. All I wanted to do was lock myself in my room, slip into bed, and do nothing but sleep, think, and cry for a good 24 to 48 hours.

His hands gently landed on my shoulders. He turned me to face him. "No. Stop being stubborn and talk to me. I'm right here."

The last three words made me shake with uncontrollable sadness and heartache. My tears fell fast and freely. As much as I didn't want to break down in front of Tyler, I couldn't help it.

Without saying a single word, he pulled me against his chest as one hand ran up and down my back and the other massaged my head. I instinctively wrapped my arms around his waist and held onto him, sobbing heavily into his chest.

“I-I—my job—don’t,” I wept.

He chuckled softly, making me smile a teeny bit. “Now, say that again?”

I sighed and pulled back slightly, wiping my tears with one hand. “I-I don’t think I got the job, Tyler.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I just know it,” I cried out, pressing my forehead to his chest again. “You needed to be there. It was damn zoo, with everything all over the place, and I couldn’t control any of the fucking chaos. How was I supposed to show my boss that I could handle the kitchen staff when all they did was argue with each other and yell at me?”

He remained silent, his absentminded back massage calming me down a bit.

“Thankfully, none of the food was sent back to the kitchen. Alyssa said the guests seemed happy, but that’s not the point. I just—I’m just so mad at myself.”

“Can I show you something?”

I stepped back and wiped the remaining tears away. “I’m not in the mood right now. I’m sorry.”

“The only place we’re going is your house,” Tyler said with a smirk, jogging up the steps and holding out his hand to help me. “Come on. I need you to open your door.”

I should’ve known he always had some kind of plan lurking in his mind. I sighed, mentally, physically, and emotionally drained, as I took his hand and unlocked the front door.

He immediately headed toward the basement as I dropped my bag onto the couch, where I really wanted to drop my ass too, and followed him. I remained silent, watching him root through his toolbox until he pulled out a mallet.

“We’re not down here to work, are we?” I asked with a sniffle. “I promise I’ll help you tomorrow or something.”

Although I didn’t want to shut Tyler out, I had just flushed my dream down the drain.

“You see that wall?” He pointed to a barrier that stuck out like a sore thumb in the middle of the room. “It has no purpose being here. Hit it as hard as you can.”

“Why? Is that going—”

“Hit the damn wall, Elle,” he barked, making my eyes go wide at the blank expression on his face. Where did the playful and fun Tyler go? On the other hand, though, I liked the serious side of him—the dominant side.

I threw on the protective goggles and face mask he quickly passed to me, and he stood back as he told me to be careful. What was so hard about hitting a wall?

I stood sideways, as if I was a batter at home plate and the mallet in my hands was a bat. Gripping the wooden handle with both hands, I swung the tool behind my head and struck the wall. I frowned, glancing at the tiny little dent. *Oh, come on!*

I swung again and again using the same technique and still making little difference.

“Stop,” he bellowed, lowering my hands as he approached me. “The point isn’t to put a little-ass dent in the wall, Elle. Put your anger into it. Stop letting all the bullshit get to you.”

I remained silent, letting his words sink in.

“I’ve known you long enough to know that you have way too much shit on your shoulders. You care too much about other people. Let it go.”

He just read me like a damn book.

“Think about everything that’s bothering you. Your job. Anything you want. And hit it fucking harder than that,” Tyler shouted, pointing to my little dents.

Now I see what we're doing down here, I thought, watching him slowly blink his long, dark eyelashes and clench his strong jaw.

The sound of Jason angrily yelling at me rang in my ears. *"I have needs, and you failed to meet them because you wanted to fucking cook!"*

The sound of Alana crying and begging me to listen. *"This shouldn't have happened, because you're my best friend."*

The frustration in Chris's voice when he became overwhelmed in the kitchen. *"I know how to cook, Elyse!"*

The memory of the one phone call that changed my life forever flashed through my mind. The one after I'd waited and waited for my parents to pick me up from the sleepover.

The yelling. The begging. The crying. The heartache. The pain. Just fucking everything.

Blocking out Tyler's voice yelling at me to hit the fucking wall, I swung the mallet with everything I had in me with a gigantic roar. I didn't even bother checking the damage after the first swing because the rage and anger inside couldn't stop me from slamming the tool into the stupid wall over and over.

The images of Jason and Alana in bed. Pictures of the drunk driver that struck my parents' car. The sound of Alex and Dean arguing over the fucking recipe. The sight of Ricky freaking out over the steak and fish.

Every damn emotion I felt traveled into my arms to the broken wall.

"Hey," Tyler said softly, catching my wrists before another a strike. "That's enough."

As I caught my breath and noticed the wall crumbled at my feet, I hadn't even realized I had been crying. With his hands still holding my wrists, he led me across the room, where it wasn't so dusty, and gently removed the face mask and goggles.

My heart raced as if I'd just ran a marathon, feeling the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“I destroyed it,” I mumbled. “The wall.”

“How do you feel?” he asked, sweeping residue from my face.

I forced a crooked smile. “I don’t know how you do it, but I feel okay. A little relieved, actually. I mean, my problems aren’t solved, but I feel fine.”

“I didn’t do anything, Elyse. This was all you.”

“I wanted to be different and make a change. But I should’ve taken more control tonight.”

Tyler cupped my shoulders and looked down at me. “Then learn how to be a boss. You don’t have to be everyone’s friend. It’s work. Hell, I’m not always nice to my crew on the job, but in the end, there are no hard feelings.”

“I figured if I was nice and showed them how important this was for me, they’d support me and work with me. Instead, they just ran over me.”

“If your staff doesn’t like you, fuck them, and move on,” he said sternly. “I know you can do this because I’ve seen the way you work. But you have to stop talking down to yourself. And stop letting people fucking run over you. You’re a killer, right?”

“I know. You’re right,” I said, with a small snuffle.

“You said that the last time and still didn’t take my advice,” he reminded me with a chuckle.

“And I was stupid not to.”

“Something like that. Stop taking shit from other people, because I really don’t want to have to tell you again. You’re fucking amazing. Start believing it.”

“You think so?” I asked softly, tearing my gaze from his.

As the anger and adrenaline dissipated, small jitters danced around inside me as I suddenly noticed our close proximity.

“I know so, Elle. I told you I don’t lie,” he said in a low voice as his right hand tucked a few strands of my hair behind my ear.

Why did his presence affect me so damn much? His words. His actions. When I lifted my head and stared into his eyes, I found myself sucked into temptation all over again. I wanted to know what his lips tasted like. And how his hands would feel all over me.

What did he see in me?

Break out of it, Elyse, my mind snapped. Say something.

As the unwanted and silent tension grew, I parted my lips to speak but ruined the moment by sneezing.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tyler

AFTER MEETING with the owner of a one-hundred-year-old hotel that needed massive renovations, I headed toward my jeep as thoughts of sketches, timetables, and potential meetings flew through my mind.

Just as I was about to open the door, my phone rang. One look at the caller ID—Elyse—was all I needed to grin widely and answer.

“They loved my food!” she screamed so loudly that I held the phone in the palm of my hand in front of my chest and still heard everything that ran out of her mouth.

I didn’t even need to hit the speaker phone button.

Deep down, I knew the job was hers, because her boss would’ve been the biggest dumbass in the world if he didn’t promote her.

With the dumbest smile on my face, I leaned against the driver’s side door and listened to her babble on and on and on about how the governor and his daughter loved the food and how her boss was proud of her.

He better damn be, I thought a little too harshly.

As her official taste tester—that sounded so inappropriate—during the week leading up to the big day, I couldn’t help but notice the amount of time and effort she spent creating the menu and then perfecting each recipe. I was pretty sure the guys and I each gained five pounds that week too.

“Wait,” I cut her off. “Did you get the promotion then?”

“No, but I’m an official candidate or applicant or contender! Shit, I can’t remember the exact term he used.”

I smiled and shook my head as she listed off more terms meaning “candidate.”

“Anyway, Dave said he has to interview a few more people for the position before making a decision. But I should know something in a month or two.”

“Hey, it’s Friday. We should celebrate.”

“Yes!” she shouted with excitement in her voice. “Should we go back to the club?”

“Nah, I know the perfect bar.”

“Perfect!”

As she launched into details about her meeting with her boss, I finally hopped into my jeep, set my phone on the console, and happily listened to her all the way home.

I leaned against the passenger side of my jeep, scrolling through the messages on my phone, as I impatiently waited for Elyse for our night out. Even though she swore she would be ready by nine, it was a few minutes after, and she was still nowhere to be seen. By now, I should know she would never be ready on time.

As her designated driver tonight, I decided on a dark blue, printed button-up with short sleeves, black jeans, and matching shoes. My hair had agreed with me, and I’d had time to gel it back nicely against my shaved sides.

When the sound of her front door opened and closed, I looked up and watched Elyse cautiously head down the porch steps in knee-high black boots with a skinny heel. Her normally wavy hair was straightened and fell over part of her face. She dressed in a sheer black top that clung to her small body and showed a black lacy bra underneath and high-waisted jeans. Red lipstick stained her plump lips, and her floral scent intoxicated me more and more the closer she got. *Damn.*

“I like your hair like that,” she said with a smile, quickly looking over my outfit.

“Oh, this?” I teased, pretending to swing my hair over my shoulders. “I just straightened it.”

“Do I look okay?” She pushed a few strands of her hair behind her ear nervously. “I feel weird when I’m in anything other than my chef jacket.”

She looked more than fucking okay. She looked fucking beautiful.

“You look amazing,” I reassured her, opening the passenger door to my jeep for her. “I don’t think you could ever look bad.”

A few minutes later, we were laughing and driving to Lucky Lou’s, a dive bar a couple of miles away from our neighborhood. The guys and I had hit the low-key bar, which served cheap drinks, a few times without complaint.

“Tell me a funny story. Something that happened to you,” Elyse demanded as I came to stop at a red light.

I tapped a finger against the steering wheel, thinking about her request, and smiled when a memory popped into my mind.

“When I was in the military, my buddies and I used Tinder for fun and good times, right?”

“Not that you would need Tinder, but okay.”

“So, you’re basically calling me cute?” I teased, stepping on the accelerator when the traffic light turned green.

“I don’t recall that coming from my mouth,” she said with a mock gasp as one of her fingers poked my bicep.

Maybe she was still high on the news of her promotion, but I really liked her energetic mood tonight. She was bubbly. Carefree. Lively.

“Anyway, I deleted the app, but I guess I hadn’t deleted my account. I don’t fucking know. I was on a train heading home from base one day when I saw this girl sitting in front of me across the aisle. I had a clear view of her just swiping away

on Tinder for a good ten minutes. Then my picture popped up, and I was confident she would swipe right. Nope. She swiped left—quick as hell too.”

Elyse threw her head back against the seat and laughed aloud.

“She didn’t even look at my other photos. I mean, I had a fucking dog in my profile picture, and women love hot guys with animals!” I said, with a laugh, shaking my head at the memory.

My ego had taken a gigantic hit at the time, but now, I found it funny.

“Aw, were your feelings hurt?” she joked, still chuckling.

“No,” I lied tightly. “She’s the one who missed out.”

When the radio started playing an infectious pop song, Elyse turned the volume up and started dancing in her seat.

“What the hell is up with you tonight, Elle? You on drugs or something?” I asked playfully, arching an eyebrow.

“Nope. I’m just high on life,” she said before yanking down the overhead mirror to check her sexy red lips. “And high on a few glasses of wine, but I’m celebrating, right?”

After roaming the tiny parking lot at the bar for what seemed like hours, I found a spot before we headed inside. I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward two empty stools by the bar as she looked around. Most people were drinking at the bar, sitting at high-top tables, or shooting pool and playing darts in the back area. On the small dance floor, a few drunk women swayed to the music playing on the digital jukebox.

“What are we drinking?” Elyse asked as we parked ourselves on the stools.

“I’m getting a beer,” I replied, reading over the draft specials on the chalkboard hanging behind the counter. “What do you want?”

Tonight was really about her. A couple of beers did nothing to impair my judgment or driving skills.

She hummed as she swiveled her stool around to face me, placing her hands on my knees. “You wanted to celebrate. So, let’s celebrate. I want something strong.”

“You sure?” I asked as I waved for the bartender’s attention. “Two shots of Jameson and whatever’s on draft.”

I dropped some cash on the counter as the bearded bartender placed my beer and her two shots in front of us. Her eyes went wide, watching the thick foam from my beer spill over side of the glass.

“What? You’re not taking one with me?” she asked as I took a sip of my beer. “We’re supposed to be in this together.”

She picked up one of the shot glasses and took a whiff of the dark liquid, her face instantly curling in disgust. I immediately regretted ordering her something strong.

“I’m driving, remember? Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you tonight. I promise.”

Shooting me a wary look, she held the shot glass toward her lips and started counting down from ten. She tipped her head back and tossed the liquid into her mouth, squealing loudly and shaking her head after it went down, her blonde hair flying everywhere.

She picked up the second shot glass and proceeded to convince herself to take the shot over the next ten minutes. Watching her talk to herself and the alcohol was fucking hysterical to me. Finally, she threw back the burning liquid and slammed the glass onto the counter, shaking her head again and wheezing.

“That’s fucking disgusting. God.”

“That will put some hair on your chest,” I teased as she wiggled her body on the stool. “Won’t it?”

“Oh, it did a lot more than that!”

“I’m drunk,” Elyse announced loudly, four Jameson shots later. No longer on the stool, she stood next to my stool, gripping my thigh for balance. “It’s been soooo long since I’ve been this drunk.”

“How do you feel?” I asked, mildly amused, pushing her straight hair away from her face. Even after throwing back shots, her lips were still stained crimson red.

“I haven’t felt this good in forever,” she breathed out, closing her eyes for a moment as she swayed to the beat of the music. “Dance with me.”

I shook my head as I finished the rest of my first beer.

“Please. Come on, Ty. Dance with me.”

“Dance right here,” I demanded. “I’ll watch you.”

I expected her to stomp her heeled boot like an insolent child, but she surprised the hell out of me by taking a few steps back, her eyes locked on mine. Finding the beat, she swayed her hips and ran her hands up and down over her sides, looking sexy as fuck. *Shit, I was in trouble.*

Her fingers tangled in her hair as she spun around a few times, almost losing her balance at one point. But Elyse continued to dance without a care in the world. And I couldn’t tear my eyes off her, especially when a pretty redhead about her age started dancing with her.

They sensually moved together, with their hands all over each other, as if they had known each other for years. Smiling. Laughing. Whispering.

“This is for you from a man at the bar,” the bearded bartender said, placing a damn margarita with a damn colorful umbrella in front of me. I laughed and slid the fruity-ass drink to the first woman near me.

When I turned back to Elyse, Will was standing in front of me, blocking my view of the impromptu dance floor.

“I’m offended you didn’t accept my drink, princess,” he said with a gasp.

“Hey, I called your punk ass earlier and you never picked up.”

Still dressed in his work clothes—dirty jeans, a t-shirt, and work boots—I guessed he’d headed straight to the bar after work.

“I was busy, bro,” Will said with a shrug. “Some of the guys had me running around like a personal assistant when I had a hundred other things to get done.”

“Sorry, man.”

Sometimes that was just the nature of the job. Shit needed to be done, and the person with the least amount of responsibility or the newest crew member had to follow orders from upper management. It sucked balls, but it was also a good learning experience.

“You here by yourself?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder and checking out the growing crowd. “And I thought I was the lame one. Wanna shoot some pool in the back?”

I shook my head at both questions. Will was competitive as hell in any kind of bar game. Pool. Darts. Air hockey. Seriously competitive. I’d previously spent two hours trying to defeat him in one fucking game of pool. I lost. And not just the game—200 bucks too. And little bit of my pride. After that, I learned never to go head-to-head against the competitive asshole.

“I’m with Elyse,” I replied, stepping off the stool and checking the area where Elyse and the pretty ginger had been dancing. Except they weren’t there anymore. “Fuck.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t see her. Where the fuck did she go?” My mind went into high alert and my protective instincts kicked in immediately.

I absolutely hated the idea of her—or any woman for that matter—being alone and incredibly drunk at a dive bar filled with sketchy characters.

Will headed outside to check the premises, seeing if she'd just needed some fresh air or something, as I weaved through the thick crowd with my eyes peeled for her. All my calls to her phone went unanswered. *Fuck.*

"Fuck," I swore under my breath as I returned to my original spot at the bar.

"The bouncer at the door said he didn't see her leave, so I'm sure she's still here, Ty," Will said, clapping my shoulder a few times.

"I'm gonna fucking kill her." If the stress didn't kill me first.

Will handed me a fresh pint of beer, and I swallowed half of it, hoping the cool bitter liquid soothed my nerves.

"Will!" Elyse screamed with delight, appearing out of fucking nowhere.

She hurled herself against his muscled body and hugged him as if she hadn't seen him in years.

"It's so good to see you! I didn't know you were coming tonight. Is Kyle here? Miguel?"

My jaw clenched as her slurred words tumbled out of her mouth, her eyes bright with excitement.

What the fuck?

"Nice seeing you too, Elyse," Will said with a laugh and returned the hug. "Uh, how much have you had to drink tonight?"

She impatiently rolled her eyes and waved one hand in the hair. "I'm fine. Totally fine. Perfect, actually. I don't know. I had two shots." She held up two fingers in front of his face. "Then two more. So maybe six?"

Holding up six fingers, Elyse looked at me for confirmation, but I just glared at her.

"I think you're in trouble," Will whispered, snaking an arm around her waist and giving her a squeeze goodbye.

“In trouble?” She laughed and then appeared confused, glancing between Will and me several times. “With whom? Wait you’re leaving already?”

I sighed out loud. “No. We’re leaving.”

“Why?” Her eyes widened with shock and defiance. “It’s not even closing time!”

“And?”

I grabbed her wrist and pretty much dragged her outside, ignoring her protests. Convincing her to get into the damn car took longer than I wanted to admit because she was so damn insistent on heading back to the bar. But once she hopped in, she remained quiet, laying her head against the window as I listened to the music on the radio.

I was ready to call it a night when I pulled into my driveway, but she stumbled out of her seat and raced around the car to confront me. She stood right in front of me as I slowly climbed out, wedging myself in between her and the car. Tossing her hair over her shoulders, her eyes darkened with anger and one hand popped onto her hip. Sass was written all over her pretty little face.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she snarled, poking an index finger into my chest.

Why was I the bad guy for being a big advocate for women’s safety? I mean, seriously, anyone could’ve snatched her from the bar.

“Go home,” I said with a yawn. “Go to bed.”

“No.” Another hard poke to my chest. “Tell me why you’re mad. I thought we were having a good time.”

“You don’t fucking disappear when you’re drunk, Elle. You could’ve gotten hurt.”

Instead of appearing remorseful for making me worry, she rolled her fucking eyes at me.

“I went to the fucking bathroom, Tyler. I ended up talking to a girl in there because she told me that I was pretty.”

“I don’t care,” I grumbled weakly. “You could’ve said something.”

“Aw, it sounds like you care,” she teased annoyingly.

I rolled my eyes this time around. “Go home. You’re drunk and being annoying as hell right now.”

I knew I could easily push her aside and head toward my front door, but something in the way she adjusted her stance and parted her lips made me a little suspicious. Her gaze dropped to the ground as she fiddled with her hands before slowly bring her eyes back to my face. She bit down into her bottom lip as she gave me a dark stare. She didn’t even blink, and I honestly couldn’t focus on anything but the sexy-ass look. Then it clicked.

“Are you turned on right now?” I asked incredulously, my own eyes widening as my mind whirled back to a previous conversation.

She stepped closer, giving me a seriously seductive smirk that made me want to fall on my knees and please her. She was definitely horny.

“Do you want to find out?” Elyse asked softly as one of her fingers played with an open buttonhole on my shirt and barely brushed my hot skin.

One of her hands snaked around to the back of my neck, and she stood on her tip toes, closing the distance between us. Whatever she was doing was sexy as fuck. *Damn.*

The moment her lips met mine, I kissed her back with reckless abandon. I couldn’t help myself. Especially when she pressed her chest into mine and her free hand skimmed over my jaw. I couldn’t stop the husky groan that escaped my throat.

I dug my fingers into her hips and switched positions, pushing her against the door of my truck. We were in a frenzy of kissing, our tongues naturally and easily sliding together. The hunger and desire in the kiss drove me mad, clouding my good judgment. My dick roared to life as she moaned softly. But as my tongue explored her mouth, I tasted the remnants of

the shots she'd thrown back tonight. The kiss was needy, hungry, and hurried. Her lips moved dangerously against mine, pushing me to lose control. I pulled back slightly and felt the smile on her lips before I consumed her again. *Fuck*. I needed to stop.

I pulled away and cleared my throat, adjusting the giant bat in my pants as awkward silence surrounded us. Neither of us said a word as we caught our breath from the heavy kiss. Even though I didn't know what the hell had just happened, I knew she was a great kisser. *Fuck me*.

"Come on," I said, determined to keep the boundaries intact. "I'll walk you home, yeah?"

"No," she protested. "Can I stay with you tonight? Please? I don't want to be by myself."

She folded her arms against her chest, looking nervous and tired. Us being under one roof wasn't the best idea in the world, but part of me didn't want to leave her alone.

"Please," she begged. "I'll even sleep on the couch, and I won't say a word."

I wanted to say no, but I knew I couldn't. I wasn't sure if I could ever say no to her.

"Come on," I said tiredly, jerking my head toward my house as she squealed with happiness.

When we stepped inside, we headed directly toward my bedroom upstairs—because I was a goddamned gentleman who couldn't let a woman sleep on the couch. I really needed to get my guest bedroom together for shit like this.

After grabbing a few extra blankets in case she got cold during the night and taking one for myself, I started walking toward the door.

"Tyler?" she called out hesitantly.

"Yeah?"

"Um, can you help me? You know, with my shirt." She slowly turned around, pointing to the zipper in the back.

I gulped as I stood behind her and gently pushed her blonde hair out of the way, letting it fall over her shoulders. *Shit.* My fingers slowly glided down her back until they found the zipper.

The thin, sheer material fell down her arms as she glanced over her shoulder. I took a step back when the job was finished, and she tugged the shirt off and turned around, wearing only her jeans and black lace bra. *Aw, shit.*

With the hungry kiss still fresh on my mind, I didn't trust myself at all. I needed to get the fuck out of this room.

I forced my eyes off her body and stood in the doorway. "I'll give you some privacy. I'll be on the couch if you need anything."

"Wait!"

I turned around to find her staring at me.

"Don't leave," she said, her pale ocean blue eyes roaming over my body. "Aren't we going to have sex?"

I fell quiet for a second, hoping my dick would give me a break.

"No. You're drunk."

"No, I'm not," she fought with me. "And I can see that you want to."

I choked and dropped my hands down to my crotch. *Ah, shit.*

"Uh," I hummed, looking away from her for a second, "yeah, he has a mind of his own."

"Will you touch me? Am I your type, Tyler?" Her words tumbled out fast and shaky.

The look of sorrow in her eyes had me frustratingly tugging on my hair, because for the first time in a long time, I didn't know what to say.

"We should go to bed, Elle."

I moved to leave when she grabbed my hand. “Answer me. Please. Jason didn’t touch me. Am I not enough? Or sexy enough? Is there—”

“You’re beautiful,” I said truthfully, cutting her off. “Fuck him.”

With my hand still in hers, she placed it over one breast still encased in the lace black bra. *God, you’re testing me, aren’t you?*

“Touch me,” she pleaded, running a finger over my lips. “Please.” *Fucking Christ.*

As much as I wanted to suck her finger into my mouth and pull the bra cup down to expose her breast, I knew I couldn’t. I would never take advantage of her in her inebriated state.

But I could make her feel confident.

I gently pulled my hands away from her body and cupped her face, kissing her forehead lightly. “Stop thinking less of yourself because of a man. You’re perfect.”

“So, does that mean no sex?”

“No sex.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

elyse

WITH A LOUD GROAN, I attempted to roll over and go back to sleep, but my brain had other plans. The second I opened my eyes, my head felt like it was slowly expanding with mounting pressure. Moving only seemed to make the pain worse. So much worse.

I wondered why I'd put myself through this agonizing pain any time I got drunk. Morning-after me really hated party-girl me. Was I ready to feel this pain again if I actually *got* the promotion? Probably not. But who the hell was I kidding? Party-girl me would go fucking crazy if I got the sous-chef position.

As my eyes adjusted to the sunlight pouring in through the window, I realized I wasn't at home. My bed was *way* more comfortable than this one. Process of elimination led me to believe I was in Tyler's bedroom, considering the room was plain and spotless and he didn't decorate. Also, I hoped he would've prevented me from going home with some random guy.

I sat up in the way less comfortable platform bed. Its fluffy, gray blankets were centered against one wall, a mounted flat screen hung above a plain wooden dresser across from the bed and a pile of clothes sat near the floor-to-ceiling closet.

I frowned when I pushed the covers off me to discover I'd slept in my bra and panties. A quick look at the rest of the bed indicated no one else had slept beside me. When had I undressed myself? Then again, I didn't remember anything that had happened last night.

As my feet landed on the floor, I struggled to keep the contents in my stomach at bay and took a few deep breaths. My brain still wanted to explode, and my body felt weak and just plain gross. When I couldn't find my clothes anywhere, I quickly dug through the pile of clothes by the closet and found a white-collared button-up shirt.

My fingers clumsily buttoned the shirt as I carefully and slowly headed downstairs, each step making my head pound ten times more.

When I entered the living room, I found Tyler sitting on the couch and watching a movie. *He must have showered*, I thought. Water droplets were still running down the center of his shirtless chest, and his thick hair was damp and combed back. All he wore was a pair of red basketball shorts. Jesus, the man was gorgeous.

"Finally," Tyler said with a smirk as his eyes roamed over my outfit and down to my bare legs. "How do you feel?"

"Like shit," I moaned, plopping on the armrest of the couch. "I haven't gotten drunk like that in years. God, everything fucking hurts."

"Not to make you feel worse or anything, but I wore that shirt a few days ago."

I glanced at my very poor buttoning attempt with a blank expression. He'd probably sweat in it, but then why did it smell amazing? Was I still drunk?

"That's probably why it smells so bad," I teased.

I furrowed my brows, waiting for a quippy comeback, but he looked down at his fidgeting hands before catching my eyes again. Was he nervous? He *seemed* nervous. Jumpy even. If I'd yelled, "Boo!" I bet he would've shit his shorts. Or maybe not.

His eyes coolly darted back to the TV, but he didn't appear to be watching the movie. As I watched his fingers play with the remote, I wondered what he was thinking. What the fuck was his problem?

Was it because I was wearing one of his shirts? Was it because he could see bits and pieces of my bra and panties through the wrongly buttoned mess?

“So, uh, do you remember anything that happened last night?” Tyler finally asked, barely looking at me.

I did something dumb, didn't I? I immediately thought with a silent groan. *Shit.*

“Fuck,” I exclaimed, dropping my head into my hands. “Oh my God.”

“What?” Why the hell was he acting so strange?

With a heavy sigh, I slipped off the armrest and onto the couch and noticed him scoot a few inches away from me. *Did I stink? How dirty was his shirt?*

My mind raced with so many possibilities and questions. What the hell had happened last night?

“What did I do?” I asked, full of dread. “I did something super embarrassing, didn't I?”

I probably shouldn't have had two—or was it three—glasses of wine before I'd met up with him. But I had been so excited about making the candidate list that I wanted to celebrate. I wanted to have fun. I wanted to have a good time. And I had. I hoped.

“Nah,” he said, relief flooding his eyes. “You were fine. You didn't do anything.”

I looked at him skeptically. “Then why are you acting so weird?”

“Weird?” he repeated, giving me a confused look. “I'm good.”

“You're worrying me. Did I throw up on someone? Did I flash anyone at the bar? Kiss someone? What?”

He sighed and rolled his neck back onto the edge of the couch. “Elle, I barely slept. I'm not used to giving someone my bed and then sleeping on the couch.”

Aw, he'd slept the couch. I figured I had barged or argued my way into sleeping in his room or something. I could totally picture drunk Elyse doing that sort of thing.

“Well, thank you for being a good friend and letting me stay the night,” I said truthfully, pushing myself off the couch and instantly regretting the decision. My brain was quickly crashing and begging for more sleep. “Oh, hey, where are my clothes?”

“I washed them. I just put them in the dryer.”

Oh my God, he didn't. Little things like that turned me into a giant puddle of mush.

“Well, if you don't mind, I'm just gonna crawl back into your uncomfortable bed and take a nap until my clothes are dry,” I said, flashing him a small smile as I headed the stairs.

Tyler nodded with a big grin. “Knock yourself out.”

Aw, the little things.

My stomach growled viciously, waking me up from my drunken nap. I probably should've eaten something or had some water earlier, but I was too tired to think about it. I'd hoped the nap would make my killer headache disappear, but the joke was on me.

For the second time today, I ambled down the stairs but stopped suddenly at the sight of Will and Tyler sitting on the couch and watching a game on TV. *Shit.* Tyler's friends had a knack for catching us at awkward moments.

“It's not what it looks like,” I blurted out before they even noticed me standing in the corner.

Will simply smirked at me as I tugged the hemline of Tyler's dress shirt lower. Sitting on one end of the couch and wearing blue trackpants and a white t-shirt, Will's brown eyes danced with amusement.

“Did you get a haircut?” I asked curiously.

He nodded as he ran a hand over the short buzz cut. “Thanks for noticing, Elyse. Tyler didn’t. And I know, Miss Disappear at the Bar.”

What the hell did that mean? Miss Disappear at the Bar?

“Wait? What?” I asked, glancing between the two friends. “Disappeared?”

Tyler shrugged and held up his hands in surrender. “I didn’t tell him anything. He was there last night and watched the whole damn thing go down.”

“What the hell happened?”

“You wandered off. I couldn’t find you. I was so fucking mad at you when you reappeared out of nowhere.”

I sighed as I sat on the armrest where Will was sitting. “Wait. So you were mad at me because I wandered off?”

He nodded. “You were drunk as hell, and I couldn’t find you anywhere. People are crazy, Elyse.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, fidgeting with my hands, but then peered at Will. “Did I see you there? Were we meeting you there?”

Will laughed and nodded. “Yeah, you gave me a big hug and everything. Nah, this asshole didn’t even invite me. It had just been a long day at work, and I needed a beer.”

I dramatically wiped my forehead and rolled my head back. “That’s embarrassing, and I apologize for anything I said or did last night. But, besides feeling like a truck has run me over, I think I had a good time.”

“That’s all that matters,” he said with a smile. “And congrats on being one step closer to that promotion. You deserve it.”

“Aw, thanks.” I gently nudged my arm against his.

“Your clothes are done,” Tyler said, tilting his head toward the table in the dining room.

“Thanks.” I hopped off the armrest and walked into the newly painted space.

A fuzzy feeling warmed my belly, appreciating Tyler's protective nature.

As I grabbed my jeans from the table, my phone chimed with a new message.

Lena: Surprise! I'm outside, and I brought Chinese food! Your favorite! :)

Me: Omg! You're the best!

"Yes!" I launched into a long, overexcited squeal at the prospect of food. And seeing Lena.

"What's going on?" Tyler's voice rang out from the living room as I jumped into my jeans, leaving his shirt on.

I didn't have the time or energy to wiggle my way in my own shirt again. A smile spread across my face, realizing this was the second shirt of his I now had in my possession. I didn't plan on returning it. It was way too comfortable.

"Sorry, but I gotta run," I apologized, tucking my shirt under my arm as I headed for the front door.

"We not good enough for you?" Will teased.

"I should probably give Tyler his house back. But, no, one of my friends is at my door with food!"

"A friend? Invite her over here."

I shook my head and waved goodbye. "Nope. Not a chance. I'm keeping her to myself today, boys. See you guys later!"

I stalked across the lawn, spotting Lena sitting on the top step with bags of Chinese food in her hands. Her thick, black hair was pulled into a neat bun, and she wore a cute floral romper that accented her curves.

As soon as she saw me, her eyes did a double take and her mouth dropped wide open.

"Wait!" she yelled, standing up abruptly. "Why are you coming from your neighbor's house? Oh. My. God. You little minx!"

I rolled my eyes as I scurried up the stairs and opened the front door. Of course, she'd jumped to conclusions because, honestly, leaving his house in the afternoon while wearing my clothes from last night (and, not to mention, his shirt) made the trip to my lawn look like a serious walk of shame.

"Hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but nothing happened," I shared before making a beeline for the kitchen.

"Your hot neighbor lives there, and nothing happened?" I didn't even need to look at her to know disappointment was written all over her pretty face. "You're half-dressed, and nothing happened?"

"I got really drunk last night, and he let me crash at his place. He slept on the couch."

"I forgot you were a nun," Lena muttered, setting the food bags down on the island and opening them one at a time.

"I'm not really thinking about sex right now," I fibbed, opening a few cabinet doors and pulling out some plates and bowls. "It's not the only thing that counts right now, and the break is nice."

My stomach grumbled with hunger as she handed me a container of fried rice.

"No," she said, grabbing an egg roll from a plastic sleeve and shaking her head. "You just can't get over the little fucker Jason thinking like that. Sex will help you forget about him. You really need to get under someone."

After piling our plates with yummy and delicious Chinese food, we headed toward the living room and sat on the couch to eat.

"I'm really over him," I insisted, digging into the orange chicken and fried rice with a pair of chopsticks.

He cheated on me. With my best friend. *Knocked up* my best friend, at that. Blamed me for our relationship problems. Said I was a terrible chef.

I didn't have a single reason to care about Jason anymore.

“Keep telling yourself that, babe,” Lena said, biting into an egg roll. “You know I love you, but you also know I’m not the friend who will tell you what you want to hear. You deserve to be happy. You were too good for him anyway. I hope you know that.”

“Yeah, I know. And trust me when I say I am over him, but my heart still needs some time. Thank you for surprising me today. Why do you have to live so damn far away?”

She rolled her eyes. “We should stop using that as an excuse. We used to be so close, and right now, both of us kinda need each other. Being an adult sucks.”

I nodded in agreement. “Jason’s cousin was a fucking moron for what he did to you.”

Lena’s short-lived relationship with his cousin had only existed to make his ex-girlfriend jealous. *Ugh. Men are dogs sometimes.*

“Fuck all of them!” she yelled at the top of her lungs as I laughed. “Now that I’ve realized my worth, I’ve never felt better. He totally sucked in bed anyway. Way too vanilla for me. Enjoyed the missionary position way too much.”

I snickered. “Jason was too. He never wanted to try anything different. He only liked three positions. But I looked past it because I was an idiot. I got so used to faking orgasms that I don’t think I remember what a real one feels like.”

“Eh, the things we do and ignore for love.”

I raised my glass of water in agreement. “Amen. And never again.”

“So, tell me more about your neighbor.”

“There’s really nothing to tell. His name is Tyler, and he’s really fun to hang out with. We actually crashed a wedding reception a few weeks ago. It was the best time I’ve had in a while.”

“Ooooooh, he’s spontaneous,” Lena cooed with a wink. “I like it. I have to meet this guy sometime.”

“Just don’t be weird like Alyssa when she first met him.”

“I’ll try,” she said, giving me a curious look that indicated I was going to share that story with her before she left.

My phone beeped, indicating a new message.

Caden: Hey, Elyse. Any thoughts?

Before I replied, I thought about what Lena said about getting over someone. I had no plans to get under Caden, but maybe, hanging out with someone else would help clear my mind and help my heart a little. Maybe.

Me: I’d be happy to go out with you. As friends right now. If that’s okay.

Even though I knew he wanted to be more than friends, I had to make the boundaries firm and clear. I was never the type of woman to purposefully—or even accidentally—lead someone on.

Caden: Never been friend zoned before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

elyse

I WAS EXHAUSTED. So fucking exhausted. Sixteen-hour shifts for six days.

I had always seen only one calendar hanging in Dave's office, but apparently, the man kept half a dozen smaller ones. Which meant he'd accidentally approved two chefs taking the same week off months ago.

The calendar catastrophe also had him forgetting about two separate companies reserving the banquet room for dinner parties on back-to-back nights. Fortunately, the menu had already been planned and approved ahead of time, but the already short staff had to be split into two groups—one to focus on the companies and the other on the normal restaurant crowd.

When I wasn't working, I was sleeping. Even with his own busy schedule, Tyler found time to make progress in my basement, and I left extra food from the restaurant on his porch.

The one bit of good news was that the kitchen staff had known about and prepped for a birthday party tonight, which was still important but on a less grand scale than the one for the governor's daughter. With everything under control, I took off as soon the final preparations for the party were completed.

I now had an entire weekend to myself.

A twinge of disappointment hit me when I didn't spot Tyler's jeep parked in his driveway when I arrived home. None of the lights in his house were on. No music was blasting. And my lawn had been cleared of the piles of rubble and other messes that he'd previously left there.

I vaguely remembered him mentioning his schedule was crazy busy this week too, but the likelihood of him being with a woman sounded more probable.

After throwing my bag on the couch, I immediately poured myself a glass of wine and ignored taking off my uniform, even though I smelled awful. I plopped my sorry butt in a chair in the kitchen and whipped out my phone for any missed messages. Nothing.

Without anything better to do with my time, I decided to bother my missing neighbor.

Me: I'm disappointed. I came home, and you weren't blasting music :(Why do I feel you've found a better way to spend your Friday?

Tyler: You miss me?

Me: Where are you? You're replying too fast to be with someone.

Tyler: Lol. I'm in Vegas. Remember I told you? Work trip.

Me: I forgot! Wow. I'm jealous. Shouldn't you be drunk right now?

Tyler: Shit. I wanted to be, but everyone had plans. I thought it would be a guys' weekend once work was done, but everyone has company besides me.

Me: You should've asked me. I'm off the entire weekend :(

Tyler: Well, come up here. It's only like four hours.

Me: Do you want me to?

Tyler: I wouldn't have said it if I didn't.

Me: Beg. Make me come.

Tyler: That sounded so wrong.

My tired eyes shot wide open after reading the last message, and I laughed out loud, completely embarrassed. After a taking a huge gulp of wine, I carefully reworded my last message.

Me: What I meant to say was give me a good reason I should drive four hours?

Tyler: Well, for one, I have a sick-ass suite. Two, I'd do it for you.

Me: Well played. I'll be there tomorrow.

Las Vegas. I had only been there once, and honestly, I hadn't even counted that as a trip. Alana and I were ready to celebrate my 21st birthday with epic plans, getting super drunk, maybe getting lost like in *The Hangover* movie, and waking up with a face tattoo. But all that went sideways when Alana's boyfriend at the time had tagged along.

During the entire road trip to the city, they constantly bickered and yelled at each other as I wished I was anywhere but there. The arguing continued once we arrived in Vegas, causing Alana to storm away without a word. Her boyfriend and I had spent a solid two hours trying to find her.

As tired as my body was, my mind reeled with excitement at the thought of spending the weekend in Las Vegas with my very hot neighbor.

My first time in Vegas had been so horrendous that my mind had blocked out any details of the city. Pulling into the crowded parking lot at the Excalibur Hotel & Casino, I had completely forgotten how gorgeous and mesmerizing everything and everyone was. And hot. The weather was stinking hot, humid, and gross.

Dressed in denim shorts, a baby blue tank top, and sandals, my skin started to sweat profusely from every pore in my body when I stepped out of the car to retrieve my bag from the trunk. After the five-hour drive—an extra hour for bathroom breaks and stupid traffic—I was ready to take a shower and relax for a little bit.

Tyler had messaged me the hotel details and instructed me to arrive before seven because he'd wanted to hit a pool party

at the hotel.

I smirked as I headed toward the hotel entrance, checking out the medieval castle structure and the kings and queens theme. *A fantasy world for adults.*

Once inside the air-conditioned hotel, I bypassed the customer service desks and admired the chandeliers hanging from the ceilings, the small glimpses inside the luxurious restaurants, and all the brightly colored slot machines.

The impeccably dressed staff made me wonder if I was capable of working at a hotel and casino just so I could run around in cute uniforms every day.

I took a deep breath when I stepped inside the crowded elevator and pushed the button for the nineteenth floor, wondering if Tyler was excited that I was here. From his messages last night, he hadn't been having too much fun, because his friends weren't around that much.

Wheeling my small, black suitcase down the long hallway on Tyler's floor, I ran a hand through my hair and took a few more deep breaths before knocking on the door, ignoring the other guests walking past me.

Why the hell was I so nervous? I'd spent the night at his place a few times now. A hotel room in Vegas wasn't any different, right?

But all my nerves faded when Tyler opened the door and gave me the biggest and most excited smile ever. Or my nerves faded because my eyes were too busy ogling his fucking God-like body. *Holy. Fucking. Shit.* His muscled and chiseled chest was completely bare, sporting a small patch of hair in the middle. The way his hunter green swim trunks hung off his waist had me clenching my thighs shut. A thin silver chain dangled from his neck, and his hair was pushed back, highlighting his facial features and light scruff.

Earth to Elyse, you should stop staring now.

I cleared my throat and shook my head. "I would hug you and all, but I'm sweaty and gross."

He just smiled and stepped aside, giving me room to step inside.

“What do you think?” he asked, closing the door as I slowly surveyed the suite.

“Wow,” I breathed out as my eyes locked onto the floor-to-ceiling window in the living room and the stunning view of the city and all its lights.

The room and the hotel were vastly different from my first experience, where Alana, her boyfriend, and I were crammed into one room with two double beds in some cheap hotel off the Strip.

The living room and kitchen made up the main area and held a long gray fabric couch, end tables, a coffee table, a desk with an office chair, and small kitchen appliances. A wide-open entrance led to the gigantic bedroom that contained another amazing view, a California king-sized bed, a dresser, and a mounted flat screen.

The bathroom connected to the bedroom featured a single round bathtub in the center of its gold and white marbled floors. Even though we were just staying for the weekend, I was thrilled at seeing the double vanity counter with two sinks and one gigantic mirror. *Score! I have my own side.* I giggled to myself.

One peek through the glass shower door had me itching to strip off all my clothes and jump in with its spacious room and overhead showerhead.

“This is absolutely gorgeous,” I admitted, falling back onto the bed and starfishing out. “Where have I been all my life?”

Moments like this made my heart ache to travel and experience more. I wanted more.

“I know, right?” Tyler snickered and ran a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe the company put all of us up in these nice suites for the night.”

“The night?” I frowned and furrowed my eyebrows.

“Yeah, we had meetings all day yesterday, and we were supposed to leave today. But it’s Vegas. So the guys and I decided to stay for the weekend, and we paid for the other nights.”

My mind clicked on one small detail. “You said suite, and I kinda thought that meant two rooms.”

“Sorry,” he said, with a shrug, standing at the edge of the bed. “I can sleep on the couch, but have you seen the size of this bed?”

With a wave of a hand, he shoed me over to one side as he fell onto the other. He was right. The bed was ginormous. We could easily sleep through the night without touching.

“I mean, if you’re uncomfortable with the idea of sharing a bed, I will sleep on the couch,” Tyler said quickly, twisting his head to look at me.

The truth was I was far from uncomfortable sharing a bed with him. Plus, he mentioned he hadn’t slept well on his couch at home. *Maybe he has issues sleeping on couches in general*, I thought. I didn’t have the heart—or the willpower—to kick him out of the luxurious bed that he’d technically paid for.

I shook my head. “You don’t have to sleep on the couch,” I said with a tentative smile. “You’re right. The bed is big enough for the both of us. Just don’t hog all the covers.”

“I can’t make promises,” he teased, rolling off the bed and adjusting his swim trunks. “Come on. Go get ready.”

I groaned reluctantly. My tired body didn’t want to leave the amazing bed. But I jumped off and retrieved my suitcase from the living room. With my hair tied back, I took a quick shower to at least wash the stink off me and shave. Everywhere. And I fucking hated shaving. A necessary evil.

I shimmied into a sky blue bikini with a floral print over the cups of the top and threw on a long-sleeved, loose-knit crop top.

After brushing out my hair, I took a deep breath and gave myself one final look in the mirror. I stepped out of the bathroom, noticing Tyler leaning against the headrest of the

bed and watching something on TV. But the moment he glanced in my direction, he turned off the TV and tossed the remote onto the bed without taking his eyes off me.

He scrambled off the bed, still wearing the same green swim trunks. God, he looked beautiful.

I had no doubt all the women at the party would be all over him, wanting his attention. I held back a heavy sigh and curled my hands into fists as I imagined my fingers roaming over his broad shoulders before trailing down his chest and further south into the swim trunk region. *Fuck. Stop it!*

“Do I look okay?” I asked timidly, playing with the strings of knit crop top and grabbing my sandals from my open suitcase.

“Uh, yeah,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Yeah, you look great.”

“I’m ready to go,” I mumbled, laying one hand on his muscled arm for balance as I slipped my sandals on.

Silence surrounded us as we walked toward the elevator and stepped inside, hitting the first floor button.

“Hopefully, you don’t fuck up my game this time,” he teased with an exaggerated sigh.

I gasped mockingly, dramatically throwing a hand over my heart. “Me? Fuck up your game? How dare you!”

Tyler threw his head back and laughed. “Should we do a rematch tonight?”

“No.” I shook my head and rolled my eyes at him. “Besides, where do you think you’ll be entertaining these women lining up for a piece of you? Definitely not in the suite that you used to lure me here.”

He was joking about messing up his game, right? Or was that his way of telling me to mingle with the other guests at the pool party? Why would he invite me here if he didn’t actually want to hang out with me?

I didn’t have much time to over-analyze as Tyler grabbed my hand and led me into the very swanky and spectacular pool

party. The sun blinded me. The loud music deafened my ears. The pool silently invited partygoers with its enticingly cool blue water.

Dozens of bright orange beach umbrellas were neatly lined up at the edge of the pool, providing shade for the black metal lounge chairs with matching orange cushions. The VIP cabanas with chaise lounges and dancing space stood near the busy bars.

What made my heart race with excitement the most was the infectious energy of the crowd. The women were gorgeous, donning their expensive sunglasses and ultra-revealing designer bikinis, but my confidence didn't waver one bit because the vibe of the party was so welcoming. I might not have looked like I belonged here, but for one night; I was ready to have fun.

Squealing with joy, I latched onto Tyler's forearm and dragged him to the nearest bar. With the sun still burning brightly, I needed something cool and refreshing. I figured if I ordered the drinks, I could space them out and limit my intake during the evening. After all, I was *not* ready for another round with party-girl me. I wanted to remember *everything* from this last-minute trip.

After placing our drink order, I tapped my fingers against the counter and turned to face Tyler. "So, why aren't your friends here? How come they don't want to hang out with you?"

He sighed, rubbing his face with his hand. "Miguel invited his wife, Lauren, for the weekend. And they're off doing touristy shit. Will took off this morning because he needed to get back to work on a project. And I can't rely on Kyle for shit."

"Sorry your guys' weekend was a bust. I wish I could say I'm sorry, but I'm kinda happy to be here."

"Are you?"

I nodded as the bartender placed Tyler's whiskey and my fancy strawberry margarita in of me. The first sour taste made

my face curl and my left eye twitch. *Hello, tequila.* Other than the shots I'd taken the last time I'd gone out with him, I hadn't broken out of my rum and wine kick in quite a while. The burning liquid raced down my chest but then cooled in my stomach.

Drinks in hand, we stepped away from the bar and scanned the bustling crowd. I noticed Tyler's eyes trailed after a beautiful brunette—of course brunette—wearing a skimpy, white bikini, a gold belly chain, and matching gold bracelets. His gaze lingered a bit longer when she walked past, revealing her thong bottoms.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes when, suddenly, I caught the blatant stares, smiles, and winks of several attractive men. But their smiles faded when they noticed Tyler standing nearby.

I tapped his arm. "Hey, I'm going to go and sit by the pool. I'll catch up with you later."

"What?" Tyler shot me quizzical look with narrowed eyebrows. "You're too cool to hang with me?"

"Uh, no. I didn't want to fuck up your game." My fingers turned into air quotes around the last word. "It's not a problem. I don't mind hanging out by the pool."

This was me being the bigger person.

I didn't like it.

If I was a random stranger and had met him at a party like this, I one hundred percent would've tried to hit on him. Probably without success, knowing my luck.

Tyler rolled his eyes and chuckled. "I was joking, you dummy. I wouldn't have invited you all this way if I didn't want to be around you. I want you here with me, Elle."

"I want you here with me, Elle."

My heart skipped a beat at his words. And my body especially loved the way he twirled my hair around his fingers.

I blushed as the words repeated in my mind. I blushed so fucking hard.

“Good! Because I’m ready to have fun—with you,” I said with an awkward smile.

“I know you do. Let’s have fun. Just don’t fucking disappear.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tyler

“SHOTS!” Kyle announced, with so much energy and enthusiasm that I figured he might barf rainbows and unicorns when the night was over.

I was still a tad annoyed with him for ignoring my texts all day.

When he and Jamie, a woman he’d met last night, finally graced the exclusive pool party with their presence, he kept buying rounds after rounds of drinks and shots. Jamie and her half a dozen friends had managed to snag a VIP cabana, which included a flat screen TV, ceiling fans, comfortable chaise lounges with decorative pillows, assorted dry snacks, and non-alcoholic beverages.

Kyle set a metal tray full of vodka shots on a table and handed them out to everyone in the immediate vicinity.

“Everyone is taking one, because I don’t like wasting money,” he grumbled, handing me a shot.

He held one out for Elyse, but she shook her head and smiled. “Thank you, but no.”

“You don’t decline free drinks!” he gasped in horror as his eyes widened. “Come on, don’t be a pussy.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” she purred, leaning forward and giving him a good view of her cleavage.

“Still not a good look, E.”

She rolled her eyes, grabbed the shot glass from his hand, and gulped it down. I smirked, watching her make a disgusted face and shake her head to ward off the foul taste.

Even though I didn't mind if she got wasted tonight, I could tell she was happy enough to feel a good buzz as she spaced out the timing of her drinks. As long as she was having a good time, I really didn't care how much alcohol she drank.

I polished off the vodka shot with one swallow and watched her dance around with Jamie and her friends. Elyse looked fucking amazing in that damn bikini, showing off her long and lean torso, her pert ass, and perky tits. The fading sun highlighted every curve and made her skin glisten. I was in fucking trouble.

I wasn't the only guy who noticed her, either. I'd caught a few other guys staring at her and then winking at me as if to say, "Nice catch, man." I tried my best to keep my eyes off her, glancing at other nearby beautiful women in their barely-there swimsuits, but somehow, my eyes always returned to her.

She was so damn sexy when she thought no one was watching her. But the truth was everyone was watching her.

As I leaned back on the lounge, Kyle plopped down by my feet and gave me a shit-eating grin.

"We should come to Vegas every weekend, bro," he said. "The fast life and the women."

I didn't reply, thinking the novelty of the city would wear off after a few trips.

"Sorry I bailed on you yesterday," he said, with a half shrug. "But I see you convinced Elyse to come up."

I actually couldn't believe she'd driven all the way out here to keep me company. I had been half joking through our messages about her joining me, not really believing she'd do it. Her schedule had been mad busy just like mine over the past week, and I knew she would be just as content to kick back with a bottle of wine and binge watch something.

But nope, she'd spent five hours on the road by herself because my friends had ditched my poor ass. That beautiful girl was something else.

I nudged him little too hard as I laughed. "Yeah, because I can't count on your sorry ass for shit, man. I didn't spend a

few extra days here to sit in my fucking room and drink alone.”

“Where are your balls, bro?” Kyle asked, rolling his eyes. “We’re in fucking Vegas. Just go somewhere, and seriously, two seconds later, you’ll meet someone.”

He wasn’t wrong. But for some reason, hanging out with strangers didn’t seem like fun to me.

“She staying with you?” he asked as he watched Elyse and Jamie dance together, which meant playing with each other’s hair and running their fingertips over each other’s arms with barely a whisper of air between them.

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s harmless. So, don’t start your shit.”

“Get the fuck out here,” he scoffed. “A girl like that sharing a room with you and it’s harmless? You’re the fucking worst.”

As my mind searched for a witty comeback, Kyle yelled out. “Elyse, watch your hands! She’s mine tonight!”

Jamie arched a perfectly plucked eyebrow. “Says who?” she challenged, planting her hands on Elyse’s bare waist and pulling her closer. Good God, I was in so much trouble.

The brunette with captivating green eyes that captured Kyle’s attention for the weekend was, no doubt, insanely gorgeous. Any other time I probably would’ve been a bit jealous, but in reality, Jamie had absolutely nothing on Elyse.

From her designer red bikini to her shades and gold jewelry, Jamie’s picture of perfection was designed to turned heads and cast her in the spotlight. Elyse was refreshingly and naturally beautiful, completely unaware of the attention she attracted.

When a dance remix of “Heartless” by Diplo and Morgan Wallen began blasting over the loudspeakers, Elyse shrieked with excitement and started bouncing in place. “This is my song!”

As I polished off my whiskey and set the glass on the side table, she bounded over to me and yanked me to my feet,

dragging me by the hand to the dance floor. When she turned around to face me, she stumbled a bit, crashing into my chest and planting her hands on my hips.

She gave me a goofy grin as her blue eyes shone when she started singing along to the lyrics.

Her fingertips danced around on my arms as her hips swayed back and forth to the beat. Because I wasn't the greatest dancer in the world, I stood there, swaying to the beat, with my hands resting on her hips.

When one of Jamie's friends, Kayla, a cute blonde, accidentally bumped into Elyse, she turned around in my arms so she could sing-yell the lyrics with Kayla. And when she wasn't singing, she was bumping and grinding against me, testing my patience and resolve.

Her ass brushed and pushed against my hard dick too many times to count, making me inwardly groan with lust. She was definitely the definition of dangerous, especially when one of her hands grabbed mine and placed it over her taut and bare stomach. *Fucking hell.*

As she continued to dance, my hands drifted all over her soft skin. My fingertips skimmed the edge of her bikini bottoms before trailing up between the valley of her breasts.

She grabbed my neck and pulled me closer. I thought I heard her gasp as I blew warm air into the curve of her neck. My hands craved to touch her everywhere. Everywhere. *Fuck.*

Without warning, Elyse turned around again and wrapped her arms around my neck as her body continued to sway to the beat of the music. I studied everything about her: the way she closed her eyes to feel the rhythm, the way her lips moved as she mouthed every single word to the song, the way her heart pounded against my chest.

Teasingly, she ran her finger down the bridge of my nose and winked. "*Why you gotta be so in between loving me and leaving, leaving?*"

Even when the song ended, we were still wrapped in each other's arms.

“Who broke your heart?” I asked, noticing her frown for a second.

“Why do you ask?” Her blue eyes narrowed with curiosity.

“If you could see how you sang that song just now, you’d ask yourself the same question.”

As I watched her struggle with what she wanted to say, I wondered if she would deflect or tell the truth. Did she believe I would think less of her if I knew about her failed relationships? Was she too embarrassed to reveal something so personal? This girl wore her heart on her sleeve, and I just wanted to know how the asshole had broken it.

Elyse sighed as her arms left my neck and she rested in mine.

“I’ve always been the girl to dream about my wedding and keep notes and pictures of everything I wanted. When my ex-boyfriend proposed, I had never been happier, thinking my life was finally coming together.”

She laughed bitterly and shook her head. “Except nothing in my life ever comes together. Absolutely fucking nothing. A few months before the wedding, I caught him in bed with my best friend.”

I remained silent, floored that any guy in his right fucking mind would do something like that to a woman like her. A woman who put everyone else’s needs before her own.

“The guy that pushed you?” I guessed, clenching my jaw and wishing I had done something more than yell at him that night outside her house.

Cheating in a relationship was one thing, but shoving a woman half his size was another. No woman in the world deserved that kind of treatment. Especially Elyse. She was the type of woman who deserved the entire world.

“Yeah,” she mumbled. “But that’s not even the best part. My ex–best friend is pregnant. It fucking hurts. Two people that I cared about so much ...”

“The one from the hardware store?”

The bits and pieces of her life were coming together now.

Elyse nodded. “For months, I hated her because she’d taken the life I’d wanted so badly. I gave him three years of my life only to have him complain I wasn’t around enough because I worked too much. He blamed me for everything, and after a while, I just started believing him. Nothing I did made him happy anymore, and he started hating me. But not once did he think about how stressed I was, having to do everything. I bought the house and paid the bills, and he did nothing but complain about me like I meant nothing our entire relationship. I got so brainwashed and didn’t see it.”

I really wanted to kick this guy’s fucking ass for preying on her insecurities and good intentions. The hurt in her eyes made me want to sweep her away and protect her from all the bad in the world.

I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, pulling her close for a hug, as I kissed her forehead. “Elle, he’s stupid as fuck for letting you go. He’s even dumber for blaming you for everything. Give me permission, and I’ll hunt him down and beat his ass.”

She pulled back from the hug, laughing and shaking her head.

“I’m serious,” I said. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, Elle. You’re fucking perfect. Don’t settle for some asshole that doesn’t appreciate what you do.”

“D-Do you really mean that? Or are you just saying that because you feel sorry for me?”

I really wanted another round with her piece of shit of an ex.

I pulled her in for another hug. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

By the time the spotlights around the pool clicked on, the sky had already begun to darken, and more than half of the party had left. Even the majority of the people hanging out in the

VIP cabana were gone, leaving just Elyse and me talking and sipping our drinks. Kyle and Jamie slipped into the pool to cool off, but once their tongues became involved, a fire ignited between them.

“Tonight was fun,” she said softly, laying her head on my shoulder as we shared a chaise lounge.

“Yeah, it was fun,” I agreed, finishing the rest of my beer.

“Hey, I’m sorry about earlier.”

I peered down at her with a confused look.

“I shouldn’t have told you all that stuff about my ex,” she said as her fingertips lightly ran up and down my thigh. “Nothing kills a party like talking about your ex.”

“Hey, I asked,” I protested with a shrug, bumping my arm into hers. “I was the one who asked about your broken heart. Remember?”

“Yeah, but I should’ve—”

“You should’ve done nothing,” I said, cutting her off with an apologetic smile. “You have nothing to be sorry about. Seriously. *He’s* the one who should be sorry. And he’s really lucky I didn’t fuck him up that night.”

She chuckled, as she looked me with wide eyes. “You would’ve done that? You didn’t even know me then.”

“No man should ever push a woman. As I said before, Elle, give me permission, and I’ll hunt him down and beat his ass.”

“Can I help?” she teased. “We’ve already established that we’d probably go to jail together. What do we have to lose?”

“A lot,” I grumbled, feeling a bit of guilt tumbling around in my stomach. “You deserve everything good, and I’m not just saying this as your friend, either. He’s the one who will regret it. I know he will.”

Laying her head on my shoulder again, I saw a smile play across her lips. “Thank you, Tyler. That means everything to me.”

The first night we met, I knew her ex-boyfriend was a gigantic douche, just from the way he reeked of alcohol, yelled viciously in the middle of the night, and shoved Elyse to the ground without remorse. I saw her scraped hands, but I didn't want to bring it up.

The more time we spent together and the more I learned about her, I understood how his actions and words had affected her and her confidence so deeply.

"Hey," I said, nudging her arm. "I have to tell you something."

"Sure," she said with a shrug.

"Uh, um, remember when we went out to celebrate your promotion? And you got drunk as hell?"

"Uh, yeah." Her arched eyebrow told me that she didn't like the direction of this confession.

"I, uh, told you that you didn't do anything when you asked the next morning. I kind of lied."

Her big, blue eyes widened at me with surprise and a twinge of disappointment. "You lied to me? I thought you wouldn't lie to me. So, what did I do that night?"

Fuck, I felt awful, lying to her to keep things less awkward between us.

"I'm sorry," I said truthfully. "And I won't." I paused for a moment before the confession. "You kissed me that night."

Her eyes blinked rapidly, and Elyse shook her head, her beautiful hair falling over her shoulders and shielding her face.

"No," she said, staring at her hands. "I don't remember that."

"No shit. You were drunk."

She turned sideways on the lounge as if she was getting up to stand. She laughed nervously and scratched her forehead, probably to fight off the wave of embarrassment.

"Elle, come on," I said playfully, touching her bare shoulder with my index finger. "Look at me."

She shook her head, remaining silent.

“Elle.” My voice warned her, a little smirk playing on my lips. “Turn around and look at me.”

Again, she shook her head.

Wrong choice, sweetheart.

I leaned toward her as my fingers reach over and tickled her bare waist. Her hands clapped over her mouth, trying to suppress a giggle. My fingers brushed her skin again, and one of her hands slapped my hand away.

“Stop,” she ordered, giving me a glare over her shoulder.

But her cute little stink eye just made me smile, and I grabbed her by the waist, pulling her back onto the lounge, and tickled her even more, making her screech with laughter and yell at me to stop. With one of my hands splayed over her belly, Elyse tried wiggling and twisting her way out of my grip without success.

She ended up crashing onto her back against the lounge, closing her eyes as she tried to catch her breath from laughing so hard. I couldn't help but watch her beautiful chest heave up and down with every deep breath. God, she was fucking flawless.

Two of my fingers absentmindedly reached out and twirled the strings on the front of her knit crop top. I stretched my body sideways along hers, propping up my head with my hand.

When her eyes finally opened and landed on mine, I could see the wheels spinning away in her mind.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“Was—” she paused nervously, clasping her hands over her stomach. “Uh, was the kiss good at least?”

I should've quickly reassured her the kiss had been more than good, but something inside me believed my words wouldn't have been enough. And maybe my mind was looking for an excuse to feel her soft, warm lips against mine again.

I quickly reached over and tucked some hair behind her ear before cupping the side of her face and lowering my head to meet her beautiful, plump lips. The moment our lips touched, her body immediately relaxed as my hand drifted down her side and landed on her hip.

Fuck the damn rules. I'll worry about that later.

As I sucked in her top lip between my teeth after tracing my tongue against the seam of her cherry-flavored lips, Elyse shifted her body, pressing hers against mine and nudging one leg between mine. When her leg nestled between my crotch, I deepened the kiss and let my tongue probe the inside of her mouth. The little moans and gasps that escaped from her drove me crazy until I wanted and needed more.

Without breaking the kiss, she managed to climb onto my lap and straddle me, pushing me back against the lounge. *Holy fucking shit.* My cock was already begging for attention, but it grew even more uncomfortable when I felt the undeniable heat between her legs.

Cupping my face with both of her hands, she intensified the kiss a hundred times more and rolled her hips against mine, making all the blood rush to one spot.

I peeled my lips away as one of my hands gently grabbed a handful of her hair, tugging her head backwards so my lips could trail sloppy kisses along her jawline and down her neck.

Before my lips could find hers again, one of the bouncers yelled, "The pool is closed. The bar will close in ten minutes."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

elyse

HOW LONG DID it take to go up nineteen floors? Because it felt like years. The entire elevator ride was so awkwardly silent between Tyler and me, even though the rest of the passengers filled the small space with talking, laughing, and drinking.

What the hell happened in the cabana? One minute we were talking, and the next we were making out like two horny teenagers. At least I understood why he'd acted so strangely the morning after we went out to celebrate my almost-promotion. I had fucking kissed him. He and I were friends, and I'd kissed him.

But then he'd kissed me tonight, making me feel all sorts of things—things I hadn't felt in a very long time. Magic. Fire. Kissing him alone had me wanting to risk everything in the cabana. Damn bouncer. Or security guard. Whoever had spoiled the hot and heavy moment between us.

As he stood in a corner on the opposite side of the elevator, I wondered what thoughts were running through his mind. I didn't know about him, but I was sober as hell now and panicking from the sound of my rapid heartbeat.

I knew one thing for sure. I needed Tyler to touch me. Sparks shot through my body when I remembered his hands palming my ass or his tongue dancing with mine.

When the elevator chimed, signaling our floor, I finally exhaled a sigh of relief as we scurried off into the empty hallway. The way we slowly walked toward the room in silence reminded me of two teenagers heading home from a first date, unsure of what to do next.

What made everything worse was that we were sharing a fucking room. Maybe one of us was sleeping on the couch tonight, because there was no way both of us could sleep in that bed—no matter how fucking big it was—without something happening.

Tyler held the door open for me, and I walked in and headed straight to the bedroom with the intention of changing out of my swimsuit.

“I think we should probably talk, right?” he asked, stopping me in my tracks.

Why did everyone want to talk about something that couldn't really be explained? I knew what he wanted to say. It was a mistake. It should never happen again. We were friends. *Spare me the fucking details.*

I took a deep breath, turned around, and looked him straight in the eye. “Is that really necessary? You really want to talk right now, Tyler?”

My words tumbled out a little bitterer and colder than I'd intended, but I wasn't in the mood for a lecture about how much our friendship meant to him.

“No,” he finally said, pursing his lips together as he slowly walked toward me. “I don't.”

And all my self-control dissolved into a big pile of mush. Was thrown out the window with the incredible view of the bright city lights. Circled down the bathroom drain.

I had never been so grateful in my life that I'd taken the time to shave before the party.

As he stood before me with a hungry look, I summoned my courage and said, “Then kiss me.”

Without wasting any time or words, Tyler scooped up me as I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs clung to his waist like a magnet. After a few short steps into the bedroom, he threw me down on the bed, causing a mountain of pillows to fall on my face.

I laughed, pushing them to the side as I held myself up with my elbows, watching a mixture of lights and shadows from the open window dance on his dark skin.

Shoving a pillow behind my head, I bit down on a smile and gazed at him slowly climbing over my body with a wicked grin on his handsome face. As soon he was within reach, I grasped his neck and pulled him into a kiss, opening my legs as his body fell between them.

As our tongues collided and battled for dominance, one of his hands ran up my thigh before resting on my ribcage. I breathed with anticipation, aching for more, his smell intoxicating me more than two vodka shots and three strawberry margaritas.

I moaned into the kiss when his fingers crept under the top of my suit and brushed a stiff nipple. When his fingers tugged on it, I squirmed underneath him as a fiery bolt raced toward the growing inferno between my legs.

Tyler dragged his lips away from mine, kissing down my jawline to the exposed areas of my chest. The rough and calloused fingers that played with my tits trailed south down my body, circling over my sex through the bikini bottoms. The grazes and barely touches were driving me mad with need as his lips and heavy breaths tickled my neck.

I cried out with some relief when his fingers finally slipped underneath the material and trailed through the moisture he'd caused. Not having been touched like this in some time, my legs instinctively tried to close, but he nipped my chin and wedged one of his legs between mine.

“Don't do that,” he ordered before his mouth claimed mine again. “Let me take care of you like you do everyone else.”

Whoa. Could this man be any more perfect?

Our tongues tangled again, and I could taste the whiskey that he had been drinking all night. His kisses were like an antidote, and his breath filled my lungs.

My soft moans grew louder and louder as his fingers played with my wet folds and teased my clit before two digits

easily slid inside me. Throwing my head back against the pillow and digging my nails into his shoulder, my body went into shock, never ever remembering feeling so good before. Especially when he began pumping his fingers inside me over and over. A warm sensation grew in my stomach and my breath hitched, keeping up with his fingers moving inside of me.

“Open your eyes, Elle,” he commanded.

I reluctantly peeled them open to find him giving me a sexy little grin as his fingers continued to tease and torture me.

“Holy fuck,” I groaned as he managed to spread my legs wider, making them tremble.

“You’re so fucking wet right now,” he whispered in my ear before tugging on it between his teeth. I winced to his touch, almost too sensitive to keep going. I went into a pleasure shock from his fingers, his hands, and couldn’t focus on anything else.

And that was all I needed as the strong tidal wave of tension ripped through me with incredible force.

“Tyler!” I screamed, closing my eyes again and arching my back off the bed.

With his fingers still inside me, his thrusts matched the timing of my heavy breaths until the strong waves eventually dissipated into ripples.

I was a damn puddle for him—and we were only just beginning. *Holy fucking shit.*

Jason had never made me come like that. Ever. Even in the beginning of our relationship when everything was shiny and new and we couldn’t keep our hands off each other, he had never given me an earth-shattering orgasm. Not even on his best days.

Tyler had coaxed one out of me within minutes. With his fucking fingers.

“You came already?” he asked, a little stunned, as his fingers slipped out of me. “Damn. I must be doing something

right.”

All I could do was giggle and lazily nod at him. I felt like I was floating on my back in a pool and watching the fluffy clouds above me. I felt like I had all the time in the world with no place to be.

Yeah, he was doing something right.

As my breath steadied, I watched him lick his fingers, tasting me, and my body started to warm again. His thumb traced my lower lip, and I opened my mouth slightly to suck it in. He growled softly with approval as a new kind of hunger and desperation appeared in his eyes.

“Don’t move,” he demanded as I continued to lay flat on my back.

I hadn’t been planning on moving for the next few hours—maybe days.

He scooted further down the bed and sat on his knees in the space between my legs. His erection poked through the thin material of his swim trunks. I licked my lips, eager to taste him and see him completely naked. I’d already seen him shirtless, and I needed to see the rest of him.

Ever so slowly, he pulled my bottoms down my legs and threw them over his shoulder and onto the floor. Out of shyness and habit, I tried closing my legs again, but his strong hands kept them open and his head shook lightly with disapproval.

With his eyes trained on mine, he lowered himself between my legs and wrapped his hands around my thighs. The second his warm tongue pressed against my core, I gasped so hard that my breath became trapped in my throat. I was unable to breathe for a millisecond.

Fortunately, my breaths turned heavy and desperate as he slowly flicked his tongue at the base of my clit before sucking it between his teeth.

Holy. Fucking. Shit. This was how I wanted to die. With Tyler between my legs. And his tongue throwing me into a delicious state of euphoria.

My hips automatically matched the rhythm of his tongue, his mouth. He consumed me whole, burying his mouth in my arousal and licking my juices clean. His mouth moved against me faster as he kept the same pace and pressure.

“Oh my God,” I cried out when he folded up my legs and pushed them to my chest.

My hands gripped his thick hair as his tongue continued to expertly stroke me into oblivion. Between me riding his face and his mouth performing amazing feats of magic, the tidal wave inside grew stronger and stronger. When a finger slipped inside me, I knew a second orgasm was only mere seconds away.

“Tyler,” I moaned, tugging on his hair only to have him ignore me.

A second finger joined the first one.

“Tyler,” I yelled as my hands practically clawed at his head.

Without even sliding his fingers out or removing his mouth from me, he opened his eyes and looked at me as I watched his jaw move against me. *Holy hell, that's so fucking sexy.*

“I need you to fuck me right now. Please,” I begged, loosening my hold on his head.

He laughed faintly and shimmied off the bed, standing at the edge. After wiping my moisture from his face, he reached into his trunks and confidently rubbed himself. My mouth watered instantly at the teasing sight.

“That’s number two. I’m not counting or anything,” he grinned, biting down on his glistening lips.

I crawled toward the end of the bed to where he was standing and got on my knees at the edge of the bed. My hands roamed all over his ripped chest, my lips trailing hot kisses down his neck as he shuddered at my touch. Electricity shot through me as I dragged my lips down his chest and glided my tongue over one of his nipples.

“Shit,” he hissed as his hand tightened around his cock.

As much as I wanted to play with his sensitive nipples, I wanted to play with something else.

When my lips reached the waistband of his shorts, Tyler withdrew his hand and I dipped one finger into the edge, ready to undress him. I squealed with surprise when he suddenly and easily picked me up off the bed and forced me on my feet in front of him.

With a smirk, he sat on the edge of the bed next to where I was standing and studied my half-naked body. Slowly swaying to an imaginary beat, I untied the strings to my crop top before pulling it over my head and tossing it to the floor. Then I freed my aching tits from the final piece of clothing.

“You’re so fucking sexy, Elle,” he breathed out as his eyes trailed up and down my naked body with so much fucking lust and desire.

I’m pretty sure that was the lust talking.

He crooked his index finger at me, indicating that I should come closer. I stood between his legs and held onto his shoulders as his hands cupped my tits and his fingers teased my nipples. Just when his mouth latched onto one of my breasts, I pulled back abruptly and knelt before him.

I needed my time with his magnificent body. My hands pulled his swim trunks down his legs, and I carelessly tossed them aside as my eyes hungrily stared at his hard erection, ready for my touch.

Pushing my hair to the side, one of my hands wrapped around the tip of his length and slowly stroked him in a circular motion. His cock hardened even more when I spit on it before taking him in my mouth. I wrapped my tongue around the tip before releasing it with a pop.

Tyler groaned with pleasure as I flicked my tongue around the tip and dragged it up and down the shaft. I teased him until his groans grew louder and louder, and then I took him whole, feeling the tip poke the back of my throat. He gathered my hair in his hands and guided me into a gentle rhythm.

“Holy fuck, Elyse.” He moaned as I cupped his balls.

As his breath became more ragged, he yanked my head back by my hair and pulled me onto his lap so that I was straddling him. His aggressive approach excited me even more as he sucked one nipple between his teeth.

“Should I get a condom?” he asked, dropping his hands to my waist.

Pregnancy wasn't a concern for me because I'd been on birth control since my relationship with Jason.

I shook my head. “Do you have anything that I should know about?”

He shook his head.

Satisfied with his answer, I reached down and positioned his length at my entrance as his fingers toyed with my clit. God, this was it. My heart was nearly beating out of my chest as I studied his face in the dark. Passion filled his dark eyes as he waited for a last cue from my body. I couldn't help but feel nervous. He was extremely experienced, and I didn't want to disappoint him.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked, looking up at me.

I stared at him for a few seconds. No words could show how sure I was about what was happening. Instead, I laid my hand against his cheek and pulled him into a soft, slow kiss. I wasted no time slipping my tongue into his mouth, loving the taste of him. I figured that was enough to show how much I wanted this. Wanted him.

I slowly lowered my hips onto him, and he entered me as his mouth took mine. He let out a quiet groan as he eased himself deeper into me. I moaned and threw my head back as he filled me completely and our bodies became one. He pulled back and thrust in again as I cried out against him.

He felt so fucking good. I wanted to remain like this forever, never wanting this bliss and fulfillment to ever end.

Dropping my head into the crook of his neck, we both moaned at the same time as we slowly developed a rhythm between our hot and sweaty bodies. I felt fucking everything. His cock setting my body on fire. One hand on my hip keeping

me in place. The other roaming wherever it wanted to—my tits, my waist, my ass. His lips grazing over my throat.

With my hands clutching his shoulders, I lifted my head and rode him hard. Besides our heavy breathing and moans, the only sound in the room was our skin slapping against each other's, which turned us on even more, pushing me to bounce viciously and driving him to pound into me. I pushed my hips inward toward his stomach, and back out, crashing into him. I had never felt anything like this.

A few seconds later, he laid flat on his back, tucking his arms behind his head and smirking at me as I continued to rock his dick. With my hands on his chest, he continued to give me his shit-eating grin, watching my tits bounce with every movement. I loved the way he looked, watching me watch him. Pure bliss.

I dropped my body over his chest, circling hips, as my mouth captured his. His hands slid down the sides of my body, with one hand gripping my ass and the other finding one of mine. My heart raced as our fingers intertwined perfectly.

“Fuck, Elyse,” he groaned into my lips. “Just like that.”

“Like this?” My tongue slipped into his mouth as my hips twirled over and over. Faster and faster. And then slow again.

He grunted his approval as his hand on my ass spanked me hard.

Without pulling out of me, Tyler abruptly rolled us over, with me under him and him between my legs. Burying his head in the dent of my neck, he rotated his hips with powerful strokes as his fingers played with my clit. As the tension started to build again, he pulled out completely and stroked himself.

I scowled at him while he grinned. *What the fuck was he doing? Asshole.*

My body already missed the feel of him.

“Please,” I begged as one of my hands snaked down my body to play with myself, but his hand slapped it away. “Please don’t stop.”

He grabbed my legs, propping them against his chest, and then slammed into me without warning. I screamed. My head crashed back into the mattress. My hands fisted the sheets. My back arched a foot off the bed. My eyes rolled into the back of my head.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, slowing down to wait for my response.

“No,” I mumbled, completely dazed as he sped back up with a grin on his face.

The penetration was deeper, hitting all sorts of electrifying spots, and his pace increased, driving me insane and making my legs tremble against his chest. Tyler then pushed my legs to my chest and made me hold my legs in place, the pleasure between my legs continuing to grow. When he sank into me, his strokes were demanding and needy.

Pushing my legs to the side and pulling out of me again, he made a circle motion with his index finger, signaling me to turn around as he caught his breath. He looked so fucking sexy with sweat sliding down his body and his chest heaving from exhaustion.

If he'd asked me to do anything he wanted, I would've done it in a heartbeat. No questions asked. He had that much power over me.

As I planted my knees on the bed and my hands in front of me, he rammed into me from behind, thrusting deeper and faster. I no longer even had the strength to hold up my head, letting it fall onto the comforter.

“You feel so fucking good,” he panted as his hands brutally clenched my hips. His words continued to drive me wild, adding to the feeling that continued to build in my stomach.

I moaned with satisfaction as I felt my stomach and other parts of me tighten into knots.

Tyler rested one hand on the arch of my back as I pushed my ass into his rhythm.

“Don't come yet,” he demanded, breathing heavily.

“Tyler,” I whimpered, my eyes damn near ready to bulge from my head. “I’m going to come.”

I tried. I really did. But when he twisted my hair around his hand, tugging my head back a bit, all the tight knots inside me burst open with force and hit me hard, knocking the breath out of me.

He felt my release, pushing him to slam into me harder and faster, until he found his own inside of me.

He held onto my back, trying to catch his breath as his hot skin continued to warm me. He stilled, not pulling out of me, and placed kisses up my spine. I rolled my hips, taking advantage of him still being inside of me. I could feel his heart pounding against my back and loved the moans escaping from his lips. He let me fuck him still, squeezing my tits until he slipped out of me.

Unable to keep our hands off each other and our sexual appetites still ravenous, we ended up fucking in the shower until our skin wrinkled. And now, Tyler and I laid on opposite sides of the bed and stared at the ceiling in complete silence.

Reality had finally hit us. We could be friends with benefits, right? Was that still a thing? Although I knew he wasn’t looking for a relationship, I didn’t want this to be a one-time thing, because the sex between us was obviously amazing. Well, it was for me. *Shit*. What if he thought the sex was terrible, and he didn’t know how to tell me that I sucked at sex?

Because, honestly, that was probably the best sex I have ever had.

Was this the end of our friendship?

Had our friendship reached a new level of weird?

Did we need to ignore each other now?

Or at least ignore the fact we’d seen each other naked?

I absolutely hated not having answers to any of my questions. As much as I enjoyed hanging out with Tyler, I wanted him inside me now. *Ugh*. My mind shot off in a thousand different directions.

“So, uh, does this change anything?” I asked, breaking the silence but continuing my staring contest with the ceiling.

“It doesn’t have to,” he replied, clearing his throat.

I frowned. His answer didn’t ease my mind or satisfy any of my internal questions.

“I don’t want our friendship to get weird.”

“Then let’s not make it weird, Elle.”

And how do we do that? I wondered to myself.

“When was the last time you had sex?” Tyler asked suddenly.

What? I sharply turned my head and shot him a confused look.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just answer the question.”

I huffed. “Six months. Maybe more. Why?”

He shifted to lay on his side under the covers, propping his head up with a hand. “I think you just needed a release, since, you know, it’s been a while. I’m totally fine with you using my body for your sexual needs.”

I giggled and rolled my eyes.

“Seriously, Elle. We don’t have to make this weird. We’re adults, but since you can’t seem to get enough of me, we can have more fun the rest of the weekend.”

“So, we can fuck until Sunday?” I asked, my voice betraying all my excitement. “No strings attached?”

Tyler laughed. “Yes. Everything will go back to normal when we’re home. What’s that saying everyone jokes about? Whatever happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

elyse

THE GROWL in my stomach woke me up the next morning. I smiled as I slowly stretched out my arms and legs, not wanting to disturb a still sleeping Tyler. I credited the amazing and comfortable bed and the fantastic sex marathon for one of the best nights of sleep I'd had in a long time.

I also didn't mind sharing a bed with another warm body, missing having someone else sleep next to me. The night had been so amazing and exciting that I would have done anything to rewind and replay it over and over and over.

Not wanting to leave the comfort of the bed, my stomach growled again in protest, and I cautiously slipped out of bed. I threw on a t-shirt and shorts and left my messy hair alone.

The kitchen was small, probably to encourage guests to order room service or visit one of the restaurants in the hotel. I rolled my eyes, finding eggs, milk, and beer in the refrigerator. Clearly, a man's ultimate shopping list, minus the bacon. With my stomach still crying out for food, I grabbed the eggs and the milk. *Hello, scrambled eggs.*

I started opening the cabinets above the counter, searching for a simple pan as I stood on my tiptoes. I huffed with impatience. *Seriously. Did a giant install these damn cabinets? What about the little people?*

As my hand felt around the inside of cabinet, two strong hands gripped my waist. I yelped in surprise as Tyler pushed the front of his body into the back of mine. His hands slipped underneath my shirt, caressing my stomach before inching up to my breasts.

Closing my eyes, I groaned with pleasure as his fingers played with my nipples. I threw my hands behind his neck as

his hands set my body on fire.

As one hand cupped my breast, his other slipped beneath my shorts, his fingers immediately toying with my clit. I gasped at the sensory overload, feeling the heat from his body against mine. Truth be told, I wouldn't have minded waking up to this every single morning.

“Good morning to you too,” I teased as my fingers locked onto some hair at the base of his neck.

Tyler didn't say a word as two fingers easily slipped inside me. He was barely touching me, and my body was at his mercy, relaxing immediately. I sunk my teeth into my bottom lip and moaned, welcoming his fingers pumping in and out and his thumb circling my clit. He had me completely soaked.

I tried to lean forward onto the counter, but the hand on my breast kept me in place as his lips sucked on my earlobe. My legs began to tremble, and my knees went weak as his fingers plowed into me with expertise.

Needing something—anything—to hold onto, I reached behind me and grasped his erection. *Fuck. He was completely naked.* And my hungry eyes had yet to ogle him in all his naked glory.

“Tyler,” I cried out, arching my back, feeling the tension rise in my belly.

He suddenly withdrew his fingers and slid my shorts down to my ankles, and I gingerly stepped out of them with a knowing smile. Grabbing my waist and positioning me where he needed me, he slammed his length inside me with a loud grunt.

With one hand on the counter, my other hand swept my shirt over my head as he cupped a naked breast. Unlike last night, he took his damn time, hitting all the right spots and overwhelming me in the best way possible.

He felt so damn good.

One hand left my waist and wrapped around my neck as his pace quickened.

“Fuck,” he groaned, driving into me harder, squeezing tighter.

The hand on my waist slid down to massage my clit, and all the butterflies in my stomach fluttered rapidly.

“Tyler,” I moaned, closing my eyes and basking in all the delicious sensations.

I frowned slightly when he eased himself out and turned me to face him. His eyes danced with lust and fire. His hands flew back to my waist and lifted me onto the marble counter, pushing my legs apart and planting his hands behind my knees.

“Fuck!” I yelled, throwing my head back as he entered me with force and speed.

With one hand around his neck and the other on the counter, my body yielded to his as he rapidly rotated his hips in search of his release. Watching the hunger in his eyes as my tits bounced with each thrust and feeling his cock sliding in and out of me, I fell apart in no time.

My legs shook. My eyes rolled back into my head. My breaths came heavy and hard. Spasms wracked my body and pushed Tyler into his own state of euphoria.

I squealed as he pulled out and released himself all over my stomach. I leaned back against the cabinet, catching my breath and forgetting my hunger.

“Good morning,” he mumbled as he headed back to the bedroom.

He was right about that.

Although spending the afternoon in bed would've been nice, Tyler and I explored the Strip after grabbing a quick lunch. We wandered in and out of different casinos, stopped at a few souvenir shops, and visited a few tourist attractions.

Lights flashed everywhere. Buildings seemed to touch the sky. The crowd was heavy with tourists. I was overjoyed with happiness. This was the Vegas experience I'd wanted the first time around. I was pretty damn sure no one headed to Vegas with the intention of mending a toxic relationship between two difficult people.

Tyler was a good sport about everything as I dragged him to all the sights I wanted to see, including the wax museum and Hell's Kitchen. Gordon Ramsey was my favorite person in the whole entire world, after all.

The last place we stopped at was M&M World. So. Much. Candy. All the different colored candies almost gave my poor eyes a headache, but that didn't stop me from looking at everything in the whole damn store.

After I'd made a few purchases, I spotted an older woman standing by the chocolate tower and keeping an eye on her kids from a distance.

"Excuse me," I said, holding out my phone. "Do you mind taking a few photos of us?"

"No problem," she said with a sweet smile and took the phone from my hand.

Unfortunately, Tyler hated having his picture taken and refused to cooperate. He stood awkwardly and stoically in front of the chocolate tower, and I simply rolled my eyes at him. Not wanting to waste the poor mother's time, I surprised him by throwing my arms around him and hugging him tight.

We'd just added sex to our friendship, and this was my attempt at not making things weird between us. As the patient woman snapped photos of us, Tyler smiled and playfully roughed up my hair, eventually putting me in a headlock and making me laugh hysterically.

"Thank you so much," I said the moment I wrangled myself out of his headlock.

"I took a bunch of them," she said, handing my phone back to me. "You guys are a beautiful couple."

She wandered off before either of us could correct her.

I quickly glanced at the number of photos she'd taken, but my fingers stopped at one in particular. In the previous shot, Tyler appeared surprised as hell at me throwing my arms around him, which made me giggle. But in the next photo, he had thrown one arm around me, and as he gazed down at me with a gigantic smile, I looked up at him with a smile to match. We looked absolutely perfect together.

We walked through the casino as we headed toward the room, laughing, and joking around like normal. Tyler rolled his eyes at the colorful and noisy slot machines, admitting he and his friends had gone to a casino when he'd turned twenty-one and he'd ended up losing over a hundred dollars. Since then, he'd refused to play another slot machine.

After I whispered some super naughty bedroom ideas in his ear, he slipped a twenty-dollar bill in a nearby nickel slot machine and actually won two-hundred dollars when he'd only had a few dollars left. When he collected his winnings, we returned to the room, and I fulfilled my end of the bargain, stripping him naked the moment the door closed.

Words weren't needed between us as we accepted the limited time we had together, knowing things would hopefully go back to normal when we left. Because we didn't have much time left, Tyler had given Kyle the keys to his jeep, allowing him to drive it back to California because Kyle had hitched a ride with him anyway.

As a gentleman and true friend, he'd wanted to keep me company on the drive home. But as a guy with insatiable sexual needs, he'd also wanted to spend the last two hours completely naked and alone with me. As a girl who had never been fucked like this her entire life, I was more than happy to stay as long as humanly possible.

After another mind-blowing round of amazing sex, I wrapped the sheets around my naked body and gave him a small smile.

“Did you hear anything about the position yet?” Tyler asked, pushing some hair away from my face and stroking my cheek.

I leaned into his palm, watching the little drops of sweat trail down his chest.

“Not yet,” I said with a small sigh. “I’m trying not to think about it too much. I’m trying hard to not get my hopes up. I was kind of thinking that I might take a break from cooking if I don’t get the promotion.”

But in reality, I knew I couldn’t step away from the kitchen. Cooking meant the world to me. It was in my blood. My memories. My mind. My soul. I felt connected to my mom when I cooked, and I desperately didn’t want to lose that.

“Do you think you could really do that?” he asked, lying on his side with an elbow propping up his upper body.

I shook my head. “Probably not.”

“Do you always think about your mom when you’re cooking?”

“It’s hard not to,” I admitted. “My mom had wanted to open her own restaurant. She had a special ability to make anything taste amazing.”

Tyler laughed out loud, and I smiled.

“I’m so serious. I used to absolutely hate eggs benedict when I was younger, but my mom made me try it after I watched her make it.”

“And?” He arched an eyebrow, waiting for my answer.

“I loved it. It is one of my favorite dishes to this day. She just knew how to make food taste better. She always said that if she could quit her day job, she would become a chef. But then they died, and part of me feels like I owe her—like I should open a restaurant in her memory.”

My heart ached at the memory of my mom hustling around the kitchen during the holidays. She refused help, especially my dad’s, because she was determined to make everything perfect, especially our favorite dishes. Even though my dad

couldn't help her, he'd cheered from the sidelines, supporting her passion and determination.

"You're amazing, you know that?" Tyler said, running a finger down the bridge of my nose and tapping the end. "Your parents would be so proud of you right now."

"You think so?" I ducked my head so he couldn't see me blush furiously.

"I know so. So, you want to open your own restaurant?"

I nodded.

"Have you thought of a name? Are you going to keep it classy? Name it Twelve or Thirteen?" he teased.

I giggled and shook my head. "I never really thought about it. Kinda figured I should focus on one dream at a time."

"What was your mom's name?"

"Alice."

"What about Alice's Dream? Or Alice in Wonderland?" he offered jokingly, running a finger over my sheet-covered knee and making my heart skip a beat.

"You might be joking, but I like those," I admitted. "I should probably figure out the theme of the restaurant first. Like would it be an all-American diner with burgers and fries and breakfast specials? Or something Italian? There are so many options."

"Well, whatever the theme or style, I'll be there every day—with my discount."

"Discount?" I blurted out, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, I did come up with the name," he said, tugging the sheet away from my chest. "What did you expect?"

"Maybe, uh, you could design it for me," I breathed out as he scooted closer and wrapped his lips around a tight nipple.

"Oh yeah?" he asked as he lazily ran his tongue around my hard nipple. "What would I get out of it besides my discount?"

I moaned, closing my eyes, and feeling wetness pool between my legs as his other hand fondled the other breast and nipple. I wondered if I would ever tire of his touch. The way my body burned for him right now, the answer would be no.

“Good food,” I managed to breathe out.

“And?” His fingers pushed the rest of the sheet away from my body as I slid down to lie next to him.

“Uh, a good Yelp review.”

“What would the review say?” He wedged a leg between mine as his lips and tongue continued to play with my tits.

“You’re gonna have to wait,” I teased.

He growled in frustration.

“Tyler?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you like your job?” I asked, running an arm around his shoulder and stroking his back. “Do you like being an architect?”

We always talked about my job, and I knew very little about his, other than that he was an architect.

“I love it,” he said, lifting his head from my breasts and smiling at me. “I’m good at it, and I’m happy that not I’m not working behind a desk all day.”

“What’s your favorite part?”

“The creativity. The details. Seeing the finished product. I love being able to sketch a floor plan after just one walkthrough.”

“When can I see some of your sketches?” One of my fingers trailed down his chest as I smiled seductively at him.

“When everyone else does,” he replied, ducking his face into my neck and rubbing his facial scruff against it.

I laughed as he tickled my neck with his scruffy chin and one of his hands tickled my waist. We rolled around on the bed for a few minutes, tickling each other and waiting for the other

to beg for one of us to stop. As his hand brushed between my legs, I wondered if he was this playful with the other women he slept with. I definitely didn't like the image of him and some brunette getting into a tickle fight.

Why was I thinking about that now?

"Hey," I said seriously as he rolled on top of me. "I'm going to ask you again. When can I see your sketches?"

Tyler looked down at me and smirked. "I'm going to say it again. When hell freezes over."

Then he took a nipple between his teeth and pulled gently. *Asshole*. Two could play this game.

I slipped a hand between our legs and wrapped it around the base of his erection and started stroking him. He grunted with approval at my touch, and I smiled victoriously. His mouth sucked my tit with each teasing stroke.

I had never so felt so empowered and confident, feeling a man succumb to my hands. Despite my lack of experience between the sheets, I knew I must have been doing something right if he kept coming back for more of me. Me. Was it possible that he was attracted to me even though I wasn't a brunette? Whatever the reason, I wanted to enjoy and remember every single moment.

My hand tightened around his cock as my strokes became faster and harder.

"Don't," Tyler groaned as the darkness in his eyes intensified. "Stop."

I knew he meant "don't stop," but I needed something from him first.

"Okay." I removed my hand from his warm skin and rolled over, showing him my backside.

"That didn't actually mean stop," he breathed out.

I smiled smugly. "Are you going to show me your designs?"

Tyler's laugh echoed behind me. "I see what you did."

“Did it work?” I whispered.

“Yes.”

Using his size and strength to his advantage, he pushed me onto my back as he leaned on his elbows and looked down at me. Even with my chest still exposed to him, I felt comfortable as his fingers continued to trail over my body and his eyes studied it as if it were the most beautiful thing in the world.

“What was your mom’s name?” I asked curiously. He already knew so much about me, but I still didn’t know that much about him.

Tyler remained quiet, tangling his fingers in my hair. Even though he never seemed to want to talk about himself, I wished he would open up a little more.

“Elizabeth,” he muttered, avoiding eye contact for a second. “People called her Beth.”

“What was she like?”

I watched him swallow deeply as his eyes darkened.

“Uh, she put everyone first and herself last. She went out of her way for everyone, even if they’d wronged her. She didn’t see the bad, only the good in people. I still don’t understand how something so bad can happen to someone with a heart like hers. It fucking kills me every day. She was so beautiful.”

Not only did I feel for him, but I understood his pain. The ache of losing someone never truly disappeared, and no amount of heartfelt words could lessen that ache. Life was simply not the same, especially around the holidays.

Losing my parents had changed me. Changed the way I lived and loved—and the way I viewed life. I blamed the entire world for what had happened and wondered why life seemed to have had it out for me. I blamed everyone else because I couldn’t admit it was my fault. But as I grew older, I realized the world had different plans for me, and it was up to me to find out what they were.

I cupped Tyler's cheek and sucked in a large breath of air, making him look at me. Tyler fucking Sullivan had opened up to me.

"She sounds amazing, Tyler. Think of it this way: you were lucky enough to be loved by her. And that love will never go away."

He laughed through his nose and pushed my hair out of my face.

"When she died, I didn't give a fuck about anything anymore," he admitted with a shrug.

"Is that why you don't want a relationship?" I asked hesitantly, hoping he would continue to share more about himself.

I was genuinely curious if he'd had his heart broken, because he never talked about his past relationships.

"No," he answered dryly, clenching his jaw and falling onto his back on the bed.

"Did someone break your heart?"

Shit. I shouldn't have asked that.

"Elyse, I don't want to talk about it."

"I didn't—"

As Tyler sighed deeply, I knew he was shutting down on me. And now I knew how it felt when I did it to him. Who hurt him? Didn't he know how much I wanted to help him?

"Just let it go," he said tiredly, placing his hands behind his head. "And please don't ask me about it again."

Awkward silence filled the room as the mood dramatically changed. He stopped touching me. Stopped looking at me. I knew I'd hit a serious nerve when he turned on his side with his muscled back facing me.

I laid there for a few seconds before sliding out of bed and slipping into the plush hotel robe. I needed to step away, and he needed space.

As I walked toward the bathroom, Tyler spoke. “I know you’re going to fall for me.”

His words stopped me in my tracks as I turned to face him, arching an eyebrow.

What does that mean? Why did he say that?

“What?”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Elyse, but I think I will.”

He rolled onto his back again and stared at me blankly.

“What makes you think I’m going to fall for you?” I asked.

“Call it a hunch,” he said, sitting straight up and adjusting the sheets to cover his lower half.

“Well, your hunch is wrong,” I said quickly, leaning against the door frame and holding my robe closed. “I’m not going to fall for you, Tyler. Like you said, it’s just sex.”

“You sure, Elle?”

I nodded confidently, even though I wasn’t sure at all. Maybe I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of being right. Maybe I honestly didn’t know what I was feeling. All I knew was that this had been one of the best weekends of my life, and I had no intention of ruining it with an argument.

“Positive,” I gulped.

“Well then, come back to bed,” he ordered with a sexy smirk, patting the empty side of the mattress.

“We have to be on the road in an hour, Ty.”

“You have to learn how to live without a fucking plan, Elle,” he said, using his index finger to tell me to come closer. “Now get your sexy ass over here.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Elyse

I RETURNED to work the next afternoon with renewed energy and in an amazing mood.

My heart felt a little less broken, and the pain of Jason’s betrayal and lies no longer made me burst into tears. All my life, I’d wanted to move forward—do something worthwhile—but Jason held me back and led me to believe I was worthless. *What a piece of shit.*

“Elyse!” Alyssa’s squeal of excitement broke through my trance.

As much as I wanted to hug her tightly, I couldn’t, because my hands were covered with fish goo from filleting, boning, and skinning. Even though we hadn’t seen each other in two days, it had kind of felt like forever.

“I missed you so much!” she exclaimed, cautiously eyeing my messy hands, and remaining a few feet away. “Life feels weird without you. Even for two days.”

“Did you just clock in?” I asked, setting my knife on the counter.

She nodded with a smile.

“I’ve missed you too. I have so many pictures to show you. How are you doing?”

“Tired but good. So, was Vegas fun? Especially since you didn’t invite me?” Alyssa pretended to pout.

Was Vegas fun? Hmmm ... Well, I went to an incredibly pool party, got tipsy, had a ton of sex, and toured the Strip. Yeah, it was fun.

My face warmed at the image of Tyler's perfect naked body and all the things he'd done to mine.

"Vegas was fun," I said, shrugging my shoulders.

My sister stared at me silently, immediately reading past my fib.

"What aren't you telling me?" she asked suspiciously.

I huffed. "Fine. Vegas was amazing. I wished I could've stayed longer."

"You had sex!" she shrieked so loudly that I shushed her and quickly scanned the kitchen to check if any of the other staff heard her. Luckily, no one seemed to have heard little outburst.

Alyssa arched a thin eyebrow and dramatically lowered her voice. "You had sex, didn't you?"

What the fuck? Was it written on my forehead or something?

Her eyes widened with excitement when I didn't reply.

"Oh. My. God. You did! Tell me everything. Did you finally bang Tyler? Was it him? How was it? How do you feel? Oh! I cannot wait to see him!"

I loved my sister, but she also has the world's biggest mouth. She also has a special talent of making the simplest of moments awkward.

"What makes you think I had sex?" I asked, willing my heart to calm down and my facial nerves to remain impassive.

Alyssa scoffed and rolled her eyes. "I wasn't born yesterday, dummy. One, you're fucking glowing. Two, you've been smiling the entire time I've been standing here. Shall I continue?"

No, I didn't need her to continue to run her mouth. *Shit.* I couldn't tell her about Tyler. She would make everything a *hundred* times more awkward, even if she swore up and down that she wouldn't tell a soul.

I sighed and pulled off my gross latex gloves, tossing them into the nearest garbage bin. After thoroughly washing my hands, I dragged Alyssa into the freezer.

“It’s true!” she squealed again, jumping up and down and clapping like a toddler. “You lost your virginity again.”

Seriously?

“You had sex with Tyler, didn’t you?” she asked again, not giving me a chance to say a word. “I knew you guys would hook up when you told me that he invited you out there. I just fucking knew it.”

“I didn’t have sex with Tyler,” I hissed. “I hooked up with some guy at a pool party.”

“What was his name?” Alyssa challenged, narrowing her eyes at me.

Fuck, she was reading through my lie—again.

“Barry.”

“Barry?” She made a face. “That’s not a sexy name. Barry.”

I shrugged, praying she wouldn’t turn around and notice the giant tub of strawberry ice cream sitting on the shelf behind her.

“Whether his name is sexy or not, the sex was amazing,” I said, feeding her a bit of truth.

“This gives us an excuse to visit Vegas more often.”

I shook my head. “I don’t even know his last name, Lyss. We agreed it was a one-time thing. For all I know, Barry might not even be his real name.”

“Yeah, like what kind of parents would name their child Barry?”

I wanted to pat myself on the back for distracting her with such a terrible name.

“What did you do to my sister?” Alyssa asked with a proud grin as she clamped her hands on my shoulders. “A one-night

stand. In *Vegas*. I am so fucking proud of you.”

I had no idea having sex after a six-month celibacy period was a huge milestone, but my little sister was dancing around in celebration.

“So, um, Halloween is this weekend,” she said once the celebratory dance ended. “What are we doing? Oh, we should have a party. At your house.”

“Why *my* house?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at her, and realizing she hadn’t thought of this idea right on the spot. “I don’t know. I’ve been drinking so much lately, and that’s something I hardly ever do.”

“I have an apartment with an annoying roommate. And who cares about the drinking? I drink like every other night. It’s just alcohol.”

She said it so easily and casually, as if it were nothing.

I sighed. “Who would even come? I really don’t want a ton of people at my house, Lyss.”

“I promise it won’t be a banger. I’ll help decorate and everything. Also, we could go shopping and get sexy costumes!”

As I stood there thinking of an answer, my baby sister headed for the freezer door but tossed out over her shoulder with a smug smile, “I’ll see you soon, sis.”

What did I get myself into?

I silently stood behind Alyssa with a Michael Myers mask over my face and waited for the right moment to scare the shit out of her.

“I’m excited to see what everyone dresses up as,” she said cheerfully as she rummaged through a rack of costumes, trying to find the perfect one.

When I didn't reply to her comment, she turned around and shrieked with terror at the sight of the mask. Tumbling backwards into the rack, she scowled, pressing one of her hands to her chest as I laughed hysterically.

"Asshole," she growled, standing up and straightening out the mess as I ripped off the mask and returned it to its proper spot.

Because she'd convinced me to throw a small party at my house, I dragged her sorry ass with me to the party store for supplies and costumes. I soon regretted my decision, because shopping with Alyssa was kind of like shopping with a two-year-old kid that had to touch everything—kind of like Tyler in the hardware store.

She needed to evaluate every single costume she deemed sexy and hot so that she could determine if it would make her look hotter.

Honestly, Alyssa didn't even have to beg to have Halloween at my house. Halloween was one of my favorite holidays. I loved scary movies. I loved handing out treats to the kids that stopped by. Last year, a little girl had dressed up as a chef because it was her dream. My heart melted on the spot, and I might have given her an extra candy bar or two.

"Superwoman?" she asked, tapping her nail against the picture on the costume. "The skirt looks short enough for me. What do you do think?"

I scrunched my nose at the model wearing the skimpy outfit. "Eh. Superwoman costumes are kinda cliché now. So, pass."

I giggled to myself as I pointed toward an inflatable dinosaur costume, watching my sister's face turn red. "Don't you dare!" she shrieked.

A millisecond later, she excitedly pulled a Harley Quinn costume from a rack. "This is the one."

"Will Cory be your Joker?" I teased as she started to list all the accessories she would need to buy to complete the look.

I wasn't too surprised with her choice. The fictional character's personality perfectly fit Alyssa. Maybe a little too perfectly.

"He will be now," she said firmly. "The Jared Leto one, though. So which costume do you like?"

I quickly gazed at the costumes displayed in the front and pointed to the sexy cop outfit. *Shit.*

I just gave her shit about Superwoman being cliché, and I'd pointed out the cheesiest costume. *Hypocrite much?*

"This is going to be so much fucking fun!" my sister squealed, ignoring my hypocritical choice. "You're going to be one fine-ass cop."

When Alyssa and I pulled into my driveway, Tyler stood on my lawn with his phone in his hand. I took a deep breath, grabbing the shopping bags from the backseat before I faced him. As usual, he was wearing his work attire of cargo pants and a t-shirt.

I plastered on a bright smile, walking toward him but mentally undressing him with my eyes. *Shit.* Even with the hot sun beating down on us, goosebumps pebbled my skin as my heart raced.

Please don't let this be weird, I silently prayed as I watched him slide his phone into his pocket. *Please don't let this be weird.*

If he knew how much he had already affected me with his personality, humor, and dangerously good looks, our friendship would come to a screeching halt. Especially as my eyes focused on the way his muscles strained against the simple t-shirt he wore.

Think of something gross, Elyse.

Dave naked.

Dave naked.

“I was just about to text you,” he said, clearing his throat and grabbing a few bags from my hands. “I have some free time and wanted to finish the drywall.”

“Hey, Tyler,” Alyssa said, pounding a tiny fist on his shoulder. “Hard at work I see.”

“Barely,” he teased with a playful wink as he followed us inside the house. “You wanna help?”

“Is this a trick question?”

“What are you two up to today?” he asked as looked in my direction but then quickly glanced away.

Fuck, this is already weird.

“Halloween shopping,” I said, biting my bottom lip as I set my purse and bags on the couch. “I’m having a party Friday night. You should come. Ask Will, Kyle, and Miguel if they want to come too.”

“Damn, I forgot about Halloween.”

“Which means we’re not taking no for an answer,” Alyssa said sweetly. “The theme is sexy costumes. Nothing scary. I trust you won’t disappoint me.”

Tyler wiped his hands down his face. “You know that defeats the purpose of Halloween, right?”

“I don’t care. You can come shirtless if you want,” she suggested with a wink. “I’m Harley Quinn, and Elyse will be a cop. Too bad the guy you fucked in Vegas won’t see you, Elyse.”

I immediately choked on the air in my lungs as my mouth fell wide open. *What the fuck?* I wouldn’t have said anything if I knew she was going to blab it to the whole damn world. She knew Tyler and I were friends, but that didn’t give her the right to share my business in his presence. *I am going to fucking kill her.*

I shifted my feet around as my palms grew sweaty from embarrassment and my face heated to many different shades of red.

“Damn, Elyse,” he said with a whistle. “You got some in Vegas? When?”

“Wait, how did you not know?” Alyssa asked him with a frown. “You were with her the whole time.”

“Not the whole time, if you know what I mean,” Tyler said smoothly with a wink.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Do you remember meeting some guy named Barry at the pool party?”

Thankfully, he shook his head and shrugged. “I was kinda occupied myself.”

I wanted to kill him too. Dealing with Alyssa’s big fat mouth was one thing, but then watching Tyler’s amused reaction ... My misery was going to kill me.

I opened my mouth to play it off, but then my baby sister shot off her mouth—again.

“Apparently, it was the best sex ever.”

Fuck. My. Life. Could I not share *anything* with Alyssa and not have it bite me in the ass later?

I grimaced, feeling my cheeks flush like warm honey as I ducked my head and proceeded toward the kitchen.

“Really, now?” Tyler asked, following me.

I heard the fucking enjoyment in his stupid voice as he and my sister joked around like I wasn’t even there.

“Enough,” I said sharply, heading toward the basement. “Tyler, finish whatever you need to do in my basement. And, Alyssa, go organize the decorations.”

They immediately stopped laughing and simply looked at each other in silence. Tyler brushed past me and disappeared into the basement, and Alyssa turned to head toward the living room but not before she threw out three words in my direction.

“One word. Cruella.”

Alyssa left as soon as the sun set, and I kept my mind occupied in the kitchen, making lasagna. As I opened the oven door to check on the dish, I heard the basement door softly close behind me. After shutting the oven door closed and giving the pasta dish a few more minutes, I turned to see Tyler leaning against the table and giving me a dark look that I couldn't quite identify.

Was he mad at me? He had no right to be. In fact, I had every right to be mad at him for egging her on.

“Smells great,” he said. “What are you making?”

“Lasagna,” I replied dryly, leaning against the counter, and taking a deep breath.

Snap out of it, Elyse. Be cool.

“You can stay for dinner if you want. I made plenty.”

Why did the offer sound lame and weird? I'd cooked dinner for him dozens of times.

“You know I would love to—”

“But?” I interrupted, arching an eyebrow.

“But I have to be somewhere,” he said, running a hand through his hair.

Under normal circumstances, I would have asked him where he needed to be and then teased him about it, but somehow, asking him now felt intrusive and awkward. And I wasn't sure I wanted to hear his answer.

My stupid mind worked overtime, wondering if he had a date. He was single, after all. He could do whatever—or whomever—he wanted. We'd just had meaningless sex in Vegas. But then again, maybe he had a work thing. Or maybe he was hanging out with the guys. *Shit*. I really hated my brain.

“So, uh, the best sex ever, huh?” he asked slyly, with a fucking smirk that I wanted to wipe off his handsome face.

Fuck me.

I shrugged casually. “I just told Alyssa what she wanted to hear so she would let it go. I really hoped you would do the same. Just shut up.”

I had no plans to stroke his ego—or any other body part of his—because even he knew he had a gift. Ever since I’d returned from Las Vegas, I’d tried to piece together exactly how this happened and wondered if he’d felt just as nervous and weird as I did. I couldn’t stop thinking about what we did and how I felt—the thoughts were consuming me.

The second he started walking toward me, I turned to face the counter.

“Yeah, sure, that’s the case,” he said playfully, caging me between his body and the counter. Suddenly, his hands gripped the edge.

“One hundred percent,” I said weakly, clenching my legs together and ordering myself to relax.

Don’t let him get to you, I repeated silently to myself. *Don’t let him get to you.*

“Well,” he muttered, pressing the front of his body against my back. “Judging from the way you sounded when I touched you here, I’d say you’re lying.”

I froze in his hold, letting his fingers and hands possess me. As his finger slowly circled around my hip, I wanted to pull away or push him away, but the force was too strong. My need for him was too strong.

“Or here,” he whispered seductively as his fingers dipped into the waistband of my loose shorts.

My damn nipples poked through my thin shirt, and the slight growl in his voice told me he noticed.

I gasped the second his fingers brushed against my panties. The low chuckle vibrating from his throat told me he immensely enjoyed my reactions to his touch. My toes curled.

My head rolled back. And my stomach deflated at his burning touch. Then I remembered the deal we'd made in Vegas.

I suddenly whirled on him, hot anger coursing through my mind and body as I pushed him away. "Stop!"

"Whatever happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." So what the fuck was he doing?

He stepped back and blinked a few times as relief shot through me.

"You know exactly ..." I broke off in an accusatory tone, running hand over my forehead. "Just stop."

If we were going to keep this in Vegas, then he needed to stop with the overt comments and actions. Because, honestly, my determined resolve was starting to fade.

"What if I—"

"Seriously, Tyler?" I snapped, cutting him off.

He rolled his eyes and grinned. "I'm just messing with you. Chill."

"Right," I muttered under my breath, pulling on an oven mitt, and opening the oven door to take out the pan of lasagna.

"Nah, seriously," he said with a chuckle, leaning against the counter and keeping a respectable distance between us. "Thanks for coming to Vegas, though. If you ever need a partner for a trip, I got you."

"It honestly wasn't a big deal, but I'm happy I could be there for you."

"I would do the same for you."

"Yeah, I know," I said with a nod, pulling off the oven mitt.

"Well, I should get going. I'll see you around, yeah?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tyler

ELYSE WAS the definition of dangerous.

Over the past few years, I'd mastered the art of becoming emotionally unavailable. I rarely slept with the same woman twice, but for some reason, I wanted more of her.

What the hell had happened in Vegas? One minute we were laughing and joking around, and the next minute, we were tumbling around in the sheets.

And I couldn't get enough of her. Her presence. Her body. Her beauty. And, shit, I couldn't get over the way she'd reacted to my touches, simply melting and craving me at the same time. And the sex was fucking amazing, something I'd honestly never expected. Like, amazing for four rounds. What the hell? I'd never done that before.

She was fucking dangerous.

But what we'd done in Vegas was affecting our friendship. She was always in her own damn head, overthinking and overanalyzing. As much as I didn't want to push her away, I was scared to be around her. My fingers ached to touch her. My body warmed just being near her.

Why couldn't I stop thinking about her? We were friends. That was our deal.

The idea of dating didn't really scare me, but I knew I wasn't ready for anything serious. I still wasn't over my past.

I just needed to remind myself that Elyse didn't want anything serious either. I was happily single. I could have sex with whomever I wanted.

After leaving Elyse's house and reluctantly turning down her dinner invitation, Kyle, Will, and Miguel sauntered in to watch a basketball game and throw back a few drinks.

"You ready for the Lakers to get their asses beat?" Miguel asked, plopping down in the middle of the couch.

"Fuck that shit," I said, with a laugh. "I'll put two hundred down."

I couldn't wait for the Lakers to beat some 76ers' ass. I had always been a sports fan, always rooting for the Lakers because my dad was a huge fan. I loved watching football and baseball too, but I'd never had a strong loyalty to a specific team.

"This is definitely going to be the game of the year," Will said, handing Miguel and me beers that he and Kyle had brought over.

The guys and I spread ourselves around the living room, chatting during the commercials and drinking way too fast. A whole case of beer disappeared after a half an hour.

"So, how weird is it for you?" Kyle asked, watching me pour myself a glass of whiskey.

"What?" I asked with a confused look.

"You didn't want to fuck Elyse because she's your neighbor. So, is it weird?"

How the hell did his nosy ass even know about us in Vegas? *What the fuck?*

"What?" Will barked, whipping his head around to stare at me. "I knew that shit would happen. I could tell from that night at the bar."

"How do you even fucking know, Kyle?" I asked with a sigh as I sat back down on the couch next to Miguel.

"I stopped by your room to see if you wanted to get food," he said with a casual shrug. "But I heard Elyse. She's very loud."

My face hit the palm of hand as fast as the guys cheered.
Shit.

“Everyone in the hallway could hear her actually.”

“You were gonna keep that one to yourself, huh? Didn’t want an ‘I told you so’ from us?” Miguel said, leaning back on the couch while a commercial played.

“Yeah,” I said, without thinking. “I wouldn’t do that to her.”

“You do it to everyone else,” Kyle blurted out as he crushed his beer can.

He was right. I’d had no problem telling them about any of the other women I had been with, but Elyse was different. She wasn’t just a girl that I’d fucked and forgotten about.

“We’re friends and neighbors,” I blurted out, taking a sip of my drink.

“And fuck buddies.” Kyle faked a cough, earning laughs from the other guys.

“Shut the fuck up,” I muttered but then quickly looked at Will. “Wait. What did you mean from the night at the bar? Nothing happened that night.”

He belched loudly after polishing off the rest of his beer. “Man, you should’ve seen your face when she disappeared.”

Will imitated my worried facial expressions with wide eyes and pursed lips as Miguel and Kyle cracked up hysterically.

“I was pissed,” I defended. “I’d be mad if *any* woman I was with just up and left.”

“Yeah, right,” Kyle said, shaking his head. “You were *all* over her in Vegas. Come on, be real with us.”

I drained the rest of my whiskey and shook my head. Now wasn’t the time to be real with them—or anyone. “She was drunk, and we were celebrating some good news she got. I just wanted to make sure she had a good time.”

“Chill out,” Miguel said, rolling his eyes. “It’s just sex. No one is saying you’re in love with her.”

“Game’s back on,” I pointed out, knowing this was the quickest way to shut them up.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” I jumped up from the couch, pounding my fist into the air. “He missed the easiest fucking shot! No one was around him. Fuck.”

“How the fuck do you miss that? It was a clean shot,” Miguel taunted, playfully gathering the betting money on the table.

I scowled at him and threw a balled-up napkin on the floor.

“Fuck you, Miguel,” Will said, watching him count the money with a big-ass smile on his face. “It was a close-ass game.”

“Thanks, fellas,” he bragged. “Six hundred dollars richer. Now, take your two shots. The rules still haven’t changed.”

Of course, Miguel and his damn memory would never forget the tradition we’d started, where the losers slammed down two shots. My head already buzzed from the beer and whiskey. I hadn’t even eaten a decent meal all day—just had toast for breakfast and some chips while watching the game.

I should’ve had dinner with Elyse. That lasagna looked and smelled fucking amazing. I had no doubt it tasted phenomenal, because she honestly had a gift in the kitchen—and in the bedroom. *Shit.*

I grabbed the two shot glasses of vodka that Will poured and tossed the liquid back, one after another, as Kyle and Will did the same. The alcohol quickly settled into my stomach as my eyes blinked rapidly.

“Oh, hey,” I said, suddenly remembering my conversation with Elyse and Alyssa. “Elyse is throwing a Halloween party

tomorrow at her place, and she said you guys should come over.”

“Fuck yeah!” Kyle smirked. “Can I bring someone?”

I shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

As soon as the guys left, I parked my somewhat drunk ass on the couch and wondered if Elyse was still up. From where I sat, a few lights were on in her house. I wondered what she was doing.

I shook my head, believing I could shake any thoughts of her out of my mind.

I couldn’t.

I reached for my phone that I’d tossed carelessly on the couch before taking the shots. If I asked nicely or even begged, I wondered if she’d bring me any leftover lasagna.

Me: Wyd?

Elyse: I just got out of the shower. Whatcha doing?

Well, I didn’t want lasagna now. Shit.

Me: I just finished watching the game. Does your dinner offer still stand?

Elyse: Tyler, do you see what time it is? It’s way too late to eat right now. Besides, I may or may not have eaten it all lol.

Me: I was talking about something else ...

I chuckled as I waited for her reply. I really needed to stop messing with her like this, but I couldn’t help myself. Elyse was definitely the strong one in our friendship. Nine times out of ten, she would stop me from being an ass and tried to do the right thing. And the right decision was to keep what we did in Vegas in fucking Vegas for the sake of our friendship.

I smirked, seeing her chat bubble type and then disappear.

Elyse: What were you talking about?

Me: You know what I’m talking about. You just want me to say it, don’t you?

Elyse: ... maybe.

Me: Yes or no?

Elyse: Yes. Tell me!

Me: I want to taste you again.

Elyse: Oh, do you?

Me: I want your legs wrapped around my neck, and I want to hear you like the entire hotel did.

Elyse: Lol. I thought this was going to be a one weekend thing. You can't say things like that.

Me: I just wanted to get that out.

Elyse: Wow, Tyler, the tease. Two can play this game, and I'm sure it will be ten times harder.

Me: Try me.

Elyse: Just admit you want to sext me, Tyler.

Me: I want to do more than sext you, Elyse.

Elyse: Well, too bad you can't.

Me: You sure?

Elyse: Positive. You can just sit there and think about me dropping this towel that's around my body right now ;)

Me: Are you touching yourself?

Elyse: I might be. You would never know that though.

Me: Do you need help with that?

Elyse: Not at all. Goodnight, Tyler ;)

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

elyse

“HAPPY HALLOWEEN!” I said with a forced smile, opening the front door for a bunch of people that I didn’t know.

I should’ve known Alyssa wouldn’t follow any of the rules I’d laid out for her regarding the party. I should’ve known something was up when Alyssa insisted we move some furniture around in the living room and dining room areas to make more space for guests. And my last clue was the shit-ton of alcohol she’d made Cory and Caden haul in and set up in the kitchen.

I took a deep breath, closing the door, and reminded myself not to be the older, *boring* sister. What was the worst that could happen tonight?

At least my house looked awesome as hell with all the decorations Alyssa and I had hung up. Fake candles were placed strategically around the rooms. Spooky string lights were pinned to the ceiling to create the look of a haunted house without the terror. Fake cobwebs with equally terrifying fake spiders and colorful streamers hung from the doorways.

Plastic pumpkin containers held different snacks—pretzels, chips, and candy—and Alyssa made cute little signs for the specialty drinks. Candy corn cocktail. Halloween hypnotist. Vampire kiss martini. A foldout table for beer pong and other drinking games was set up in the basement.

“Do you know any of these people?” Lena asked, handing me a plastic cup full of blood-red liquid. “Because that kid over there looks like he’s sixteen.”

What’s the worst that could happen? Being arrested for serving alcohol to minors.

I rolled my eyes and took a huge swallow of the vampire-themed drink. *Mmmmm. Tasty.* “I told Alyssa that I didn’t want a huge party.”

Lena snorted. “When was the last time Alyssa actually listened to you?”

Fair point.

The director of festivities was still upstairs perfecting her hair and the rest of her look as Lena and I talked and kept an eye on the unknown guests. As part of my costume of sexy cop, I wore a sleek, dark blue romper with a wide belt around my waist. Real handcuffs—on loan from Lena—and latex gloves hung from the belt. Completing the look was fishnet stockings and black, knee-high boots. I’d puffed out my hair into big voluminous curls, and a matching blue police hat sat on my head.

Alyssa had demanded I wear a push-up bra, and she’d unzipped the top part of the romper to show off a good amount of my cleavage. I zipped it up to show only a *modest* amount as soon as I’d started greeting guests at the door.

Lena looked absolutely sinful as Catwoman, dressed head to toe in a black latex suit that showed off her curves. A cute, black headband with cat ears pulled back her black hair.

“Thanks for coming down,” I said, nudging her arm.

She fake-coughed into her fist. “Yeah, I wasn’t feeling too well so I called in sick.”

I snickered and raised the plastic cup to my lips again.

A few minutes later, the woman of the hour finally descended the stairs, catching everyone’s eyes. She was dressed head to toe in a super sexy Harley Quinn outfit, her blonde hair, which had been dyed pink and blue, pulled back into pigtails. She wore a ripped t-shirt that showed off her taut stomach, sparkly blue spandex bottoms, and black ankle boots. Then, her Jared Leto Joker 2.0 followed her and latched onto her arm.

“Wow!” I said as Lena and I approached her and Cory. “You look amazing.”

“You’re the sexy one,” she said, grabbing the cup from my hand and draining it. “Lena, you look incredible too.”

“Meow!” Lena hissed with a wink.

“Enough small talk,” Alyssa said, her fingers finding the zipper on my romper and tugging it down. “Time for shots, bitches.”

As soon as she and Cory turned and headed toward the kitchen, my fingers found the zipper and tugged it back up.

What’s the worst that could happen? Accidentally flashing my tits to my coworkers and a ton of people I didn’t know.

After taking some terrible shots with my sister and Cory and chatting with them for a bit, I wandered into the basement to check on my coworkers who were playing games. I playfully whistled at Alex, who was dressed as a bunny in a white bodysuit with a white headband and furry rabbit ears.

I grabbed her hand and twirled her around in a circle.

“Acklin, I never knew you were that pretty,” Alex joked as she stopped spinning and adjusted her bunny ears. “I blame Dave for hiding that hot body under all those work clothes.”

“I could say the same thing about you, too,” I said with a grin.

“Oh, this old thing?” she scoffed. “I’ve had this costume for years.”

“Well, if it ain’t broken then don’t fix it.”

“Or is it don’t fix it if it ain’t broken?”

After Alex and I talked a bit, I headed back upstairs and literally bumped into Caden, who had been hovering around the door. Dressed as soldier in training, he wore tan camo cargo pants and a tight tan t-shirt that strained against his muscled chest. His light blonde hair was pushed back, showing off his shaved sides, as a faint beard dotted his strong jawline.

“Wow!” he said, staring at me with wide eyes. “I’m speechless.”

“You make a cute soldier,” I said, tapping his nose and enjoying his attention.

“Thanks for the invite,” he said, pulling me into a tight hug.

“Of course,” I answered, pulling away and waving to Lena. “Enjoy yourself.”

As I made my way toward Lena, I frowned slightly as Caden followed me, keeping a hand on my waist. After making quick introductions between Lena and Caden, I purposefully stood next to the sexy cat to avoid his light touches. But he stood close and twirled strands of my hair between his fingers.

Although his eyes seemed more focused on my tits than the conversation I was trying to carry among the three of us, I wondered if I was giving him a fair chance. He seemed like a good guy, and he genuinely appeared interested in me.

“Do you ladies need another drink?” he asked, tilting his head toward the kitchen.

“Yeah,” I said. “Surprise me.”

As he walked away to grab more drinks, I heard the doorbell and rushed through the horde of people to answer. A huge smile crossed my face when I saw Tyler and the rest of the guys dressed in different baseball costumes standing on the porch. Tyler wore a dark blue jersey with thin white stripes with half the buttons undone, revealing his chiseled chest, and white pants that cuffed at the ends. A matching dark blue baseball cap covered his hair.

“Hey,” I said brightly, standing to the side to let them enter.

“Elyse,” Kyle hollered, giving me a side hug. “Long time, no see.”

I laughed. “I just saw you like last week, you weirdo.”

My smile soon faded when my eyes landed on three gorgeous women in their group. They were all dressed as slutty bunnies, wearing the same attire except in three different

colors—pink, white, and black. They all wore ruffled panties with matching corsets that pushed their tits up to high heaven, bunny ears headbands, thigh-high stockings complete with garter belts, and stiletto heels. Of course, fucking stiletto heels.

I wondered which bunny was Tyler's. My money was on the brunette dressed head to toe in black.

"Thanks for inviting us," Miguel said, giving me an awkward hug.

"Where are the drinks?" Will asked eagerly, rubbing his hands together. "I'm ready to get fucked up. And, Elyse, you're taking a shot with me later."

After I quickly pointed to the kitchen and informed them of games in the basement, the guys and their dates made a beeline toward the bar area. I hoped my fake smile hid the fact I was pissed off that none of their dates had said anything to me. A quick thank you or "what a nice house" would've been nice—and polite. *Idiots.*

"Hey, Angelina," Tyler said, lightly pushing the tall brunette toward the kitchen. "I'll meet you in there in a second. I want to say hi to Elyse."

The black bunny crinkled her perfectly plucked eyebrows at me before pouting her red lips at Tyler and giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. I used all the willpower I had not to roll my eyes as she disappeared through the dining room.

I closed the front door as Tyler stepped closer, almost trapping me between him and the door. I bit my lower lip, watching his eyes roam up and down my costume.

"You know, I'd let you arrest me any time you wanted," he said huskily, licking his lips as my cheeks warmed.

"Have you broken any laws lately?" I asked playfully.

He shrugged. "I know *you* have."

My eyes went wide with fear. Was that kid Lena had pointed at earlier really sixteen?

"It's a fucking crime to look this sexy," he finished with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes dramatically and shook my head at his lame pick-up line.

“Maybe I should arrest you,” he said as his fingers toyed with the handcuffs on my belt.

Arrest me for having really dirty, dirty thoughts about your hot naked body, I thought as my insides melted.

“For what?” I demanded, slapping his hand away from the handcuffs.

“For me to know and for you to find out.”

I laughed as my mind spun. Were we flirting? Did friends that had sex flirt? Even though I knew he wasn't interested in relationships, was everything a game to him? Was *I* a game to him? Why did he bring a date to my party? What the serious hell were we doing?

“Seriously, Elle, you look amazing,” Tyler said, taking a step back.

“I can say the same about—”

“Hey, beautiful, here's your drink,” Caden interrupted, pushing a drink in my hand before taking a long look at Tyler. “Tyler, right?”

“Yeah,” he replied dryly.

I took a huge swallow from my cup, wondering how to diffuse the tension among the three of us as Caden placed a protective hand on my hip and pulled me close.

“Nice seeing you,” Tyler finally said. “I'm gonna go get a drink.”

As soon as he disappeared, Caden turned to face me, placing a hand on the door behind me and stepping closer.

“Damn, Elyse, stop playing hard to get,” he whined. “This is getting old. Give me a chance.”

“I said we could go out as friends,” I reminded him of our text exchange a while back.

“And I said I hated being tossed into the friend zone.”

I shrugged. “Take it or leave it, Caden. I’m seriously not looking for a relationship right now. But I wouldn’t mind getting to you know as a friend.”

His eyes darkened for a moment before lighting up with excitement.

“I think you might take me out of the friend zone after one dinner,” he said cockily.

“Maybe,” I said.

But I doubted it.

The party calmed down after a few hours and when most of the crowd became too drunk to even hold a decent conversation. Somehow, drama had crept in among my circle of friends. Kyle’s date, the white slutty bunny, was upset that he’d flirted with Lena for most of the night. She had unwisely tried to pick a fight with Lena, telling her to back off, but Lena used some very choice words and her “don’t you dare fuck with me” tone with the poor bunny.

The wounded rabbit hopped away with the pink slutty bunny because Will wasn’t really paying attention to her anyway. No, he’d tried to keep a discreet eye on Alyssa, who had argued with Cory most of the time. I didn’t know why they were mad at each other, but I heard my sister use the phrase “he’s just a friend” over and over.

As much as I didn’t want to get caught staring at Tyler and his stupid date, I danced with Lena and pasted on a huge fake smile. He was sitting on the armrest of the couch while Angelina stood between his legs with her arms around his neck. He had one hand on the small of her back and the other around his drink.

Why the fuck did I wish I was the one with my arms around him?

I really wanted to kick her scrawny ass out of my house, but I didn’t have a good reason other than that she annoyed

me. And she was rude. She still hadn't said a word to me. "This party is lit" was always a compliment a hostess loved to hear.

Lena scurried away for a second to change the music, and I shot her a "what the hell are you playing" look when an old Arctic Monkeys song sensually slow danced its way out of the speakers. This song set the mood for everything. Everything.

I playfully rolled my eyes at her as she shimmied her way to me, pulling my police hat off my head and tossing it on hers. She couldn't remember when she'd lost her cat ears. As I swayed my hips and began putting my hands on her shoulders, a strong set of hands wrapped around my waist and yanked me back into a hard surface.

Lena waved her fingers at me as she slowly back away. I looked over my shoulder to find Caden winking at me.

With alcohol running through my system and my mind thinking too much about Tyler, I followed Caden's lead and found his rhythm as his hands drifted respectfully over my body. One of my hands slid around his neck as my hips rolled against his. The guy at least knew how to dance.

For a few minutes, I simply lost myself in the slow, sexy beat. Nothing bothered me. I didn't feel anything but the music. And I loved every minute of it, being free from my emotions and thoughts. I felt incredibly liberated.

When the song ended, I pulled away from Caden and turned to face him. I found him holding his arms open for a hug. I willingly fell into him and hugged him before feeling the stifled air hit me. I needed a break.

"I'll be back," I muttered, waving a hand at him. "Have to use the bathroom."

As I made my way through the heavy crowd, my eyes connected with Tyler's and my lips pulled into a small smile. I wanted him so bad. The tension between us was undeniable. And I hated it.

I needed the sanctuary of the bathroom. I hopped over the makeshift rope barrier that blocked people from entering the

second floor and took a deep breath as soon as I closed the bathroom door. I studied my reflection in the mirror. What the hell was happening to me? I thought I had been doing well during my unintentional celibacy period. I focused on work. On mending my broken heart. But then after having incredible sex with Tyler for a few days, I couldn't stop wanting him again. And again.

The doorknob jiggled, and I yelled, "Someone's in here!"

The door suddenly opened and closed in a matter of seconds. I whipped around to see Tyler locking the door as his eyes narrowed at me. "I don't care."

"What are you doing in here?"

With his eyes locked on mine, he slowly stepped towards me as I backed into the counter, gripping it with both hands. Why did my body react so quickly whenever he was around?

With just a sliver of a breeze between us, I could smell the scent of cologne on his skin and alcohol on his breath.

"Answer me," I demanded, refusing to cower to the darkness in his eyes.

"Were you trying to make me jealous?" he asked seriously.

What? Not really. But mission accomplished if he was. What about *him*? Did *he* bring the slutty bunny to make *me* jealous? Or was she another meaningless fling? The thought made my stomach sink.

I shook my head, not wanting the image of her touching him in my mind. "What? No. I wasn't trying to make you jealous."

"You sure about that?" His eyebrow popped as his hands gripped my waist and lifted me to sit on the counter.

What the hell was happening? My heart violently pounded against my chest as Tyler stood between my legs. His fingers lightly touched my lips before trailing down to my chest, lazily playing with the zipper of my romper.

"Positive," I whispered as I felt the zipper being tugged lower.

“I’m not sure I believe you, Elyse.”

“What are you gonna do about it?”

He smirked as his lips lightly brushed mine and one of his hands cupped my breast through my bra.

Just fucking kiss me.

My stomach caved in as his index finger caressed my inner thigh. He was fucking torturing me with his own dance.

I impatiently grabbed the hand on my thigh and guided it to my sex as I leaned against the mirror behind me. I parted my legs, giving him full access to my body. Permission to do whatever the hell he wanted with me. I couldn’t take it anymore.

I wanted it all. Now.

“Is this what you want?” Tyler asked as his fingers pushed the crotch of my romper to the side and pressed against me.

I sucked in a large breath of air and pulled the zipper of my romper down to the base by my navel. I shrugged out of the top part of the costume and pushed my bra straps down my arms.

“Does this answer your question?” I sassed back.

My body was on display for him. And I really didn’t give a damn how desperate I seemed, because I *was* fucking desperate for his touch.

Without warning, his fingers tore an opening in my fishnet stockings, pushed my black panties to the side, and shoved inside me.

“Shit,” I breathed out with relief, leaning my head back against the mirror.

“Shit,” he repeated, burying his face in my neck and pulling down a bra cup to fondle my tit. “You’re so fucking wet for me right now.”

I rocked my hips, matching his strokes, and rode his experienced hand. When his other hand began massaging my clit, I stood at the edge of my release.

“Tyler,” I moaned, not bothering to keep my voice down. The music from downstairs drowned out any sounds we made.

I squeezed my breasts, closing my eyes as his fingers sank into me. His thumb circled my core, teasing and torturing me. I closed my eyes and bit down on my lip, loving the feel of the deep strokes.

I opened my eyes when I felt him stop.

“Take this off,” Tyler ordered, sliding his fingers out of me.

I pushed the costume down my body, lifting my hips up a little to pull it off my legs. With a smirk on his face and my legs opened for him, he aggressively yanked me to the edge of the sink and lowered his body.

“Fuuuck,” I moaned, feeling his warm tongue drag everywhere except the one place my body desperately craved.

I squirmed as he threw my left leg over his shoulder and flattened his tongue against my center. His strokes were long and sloppy, devouring every inch of me. His tongue flicked, swirled, and sucked on my clit, making me fall apart in his hold.

“Holy—” I said, not able to finish my sentence as his fingers simultaneously tunneled inside me again.

My body warmed with the amount of pleasure that washed over me. When my legs started to tremble, one hand shot out and grabbed a handful of his jersey.

Sensing I was on the brink, he stopped and peeked up at me before standing up. He was teasing me, right? He had done that before. He removed his fingers and popped them in his mouth, cleaning off my taste.

I gasped with a mixture of confusion and incredible frustration.

“Enjoy the party,” he said with an evil smirk, before leaving.

Are you fucking kidding me?

What's the worst that could happen? Being sexually frustrated and wholly unsatisfied.

Fucking asshole. I stayed in the bathroom longer than I should've, trying to get my shit together. I even tried finishing the job he fucking started, but nothing worked. After wallowing in frustration, I removed the stockings he destroyed, got dressed, and fixed my hair before returning downstairs.

Thankfully, no one noticed my absence as the party petered out over the next hour. I didn't even notice Kyle and Lena were missing until Alyssa flipped on the normal lights. I sighed after closing the door when the last of the guests left.

Alyssa and Will were leaning against a wall, talking and still drinking. How much could one tiny girl drink?

Tyler held open a garbage bag, tossing in the plastic cups that were littering my house. As much as I wanted to avoid him, I really couldn't, especially because he was helping clean up.

"You don't have to stay," I said, picking up a few empty cups and throwing them in the bag. "I got this."

He shrugged. "It's okay. Besides, I know how shitty it is to clean up after a party. And I want you to think I'm a good friend."

Friend. Right.

"You're an okay friend," I said, holding my hands up in defeat. "I guess."

He stood up and gazed at me. "Why okay?"

"You know why," I said shortly, rolling my eyes.

"Maybe you should remind me," he said, laughing and continuing to pick up a group of cups. "And next time don't try to make me jealous. Then, just maybe, I'll let you come."

“You’ll *let* me come? I don’t need you to make me come. I can do it myself,” I lied, shocked by his comment.

“Oh, yeah? Is that what took you so long?”

“Where’s your date?” I asked, grabbing the bag from his hands and holding it open. “Did she run away or something?”

“I should be asking you the same question.”

“He wasn’t my date, but we are going out tomorrow night. We’re having dinner.”

I should’ve added “as friends,” but I didn’t. *Hmph.*

“Angelina left to check on her friends. They’re really not happy with Kyle and Will.”

I chuckled and shook my head.

“You know what?” Tyler asked, lighting up with a boyish grin. “We should go on a double date. Friends still do that sort of shit, right? I’ll bring Angelina.”

What? His question knocked the wind out of me as I gave him a confused look.

“What? Why?” I managed to choke out.

“So, I can make sure this guy is good enough for you,” he replied as if the answer was completely obvious. “Tomorrow night, right?”

“I guess so.”

What’s the worst that could happen? Agreeing to a double date with my hot-ass neighbor who fingered me in the bathroom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

elyse

Tyler: You know we're waiting for you? Slow ass.

Me: I'm coming!

Tyler: I've heard that before.

Me: Bye.

I RESTLESSLY GLANCED at my reflection one last time before grabbing my black clutch. Despite the butterflies in my stomach, I actually felt incredible. I wore a simple, red bodycon dress with thin, jeweled straps that created a square neckline. I'd paired the dress with matching faux diamond heels and kept my hair in bouncy curls to frame my face.

"Shit!" I exclaimed loudly as I hastily opened the door to find Caden standing on the porch and waiting for me. "You scared me. I didn't hear the doorbell."

"I didn't ring it," he said, smirking, pushing himself off the pillar and slowly scanning me from head to toe. "I don't mind waiting, especially when you look this beautiful."

He leaned in for a hug, digging his chin into my neck. "Thanks for finally going out on a date with me."

I bit my tongue to refrain from adding "as friends."

"Well, thanks for agreeing to the double date," I said lightly as he grabbed my hand and led me down the porch steps.

He muttered something under his breath as he let go of my hand and walked over to the driver's side of his car.

As I opened the passenger door, Tyler walked out of his house, smiled, and waved at me. In previous texts, he'd

mentioned his date, Angelina, would meet us at the restaurant because she had a business meeting of some sort in the area.

I waved back, admiring his outfit for the night. He was covered head to toe in black—jeans, button-up shirt, and shoes—but he offset the dark color with a tan sports jacket. He looked amazing. I was in so much trouble. Actually, the whole double date idea had sounded miserable from the beginning.

Caden stepped on the accelerator, roaring his old school car to life before peeling out of the driveway. After giving him directions to the restaurant, I peeked at my phone, noticing a message.

Tyler: Elyse, why would you come out of the house like that?

Me: What?

Tyler: You just made us all look like shit. You look good.

Me: I don't think you could ever look like shit. Lol.

Tyler: Is that a compliment?

Me: Tyler ... we're both on dates. I'm not texting you all night. I'll see you in ten minutes lol.

Tyler: I'm not on a date. I just wanted to crash yours.

I didn't reply to his message, laughing under my breath. What did he mean by "not on a date"? Was Angelina just tagging along, just because?

I laughed lightly, tucking my phone in my clutch, but frowned slightly at his last message. What did he mean he wasn't on a date? Did Angelina know that?

"Whoa," Caden breathed out, throwing his car into park as he stared at Eleven. "You work here?"

Tyler had suggested dinner at the one place where I spent most of my time, because he had never been before. Without a doubt, he'd had Alyssa's help getting our names in, because the wait-list was crazy long. Even though the place drove me crazy sometimes, I was actually excited to be a customer for once. To be waited on.

“Yes,” I answered, stepping out of the car and surveying the already busy parking lot.

“This is super fancy,” he commented, standing by my side as his eyes zeroed in on the floor-to-ceiling windows wrapped around the establishment.

“The food here is amazing,” I teased as we waited in the lobby for Tyler and Angelina.

“It’d better be, with these high-ass prices,” he muttered. “Shit.”

The date was already awkward enough without the presence of another couple as Caden mumbled about the pretentious air and the arrogance of rich people. I tried to change the subject, wanting him to feel more comfortable, but he stiffly pointed out all the differences between his job and mine. I honestly didn’t know how to reply to any of his polarizing comments.

I sighed. *This is going to be a long fucking night.*

“Omigod, this is so beautiful!” Angelina squealed with a little bounce as soon as she and Tyler walked through the door.

I tried to keep my expression neutral as my eyes skimmed over the gorgeous woman wearing the fucking hell out of a shimmery pale purple dress with rhinestone straps. Her hair was pulled back into a sleek bun, silver earrings dangled from her ears, and a thin rhinestone choker wrapped around her neck.

I wasn’t sure which outfit I hated more. The slutty bunny. Or the model party girl.

As soon as I approached the host exchange, one of the hostesses, Kimberly, almost screamed at the sight of me.

“Elyse?” she whisper-yelled with wide eyes. “Wow! Never thought I’d see you on the opposite end.”

“Alyssa reserved a table for four for me,” I said nervously, nodding to the other staff members that glanced in my direction.

I smiled widely as I followed Kimberly to a booth by a window, knowing Alyssa had waved her magical hand around for my reservation.

I slid into one side of the booth as Caden sat beside me.

“I’m impressed,” Tyler said, leaning back in his seat, after Angelina delicately glided on the other side. “I wonder if the food is any good.”

I rolled my eyes as my fingers trailed over the heavy menu.

“Elyse!” Alyssa squealed, waving at me because Caden didn’t appear to move from his seat to allow me to hug her. “Hey, Caden, Tyler, and the slutty bunny from the party.”

Angelina glared at her from her corner.

“Nice penguin costume, Alyssa,” Tyler teased, pointing to her faux tux with a black bow tie.

My sister discreetly stuck out her tongue and flipped him the bird.

“You should know I’m dealing with your food,” she snapped back.

“I think I’d like to see your manager,” he said, rolling his head around in search of an authority figure.

Alyssa rolled her eyes and then faced Caden. “Hey, why is your brother ignoring my texts? What did he say to you?”

“Lyss, you know I don’t know what you and my brother do, and I really don’t care,” he answered, stretching out an arm and laying it on the backrest.

She rolled her eyes and whipped out her black padded notepad to take drink orders.

“So, you work here?” Angelina asked after Alyssa left. “As a chef, right? What’s it like?”

I nodded. “It’s stressful, but I love it. What do you do?”

“I’m in between jobs right now, but I’ve been interviewing with different modeling agencies. I actually just came from an

interview, and it went really well.”

She spent the next five minutes raving how the creative directors loved her portfolios and told her she had “something special.”

“Excuse me,” Tyler mumbled, standing up. “I gotta use the restroom.”

“We should order appetizers,” Angelina gushed, clapping her hands and not even acknowledging Tyler’s absence. “But I shouldn’t go over my calorie count.”

“I think appetizers are made to milk more money from consumers,” Caden spouted with a light shrug.

He wasn’t wrong. *But appetizers are still yummy*, I thought.

“Oooh, how about the chilled gulf shrimp?” she cooed. “I think Tyler and I will order those. You’re more than welcome to share with us.”

“Tyler’s allergic to shrimp.”

Angelina’s eyes went wide for a moment and her lips formed a small O. “Oh. I knew that. Is scallops a fancy word for shrimp?”

As Tyler approached the table, our eyes locked for a moment and I wished this was a real date with him. I couldn’t deny my attraction, and I knew I shouldn’t want more. Or something different.

“What did I miss?” he asked, sliding back into the booth and rubbing his hands together.

“I want to order an appetizer,” Angelina said, scooting closer to him. “I mentioned shrimp—”

“I’m allergic,” he interrupted.

“Yeah, *she* told me.” She jerked her head in my direction and pointed across the table.

What the hell? How did pointing out someone’s allergies make me a bad guy?

“Her name is Elyse,” Tyler said sharply.

“I think this might be the best pasta I have ever had,” Tyler praised, digging his fork into his dish of pappardelle steak pasta. “You can make this at home, right, Elle?”

I smirked and nodded before shoving a delicious bite of my pan-roasted salmon into my mouth.

“I don’t know how anyone can eat fish,” Caden said, roughly cutting into his perfectly cooked filet mignon. “That honestly looks like cat food. Gross.”

This guy was honestly not my soulmate. Why did Alyssa think we’d be good together?

“Caden,” Tyler said. “What do you do?”

“I’m a bouncer right now, but I’ve been thinking about enlisting. Not sure though. Kind of a distant thought.”

“Really?” I asked, excited to finally have a somewhat decent conversation. “Tyler was in the service. I’m sure you could talk to him about your concerns.”

“I didn’t know you were a military man,” Angelina cooed, pinching his cheek like a little toddler. “That’s so sexy. I guess there’s a lot I don’t know about you.”

Tyler shifted his face away from her manicured hand and shrugged. “We met three days ago. I don’t expect you to know everything.”

“So, is the military stereotype true?” Caden asked, shoving a huge bite into his mouth and chomping on it.

Seriously, Lyss?

I sighed as I took a long sip of my second glass of wine to settle the sinking feeling in my stomach.

“What stereotype?” Tyler asked curiously.

Caden shrugged. “You know, becoming an alcoholic, hooking up, getting married for money, and a lot of gay shit. Overall, not being shit and being fucked up in the head when their tour is over. But I wouldn’t mind a Charger.”

He was the only one at the table to laugh at his comment as Tyler pursed his lips together and I fought with myself not to yell at Angelina for picking through her eggplant ravioli dish as if it might have bugs in it.

“But my main concern is my girl cheating on me while I’m deployed or something. That happened to my uncle when my aunt cheated on him while he was in Iraq. She slept with one of his friends and got pregnant by him. It nearly killed him,” Caden continued his rant.

“I’m going to act like you didn’t just say that,” Tyler said, narrowing his eyes. “Why is that even a concern when you’re not dating anyone right now?”

“Anything could happen,” he answered, sending me a smile. “And women can’t do long distance. Everyone thinks guys cheat more, but women are worse.”

“So, you think women will cheat while their boyfriends or husbands are away? What about the guy, especially when there are so many temptations?” I asked pointedly, frowning my eyebrows. “Why is it all about the woman cheating, Caden? That’s misogynistic.”

And why was that his concern with joining the military? He was single.

“Call it what you want,” he said, annoyingly tapping his fingers on the table. “But I’ve seen it happen and heard about it. No man will cheat on deployment when he knows he has something to come back home to.”

“False,” Tyler answered, leaning back in the booth. “It’s not only women. Trust me.”

Caden laughed. “Oh, shit. You probably cheated too. All that ass in other countries and shit.”

What. The. Fuck? I was seriously contemplating wringing Alyssa’s neck the next time I saw her. Did he even realize he

was fucking up his one chance for me to see him as more than a friend?

“Do you realize how fucking stupid you sound?” Tyler said in a tone I had never heard from him before.

“Oh, did I offend you?” Caden asked in a sing-song tone.

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Well, I mean, stereotypes can offend anyone,” I said carefully, hoping to diffuse the tension. “Not all stereotypes are true or even remotely accurate. And women aren’t the only ones to cheat.”

“What does it even matter?” Angelina asked, shrugging her shoulder as she pushed a sun-dried tomato to the side. “If you want to join the military, then join the military. Why are you worried about a girlfriend you don’t even have yet?”

Tyler and I remained silent.

“I mean, people think models do coke to stay thin, but that’s not stopping me from becoming a model,” she continued absentmindedly as she nibbled on a piece of zucchini drenched in gorgonzola cream sauce. Did she know many calories were in that cream sauce?

“So, if Elyse and I were married, you mean to tell me that she wouldn’t fuck Tyler if I was on deployment for a year?” Caden asked, making me nearly choke on the lump in my throat. “Women are fucking cheaters.”

Could this night get any worse? This had to be a joke.

“No, I wouldn’t,” I raised my voice, tired of his shit. “I wouldn’t have exchanged vows to cheat on my husband.”

“I never cheated on my wife, and she never cheated on me,” Tyler blurted out, shutting down all the other conversations at the table. “I was gone for almost a year. And I don’t see how wanting to enlist and a cheating girlfriend has anything to do with your career.”

“Your wife?” I exclaimed in complete surprise.

He hadn't said ex-wife. Was he still married? What the fuck?

"Come again?" Angelina asked, peering at his hands. "You're married? Where's your ring? I'm on a date with a fucking married guy. Am I at least better-looking than your wife?"

I cleared my throat, awkwardly blinking my eyes.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Tyler asked her. "I'm not a cheater, and no."

What the hell was going on right now?

Tyler stood up, throwing his napkin on his seat and a few bills onto the table before storming out of the restaurant.

Tyler was married? I knew he'd kept some details close to his heart, and I'd hoped, in time, he would trust me enough to share those memories.

"I should probably go after him, even though he insulted me," Angelina whined, rolling her eyes.

I held out my hand to stop her and shook my head.

"I'll check on him," I said, glaring at Caden to move his dumb ass out of the booth.

"Really?" he sneered. "You're going to go after him?"

"He's my friend," I snapped, feeling my patience with him quickly fade. "Now move."

He sighed heavily, as if standing up was the hardest thing to do, and I shot out of the booth and ran out of the restaurant.

Fuck you, Caden, I thought angrily.

Tyler and I were friends. Good friends. I owed him more than he would ever realize. And for that, I would always choose Tyler over anyone at the table.

"Tyler!" I yelled after pushing my way through the heavy front door. "Wait!"

I found him leaning against the back of his jeep, cupping his jaw and keeping his eyes on the ground.

“Go back inside, Elyse,” he ordered as my heels clicked slowly toward him. “Go finish your date.”

“I don’t care about the date,” I snapped, resting my hand on his arm, but he jerked it away. “I came out here to check on you.”

“I’m fine. There’s nothing to check on. I’m not in the mood. I shouldn’t have come.”

“Well, come back,” I said, rubbing my hands up and down my arms to ward off the night chill in the air.

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t even have said anything, okay? So, let’s just drop it.”

“Tyler, you did say something and then you walked out. You know you can talk to me, and I will never judge you.”

“You just want to know more about I said in there, and it’s not your place.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Well, I do, but only if you want to talk about it.”

“There’s honestly nothing to talk about, Elyse,” he shouted, pushing himself away from the jeep and walking toward the driver’s door. “Go back to your date, and stop pushing me to tell you shit that I don’t want to talk about. It slipped. I shouldn’t have said it, so let it the fuck go.”

“I don’t care about the stupid date! I understand you don’t want to talk to me right now, but you know I’m here for you. Anytime. I trusted you when I needed you, and I really hope you feel the same way.”

“I don’t.”

I took a step back and blinked at him. He didn’t trust me? How could he not trust me after everything we’d been through? Those two words hurt me to the core.

“I can’t believe you’re yelling at me for being your friend,” I said ruefully, shaking my head. “Fine, don’t trust me. But just know that I trusted you the day I met you—even if you were a serial killer—and, yeah, that sounds stupid crazy. But it’s the fucking truth.”

He remained quiet, giving me an impatient look. What the fuck had crawled up his ass?

“How can you tell me not to shut people out, but you’re doing the same thing? You’re a hypocrite. Why won’t you open up to me? I fucking told you everything,” I shouted, losing control of my voice.

“That was your decision. Not mine,” he replied, anger flushing his face.

“Seriously?”

“Are you done?” he asked coolly, opening the door.

“You don’t have to be an asshole.”

I stormed away without giving him a chance to respond. I didn’t want to hear anything else he had to say. But at the same time, I understood Tyler dealt with pain differently. Whether I liked it or not, I needed to give him space.

When I returned to the table, I found Angelina feeding Caden bites of her eggplant ravioli and cooing over him like he was a toddler. With my appetite gone, I just wanted to go home and open a bottle of wine.

Alyssa dropped by and boxed up the remaining food, which Caden eagerly volunteered to take home—except for my fish because he didn’t want to “eat cat food.” The cash Tyler threw on the table covered more than half the bill and I slipped Alyssa my credit card as Caden complained about how the restaurant was overcharging everyone for a simple meal.

I would pay a thousand dollars to watch him perfectly create any of the dishes we ordered tonight.

I was ready for the night to end. I didn’t even care when Angelina and Caden exchanged phone numbers before we said goodbyes in the parking lot.

“I had such a good time,” Caden said enthusiastically, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and seemingly ignoring my despondent mood. “Did you have a good time?”

“Uh, sure,” I fibbed, leaning my head against the window.

“What’s going on between you and Tyler? Is the guy okay? Look, I’m sorry I offended him, but the subject itself wasn’t all that deep. Why was he so sensitive?”

I sighed and remained silent, not having the mental capacity to answer any of his idiotic questions.

“Are you into him or something?”

“No,” I said, scowling at him. “We’re friends.”

“But you were on a date with me, and you ran after him, leaving me with his date.”

“We were having dinner as friends. And it seemed like you got along with Angelina just fine.”

“Well, you were a shit friend to me,” he snapped. “I did everything right tonight.”

I stifled a snort. He did everything right? Was he serious?

He called my delicious salmon entree cat food. He bitched about the jacked up menu prices. He basically thought Tyler was a pussy. He accused me of playing hard to get several times. And he didn’t even say thank you to me for covering the bill.

When Caden parked outside my house, he pushed himself out of the car and followed me to the porch. As I dug for my keys in my clutch, Caden pulled me close and kissed me.

I placed my hands on his chest and pulled away. “I’m sorry, Caden,” I said. “I can’t.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we’re just friends. Nothing more.”

He laughed shortly. “I knew this was about Tyler. He obviously doesn’t care about you.”

I bit my tongue, knowing that wasn’t the truth.

“This isn’t about Tyler,” I said, completely annoyed with his self-absorbed attitude. “This is about me, and what I want. I told you from the start that I wasn’t ready to date.”

“Fuck it,” Caden muttered, stalking off the porch.

Tears slid down my face the moment I stepped in the house and closed the door. Even when I held my temper and my tongue, I still felt like the bad guy. Why? I'd never wanted to hurt Caden, despite his egotistical attitude. Why did I feel like complete shit?

The one person I wanted to talk to more than anyone else was the one person who had shut me out. My life really sucked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

elyse

THREE DAYS after the disastrous double date, Tyler and I still hadn't spoken to each other. When I was at work, he was at my house working on the basement. When he was at his job, I left containers of food on his porch. He was avoiding me, and I didn't know why.

Thanks to Dave managing to screw up the schedule and overstaff the kitchen, I went home after the lunch rush, ready to plop my butt on the couch to drink wine and watch a movie.

As I picked up the remote, the doorbell rang and my heart jumped a little, hoping Tyler would be on the other side.

"Lyss?" I asked with concern, noting her puffy eyes and nose as I opened the door. "What's wrong?"

I pulled her inside and wrapped my arms around her as she rested her head in the crook of my neck and sobbed quietly for the next few minutes. We simply stood there as I gently ran my hand up and down her back to soothe her.

"I made a mistake," she cried, pulling away from the hug and throwing herself on the couch.

"What kind of mistake?" I asked, sitting beside her and pushing her messy blonde hair out of her face.

"I broke up with Cory."

"Why?"

"I thought he was cheating on me," she sobbed, reaching for my wine glass on the end table and gulping it down in one swallow. "But he wasn't."

"Why did you suspect him in the first place?"

"Because he was sending flirty texts to other girls."

“Oh.” I was ready to grab my car keys, head over to his place, and break his stupid phone and his hands.

“Except he only did it to make me jealous,” Alyssa explained, taking a deep breath and wiping her tears from her eyes. “He doesn’t like that I have a ton of guy friends, and he thought I was cheating on him.”

Even though Alyssa and Cory had been together for a few years, he and I weren’t close, despite my few attempts. Anytime I’d asked him a question, he’d either given me a one-word answer—usually “yeah” or “nah”—or the shortest reply possible.

As long as he made my sister happy, I didn’t have a real problem with him, even if he didn’t seem to like me very much.

“I know you guys were having some problems, but I thought you were happy,” I said, rubbing her arm.

“I thought I was happy too,” she admitted with a casual shrug. “But when I ended it, I kind of felt relieved. I mean, I’m sad I hurt him and everything.”

“Did he make you happy?”

“At first, but over time, no. We just fought so much. I couldn’t do anything right. I had too many friends. I had too many guy friends. I worked too much. I didn’t spend enough time with him. I was smothering him. Nothing I did made him happy.”

“I’m so sorry, Lyss.”

“I think I settled,” she said, looking down at her hands. “We had been together for so long that I thought this was how relationships worked. But I don’t think I’m in love with him anymore.”

“You should never have to settle either,” I said determinedly, reaching for her hand and squeezing it. “You’re an amazing person. If he can’t trust you, then that’s on him.”

“Yeah, I know. But do you think I’m expecting too much from a relationship? Is it too much to want a little bit of

excitement and adventure every now and then?”

I shook my head.

“Then why do I feel so bad? Why am I crying?”

“Because you’re human, sweetie. And you have a heart. You didn’t set out to intentionally hurt him.”

“But I did, and now he hates me. He’s been blowing up my phone all day,” she said, opening her arms wide and sticking out her lower lip. “Hug me.”

I laughed faintly and pulled her into my arms. “He doesn’t hate you. He’s just hurt. Besides, you’re young and beautiful and have time for everything in between.”

“You’re right,” she said, pulling away from the hug and standing up. “I am young and beautiful.”

I playfully rolled my eyes. “And don’t ever settle. You’re too good for any man anyway.”

“I love you. Can I stay with you today? My roommate, Natalie, has been up my ass lately, and I just can’t deal.”

I nodded, following her into the kitchen.

“Let’s drink wine and complain about men,” she said, setting my empty wine glass on the counter and finding a new one in the cabinet.

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” I said, with a laugh, grabbing the opened bottle of wine and filling both our glasses. “Which by the way, why the hell did you think Caden and I would be good together?”

“I don’t think I ever said that,” Alyssa said, making a face at the idea. “I just thought you needed a distraction. He’s cute and liked you. You could’ve had some fun with him at least.”

I shook my head. “The dinner was hell.”

Even though she had served our table, Alyssa had immediately called me once her shift ended for all the details. She knew everything from Angelina believing scallops was a fancy word for shrimp to Tyler being married once to Caden never even thanking me for paying the bill.

“I never said he was your soulmate or that you should marry him. I just pushed you to have some fun. You really need to get out more. You’re young ... ish.”

I patiently waited for her to add “beautiful,” but she just smirked at me.

“You know when I said, ‘Let’s complain about men,’ I didn’t mean you should complain about Caden.”

“Who else would I complain about?” I shot her a confusing look.

“Tyler.”

“What?” I choked on my sip of wine.

Alyssa rolled her eyes and grabbed the bottle of wine before heading toward the living room. “I wasn’t born yesterday, Elyse. I saw you guys staring at each other at the party.”

“Well, did you see what his date was wearing?” I deflected, following her and sitting back down on the couch.

“Oh please,” she said exasperatedly, waving a finger in my face. “I saw him follow you upstairs after that sexy little dance. And I noticed his gigantic shit-eating grin when he came down. And *you* weren’t wearing your fishnets stockings when you came back down.”

Shit.

“It was a one-time thing,” I mumbled into my glass, averting my gaze.

“And why is it a one-time thing?”

“Because we’re friends, and neither of us wants a relationship.”

“Again, why is it a one-time thing?” she asked impatiently. “Friends can have sex more than once, you know.”

“You know, this isn’t about me right now,” I said, sighing. “You should be complaining about Cory and his trust issues. I mean, what’s that about?”

“Why are you avoiding my question? Why are you being so evasive? Talk to me.”

“You have a big mouth, Lyss,” I admitted, settling back into the couch.

“So?”

Even though she couldn't keep a secret to save her life, I also didn't want to bother her with my problems. Apparently, she had her own issues that she needed to deal with. Weren't younger sisters supposed to look up to their older sisters? I desperately wanted to be the strong, older sister for her.

“So? So, my business becomes everyone else's business. You seriously cannot keep secrets.”

“I can keep secrets,” she protested. “I just don't believe your secrets are really secrets.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Alyssa shrugged and sipped her wine. “It means anyone with two eyes could see that you two like each other. Neither of you—especially you—are good at hiding your emotions.”

My sister had a point. I might talk a big game, but I tended to wear my heart on my sleeve sometimes.

“So?” she asked, arching an eyebrow. “What's going on between you and Tyler?”

I sighed, knowing she wasn't going to give up.

“We had sex in Vegas,” I admitted.

“I fucking knew it!” she yelled, jumping up and almost spilling her wine. “I totally knew you guys banged in Vegas. Barry. Pssh.”

I grinned at my brilliant lie.

“I mean, no parent should ever name their child Barry,” Alyssa ranted, shaking her blonde locks. “That's just so mean and cruel. Okay, so, you know I have to ask—is he as good as he looks?”

“The sex was amazing.”

“So, why aren’t you over at his place boning him right now?”

“Because he doesn’t want a relationship.”

“And you do?”

“What? No?” I stammered, taking a long swallow of my wine. “We agreed it was a one-time thing because we don’t want this to affect our friendship. We have a really good friendship, Lyss.”

“And it could be better when you add sex.”

“Besides, we’re kinda mad at each other right now. I’m giving him his space.”

My sister rolled her eyes and drained the rest of her glass. “It’s been three fucking days, Elyse. Get your ass over there, naked, and get him.”

I puffed my cheeks, blew out a breath, and thought about the agreement we’d made in Vegas. Aside from the obvious bathroom incident at the party, he did send me very explicit texts just a day after the trip. And he had been overly flirty with me. Was it possible to still be friends with him and have sex?

“I don’t know,” I said slowly, wondering if I should open the metaphoric door.

“You won’t know until you try,” she said, patting my shoulder before grabbing the wine bottle behind me. “And we really need to work on your confidence, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Tyler

NOVEMBER 10. The day I could never forget even if I tried. The day that changed my life forever.

For the past two years when this day had rolled around, nothing but emptiness consumed me.

My dad said I should stop beating myself up and learn to move forward. Not move on from Jordyn but just move forward. The old man wasn't wrong.

I'd never expected to fall in love and get married so young, but then I'd realized it just meant we would have that much more time to be together. I'd given myself wholly to another person, and now, I was just a broken man after losing her and our son.

I still felt broken, but the shards didn't hurt as much when I was with Elyse.

I hadn't planned to share that part of my life with her, and I sure as hell didn't want to relive the pain by explaining it. But I shouldn't have taken my anger out on Elyse. She'd been trying to be a friend. A good one. And I'd pushed her away because I was the asshole and was having a bad day.

And, honestly, I didn't even know why I'd pushed her away when she was seriously the only woman I would listen to. As much as I wanted to apologize to her—and maybe annoy her because it's my favorite pastime—I knew she was still pissed, not having texted me since the fight. So I gave her space to cool off.

She had been hurt way too many times, and I didn't want to be added to that list. She was genuinely the best person I had ever met. She didn't even know how beautiful she was.

Ever since being with her in Vegas, all I wanted to do was touch and tease her. I was driving myself crazy holding myself back whenever I was around her.

But today was not the day to apologize. Today was the day where I didn't do a damn thing but drink. Drink to numb the pain.

Today was the day I kept my phone off and ignored the world, including my dad and the guys. And now Elyse.

I sat back on the couch with a bottle Jack Daniels in hand in the soft glow of the living room light. The house was silent and dark—just like me.

After polishing off the rest of the bottle, drinking it like it was water; I pushed myself off the couch with a painful groan and dragged myself to the kitchen to grab another bottle. The thoughts in my head and the pain in my soul needed to be hushed.

Or numbed. Whatever came first. I didn't fucking care.

After a loud belch, my fingers wrapped around another bottle of Jack Daniels, and my feet drunkenly stumbled back into the living room, where I crashed on the couch with a loud thump.

When would the pain end? The heartache? The guilt? The anger? All the emotions that had wrecked me when I'd lost my mom. Sometimes I couldn't remember her, which pissed me off to no end because I'd loved her so much. And she was gone too. She wasn't here. With me.

I was just fucking lonely. Was I trying to find love with random strangers? Even though I'd stated repeatedly that I wasn't ready for a relationship, I'd often wondered if that was really true. I'd loved my relationship with Jordyn. Loved our marriage. A part of me wanted to feel that way again. Could I find that with someone else? Like Elyse?

I loved watching her smile. And laugh. I just loved it when she was happy.

I twisted the cap off the bottle and took a long swig, washing away the pain.

My life was complete shit.

Suddenly, I heard what I thought might be a faint knocking. *Fuck, unless it's just my head already pounding.* I groaned.

Did someone just knock on my door? Did someone just call my name? I shook my head, figuring I was hearing stuff. *Thank you, alcohol, for impairing my hearing.*

But then the doorbell rang. Loudly. And again.

“I’m not fucking buying anything,” I yelled, setting the bottle on the floor.

“Tyler?” Elyse’s concerned voice drifted through the front door.

Am I dreaming? I closed my eyes for a minute, listening for the doorbell and her voice again.

When I opened my eyes again, I found myself sprawled across the couch and Elyse sitting on the edge with a worried look. I blinked a few times to make sure my head wasn’t messing with me.

“Elyse?” I asked, furrowing my brows.

“Yeah,” she said softly, gently laying a blanket across me.

“What’s wrong with me?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”

I wasn’t dreaming. She was really here. With me.

“You don’t know that,” I said with a hollow laugh, as I reached for the bottle on the floor.

But her small hands quickly wrapped around my wrist and pushed my hand into my lap.

“Don’t do that,” I slurred.

“It’s for your own good,” she barked seriously.

“Look. I get you’re trying to be a good friend and all, but right now, I just need you to give me the damn bottle and leave. Please.”

She shook her head as her eyes quietly studied me.

“Don’t be an asshole again, Tyler,” she said with a sigh, as she noticed the mess I had made during the day. Empty beer bottles littered the floor and anywhere else I’d tossed them. A pizza box with a few slices remaining was laying around somewhere.

“I’m not doing anything but drinking,” I pointed out before coughing for a few seconds.

Damn. I was seriously starting to feel like shit.

“But then you stopped me,” I said accusingly.

Elyse pushed part of her hair away from her face, and I couldn’t help but stare at her beauty. She was seriously drop-dead gorgeous. All her ex-boyfriends were the dumbest fuckers on the face of the planet. And I was equally as dumb.

“You’re wasted, Ty,” she said, leaning forward and planting her hand on my lap.

“And horny,” I added, with a wicked laugh.

She ignored my comment, pulling her hand away from my head. “What’s going on? Please just talk to me.”

“Why are you here?”

“Because I care about you more than you think.”

“Why?” I asked stubbornly, wondering why someone as sweet as her would care about an asshole like me.

“Because you would do the same for me. Actually, you have been there for me—multiple times.”

I breathed out a frustrated sigh and roughed up my hair. “I’m so fucked up, Elyse. That’s never going to change.”

“No one is asking you to change,” she said gently. “We’re all fucked up in some way or another. But you don’t have to deal with this alone. I’m not walking away from you again.”

“Even if I forced you?”

“Even if you forced me.” I loved watching her smile.

“I don’t think I even know how,” I confessed. “I don’t like talking about my life much less my feelings. I’ve never been the type to share.”

“We can try together,” she offered. “I didn’t like talking about my life either, but then you came along and badgered everything right out of me. But it was also easy with you, Tyler, and I don’t regret opening up to you. You told me to stop beating myself up over things I couldn’t control. Maybe you should follow your own advice.”

The alcohol viciously attacked the moment I stopped drinking and moving. My head spun rapidly, despite my best efforts to shake it off.

I sighed loudly, staring at the beautiful woman sitting by my side on the couch.

“I wasn’t lying,” I rambled. “I was married. I never saw that being my life. Just figured I’d be single forever. I remembered my dad going the fuck off when I told him I proposed. But I knew what I wanted. I wanted to build a life with her.”

I lifted my body and pulled out the picture I had underneath my leg. It was of Jordyn the day she had found out she was pregnant. I’d taken the photo before she’d even told me the news, because for some reason, she’d looked especially beautiful that day. Something about her had been different. After I’d snapped the shot, Jordyn told me she was carrying our baby.

I handed the picture to Elyse and looked away, not wanting to watch her reaction. She stayed quiet for several minutes as she stared at the picture.

“She’s gorgeous.”

I wanted to move. I wanted to pace angrily around the living room. I wanted to throw something against the wall. But my body refused to move.

“Her name was Jordyn,” I continued, staring at the ceiling. “She was always there for everything—the good and the bad. I

mean there's a fuck ton of shit that goes on in your head when you're in the military. But she never left me."

"I was young and in love, but I freaked the fuck out when she found out she was pregnant. Every guy panics, right? But after the initial fears passed, we were excited and couldn't wait to be a family. Then I lost them. In childbirth. She lost too much blood, and my son stopped breathing."

I closed my eyes as I choked out the last words, feeling hot tears slide down my cheeks.

"Something that should've been the happiest moment of my life turned into the worst day of my life. Really, my life became a living hell since that day."

"I'm just so fucked up," I slurred, opening my eyes to see tears falling down her gorgeous face. "It's been three years now. Three years without them. And I have no fucking idea what I'm doing."

I desperately wanted to wipe her tears away with my thumb, then maybe kiss her tenderly and tell her everything would be okay. But my vision had started to blur, and all my body parts refused to move.

"I don't even know what to say," she said, wiping away the tears with the back of her hand. "I'm so sorry, Tyler. I am so sorry that I whined about everything that happened to me, and you were dealing with this all along. It breaks my heart that you went through something so horrible."

I closed my eyes for a moment, feeling the darkness quietly creeping in.

"You shouldn't hold something like this in. Please let me be here for you." She grabbed my hand and squeezed it before leaning over to wipe under my eyes. "The worst of things always happens to such good people."

I felt weak and pathetic. Life was slipping through my fingers, and I wasn't entirely sure if I wanted to stop it.

"No. I don't need someone being there for me," I mumbled, feeling the warmth of her hand in mine. "I should be used to this feeling. Death has a way of surrounding me."

“Well, you signed up for it when you offered to be my friend,” she whispered, tears still falling down her cheeks. “The pain will never go away, but neither will they. I can see how much you loved them, Tyler. And just because they’re not here doesn’t mean they’re not with you. And trust me, it will never get easier, but the people around you can help ease the pain. Even if it’s just for a few minutes. But please don’t drink yourself numb. That will only make it worse.”

I stayed quiet for a few seconds and pulled my hand away.

“I can’t get through the rest of this day sober,” I slurred. “And I’m going to finish it all and go get more.”

“You’re not driving.”

Before I could reply, everything went black.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

elyse

WHEN I WOKE UP, Tyler was still sound asleep on the couch. I stifled a groan as I stood up and stretched out my body quietly. I needed to harp on him about buying a matching recliner, because sleeping on his floor wasn't fun.

Even though he appeared peaceful, I knew he was in bad shape, hurting and grieving the loss of his wife and son. His tremendous loss explained why he'd avoided relationships. He either didn't want to relive the pain of losing another loved one or he wasn't ready to move forward.

I felt so fucking bad for him. Hearing the pain in his voice and watching him cry had shattered me. I'd barely slept, thinking of what he had gone through and how it made much more sense now why he hadn't opened up before. Tyler was so used to being alone that he probably didn't know how to accept my offer to be there for him. I desperately wanted to take away the hurt because he was such a good guy. I didn't like seeing him in that shape, drunk out of his mind.

I quietly cleaned his house, recycling all the beers cans and bottles of whiskey and tossing pizza boxes and other takeout items into the trash. As soon as I found a bottle of pain reliever, I set it on the kitchen counter and opened the refrigerator to figure out what to make.

I sighed at his limited selection: more beer, eggs, butter, milk, bacon, strawberries, and bottles of various condiments. *Men*. After spotting a loaf of bread on the counter and finding vanilla extract and cinnamon in one cabinet, I started whipping up the ingredients to make French toast, one of the best breakfast meals for a hangover.

Once I plated four generous slices, I added a bit of powdered sugar and strawberry slices on top. I grabbed the plate, silverware, a bottle of water, and the bottle of pain reliever and headed toward the living room.

Tyler groaned and sat up on the couch as soon as I entered.

“Elyse?” he asked drowsily, rubbing his eyes with his fists before running his fingers through his messy hair.

“Hey,” I replied simply and softly, setting the plate of food on the coffee table and shaking out two pills into my hand. “Here. You should take these.” I held out the pain reliever tablets and the water bottle for him.

He silently accepted both and then grabbed the plate of food after knocking the pills back.

“Did we fuck or something?” he asked with a confused expression as he cut into the French toast.

“No.” I shook my head. “I didn’t want you to be alone.”

“You stayed here all night?” He moaned loudly, chewing on the bite of food. “Did you sleep in my bed again?”

I smiled gently, watching him devour his breakfast. It seemed like he had no fucking clue what had happened last night.

“I alternated between the couch and the floor,” I admitted with a small laugh. “You tossed and turned a lot. Which reminds me, you should buy a recliner.”

“You could’ve slept in my bed, you know.”

I shrugged. “I know.”

“But good. I would’ve liked to remember if we fucked again.”

I picked a strawberry slice off his plate and popped it into my mouth, wondering when I should bring up what we talked about last night. Did he remember anything? Should I remind him? Or should I pretend nothing happened?

“I told you everything, didn’t I?” he asked quietly, looking at his almost empty plate.

“Yeah,” I replied. “We don’t have to talk about it again, but just know I’m here for you. We’re friends. Drunk or sober, you can tell me anything. Just don’t go off on me again.”

“What else did I tell you? My social? Debit card number? My PIN?”

I laughed. “Yeah, I wouldn’t mind having your PIN for your debit card.”

“Thank you,” he said, finishing off the rest of the toast. “This really meant a lot to me. I do this shit every year, and I’m kind of surprised my liver hasn’t failed me yet.”

“Hey,” I protested, giving his shoulder a small shove. “Don’t say that.”

“Why? Will you miss me?”

Of course I will, I thought immediately.

My heart twinged at the thought of Tyler not being in my life. In such a short amount of time, he had become a huge part of it, and now, I couldn’t imagine life without him.

“You know I will,” I muttered. “And I want you to talk about them, Tyler.”

“I’ll get there.”

“You would’ve been a great father,” I whispered hesitantly.

He stopped chewing and froze for a second.

“You think so?”

I nodded. “I don’t have to think. I know so, and I think you do too.”

“His name was Charlie,” he admitted, saying more than I thought he would. “After my dad. If he’d been a girl, then I would’ve named her after my mom.”

“I love that,” I said, giving him my full attention. “You can still do that. You know, when you decide to have kids again.”

“Doubt it. I can’t come close to reliving this nightmare again.”

I wanted to keep him talking and find out more about his family, but it wasn't the right time. I didn't want to upset him.

“So, what are you doing for the rest of the day?” he asked, setting the empty plate on the coffee table. “Do you have to work?”

I shook my head. “I've got nothing planned.”

“Movie marathon?”

After agreeing to spend the day on his couch watching movies and snacking, I returned home to shower and grab some snacks. With my hair still damp, I threw on a cute, white two-piece pajama set that consisted of comfy lounge pants and a matching top.

I let myself in his house, my arms full of bags of chips and a large jar of salsa. I almost dropped everything when Tyler walked into the living room wearing only a towel around his waist. He'd used a second towel to dry his hair.

Tyler, not helping.

Instinctively, I turned my back on him and closed my eyes, feeling heat sweep through my body. Images of Vegas invaded my mind. His perfect naked body. Drips of sweat trailing down his chest. The chiseled torso. His v-line that directed my line of vision south.

“Turn around, Elle,” Tyler said, chuckling. “It's nothing you haven't seen before.”

I sighed softly and turned to face him. “Yeah, but not helping,” I said, trying to play cool and casual, but knew I was failing miserably.

“Am I making you nervous?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“So, I should just completely remove the towel?”

“Tyler,” I shouted.

“Well, then I'll go get dressed,” he said, with a small laugh.

“Uh, yeah, that would be great. Why are you down here in the first place when your shower is upstairs?”

“I was looking for my phone. Wanted to check my messages before we started a movie.”

Yeah, that’s a really good reason.

“Oh.”

As Tyler returned upstairs, I felt my chest deflate. What the hell was wrong with me? The guy was obviously dealing with some personal issues, and my mind was completely in the gutter. *I am the worst.*

“My head is killing me,” he whined, stepping into the kitchen and watching me dump a bag of chips into a bowl.

A quick peek over my shoulder helped me verify that he was completely clothed in a gray t-shirt, dark blue joggers, and white socks.

He rested his chin on my shoulder as I poured the jar of salsa into a smaller bowl. The fragrance of his body wash wafted up my nose, and my body warmed again at his scent.

“I’m happy you’re here,” he said softly, resting his hands on the sides of my waist.

I flinched for a moment before I turned around and gazed at him. *What was this man doing to me?*

“Yeah, it only took what? Four days?” I asked with a little bit of sass.

He shrugged and arched an eyebrow. “I’m a little stubborn.”

I scoffed and tossed my hair over my shoulders. “A little?”

I shoved the salsa bowl in his hands and grabbed the chip bowl as I headed toward the living room.

“Yeah,” he said with a small laugh.

“I really love your dining room now,” I said as I passed through it. “It looks great. You’re welcome.”

He laughed again as he plopped down on the couch. “Thank you, Elle. You know I seriously wouldn’t have done it by myself.”

“Yeah, I know.”

We ended up watching three movies, but watching really meant taking mini naps, joking around, and catching up with each other from the days we hadn’t been talking. We both admitted the double date had been a complete disaster from the start.

Tyler informed me Angelina “dumped” him because he wasn’t invested in their three-day relationship and because he’d told her she didn’t look better than his wife. He inadvertently mumbled something about how sleeping with her would’ve been a “huge mistake.” I was secretly happy with his decision too.

I whined to him about Caden complaining about the rest of the bill and thinking the date had been a huge success. Feeling a bit guilty, he offered to repay me, but I declined his offer. I felt better when Tyler called Caden a “selfish, immature, and idiotic douchebag.”

At one point during our movie marathon, I fell asleep with my head in his lap and his hands tangled in my hair. I loved the small gestures and moments of just hanging out with him, talking and joking. As the day progressed, he appeared more relaxed and somewhat refreshed, and I was just thrilled to keep him company.

For dinner, he begged me to make eggs benedict with bacon for him, and I relented when I sent him to my kitchen with a list of ingredients he didn’t have in his. My laziness caught up with me, and I didn’t feel like making another trip home.

“I should be taking care of you or something,” Tyler said, patting his stomach after finishing the meal. “That was so good.”

“You did take care of me when I was drunk,” I pointed out, wiping my mouth with a paper napkin. “You let me sleep in your bed all day.”

“Oh yeah,” he said with a small laugh. “You know could’ve slept in my room last night. My sheets are clean and everything.”

“I wanted to stay with you,” I replied softly.

My phone chimed with a quick hello message from Alyssa. I smiled at the amount of different emojis in the text.

“Shit!” I exclaimed, my eyes widening after glancing at the date on my phone. “Thanksgiving is a few weeks away. Wow. Time really does fly.”

“Thanks for reminding me that I need to call my dad,” Tyler said, standing up and collecting our empty plates. “What are you doing for Thanksgiving?”

I grabbed the drinking glasses and followed him into the kitchen. “Alyssa and I just hang out. We don’t really celebrate. Although I think she might hang out with her roommate’s family. I’m not sure, though.”

“Well, I’ll be in Florida at my dad’s place. Hey, you should come with me.”

What? Did he just invite me to spend Thanksgiving with his family? In Florida?

My heart fluttered at the invitation as my mind tried to remember the last time I had been invited to spend the holidays with someone’s family.

“Wouldn’t your dad mind?” I asked, setting the glasses on the counter and leaning against it. “Wouldn’t he think it was weird that you’re bringing a friend home for Thanksgiving?”

“Hell no!” he said, shaking his head as he loaded the dishwasher. “My family is cool and crazy as hell. They would absolutely fucking love you.”

I bit down on my smile and the idea of jumping into his arms.

“I’ve never been to Florida,” I said thoughtfully.

“Come with me then,” he pushed, giving me a boyish grin that I had trouble resisting.

“Let me talk to Alyssa first, okay?”

“No rush, Elle.”

Unable to resist any longer, I threw my arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. “Thank you,” I murmured into his side. “This is the sweetest thing anyone has done for me in a long time. I can’t remember the last big Thanksgiving meal I had. Probably when I was a kid.”

Throwing an arm around my back and tucking me against his chest, Tyler kissed my forehead. “I promise you’ll have fun.”

Feeling my eyes water, I knew I was two seconds away from crying like a newborn baby. I buried my face in his chest, discreetly wiping the small tears that might have fallen.

I pulled back from the hug and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Tyler.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” he mumbled, blushing a bit.

Why did my heart pound so fiercely for him? Why did I want to remain in his arms? How could he make my bad days better by just smiling at me?

“I should probably call it a night,” I said, breaking free from the embrace. “I have to work in the morning.”

He nodded and silently followed me to the front door. When I stepped outside and turned around to say good night, he pulled into his chest again as he stared intensely into my eyes. His fingers brushed the warm skin under my top, and his forehead gently rested against mine.

“Don’t,” I whispered, feeling my resolve fading quickly.

“Is that what you really want?” he asked tenderly as his thumbs caressed my skin. “Because you didn’t move.”

The word “no” lodged in my throat, and I realized I was falling for him. The way he made me feel. The way he looked

at me. The way he touched me. I could no longer avoid my feelings. I liked him. I liked him so fucking much that falling in love was probably inevitable. *Fuck, I am in so much trouble.*

Taking my silence as an answer, Tyler brushed his lips against mine as I rested my hands on his broad shoulders. I moaned softly as our tongues glided together and his hands traveled down to cup my ass.

I wanted him so badly, especially when his hands slipped beneath my pajama pants and gripped my hot flesh.

My body begged for more while my mind chastised me about why I'd been at his house in the first place. The anniversary of losing his wife and son. He was grieving and still hurting. I couldn't give myself to him when he was mourning the loss of his family.

I disentangled myself from his arms and stepped back.

"Are you okay?" he asked with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing," I fibbed, shaking my head. "I should get going."

"Okay." He furrowed his eyebrows in confusion.

"Yeah, I, um, I have to water my grass."

Water my grass? What the hell? I am so dumb, I thought furiously to myself as Tyler howled with laughter at my lame excuse slash lie.

"I should probably get home," I said awkwardly, inching my way off his porch.

"Yeah, I guess."

I nodded, looking back with a smile as I headed home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

elyse

THE TWO WEEKS leading up to Thanksgiving had been crazy and hectic at the restaurant, with the kitchen staffing prepping and making meals available for pickup. Luckily, I had a few days off to spend in Florida with Tyler and his family. Yes, I'd agreed to go with Tyler.

I was also officially offered the sous-chef position but in training for the time being. Thank God, that load was off me. One less thing I had to worry about and I'd done it on my own. Even though I'd wanted to share the great news with Tyler, I'd also wanted to surprise him.

My sister and my coworkers gave me a congratulations card and took me out for a mini celebration when it was officially announced. I also felt a sense of peace, knowing my parents would've been proud of my accomplishments and hard work.

After Tyler finished the construction part of the basement, we added carpet, pulling together how I envisioned the area to look. I had a feeling I would love the space more than my room, especially when I'd chosen the perfect furniture and décor.

If Alyssa hadn't pushed me to travel to Florida, I would have stayed home to keep her company. Her annoying roommate, Natalie, was spending time with her family, and Alyssa couldn't hang out with Cory and his family like she had in the past because of the breakup. But Lena insisted—more like demanded—Alyssa spend the holiday with her and her friends in San Bernardino. And my sister never turned down an invite to party.

“Remember to have fun!” she instructed, pulling me into a tight hug as Tyler grabbed our luggage from the trunk of her car. “And bring me something back from Florida. I’m so proud of you. I love you so much.”

I blinked rapidly, returning the squeeze. “I’m not leaving forever, but thank you, Lyss. I love you too.”

“Love me enough to stay at your place while you’re gone?” she asked with a mischievous wink.

“Absolutely not! The last time you stayed at my house when I was away, you completely trashed it when you threw a party. And speaking of party, aren’t you hanging out with Lena in San Bernardino?”

She shrugged. “I am, but I always like to have a backup plan.”

I rolled my eyes and gave her one last hug, listening to Tyler impatiently tap his watch. “We’ll talk later, okay?”

“Have fun meeting the parents. And it’s okay to break your one-time rule. Odd numbers are ass anyway.”

“Don’t remind me and shut up,” I said, rolling my eyes once more after laughing.

“Alyssa,” Tyler shouted. “We gotta go!”

She shot him a dirty look and the middle finger. “Have a safe flight.”

I kissed her cheek before she hopped into her car and drove off.

The plane screeched to a halt hours later, forcing me to peel back my eyes and lift my head from Tyler’s shoulder. I swore as soon as the plane took off, he was sound asleep with his arms folded against his chest and his head on my shoulder. He looked ridiculously adorable, and I couldn’t stop myself from tickling his nose while he slept. And, of course, that started a small war between us to see who could annoy the other the

most during the flight. Eventually, I surrendered to my own tiredness and fell asleep.

Since we weren't in a hurry, we remained in our seats, patiently waiting for the other fliers to shuffle their way toward the door. I yawned, stretched, and glanced out the window to see the sun shining bright and the clouds blue and clear.

When a break in the departing line appeared, we inched our way out of the seats and reached for our bags in the overhead compartments.

"Sucks being short, doesn't it?" he joked, grabbing his bag with ease as he watched me struggle to reach my bag that had been shoved in a back corner.

I threw my elbow into his side, satisfied hearing an "oomph" from him.

"Sucks being an asshole, doesn't it?" I tossed back.

"Eh, not really. I've gotten this far, haven't I?"

I scoffed. "What a dick."

"So, I got upgraded to a dick now? Whatever happened to asshole?"

"Tyler, just shut up and grab my bag so we can get off this damn plane," I blurted out, noticing more impatient people lining up behind us.

"Say please."

"Come on," I begged. "People are getting pissed at us."

"I don't care. Say it."

I hate him.

"Please," I muttered, rolling my eyes.

The moment we stepped into the airport, I pushed him away from me, still somewhat furious at him for causing a slight scene, but he ignored my hostility and chattered on as if nothing mattered.

“My dad should be here somewhere,” Tyler murmured as we followed the signs to baggage claim.

Who knew sleeping on a plane could be so exhausting and draining? I was ready to sit back, eat something, and drink some wine.

“I can’t believe I’m really going to meet your family,” I said. Suddenly my heart began pounding wildly. “What if your dad doesn’t like me?”

“Relax, Elyse. He’ll love you. I know he will.”

His words didn’t comfort me too much until we found our intended baggage claim area. I spotted a tall, bald older man hanging around the luggage carousel with a handmade sign that had our names neatly printed on the front. It was cute and made me smile—even if my name was spelled wrong.

“Dad!” Tyler exclaimed, dropping his bag and walking up for a hug.

From the way they hugged to the way they checked each other out for minor differences since they had last seen each other to the way they joked around, Tyler and his dad were definitely close.

Tyler certainly looked his dad, except with more hair and a few inches taller. And although Tyler was leaner with muscles, his dad was a bit stocky. I found his dad to be adorable, dressed in a Lakers t-shirt, jeans, and dad shoes—bright, ugly, white sneakers.

“Wow! You even shaved,” his dad joked.

“Something like that,” he admitted before noticing his dad’s sign. “You spelled her name wrong. Elyse is spelled with a Y not an I.”

I threw my elbow into his side again, not wanting to make his dad uncomfortable in his attempt to make me feel welcomed.

“You must be Elyse with a Y,” his dad said, ignoring his son. “I’m sorry, but then again, Tyler didn’t give me a spelling lesson beforehand.”

“It’s okay,” I murmured, feeling a bit shy. “I’ve seen it spelled much, much worse.”

“I’m Charles.” He opened his arms, and I fell into his tight embrace with a smile.

I see why he’d wanted to name his son Charlie.

“It’s so nice meeting you. And thank you for letting me crash your Thanksgiving.”

“It’s my pleasure. I just hope my family doesn’t scare you away.”

The luggage carousel started moving, and all three of us edged closer as suitcases in different sizes and shapes popped out onto the conveyor belt.

“If Tyler didn’t scare me away, I doubt anyone else will,” I joked as Charles threw his head back and laughed loudly.

Tyler rolled his eyes in good nature as he spotted his suitcase. A few minutes later, Charles grabbed mine and we wormed our way out from the remaining crowd.

“Let’s get the hell out of here, shall we?” Charles asked, still holding onto my suitcase even though I’d held out my hand for it.

If the rest of the family were anything like Tyler’s dad, I couldn’t wait to meet them.

As Charles pulled into the driveway, my smile widened with delight and anticipation. Not only was the two-story house beautiful, but I was looking at Tyler’s childhood home. It felt kind of weird yet still comfortable.

A small water fountain sat in the front yard, and the paved driveway wrapped around the building. The grass was freshly cut, and small bushes sat perfectly aligned with the front part of the house. It definitely looked like a home.

As Tyler grabbed our bags from the car, Charles led me inside. My eyes ventured all around the space, loving the décor and the set up. The walls were painted white, with family photos strategically hung in place.

Charles told me to meet him outside in a few minutes before leaving me to wander around a bit and wait for Tyler. A bit of emotion tugged at my heart because it reminded me so much of my childhood home—filled with memories, pictures, and love.

I walked over to a small, marble table and spotted a picture of a woman with dark hair, bright eyes, and freckles. I guessed the woman was Tyler’s mom as I felt him stand beside me.

“She’s beautiful. Your mom?” I murmured, and he smiled, tilting his head toward the back yard.

“Yeah,” he answered, watching me run my finger against the frame. There were so many pictures of her around, and even with her not physically standing in the room, she still lit it up.

From the lightly-colored brick concrete patio to the beautifully manicured lawn beyond, the back yard looked like it belonged in a home and garden magazine. Dark gray Adirondack chairs circled a brick firepit that perfectly matched the patio, and a jelly-bean-shaped pool with a round hot tub cleverly attached sat a few feet beyond the chairs and firepit.

We found Tyler’s dad scrubbing a huge gas barbecue grill with a brush. He mentioned cooking burgers and veggies for dinner.

“Mr. Sullivan, you have a beautiful home,” I complimented.

He sighed dramatically and hung his head in shame. “Please call me Charles. ‘Mr. Sullivan’ makes me sound older than I already am.”

“I’m sorry, Charles,” I apologized, trying to stifle a giggle.

“Tyler, show the lady to her room and then get down and help your old man,” he instructed, waving the grill brush in the air.

Tyler rolled his eyes, not liking the idea of helping his dad cook. I offered to help, but Charles wouldn't hear of it. For once, I was happy that I didn't have to worry about anything.

I followed Tyler up the stairs and into a guest bedroom, which resembled a hotel room, with a king-sized bed, mounted flat-screen TV, and connected bathroom. The color scheme was an elegant white and beige.

"So, this is my house," he said, leaning against the doorframe. "My dad has renovated a lot since the last time I've been here, though."

"I love it," I gushed, taking in the space. "Your dad seems great. So, are you going to show me your room?"

"You won't judge me?"

"I can't make any promises."

I followed him toward his room and noticed his face turned bright red as soon as he opened the door. His room was painted dark blue and covered with posters of models, sports, and music groups—but mostly models.

I bit my lip as I slowly spun around the room, making sure to remember every little detail from the trophies to the books to the video games.

"Models, huh?" I teased.

"You said you wouldn't judge," he said, grabbing a pillow from his bed and chucking it at me. I gracefully dodged it with a snarky grin.

"I'm not judging, but it's funny, because I was the same way. I think you'd throw up if you saw my childhood room."

"Who was your childhood crush?"

"I went through a lot of phases," I admitted. I sat down in the chair by his desk and spun around a few times. "But Leonardo DiCaprio and Patrick Swayze were the two big ones. I was obsessed with them. What about you?"

"Interesting," he said, scratching the fuzz on his chin. "Definitely Megan Fox."

“I don’t see any pictures of her on the walls.”

“They’re under my bed, and no, you can’t see them.”

I made a face. “Gross.”

He sat on the edge of the bed as we talked for a few more minutes, mainly about his childhood. I had no doubt he was a wild kid from the look of his room to his secret porn stash.

Finally, he stood up and stretched before walking over to me. I smiled as he placed a hand on my knee.

“Get some rest. I’m going to help my dad.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Elyse

Tyler: When you coming down? Everyone is here, princess.

Me: I'm nervous! What if they don't like me? Oh. And I forgot my flat iron and my hair looks horrible. I can't look bad on my first Thanksgiving in ages.

Tyler: I'm sure you look beautiful, Elyse. Get the fuck down here.

HIS BOSSINESS DID nothing to calm my nerves as I ran my fingers through my hair. Of course, out of all things I could've forgotten, it had to be my flat iron. So, my naturally wavy hair was a little frizzier than normal, thanks to the Florida heat and humidity.

I'd already had barbecue with Tyler, his dad, and his dad's wife, Diana, the previous night, but I wasn't ready for the amount of people I was about to meet. Hanging out with them had been fun and relaxing. The calm before the storm. Now, it was Thanksgiving Day, and I was about to meet Tyler's entire extended family. Loud voices and laughter floated upstairs as I put the finishing touches on my makeup and smoothed out my pink, pleated skirt. I tucked my thin, ivory, short-sleeved sweater into the skirt and tossed a few gold bracelets on my wrist.

I slowly climbed down the stairs, watching a little girl wave and run past me. The commotion in the house became louder and louder. How many people were here? And why was I so fucking nervous?

Complete silence answered the last question in my mind as I stepped into the kitchen and nervously gazed around at the unfamiliar faces staring back at me. My eyes landed on Tyler, and I gave him a slight smile. *Say something, Tyler.*

Whatever everyone was doing, they stopped and simply stared, not saying a single word. The moment was weird as hell.

“Everyone, this is Elyse. She’s my—” Tyler finally spoke up, clearing his throat.

“Girlfriend?” a short woman with chin-length, brown hair asked with clear excitement in her voice. “Ty, you have a girlfriend? Since when?”

“I’m Elyse,” I explained hastily. “I’m not his girlfriend. We’re just friends.”

“We’re just friends, Aunt Kat,” Tyler repeated, pushing his way through his relatives, and standing by my side.

His aunt pouted with disappointment as she polished off the rest of the red wine in her glass. From the way her bright green eyes shone, she appeared a little buzzed already. I envied her.

“Bummer,” she said, shaking her head. “Well, friends or not, you’re gorgeous. I remember looking like that once— young and functioning.”

I blushed and scoffed. “Please, you still do.”

“Well, tell that to my husband.”

Tyler introduced me to the rest of the family, and my nerves finally started to fade once different conversations and laughter returned in full force. I was no longer the center of attention.

Diana waved me over to her and few other women. She had been so warm and welcoming that I’d immediately liked her when I’d met her the night prior. She was tall, with ocean blue eyes and sweeping chestnut hair.

“Would you like a glass of wine, sweetheart?” she asked warmly before lowering her voice. “I have a feeling you’re going to need it.”

I nodded and chuckled lightly as she handed me a glass of red wine.

“I know I said this last night, but please make yourself at home here,” she said breezily. “If you need something—anything—help yourself.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking a sip of the delicious wine.

Diana pointed a finger toward a cabinet near the refrigerator. “That’s where we keep all the good stuff—bourbon, whiskey, vodka. Just in case you might need something stronger. Everyone will more than likely be drunk before dinner starts.”

“Seems like you guys know how to have fun,” I joked as I followed her toward the oven so she could check on the pies.

Diana laughed, nodding in agreement.

Just as I was about to offer to help set the table, one of Tyler’s aunts dragged me away to introduce me to her son. I spent a good thirty minutes smiling and laughing with various relatives, swept up in their genuine friendliness and sincere hospitality.

“Hey, you,” Tyler said, bumping his arm against mine.

My heart melted at the sight of him holding the most adorable little girl with blonde pigtails in his arms. I’d guessed she couldn’t have been more than two as she rubbed her big, blue eyes before wiping her hands on her Thanksgiving-themed dress with an embroidered turkey in the center.

“I want you to meet this little monster,” he said proudly. “This is Izzy.”

“Hi, Izzy,” I cooed, resisting the temptation to snatch her from his arms and hug her to death.

She looked at me for a moment before burying her cute little face into the crook of his neck. Tyler lightly patted her back. *Oh, my heart—and my ovaries.*

“Izzy, say hi to Elyse,” Tyler prompted gently.

She lifted her head and glanced at me again. “Hi.” Her voice was soft and light and made my smile even wider.

“I like your dress,” I said, poking the turkey on her dress with my finger.

She giggled and squirmed, indicating she was done with introductions. Tyler lowered her to ground, and once her little feet hit the floor, she took off running into another room.

“She likes to act shy, but by the end of the night, she’ll be all over you,” he explained.

“Or I just scared her.”

“You are kind of scary,” Tyler teased, bumping into my shoulder. “You look really nice, Elle.”

I blushed, feeling my cheeks warm. “Please. Have you seen my hair?”

A few hours later, everyone sat around the huge dining room table, which was covered from end to end with dishes. My stomach growled and my mouth watered at the platter of dinner rolls, ham, a bowl of mashed potatoes, and everything else that was within my line of vision.

Diana, Charles, Tyler, and I sat in the middle on one side, flanked by various relatives.

Diana tapped her water glass with a fork as the room went silent.

“Should we go around the table and say what we’re thankful for?” she asked as her bright eyes roamed around the table.

I loved the idea and immediately began thinking of what I might say.

“Hell no!” Edward, one of Tyler’s many uncles, said, all in good nature. “We’ve been waiting all day to eat. Let’s dig in!”

“Wait!” Justin, a family friend of Charles, interrupted. “We should pray before we dig in. It’s only right.”

Uncle Edward rolled his eyes and adjusted the thick glasses on his nose. “When have we ever prayed before eating, Justin? Stop showing off for the pretty young lady sitting next to Ty. And, Ty, you should’ve known not to bring someone so beautiful around Justin’s old ass.”

I giggled, looking at the cloth napkin in my lap.

“Eddie!” Charlotte, Izzy’s mother, exclaimed, pointing a finger at him. “Don’t say that word around Izzy. At least spell it out.”

“She’ll be fine,” he mumbled, rolling his eyes again. “‘Ass’ is going to be her first word.”

After a few more minutes of arguing over prayers and spelling out curse words, everyone finally dug in after Charles said a quick prayer and thanked everyone for coming.

“So, Elyse, what do you do?” Charlotte asked, spooning mashed potatoes onto her plate.

“She’s a chef,” Tyler answered.

“Actually,” I said, with a confident smile, “I’m a sous-chef at a five-star restaurant in Pasadena. I was officially offered the job a few days ago.”

I caught the look of disappointment on Tyler’s face as everyone congratulated me on the promotion. I hadn’t meant to leave him out of the loop, but he and I had been so busy that I’d forgotten to tell him about it.

“What exactly does a sous-chef do?” Justin asked, tossing a dinner roll across the table to Edward.

“I’ll be supervising and managing the kitchen staff, and I’ll work pretty closely with the executive chef, Dave. But mainly, I’ll be involved with the day-to-day operations in the kitchen,” I explained.

“So, *you* should’ve been the one cooking instead of Charles,” Aunt Kat cracked, earning a laugh from the group. “Because this ham is dry as hell.”

“Don’t even go there,” Charles warned, waving a fork in her direction. “One of the many reasons why I had to host

Thanksgiving dinner was because *she* can damn near burn water or anything else she touches,” he said, motioning toward his sister.

She nodded and shrugged in confirmation.

“I think it’s pretty good,” I said airily. “Charles, the food is amazing. I couldn’t have done it any better.”

Edward scoffed. “Don’t lie, sweetheart. He can take it.”

Before a friendly argument could even break out, Diana smoothly interrupted. “Congratulations, Elyse. That’s very impressive. Charlie and I might have to visit Tyler one of these days and check out your restaurant.”

“I would like that very much,” I said honestly, feeling a small lump in my throat.

“What made you want to become a chef?”

“Cooking has always been my passion. I have so many great memories of hanging out with my mom in the kitchen. I guess I’ve never thought about doing anything else.”

“And your parents are okay with us stealing you for the holidays?” Charles teased.

The lump in my throat grew ten times as my heart ached for the two people I wished were still here.

“Dad,” Tyler mumbled, shaking his head, as the room went silent.

“Um, it’s okay,” I said softly, feeling Tyler’s hand on my thigh. “My parents passed away when I was a teenager. So, it’s always been me and my younger sister, Alyssa. And we don’t really celebrate that often.”

“I’m so sorry, Elyse,” Charles said quickly, his face warming in embarrassment. “I didn’t know. But I’m happy you’re here and could join our crazy family.”

I smiled politely as everyone gave their own condolences and told me that I was always welcome here.

“So, if you’re here, where’s your younger sister?” Edward asked, raising an eyebrow in curiosity before scowling at

Tyler. “If there were two of you here, poor Justin might have a heart attack.”

I bit back a smile, as I’d highly suspected Tyler had swiftly kicked his uncle in the shin underneath the table.

“Alyssa is hanging out with some close friends in San Bernardino,” I answered, mentally reminding myself to call her soon.

“She’s a firecracker,” Tyler added, taking a sip of water. “You really can’t say or do anything without her snapping at you.”

“Sounds like she’ll fit right in,” Kat crackled.

“So, you’re not dating Tyler ...” Charlotte said, buttering her dinner roll. “Do you have a boyfriend? I’m surprised no one has snatched you up already.”

“I just got out of a terrible relationship a few months ago,” I admitted, dipping my fork into the creamy mashed potatoes on my plate. “And I wanted to take some time for myself. Focus on my job.”

“Good for you,” Diana praised, clapping her hands.

Tyler easily shifted the conversation away from me by asking Edward and Justin about the chances of some football team making the playoffs. Soon enough, all the guys at the table were talking over each other about certain players, coaches, and strategies.

I helped Diana clear some of the plates from the table before she pulled half a dozen pies from the warming oven.

“You and Tyler seem close,” she said, setting an apple pie on the counter. “He hasn’t brought anyone home in years.”

“Yeah,” I said, handing over a pecan pie to her. “He’s a good guy. I never really had a good guy friend like him before.”

“I’ve known him since I first started dating Charles, and he seems to be doing better. I know he’s a grown man and everything, but we still worry about him. He’s been through a lot.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled. “He told me about Jordyn and Charlie.”

“*He* told you?”

I nodded.

“Well, you must be something special, because he would rather die than relive that night,” Diana confessed, breaking my heart for him more.

“Tyler and I make a good team. I cook, and he fixes my house. And I want to be there for him like he is for me.”

Diana laughed. “I like you, Elyse. Your attitude, the way you talk, and, especially, how you’ve handled yourself around all this crazy. I’m happy Tyler brought you home.”

“Thank you,” I said with a shy smile. “How long have you and Charles been married?”

“Ten years this Christmas.”

My mouth dropped in awe. “Ten years? That’s amazing, Diana.”

“Our relationship isn’t perfect, but it’s ours,” she admitted, handing me a pie server as she searched for a few knives. “I’m not here to replace his first wife, but I know the love he has for me is unconditional.”

My heart skipped a beat. I was always a sucker for a good love story.

“I agree,” I said. “I can tell how much he loves you just by the way he looks at you.”

Diana waved a hand at me, brushing away my compliment as she blushed.

“Your family is refreshing, and I love it,” I said truthfully, feeling the small lump in my throat return. “It reminds me of how I spent the holidays with my family.”

“You and your sister are welcome here anytime, Elyse,” she said gently, pulling me into a tight hug. “Even during the holidays.”

“Thank you,” I said, blinking back a few tears and returning her embrace.

“And if, for any reason, you and Tyler stop talking to one another,” she said, transferring the pies onto a large tray, “you’re more than welcome to stay here. I’ll just kick him out.”

As soon as everyone had eaten their share of pie, Charles sat me down on the couch in the living room and whipped out a few photo albums, pointing out embarrassing photos of Tyler. I loved every word and photo Charles shared with me.

“Look at this one,” Charles said, showing a picture of a naked baby Tyler making a crazy face. “He would always ruin a photo by making some face. But I can’t rag on him too much since he got his humor from me.”

“But Tyler isn’t funny,” I said with a serious look, glancing away from the photo album. Diana and Charles howled with laughter.

Tyler sulked in one of the armchairs and shook his head. “But you’re always laughing.”

“To make you feel better,” I teased with a smile. “But seriously, why are you naked in most of these pictures?”

“I like being free,” he replied with a casual shrug. “I have nothing to hide.”

No, he sure didn’t.

After Charles and his siblings reminisced about their childhoods for almost an hour, everyone said their goodbyes and exchanged hugs.

“Can I help you guys clean up?” I asked, noticing the mess throughout the house as soon as the front door closed.

“Nope,” Charles said simply, reaching for his wife’s hand. “We’ll clean everything up in the morning. I don’t know about you, but I’m beat. Being too social makes me sleepy.”

“Thanks for the offer, Elyse,” Diana said with a warm smile. “But I’m an early bird, and I’ll clean up tomorrow morning. Don’t worry about a thing, sweetie.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Elyse

AS CHARLES and Diana locked up downstairs after dinner, I breathed a sigh of relief as I headed up the stairs. *I fucking made it*, I thought. And without any embarrassing mishaps. Tyler followed me into my room and closed the door behind us.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the official offer?” he asked, staring into my eyes as he towered over me. *Shit*. He smiled.

Why did my heart skip a beat when he grinned at me? Why did I want to jump into his arms and kiss him?

“I was going to tell you,” I said, sucking in my bottom lip. “But we’ve both been busy, and I kind of forgot about it.”

Taking me by complete surprise, he yanked me against his chest and wrapped his arms around me. “I am so fucking proud of you, Elyse.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you. I mean, who crashes someone’s wedding reception?”

“Someone who believes in you.”

And time stood still. Besides my sister and Lena, no one else had ever told me they believed in me. Not even Jason. Not even my coworkers.

No one had ever gone the extra mile to push me outside of my comfort zone or pick me up when I was feeling low or second-guessing myself.

An unwanted tear rolled down my cheek as I tried to fight the waterworks. Snaking my arms around his waist, I buried my face in his chest and closed my eyes.

“Elyse,” he said, concern laced in his voice. “You’re crying. Did I say something wrong?”

I shook my head and forced a smile. “No. You said all the right things. Other than Alyssa and Lena, no one else really believed in me—not even me.”

“You should feel proud of yourself,” he said, tugging on my hair to make me look at him. “Do you remember the song we sang on the way to San Diego? What’s the name of that song?”

I shook my head and laughed. “Don’t Stop Believin’.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re so corny,” I said playfully, rolling my eyes and blinking away the tears.

“Corny enough for you to kiss me?”

Is this something we do now? Just kiss each other? If so, I was totally down.

“Why would I kiss you?” I asked, biting my lip.

“Because you made up that shit-ass excuse about watering your grass the last time. That’s corny.”

He had a point.

Pushing away from his hold to turn around, I shrugged. “Sorry, my lips don’t work. Come back the next business day.”

Just as my lips pulled into a small, victorious smile, a gasp escaped my throat when Tyler boldly lifted my skirt up and pushed me forward onto the bed. With my ass on full display, I rested my head on the blanket and closed my eyes, feeling my heart beat furiously as his hands slid all over my exposed skin.

His boldness tied my damn tongue into knots, rendering me speechless and excited. I glanced over my shoulder and watched him study my body with dark, hooded eyes. My body burned with anticipation.

“Do you want this? Right now?” he asked, bending over slightly and placing light kisses on my ass.

I opened my mouth to say yes, but I quickly closed it when he started toying with my panties. As my skirt fell around my waist, I parted my legs a bit wider, giving him access and permission to do whatever the hell he wanted.

My breathing became labored as his thumb teased me and circled my entrance through the thin, lacy fabric. My mind could barely form a coherent sentence as fire and lust coursed through my body.

“Answer me,” Tyler demanded softly, slipping a finger past my panties, and dragging it through my wet folds.

“What about your dad?” I asked, unable to promise to keep my voice down.

He chuckled, moving my panties to the side. “He’s probably sleeping already. So, if you can be quiet, he won’t hear anything. I’ve gotten away with so much here,” he joked, sliding a finger inside me.

“Real ... sexy,” I moaned sarcastically.

Unamused by my sarcasm, he smacked my ass hard, and I suppressed a howl.

“Take your sweater off,” he ordered, smacking my other butt cheek.

I groaned at the sharp pain but immediately relaxed into the soothing sting as I shrugged out of my sweater. His fingers quickly unhooked the clasps of my bra, and one of my hands tugged it off my arms and threw it to the other side of the room.

Impatience and hunger in his movements, Tyler pulled my panties down and tossed them to the floor, leaving me in only my skirt. I felt like a naughty college student being punished for cheating on an exam or something. I kind of liked it. Okay, I loved it.

I whimpered at the loss of his finger inside me, needing to feel him again. Needing to feel his heat. As I was about to call out his name, his tongue flicked over my clit, and I buried my face in the blanket to drown out my screams.

Two fingers slipped inside me again as his tongue continued to torture my sweet bundle of nerves. The tension started to build as his fingers pumped fast and his teeth grazed my sex.

“Tyler,” I cried out as the blanket muffled the volume.

I continued to chant his name as his tongue roamed all over with such precision and expertise that I knew my release would strike quick and hard. His fingers slipped out, only to be replaced with his lips sealing over my sex and his tongue darting in hard. Specks of white light blinded me as my orgasm crashed deliciously into a million pieces.

“Fuuuck,” I quietly moaned, coming down from the beautiful tide that ripped through me.

“Don’t move,” Tyler commanded. I heard him unzip his pants.

I looked over my shoulder and watched him confidently stroking himself as he freed himself of his pants and boxers. I snaked one of my own hands underneath me and let my fingers roam over my pussy before sliding them in out and out. I wanted him so badly.

My head whipped forward, and my back arched when I felt his left hand grip my ass and his hard length rub against my silk folds, teasing me. Torturing me. The suffering didn’t last long, though. Suddenly, he dipped into me before quickly pulling out again and repeating the same motion, filling me with sensual bliss. I was completely consumed.

I dropped my head into the blanket again, muffling my moans.

“Shit,” he groaned, picking up the pace and intensity as he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it aside carelessly.

The only noises in the room were the sound of our bodies slapping against each other’s and the heavy breaths we expelled. Needing more. Wanting more. I fisted the blankets beneath me and bounced back into him as he dug into my hips.

He leaned over my back and reached under me to grab a stiff nipple. Soon enough, both of his hands cupped my

breasts, feeling them bounce with each thrust. I whimpered, sensing the pleasure rising in my body a second time.

“Oh my God,” I moaned in a throaty whisper.

His hands released my tits, and he rested on the arch of my back as he slowed his pace and began driving deeper. A few seconds later, he pulled out of me and tapped my side, indicating that he wanted me to turn around and lie on my back.

His hands slid underneath my ass, and he pulled me to the edge of the bed where he was standing. Propping myself up on my elbows, I bit my lower lip when my eyes focused on his glistening member. I wanted to taste him so bad.

He smirked as he spread my legs wide and stepped between them. Using his thumb to stimulate my clit, he drove the tip of his cock inside me as my fingers spread my folds for him. A low growl of approval fell from his lips as he slowly pushed his way inside.

His low moans synced with mine as his thrusts became harder and faster.

“Tyler.” My hands cupped my breasts as my fingers played with my hard tits.

“Touch yourself while I fuck you,” he demanded, pounding into me at full speed and driving me crazy with need.

I slowly brushed my fingers down my chest and over my stomach before sliding them over my wet clit.

As he held my legs wide open, he buried himself, hitting that special spot over and over and pushing me faster and faster toward the edge. I craved him for days—weeks even. I needed this. I needed him.

“Tyler,” I moaned under my breath as my release shattered. My toes curled. My neck rolled back in relief. My fingers stopped rubbing my clit. Even with my eyes closed, I could feel him smirking at me. “You feel so good.” I clenched my legs shut, shaking out the second orgasm.

“Yeah?” he breathed out softly as he pulled out of me.

When I caught my breath, I propped myself up on my elbows again and watched him stroke himself. With a grin, I sat up and positioned myself on my knees before getting level with his hard length as he continued to stand by the edge of the bed. Pushing my hair to the side, I slapped his hands away and wrapped mine around the base of his dick.

With my ass in the air, I swirled my tongue around the tip of him before licking around his base. He groaned when I took him whole, rotating my head as my hands twisted around his throbbing length. I pushed myself as far as I could go, gagging a bit in the process.

My eyes started watering as I felt his length touching the back of my throat. I withdrew my mouth from him and continued to stroke him before taking him again inch by inch. He moaned breathlessly as his hands weaved tightly through my hair.

“Baby, stop,” he murmured, pulling out of my mouth before sitting on the edge of the bed. *Did he just call me that?*

I scrambled off the bed, unzipped my skirt and let it drop to my feet, and then straddled his lap. My heart raced faster as I looked deeply into his hazel eyes, feeling his arms wrap around my naked back. For what felt like an eternity, we were just staring at each other, eye to eye and chest to chest. I couldn't break away. It was a different type of look. One that I felt in my heart.

I dipped my head, softly pushing my lips against his. He quickly took complete control of the intense, passionate kiss, parting my lips with his tongue before exploring my mouth. He tasted so good.

One of my hands reached down between us and guided his cock inside me as our tongues continued to dance together. Reveling in him stretching me out once again, I felt him grin against my lips as his hands gripped my waist.

My bounces started slow but soon quickened when Tyler sucked one of my nipples into his mouth. I threw my head

back, closing my eyes as my hands held onto his strong shoulders. His lips abandoned my tits and nibbled on my neck and ear as I lost control, with him taking me over the edge.

“Shit,” I breathed out, feeling him almost reach his own peak.

He laid back, pushing one hand against my stomach. “Slow down,” he said, slowing my pace.

With my hands fanned out on his chest, I rode him steadily as another wave of warmth surged through me.

“Okay,” I whimpered, rolling my hips, and listening to the tones of his moans change.

With his hands on my hips, he set the pace and gazed at me hungrily.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” I cried out only to have one of his hands clamp over my mouth to muffle my increasingly loud volume. I never thought being silenced would be so hot. But it was. God, this was so fucking hot.

A minute later, he quickly pushed me off his lap and stroked himself until he came. As he caught his breath, I dragged my tongue around his chiseled stomach, licking up his release. He chuckled in awe as he tucked his hands behind his head and inflated his chest.

“Is this still the best sex you’ve ever had?” Tyler asked with a smirk.

I moaned out a laugh. “Ugh, Tyler, your ego.”

“What are you gonna do about it?”

I wrapped my mouth around him a second time and listened to him groan.

I awoke in Tyler’s arms, unsure if he’d accidentally fallen asleep in my bed after he’d showered. We had been

emotionally and physically drained and passed out immediately.

Being with him was a stress reliever for me, making my tension and anxiety simply disappear. Falling asleep in his arms felt natural and waking up with his arm around me made my heart flutter. Sharing a bed with another warm body felt nice but sharing one with Tyler felt even better. Even his light snores filled me with giddiness.

I managed to untangle myself from his arms and rolled out of bed to shower and dress, leaving him sleeping. I crept downstairs, hoping I could help clean yesterday's mess, but one look in the spotless kitchen told me Diana was already up. She hadn't lied about waking up early to clean. The kitchen sparkled and shined as if Thanksgiving dinner had never even happened.

"Good morning, Diana," I said, finding her watching TV in the living room, as I sat on the other end of the couch she occupied.

"Morning, hon," she said, glancing at me with a warm smile. "How did you sleep?"

Memories of last night flooded my mind. I wasn't going to lie. "I slept great. Thanks for everything."

"If you thank me one more time," she warned playfully, running her hands through her puffy hair. "Do you guys have plans today?"

I shook my head. "I thought I would sneak away and give Tyler and his dad a chance to hang out."

"Well, if that's the case, what do you say we have a girls' day out? I could take you around Palm Beach and show you all the good stuff—the stuff Tyler probably doesn't even know about."

"I knew I liked you. That sounds wonderful!"

Diana flipped the TV off and pushed herself off the couch. "I'm going to make myself less scary. Make yourself at home and feel free to make anything you want, chef."

Since I had nothing better to do, I chatted with Alyssa for a few minutes before I started breakfast for everyone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Tyler

MY ARMS STRETCHED out over an empty spot on the bed when I woke up. Elyse wasn't there. That girl was *killing* me. Her mind. Her body. Everything about her made me question everything.

I never would have guessed she would be so fucking sexual. Maybe certain partners brought out the cravings and desires we never knew existed. If someone had told me months ago that I would be having repeatedly mind-blowing sex with this incredibly gorgeous woman, I would've laughed. Out loud. Hysterically.

But now I missed the warmth of her body next to mine. I pushed her pillow under my arm, smelling her natural scent and making me smile like a teenage girl with a huge crush on the cutest boy in class.

My heart sighed at the thought of her comforting me and dealing with my drunk ass two weeks ago. Even after we'd fought, she had been there for me. That was one of the reasons why I'd fallen for Jordyn. She had always been there, no matter the consequences.

My stomach grumbled at the delicious smell of breakfast wafting through the house, and I hopped out of bed, showered, and threw my clothes back on. I met my dad in the hallway as I walked out of the guest room.

His face lit up into an all-knowing smile. I felt like a teenager, sneaking out of a girl's room and hiding from my dad. But he didn't say a damn word as he walked down the stairs. *Shit*. I had nothing to say either, but my mind found a flimsy excuse in case he decided to ask. I was in her room

checking to see if she was awake. Yeah, I was going to stick with that story.

I followed him down the stairs and into the kitchen, where breakfast was set. I immediately knew Elyse had done this.

“You boys enjoy your time together,” my dad read from a note sitting on the table. “Us girls are out enjoying the sun. Love you. Bye.”

“They seem to be getting along fine,” he said, grabbing two plates from a cabinet. “Diana never leaves the house.”

I smiled. “I think it’s impossible not to like Elyse.”

“Does that go for you too?”

“We’re cool,” I said as we both sat down at the table and peeled back the foil that had kept the breakfast warm. “I like her, I guess.”

“You know what I mean,” he said, helping himself to some scrambled eggs. “That girl isn’t going to remain single for long. She’s beautiful, independent, smart, funny—”

“Yeah, I get it, Dad,” I cut him off. “She’s amazing, I know.”

I stopped myself from groaning out loud when I bit into a perfectly fluffy waffle. She truly was amazing.

“What’s stopping you? I know you like her. You couldn’t stop looking at her last night, and you just left her room this morning. I may be old, but even I know what that means.”

Stick to your brilliant reason, my mind cautioned.

I laughed out loud. “I really couldn’t tell you what’s stopping me because I really don’t know. I think I’m terrified of loving someone again. And I know I’m going to do something dumb and end up hurting her.”

“Do you want to hurt her?”

“No, I don’t. But at this rate, I know it’s coming. She’s too good for me. I’m fucked up, Dad.”

“Of all people, I get that,” my dad huffed, rolling his eyes. “I thought I was done with relationships when your mom died. I never wanted to look at another woman, but I knew your mom would hate that I was doing that to myself. When Diana came along, I had been so tired of being alone every night. I was scared and hesitant at first, but she remained patient and never pushed me too hard or too fast. If you really like Elyse, she will do the same for you.”

“Even if I did like her, I’m not into marriage and kids and probably won’t be anytime soon. Women want families, and I’m not ready to have one,” I said, chewing a waffle.

“You have time for that. No one said you had to start as soon as you got together. I’m just saying it would be stupid to let her go. When have you ever brought someone home besides Jordyn?”

“Mandy. Eleventh grade,” I joked, gulping down orange juice.

“That doesn’t count,” he said, covering his mouth to burp. “I almost lost Elizabeth because I was young and dumb, and then realized I would regret it for the rest of my life if I didn’t marry her. And guess what I did? Married her a couple months later.”

“Do you ever think about mom?” I asked softly, feeling an aching in my chest.

“I think about her every day. But that doesn’t hold me back from changing or moving forward. I’m a stronger man now, and I appreciate everything I have.”

“How did you know Diana was the one after mom?”

“Because she was patient,” my dad admitted, taking a sip of his orange juice. “She was just there for me. She just seemed to understand everything. I guess you just know. But, again, I wouldn’t wait too long to figure that out, son.”

My dad was right. Elyse wouldn’t remain single for very long. Men like Caden noticed everything about her and never hesitated to ask her out.

I was thinking about my dad's words and picking at the food on my plate when he spoke again, "All I'm saying is ... you're almost thirty."

I laughed. "Don't pull the age card on me."

"Just watch. All your shit will start hurting soon," he warned playfully, waving his fork in the air. "Back. Legs. Arms. You name it."

"How about we test that theory out, and you go on a run with me?"

My dad being my dad, he tried to talk his way out of it, citing his old age and his full stomach, but I ignored his excuses. We took our run a few hours after we cleaned the kitchen and talked some more on the back patio.

After breaking five times during the run, we decided to walk the rest of the route and just talk.

Diana and Elyse still weren't home when Dad and I started watching a football game around six. Watching any sports game with my dad was like watching a second game, because he lost his temper all the time, shouting at the players, coaches, and referees on TV as if they could all hear him.

As my dad yelled at one of the refs for a lousy call, my phone vibrated with a new message.

Will: Where you at, bro?

Me: At my dad's until tomorrow.

Will: Damn.

Me: What's up?

Will: Elyse's sister hit me up.

Me: What? Isn't she dating someone?

Will: She told me she was single.

Me: I'll ask Elyse lol.

As I sent the last message to Will, Diana and Elyse walked in, talking, laughing, and carrying a hundred different shopping bags on their wrists.

My mouth crashed into the floor as my eyes quickly swept over Elyse. Her hair was a few inches shorter and beautifully curled. My heart might have stopped when she flashed me a shy smile.

“I see you ladies had a good ole time,” my dad said, standing up and grabbing the bags from Diana’s hands. “Elyse, thank you for the amazing breakfast.”

“No problem, Charles,” she said with an airy laugh as she dropped her bags on the floor and sat beside me on the couch.

“I like your hair,” I murmured, flicking my finger against a highlighted curl and watching her face turn red.

“You noticed?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I noticed the first time.”

“You’re right,” she said with a shrug.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Stop,” she whined playfully, shoving her small shoulder against mine. “You’re making my cheeks hurt with all the compliments.”

“Well, they should be.”

I smiled lazily as I listened to her happily chat about her day with Diana. They’d strolled through the shopping district downtown. Walked barefoot in the sand on the beach. Grabbed lunch and drinks. Decided to do something with their hair.

“So, I’m visiting California in a few months to hang out with Elyse,” Diana announced, sitting on the armrest of the chair Dad sat in. “I haven’t had that much fun in so long. Even with my friends here.”

“I think you replaced me, Elyse,” my dad teased, resting a hand on his wife’s hip. “I’m happy you had fun, babe.”

“I had so much fun too,” Elyse added with a frown. “I just wish we were staying longer.”

Wanting to turn her frown upside down, I promised her that we would visit again and that she could even bring smart-mouthed Alyssa.

We all called it a night when the game ended, especially because Elyse and I had a long flight the next day.

As I headed toward my room, Elyse whispered, “Hey, come here. I have something for you.”

No need to tell me twice.

My body immediately jerked me in the direction of her room. As soon as I closed the door, I gathered her in my arms, ready to repeat last night, until she stopped me with a quizzical look.

“What makes you think it was sex?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

I choked on my words. “Crazy guess?”

I reluctantly placed her on the ground as she dug into a shopping bag and pulled a framed picture of a quote. “Always remember you are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, smarter than you think, and twice as beautiful as you’ve ever imagined.”

“Aw. You think I’m beautiful?” I laughed.

Scowling, she placed a hand on my chest and pushed me. “You asshole. Can’t you ever be serious? I thought of you when I read it. And you need some decorations in your bland-ass house anyway.”

“Oh! Now my house is bland? I love it. Thank you.”

She pulled the frame from my hands and stuck it back into the shopping bag. “I’m going to keep it and put it up in your house myself.”

“Do whatever you want,” I said, leaning over to peck her lips.

The small gesture seemed to surprise her, but she kissed me back slowly and sensually, placing her hands on my waist.

“Wait,” she said, abruptly breaking the kiss that was driving me crazy. “How come you always want to have sex when we’re not home? But when I’m home, you torture me?”

“Is that what you call it? Torture? That’s cute,” I said with a chuckle. “I guess I get horny when I’m out of town.”

“So, about that crazy guess?” She tilted her head to one side as she wrapped her arms around my waist.

Again, I picked her up and headed towards the bed. “You don’t have to tell me twice.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Tyler

“ALYSSA,” I whisper-yelled at Elyse’s mouthy little sister as I clutched the handle of my suitcase and tossed my duffel bag over my shoulder.

After spending most of the day on the plane, Elyse and I were both exhausted when Alyssa picked us up at the airport and dropped us off at home at about ten at night. Because Elyse had to work in the morning, she’d started to unload her bags from the car and carry them into her house.

“Yes? What can I do for you?” Alyssa joked, leaning against the driver’s side of her car.

“Elyse’s birthday is coming up, right?” I asked, keeping an eye on Elyse as she comically yanked her huge suitcase up the porch steps.

“Yeah, it’s Saturday,” she said with a nod. “But she doesn’t really care about her birthday.”

“So, she’s not doing anything?”

“She’s a simple girl, Ty. She stopped celebrating her birthday when our parents passed away. I’ve tried throwing her parties before, but she’s really never gotten into it.”

I frowned at the idea of Elyse spending her birthday by herself. I knew I was getting old, but I was never too old to celebrate.

“Do you think she’d be pissed if I did something for her?” I asked.

Alyssa giggled. “Probably, but I want to help too! I can’t let you take all the credit.”

We quickly exchanged numbers as Elyse approached us.

“So, you’re texting Will?” I arched an eyebrow with curiosity, remembering my friend messaging me in Florida. “You single now?”

She rolled her eyes as her cheeks turned red. “I thought women were bad, but, wow, word flies around guys too. Yes, I’m single. And, yes, I texted Will ... as a friend.”

“Right ... a friend.”

“Who’s a friend?” Elyse asked, appearing next to her sister, and glancing between us.

“Um,” I stammered. Where were my quick-thinking abilities now?

“I asked Tyler, *my friend*, for fifty dollars for my services,” Alyssa smoothly cut in and held out her hand. “You know, for driving your butts to and from the airport. Right?”

Her eyes narrowed at me, but I couldn’t help myself from laughing. I had no intention of giving her any money any time.

“Yeah, that’s complete bullshit,” I said with a smirk. “Hey, isn’t it past your bedtime?”

“Ugh,” she said, making a face at me. “You’re the worst. I can’t stand you!”

“So, sit down,” I snapped back teasingly.

“Thanks for picking us up, Lyss,” Elyse said, kissing her sister’s cheek as she hopped in her car. “Have a safe ride home.”

“I have something you can ride,” I whispered into her ear as Alyssa peeled out of the driveway.

She turned and gently punched my chest. “Nice try. What were you guys talking about?”

“She asked if you actually let loose and had a good time,” I fibbed, mentally patting myself on the back for the little, white lie.

“You told her yes, correct?”

“Of course, I did.” I tapped her nose with my index finger.

She slid her arms around my waist and gave me a hug. “Thank you again for inviting me to your family’s Thanksgiving. I had an amazing time. Also, I think Diana might be my new best friend. We haven’t stopped texting each other since I left this morning.”

“About what?” I asked, tilting my head.

“Uh, just girl stuff,” she said hesitantly. “Mind your own business, Tyler.”

She pushed herself away from the embrace and lightly slapped my chest again. I chuckled, watching her bright blue eyes shine in the moonlight. She’d appeared more relaxed and carefree over the past few days, and I wished she wasn’t always so hard on herself.

“Oh, it’s like that?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s like that!”

“What are you doing tomorrow besides working?”

She shrugged. “Nothing, but I don’t know when I’m getting off.”

“I get off around three, but there’s something I want to show you. I found a new spot.”

Her smile widened. “What is it? How did you find it? You really haven’t been anywhere, right?”

“No, I haven’t,” I said, shaking my head. “You’re a bad friend and a terrible tour guide.”

“Wow!” she mouthed back. “I’ll remember that when there’s something you want me to ride.”

She turned and walked toward her house.

“What?” I called after her. “No good night? Nothing?”

“Bad friends don’t say good night!” she tossed back with a maniacal laugh.

I yelled after her, “Wear a bathing suit.”

“I knew it!” Elyse exclaimed, pushing her sunglasses on top of her head as she stared out the window of my jeep.

I followed the GPS’ instructions down a long, almost secluded road surrounded by a forest of trees in a small state park.

“Knew what?” I asked, a little worried she might know about my surprise location.

“That you’re a serial killer. You brought me here to kill me, didn’t you?”

I laughed as I pulled into the dirt parking lot and put the jeep in park.

“Where are we?” She scrambled out of the car and followed me toward the back, where I grabbed a duffel bag.

I tilted my head toward the small entrance to a hiking path between two big trees. “Come here. You’ll find out soon enough.”

She playfully skipped closer to me, a wide smile on her beautiful face. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail, with tendrils framing her bare face. She was so effortlessly gorgeous.

“Here,” she sassed.

I resisted the strong urge to cup her face and kiss her deeply. Kiss her so deeply and passionately that it would make her toes curl and her heart beat more quickly.

“Turn around,” I said, making a circular motion with my index finger.

She surprisingly obeyed without a snappy comeback as I neatly folded the bandana in my hands.

“Close your eyes,” I murmured, running the fabric across her eyes.

“What’s going on?”

“You trust me, right?”

Her body tensed as I knotted the makeshift blindfold.

“Are we crashing an outdoor wedding or something?” Elyse asked. “Because I’m kinda not dressed for one.”

“You trust me, right?” I repeated, waving my hands in front of her covered eyes.

“Yes,” she replied softly.

I slipped my hand in hers and led her through a small, short dirt path. I kept my pace slow because I didn’t want her tripping over anything, but apparently, she was either too excited or too nervous about walking blind and occasionally crashed into me.

I sucked in a deep breath each time my body reacted to even the smallest touch from her. She had so much control over me, and she didn’t even know it.

Once we reached the special spot, I led her to the near edge, removed the blindfold, and watched her reaction. She gasped as her eyes slowly scanned the clear open water in front of us and the water tumbling down a small hillside.

“Tyler,” Elyse said, slowly spinning around and surveying the cluster of trees and rocks surrounding the open water. “This is beautiful. How did you even find this place?”

“A coworker mentioned it but couldn’t remember exactly where it was,” I admitted with a small shrug. “Did some research on Google, and the rest of it was luck, I guess.”

“I’m impressed.”

A tingly feeling warmed my stomach as I watched her happily skip around the rocks and then kick off her sandals. When I overheard a coworker chatting about the best-kept secret spots at some of the state parks, I figured Elyse and I could both use a break from the city and enjoy a little bit of nature.

“Tyler!” she yelled with a bright smile and wave. “What are you waiting for? Take your clothes off!”

Don't need to tell me twice.

I shrugged out of my shirt as Elyse turned back around and slid off her shirt and shorts. *Shit.* I gulped as my eyes studied her simple black-and-white-striped one-piece swimsuit with a thong bottom. When she turned around to check if I'd followed her command, I gulped again, focusing on the plunging neckline. *Shit.*

“Oh my God!” she squealed loudly as she dipped her foot in the water. “It's so cold!”

The weather was still quite warm, even in November, but I wasn't too surprised the water was cold.

“Don't be a pussy,” I teased, biting my lower lip as I stood next to her at the edge.

The constant stream of water plunged into the open body as mist sprayed the air and small waves glided into soft ripples.

“Then you jump,” she said, squirming a bit as the cold mist nipped at her skin.

I smirked at her, taking a few steps back, and jumped into the calm water.

Holy shit, it's fucking cold, I immediately thought as my body descended into the water. But within a few seconds, the river had warmed me as I broke the surface and shook my head.

I let out a holler, running my hands down my face and pushing back my hair as I treaded in place.

“Get in!” I commanded, laughing. “It's not bad once you're in.”

“Are you lying to me?”

I swam backward, giving her space to jump in. “I would never lie to you. Now, get the fuck in here before I get you myself.”

She muttered a slew of curse words before she took a deep breath and backed up to get a running start. I laughed, listening

to her scream as she plunged into the water.

When she popped up for air, she laughed with me, her wet hair sticking to her shoulders and her eyes blinking out the water.

“You’re right,” she agreed. “This feels so good.”

“Told you so,” I said, splashing her.

We swam toward the waterfall and floated to the other side, resting against a huge rock wall, and watching the water rush down endlessly. My hands itched to draw her against me when she threw her head back into the falling water, smoothing out her hair. Water dripped between the valley of her breasts, where I wanted to bury my face.

“Thank you,” she said as her hands played with the foam created when the water hit the surface. “I really needed this.”

I remained silent, noting she seemed relaxed and happy, until she threw some foam at me.

“Keep splashing me, and you’ll regret it,” I warned, pushing myself off the rock wall.

“What are you going to do about it?” she asked with a mischievous smirk as she raced through the waterfall.

She hadn’t gotten too far when I went after her, wrapping my hand around her ankle and pulling her underwater. The sassy little minx thought she was clever; she tried to pull down my trunks, but the drawstrings were tightly drawn and knotted.

“You’re the worst,” she said, laughing and splashing me when she came up for air.

“Where do you see yourself in five years?” Elyse asked softly, staring at the sky above us.

After spending a few hours in the water, we’d spread out two huge beach towels from my duffel bag on the smoothest

parts of the rock surface and laid down on our backs to watch the sunset.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly, closing my eyes for a moment. “I mean I always wanted my own architect or construction company someday. I don’t know when that will happen, though.”

She remained silent as she hummed softly to herself.

“What about you?” I asked. “Where do you see *yourself* in five years?”

“I hope that I’m working at a Michelin-star restaurant,” she answered. “There’s so much to learn and experience. I just want to make a name for myself.”

“We’re gonna get you there, I promise.”

Elyse tilted her head to look at me. “How are you so sure?”

“Because I know you, and I know what you’re capable of.”

“And I know *you’re* capable of accomplishing anything *you* want to do too.”

“Besides your career, what else do you want to accomplish?” I asked, resting my head in the palm of my hands.

“I want Alyssa to be happy,” she answered quickly with a soft sigh. “Raising her when I was a kid myself wasn’t the easiest, but it also made me stronger. She’s strong, outspoken, and sassy, but she’s not exactly driven. I don’t want her to be a server in a fancy restaurant for the rest of her life.”

“She’s definitely outspoken and sassy. I think she’s the younger sister I never wanted.”

Elyse laughed out loud. “What about you? What else in your life do you want to accomplish?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I mean, I’ve accomplished a lot so far, and I’ve learned life changes direction in a heartbeat. I guess I need to accept that whatever happens just happens.”

She tilted her head toward me again. “I know, right? That’s why I’m trying to live more for the now.”

I propped myself up on my elbows. “Can I ask you something personal?” I asked hesitantly.

“Anything.”

“What’s your favorite memory of your parents?”

She rolled onto her side to face me, glancing down at the beach towel beneath her as a finger lazily traced the floral pattern on it.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I said softly when she remained silent.

Elyse shook her head and smiled at me. “When I was younger, I wanted to stay home from school whenever my dad had the day off. One day, when my dad woke me up for school, I begged and begged him to let me spend the day with him. To my surprise, he said yes, but I had to get up and get dressed. I met him at the car, thinking we were going on some grand adventure,” she said, glancing back down at the towel. “Nope. My dad dropped me off at school, telling me an education was too important to miss. I was so pissed. I didn’t talk to him for the rest of the day.”

I laughed lightly. “Damn, that’s a good one. I might try that if I ever have kids again.”

“Do you want kids again?” Her head snapped back up as her eyes followed mine.

“Maybe in the future,” I said with a shrug. “I guess it depends if I get past this damn wall.”

“I think you will,” she said, rolling onto her back again and staring at the sky. “What’s your favorite memory of Jordyn?”

Despite the hundreds of memories of me and Jordyn that flowed through my mind, only one stood out from the rest.

“Uh, when I went on deployment, there were times I couldn’t talk to her that often. We would go days without talking, and I knew she hated it. So, when I got back, she thought I still had another week, but I surprised her at work.

She was working a double and was having a bad day, according to her coworkers. When she saw me, she screamed and passed out. Like literally passed out. And when she got up, she laughed, thinking it had been a dream. Then she got mad that I hadn't told her when I'd arrived so she could pick me up. We hadn't seen each other in almost a year."

"How long were you together?" she asked.

"We were friends first for a year, dated for two years, got hitched, and she died a year later."

Elyse turned to face me again, sympathy all over her face.

"I hate that that happened to you," she whispered.

"Life changes in a heartbeat," I repeated.

We spent the next hour talking about past relationships, and a sense of peace ran through me as I shared details about my life that I'd only ever told Jordyn. She'd known everything about me. Maybe I felt relaxed because I'd never heard even the slightest bit of judgment in Elyse's voice or any stiffness in her reaction. She simply listened to me talk, and it felt kind of nice.

However, my blood ran cold when she opened up about her relationship with Jason. The more she talked about him, the more I really hated the guy for preying on her insecurities. No wonder she always doubted herself. Had he even seen all her amazing qualities? Because even though she might not have seen how amazing she was, a single person might have held enough power to help her see her potential—or easily fuck it all up.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

elyse

WHO KNEW LEARNING ABOUT INVENTORY, payroll, and building menus could be so fun and exciting? Because it's not ... well, except the menu-building part. Even with Christmas a few weeks away, Dave had slowly started training me in my new position as sous-chef over the past week. I felt odd walking around the kitchen with a clipboard in my hands instead of a spoon or spatula or something.

Luckily, Dave needed me in the kitchen to help push out trays and trays of hors d'oeuvres for a company holiday party with 150 guests. Instead of opting for individual plates from a limited menu, the person who planned the party thought serving an assortment of appetizers would be more fun and probably less expensive. Except Maine lobster—for the lobster tacos with grilled sweet corn pico de gallo—and high-quality filet mignon—for the signature steak tartare with capers—weren't the cheapest ingredients.

After dropping off my first round of caviar and crème fraîche tartlets for the party guests, Alyssa returned to the kitchen with a big smile as she watched me.

“What can I help you with, Lyss?” I asked, watching Chris sprinkle sesame seeds on a huge tray of short rib pot stickers.

“You look beautiful today,” she said, batting her long, natural eyelashes at me.

I rolled my eyes and giggled. “What do you want? I know you want something because there's *no* way I look beautiful right now.”

“What are you doing tomorrow, birthday girl?”

“Uh, watching rom-coms and drinking wine like always. Why?” I didn’t even have time to be suspicious of her question as I prepared another tray of tartlets.

“Why?” she whined, stomping her foot. “That’s so lame.”

I shrugged. “It’s what I like to do.”

“Can I at least take you out for dinner? Please?”

“Why don’t you just come over to my place and we’ll watch movies and get drunk?”

Alyssa sighed out loud and shook her head. “Dinner. My treat.”

“Movie. My place,” I argued, carefully piping crème fraîche into an empty tartlet.

“Elyse!” she practically shrieked at me.

“Stop being a grandma, Elyse,” Alex yelled at me from her station, where she was working on a tray of Lebanese hummus with warm pitas and raw vegetables. “Go out with Alyssa, for God’s sake.”

“Thank you, Alex,” my sister said smugly, winking at the station chef.

Dave ambled into the kitchen, and my heart sank with nervousness when he spotted us talking. This definitely wouldn’t be the first time he had yelled at Alyssa for hanging out in the area with me.

“It’s your birthday tomorrow?” he asked, grabbing the tray from Alex. “You have the day off anyway. You should do something fun.”

Alyssa beamed with pride, realizing Dave had a heart under his tough exterior.

“And, Alyssa, get back in the front of the house,” he ordered, handing the tray of hummus and vegetables to her.

“Saw that coming from a mile away,” she said with a laugh as she left the area.

I sighed in frustration. I honestly didn't like celebrating my birthday. Part of me wanted to preserve the memories of my mom throwing Alyssa and me the best parties ever. She would spend all day decorating the house or a pavilion at a nearby park, and she baked and decorated the best cakes for us. Our presents were perfectly wrapped with ribbons and bows. My parents sang the loudest during the birthday song. Birthdays with my parents had been perfect and amazing.

I believed any birthday without them just wouldn't be the same.

The smell of food woke me up the next morning, making my stomach grumble. Even though I might have wolfed down a dozen different appetizers last night, I'd still gone to bed hungry and exhausted.

Wondering who the hell was in my sacred kitchen, I pulled myself out of bed and headed toward my special place. Light music floated from the kitchen as I noticed colorful balloons and streamers decorating the dining room.

Alyssa screamed, throwing her spatula in the air, when I stepped into the kitchen and eyed the different plates of food lining the counter.

"Fucking shit!" she yelled, covering her heart with one hand, and breathing heavily. "What are you doing?"

"Well, it *is* my house," I said with a smirk, watching her pick up the spatula off the floor and toss it into the sink. "This is so cute, Lyss. Thank you."

"Happy birthday, Elyse," she said, giving me a quick hug. "I know it's not much."

"This is great. I don't even know the last time you cooked."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know I'm not the greatest cook," she warned, picking up a plate of pancakes and a small bottle of syrup.

“This is perfect,” I reassured her, grabbing a bowl of scrambled eggs and plate of toast. “Thank you.”

After grabbing a few more plates and a pitcher of juice from the kitchen, we sat down at the dining room table and dug into the spread of eggs, pancakes, bacon, sausage, and toast.

“We’re going to hit the mall today,” Alyssa said, stacking two pancakes on her plate. “I managed to snag a reservation at this five-star restaurant that Jacob Stone recommended, so we need new outfits.”

I almost dropped my fork at her news. “What? How the hell did you manage that? The restaurant has blown up since Jacob’s recommendation.”

Even though Gordon Ramsay was my favorite chef, Jacob Stone was definitely a close second, owning two Michelin-star restaurants in Los Angeles that I’d always wanted to visit. Dining at a restaurant that he recommended was probably the closest I’d ever get to one of his establishments.

My sister shrugged. “I have my ways. And I promise it doesn’t involve sex.”

“I have a ton of dresses, Lyss. Can’t I just wear one of those?”

“It’s a *five-star* restaurant that Jacob Stone recommended, Elyse.”

She had a point. Shit.

“So, that’s why we’re going to the mall to find sexy dresses.”

“Why sexy?” I asked, arching an eyebrow as I bit into a piece of bacon.

“Uh, because this place is insane. Celebrities go there.”

Of course. Need to look sexy for a hot, single celebrity.

After cleaning up the kitchen and taking a quick shower, I scrolled through my phone as Alyssa hopped into the bathroom. Sitting on the edge of my bed, I smiled at all the

birthday messages on my social media accounts, but I frowned slightly when I noticed I hadn't received any messages from Tyler.

I figured he would be one of the first to wish me a happy birthday, but maybe he was still sleeping or busy at work already. I threw on some jeans and a cute top, beginning to feel the excitement about having dinner at an exclusive restaurant that one of my favorite chefs highly recommended.

One of Alyssa's favorite malls was a strip mall about thirty minutes away, which meant we needed to endure the unseasonably hot weather between stores. But according to my sister, this place had the best dress boutiques in the area. Based on her always immaculate wardrobe, I couldn't disagree with her.

"I'm melting!" I joked, waving my wallet in front of my face, as I followed Alyssa toward a store. "I hope it's not this hot later. My makeup will run down my face and ruin everything."

"Just one more reason to look for a short dress," she sang out with a wink as she grabbed my hand and pulled me into a cute boutique filled with sparkly dresses.

I spent about thirty minutes rummaging through the racks of dresses and found two dresses that caught my eye. I stood outside the dressing rooms, waiting on Alyssa to find her dresses, and checked my phone again. It was almost two in the afternoon, and Tyler still hadn't messaged me anything. Not even, "Hey, how are you doing?"

My sister noticed my frown as she approached me with a ton of dresses in her arms. "What's with the long face?"

"Nothing," I muttered, shoving my phone into my back pocket. "Ready to try on some dresses?"

"Yes! But after you tell me what's wrong."

I sighed and glared at the floor. “I’m waiting for someone to wish me a happy birthday or something. What if he forgot?”

“Does this person’s name start with a T and rhyme with filer?”

I switched my glare from the floor to Alyssa. “No.”

The smirk on her face told me that she didn’t believe me. “Does it, though?”

I wondered why I even tried lying to her in the first place.

“Fine,” I huffed, rolling my eyes. “Yes, it’s Tyler. He hasn’t said anything to me all morning.”

“He could be at a work,” Alyssa reminded me sweetly as she walked into the dressing room area and picked an empty stall. “I promise you he didn’t forget.”

I wanted to believe her, but if Tyler was one of my closest friends, wouldn’t he be the first to say something? Work or no work, he would’ve found time to message me. But then again, he was a man. Did men wish their women friends a happy birthday? *Ugh*. My mind worked too much.

“Ready?” Alyssa yelled from her stall as I smoothed out a white dress I slipped on.

The simple, white satin strappy halter dress fell just above my knees, and a thin strap reached around my neck and connected to the deep plunge in the back. I loved the feel of the smooth fabric and the breeziness of the open back.

“Yeah,” I said, throwing my hair over my shoulders as I stepped out.

Our eyes met before sweeping over each other’s dresses.

“We have the same dress on!” she yelled with a laugh.

I chuckled, watching her twirl around in her pale pink dress in front of the full-length three-way mirror. She looked absolutely stunning.

“It’s a miracle,” I cheered. “We never pick the same dress, but we should wear them tonight.”

Alyssa frowned and rolled her eyes. “That’s so lame, but we’re gonna do it, because it’s your birthday!”

“Happy birthday!” Lena screamed on the other end of the phone as I curled my hair in my bathroom.

I giggled, glad my phone was on speaker mode. “Thanks, Lena.”

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Alyssa is taking me to dinner at a fancy restaurant. I wish you could join us. It sucks that you have to work.”

Lena coughed. “That does suck. Be careful what you wish for, though,” she said brightly before ending the call and leaving me puzzled momentarily. She loved to talk, and I figured we’d be on the phone until Alyssa, and I headed out the door.

With my hair and makeup completed, I slipped into the white halter dress and strapped on a pair of white high heels. After running red lipstick across my lips and spritzing myself with my favorite perfume, I met Alyssa in the hallway.

As always, she looked gorgeous as the pale pink dress hugged her hips and showed off her small body. Looking at her was almost like looking at my reflection, except her blonde hair was straightened.

“Is this sexy enough?” I asked teasingly, spinning around for her.

“Oh yeah!” She whistled. “We’re definitely walking out with rich men tonight.”

I scoffed and shook my head.

“Elyse, you seriously look amazing. Are you sure you’re 27?”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” I said as we descended the stairs and headed outside.

“Wait,” she said suddenly, stopping on the porch and opening her small purse. “You’re wearing this.”

I shook my head, eyeing the pink shoulder sash that read “birthday girl” in white letters.

“Nope. I don’t want everyone looking at me. I don’t care that’s it my birthday,” I whined, heading toward the car as she chased after me, waving the sash around in her hand.

“Well, I do! Plus, you might get a free meal,” she countered, wrangling the sash over my head. “Shut up and wear it.”

As Alyssa pulled out of the driveway, I frowned slightly, noticing Tyler’s jeep parked outside. Maybe men really didn’t remember birthdays and stuff, but my feelings were still a little hurt.

“Hey, you okay?” she asked, nudging my arm with her elbow as she drove.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I fibbed. “Thank you for spending the day with me. I’ve had a really great time so far.”

“Good, because I wanted to let you know how grateful I am for you. I honestly don’t know what I would do without you, Elyse. I probably would’ve been in the system, desperately wanting someone to love me as much as you do.”

How could my baby sister frustrate me one minute and then make me bawl like a baby the next?

“Lyss,” I choked out, wiping away a few tears with my fingers.

“I know I haven’t been the easiest person in the world, but I can’t wait to be just like you when I grow up.”

I giggled. “Thank you. That honestly means the world to me, and I love the person you’re becoming. You know mom and dad would be so proud of you.”

“Nah,” she said, shaking her head. “They would be so proud of *you* and what *you’ve* accomplished so far. And you’re not even 30!”

One of my biggest fears was pushing Alyssa in the wrong direction. I didn't want to mess up her life because of a decision I thought was best for her. Like any good parent, I hadn't wanted to see her struggle, but I also had wanted to instill a sense of responsibility and respect in her. She was my baby sister, and I couldn't lose her too.

"Are you still upset about Tyler?" she asked as she pressed on the brakes at a red light. "Elyse, do you like him? Like, actually like him?"

"We're just—"

"Don't give me that 'just friends' bullshit," she interrupted, giving me a stink eye. "Be honest with me."

I huffed, leaning my head against the window. "Yeah, I like him. Honestly, I think he and I are better friends than I was with Jason. How weird is that?"

"Are you going to tell him?"

"No," I admitted with a heavy heart. "Telling him won't change anything because he doesn't want to be in a relationship. I have to respect that. And he basically told me not to fall for him because he would hurt me."

Sharing Tyler's loss with her felt wrong because it wasn't my story or my business, especially when he'd confided in me. Unlike my sister, I could keep a secret—or two.

"I'm one hundred percent sure the feeling is mutual," Alyssa said confidently, pulling into a crowded parking lot in the back of a building complex.

Damn her, I thought, scoping out my surroundings and not realizing where we were. *She completely distracted me with sisterly bonding. Oh, she's good. Real good.*

"Will you close your eyes for me?" she asked, poking out her lower lip into a cute little pout as we stood in front of her car. "Please?"

I sighed, nodded, and closed my eyes. She took my hand and gently guided me onto the sidewalk. After a few steps, we stopped, and I heard two things. One, Alyssa whispering

something to another person. Two, dance music blasting from the building. We were not at the exclusive and fancy restaurant.

“Uh, Lyss, I hear music,” I admitted, fidgeting a bit. “What’s going on?”

“The music is from the building next to us,” she explained smoothly. “Relax, angry woman.”

She grabbed my hand again and carefully led me up a staircase.

Building next door, my ass, I thought with a smile. Not only could I hear the music blatantly blaring in the area we were walking into, but I also detected quick flashes of colorful lights with my eyes lightly closed.

Alyssa finally made me stop walking and instructed me to continue keeping my eyes closed.

“I’ll be right back,” she said, kissing my cheek, as I heard her heels click away from me.

What the hell was she up to?

“Elyse!” she yelled. “Open your eyes and turn around.”

I quickly opened my eyes and slowly turned around.

“Happy birthday, Elyse!” a group of familiar faces screamed wildly at me.

What the hell?

My eyes scanned the crowd. I recognized my coworkers, a few friends, and Tyler’s friends—but no Tyler.

What the fuck?

But I didn’t have time to dwell on his absence. I noticed my surprise party occupied a private section on the second floor of a trendy dance club. Dark purple strobe lights flashed everywhere. The dance music vibrated throughout the area. The section overlooked the main dance floor on the first level.

Colorful balloons, streamers, and a big banner with my name on it decorated the area. A long table littered with a cake

and gift bags sat next to our own private bar and personal bartenders.

“Lyss!” I screamed, failing to keep my tears at bay. “I told you not to do anything!”

We threw our arms around each other and cried happy tears. Although I knew my sister loved me, I couldn’t believe she’d taken the time to organize a surprise party. I had the best sister in the fucking world.

“Don’t cry, you big crybaby,” she scolded, pulling back from the embrace and blotting my eyes with a tissue. “You’ll ruin your makeup.”

As soon as we stepped back, everyone else crowded around me and wished me a happy birthday.

“Happy birthday, chef,” Chris mumbled, a pack of cigarettes sticking out from the pocket on his shirt. “Uh, one of the cards is from Ricky. We tried to sneak him in here, but the security here is tight.”

“Thank you,” I said, hugging him quickly. “You guys shouldn’t have.”

Will and Kyle charged at me as Will scooped me into his arms and circled around a few times before setting me down. I became dizzy from the motion when my feet hit the floor.

“Happy birthday, Elyse!” Kyle said with a big goofy grin. “Did Alyssa ruin the surprise? I bet she did.”

I laughed and shook my head. “No, she didn’t ruin it, but the music was a big clue. Thanks for coming you guys!”

Don’t ask about Tyler. Don’t ask about Tyler.

“You didn’t drive, did you?” I asked with feigned suspicion. “Because you guys are getting drunk with me, right?”

Kyle clicked his tongue and shook his head. “What kind of question is that birthday girl? Of course, we’re getting hammered with you. And have no fear, sweetheart, we took an Uber.”

Don't ask about Tyler. Don't ask about Tyler.

“E!” I heard a familiar voice shriek my name. I turned to find Lena running toward me and hurling herself into my arms. “I told you to be careful what you wish for! Happy birthday, babe.”

I inhaled her familiar strong perfume and held her tight. “I was wondering why the hell you hung up on me!”

“You know I have a big mouth!” She stood back and laughed. “I had to hang up or else I would spoil the surprise.”

As always, Lena looked fabulous in a short, red satin dress with a v-neckline and matching red heels.

After taking a few shots with Lena and Alyssa, I threw my arms around my sister's neck and kissed her cheek.

“You know you're amazing, right?” I gushed, resting my head on her shoulder. “How did you even pull this off? I honestly believed we were going to dinner.”

A big smile formed on her face. “Well, it wasn't *all* my idea. I wish I could take all the credit, but I can't.”

“What?” I pulled back and stared at her. “Whose idea was it?”

“Mine.” Tyler's voice whispered in my ear.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Elyse

HE WAS HERE. For me.

Everything inside me completely melted, seeing him dressed up and holding a bouquet of flowers. I suddenly felt guilty for thinking he'd forgotten about my birthday. About me. I was such an idiot.

He'd planned this surprise party for me. With my sister. With my smart-mouthed sister.

And he looked devastatingly handsome, wearing black fitted jeans, a white t-shirt, an olive green bomber jacket, and black shoes. His brown hair was trimmed, with the longer pieces swaying to the left.

"Happy birthday, beautiful," he said, handing me the flowers and leaning forward to kiss my cheek.

My heart sighed with happiness as I accepted the flowers.

"I thought you forgot," I muttered, staring at the floor and feeling ashamed.

He lifted my chin with two fingers. "I could never forget you, Elyse. Honestly? I think I was more excited about your birthday than you were."

A huge smile spread across my face, and I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly.

"Thank you so much for this. I'm so happy to have you in my life," I said, on the verge of tears again.

He squeezed me tighter, lowering his head toward my ear. "I'm just showing you what you deserve. And if you can't tell, you're killing me with this sexy little dress."

Pulling away from each other, I looked over my shoulder and back before giving him a wink. “If you’re lucky enough, hopefully you can take it off later.”

I didn’t catch his reaction as I headed toward the table with the gifts and cake, setting the bouquet of flowers on it after breathing in their scent.

I was such a fool, believing he didn’t care about me. He was the one person who cared about me most of all, and his presence made the entire room shine brighter.

“Elyse!” he yelled from the bar area, waving me over. “Get your sexy ass over here!”

I smiled when a bartender handed him an opened bottle of vodka.

“Time for shots!” He lifted the bottle in the air as the bartender set out several empty shot glasses.

After tossing back one too many vodka shots, Alyssa pushed a card into my hand.

“This is a scavenger hunt!” she said, flipping the card over to show my smiling face on the back. “And, yes, you’re doing it! So, I don’t want to hear you say no.”

“But it’s my birthday,” I whined, reading over the list.

“Oh, please. You and everyone else here know I don’t like or listen to that word.”

“Take a shot off someone?” I read out loud and made a face. “Really, Lyss? This is a birthday party, not a bachelorette party.”

She shrugged her small shoulders. “I don’t fucking care. We’re doing it.”

A few minutes later, two groups were organized. Alyssa, Lena, and I were on one team, and Alex, Tia, and Kyle—because he didn’t want to be left out of any game—were on another.

My team—Team Elyse—huddled in a corner of the room and read over the list.

“Let’s split up,” Lena suggested. “We’ll each do something from the list and knock it out that way.”

Alyssa and I nodded in agreement because neither of us had a better suggestion or strategy. We raced down the stairs to the first floor. Lena tore off in search of a guy with a tattoo of a dragon or a Chinese symbol and to use the men’s restroom. I scanned the piece of paper for my tasks.

Scavenger task: Have a stranger buy you a drink.

Easy peasy, I thought with so much confidence.

My eyes connected with a handsome blonde guy who watched me descend the stairs. He nodded and smiled.

Bingo.

“He’s cute, right?” I yelled in Alyssa’s ear over the loud music, tilting my head toward the guy’s direction.

“Who cares? Just get it done!” She pushed me in the handsome blonde’s direction and pulled out her phone to take a photo for proof.

I slid into a narrow space between him and a crowd of other people at the bar. My eyes didn’t connect with his right away as I pretended to look for the bartender. After running my fingers through my hair, I tilted my head and caught him looking at me.

“You having a fun birthday?” he asked, pointing to my birthday sash.

I shrugged and leaned in closer. “It could be better.”

“Oh yeah?” He arched an eyebrow at me. “You need to get lucky or something?”

“No,” I said, giggling. “My friends and I are doing a scavenger hunt, and I just need someone to buy me a drink.”

“That’s easy,” he said, signaling the bartender. “I’m at your service. I’m Matt.”

“Elyse.” I gave him a bright smile and batted my eyelashes for him.

“What’s your poison?”

Scavenger task: Order and drink a flaming shot.

Two birds, one stone. Ha! Take that Team Kyle. Or Team Alex.

“Feeling adventurous?” I flirted.

Matt shrugged. “Sure.”

“Let’s do a flaming shot.”

His brown eyes widened with surprise, but he nodded at the request and placed the order with the bartender. Seconds later, the cute bartender returned with two half-full pints of beer and two empty shot glasses. Before filling the shot glasses with amaretto and topping it off with rum, the bartender—Ben—agreed to kiss Alyssa to cross off another task on the list as I quickly snapped a photo for proof.

Scavenger task: Kiss a bartender.

Ben whipped out a lighter as he set the alcohol in the shot glass on fire and pushed the small drinks and the beer pints toward me and Matt.

“Cheers,” Matt said with a wink.

“Cheers,” I repeated before blowing out the flame and quickly dropping the shot glass into the beer pint.

Alyssa screamed with pride as I swallowed the drink in one huge gulp and noticed the camera flash out of the corner of my eye.

Scavenger task: One point for every business card collected.

“Matt, you’re my hero,” I gushed, throwing my arms around his neck and kissing his scruffy cheek. “By the way, do you have a business card?”

He smirked, pulling out his wallet and handing me one that read “Matthew Sinclair, Accountant.”

“Hey, since you guys have your arms around each other ...” Alyssa said, waving the list in the air. “Elyse, turn around

in his arms and hold his hands. Pretend you're at prom."

Scavenger task: Take a prom-style photo with a stranger.

"Anything else I can help you with?" Matt asked once my sister had snapped the picture.

Scavenger task: Find a guy with a body piercing. Ears don't count.

"Got a body piercing?" I asked hopefully.

He chuckled and shook his head. "Sorry, beautiful."

"Thanks for your help!" I said honestly as Alyssa tugged on my hand, leading me to the staircase up to the second floor and meeting up with Lena.

Not surprisingly, she'd completed most of the tasks on the list as we quickly scrolled through her phone to review the proof. *Photo of a muscled guy with a dragon tattoo on his left bicep. Check. Photo of Lena pretending—hopefully pretending—to use the urinal with her tushy in the basin. Check. Fourteen business cards safely tucked in the pocket of her dress. Check. Photo of a guy's tongue piercing. Check.*

After all of us had double-checked the list, only one task remained.

Scavenger task: Take a body shot or let someone take a body shot off you.

"Well, the list doesn't specify who takes the body shot," I said, glancing between Lena and Alyssa.

They both shook their heads.

"You're the birthday girl, so you should do it," Lena encouraged as we headed toward the second floor.

"And, no, you can't take a body shot off your teammates," Alyssa said quickly, answering my second question before I even asked. "Gross. Find someone else."

I huffed and rolled my eyes, not wanting to lick alcohol off some stranger's body. I shuddered at the thought until I spotted Tyler talking to Will near the private bar.

“Having fun?” Tyler asked, sliding an arm around my waist as I approached.

“I would have more fun if you did me a favor,” I said, biting my lower lip and giving my best hopeful gaze.

He smirked. “And what would that be?”

“Take a body shot off me.”

Will hollered with astonishment, and Tyler’s smirk grew even wider.

“Where do you want it?” he whispered in my ear.

“Surprise me.”

After Alyssa handed Tyler a vodka shot, he gently pushed my hair to one side. His warm hands brushed my skin, burning me with anticipation.

I squirmed a bit, feeling the cool liquid hit on my shoulder and wet the thin straps of my dress. Tilting my head to expose my neck, I breathed out when his lips pressed against my skin. *Oh God, his lips felt so good.*

I just wanted to melt as he softly and slowly sucked and licked every drop of the shot from my neck. Every single fiber of my being was on fire for him. I briefly contemplated hiking up the skirt of my dress and humping him right then and there, in public. His tongue alone drove me crazy.

“How was that?” Tyler whispered, gently tugging my earlobe between his teeth.

So good. So fucking good.

“Damn!” Kyle shouted jokingly. “Get a room!”

As Team Elyse and Team Alex/Kyle huddled to figure out the winner, my mind frantically replayed the shot scene, and my body whined at the loss of Tyler’s touch. I wanted him so badly.

In the end, Team Elyse won the scavenger hunt because Team Alex/Kyle couldn’t find a person with a tattoo of a dragon or Chinese symbol, and they’d only snagged nine business cards. *Thank you, Lena, for saving our asses.*

To celebrate our victory, we cut into the birthday cake and took a few more shots before everyone scattered to the private dance floor. I wasn't sure alcohol was even needed to feel this good. To dance with my sister. To laugh with my friends. To be surrounded by people that cared about me. I never wanted the night to end.

Alyssa and I laughed when Kyle pushed himself between us, making a "Kyle sandwich." As we danced with him, I caught Tyler slowly walking toward us out of the corner of my eye, his hazel eyes trained on me, and a smirk plastered on his face. Heat boiled inside me, and a desert lodged in my throat.

When his hands gripped mine, I seriously believed my heart might rip out of my chest, especially when he pulled me close and continued to stare at me.

I was falling fast and hard. Not even Jason made feel this way. I was too paralyzed to move, out of fear of not being close enough. Too dazed to talk because I didn't want to miss anything he said. Unable to tear my eyes off him because I wanted to remember everything about him. No man had ever had this much power over me.

"Dance with me," he breathed into my ear as he twirled me around, pressing my back into his chest.

One hand clutched my hip while the other splayed across my stomach as my body swayed to the beat and felt the heat sweep through his body. Goosebumps peppered my shoulders and arms when he rested his chin in the curve of my neck and blew cool air against it.

I was in so much trouble.

When his lips brushed the small of my neck, the need between my legs ached and cried for immediate attention. As his fingers softly traveled from my exposed thighs to the curve of my waist to the outline of my breasts to my neck, I blocked out the rest of the club and everything else in my mind. Only Tyler and I existed. I needed him.

I had never wanted anyone so badly in my life.

“Elyse!” a familiar voice broke through my daydream.
“Elyse!”

My body moaned at the loss of Tyler’s body and hands when he stepped back as Alex approached me, grabbing my arm frantically and yanking me toward a group of guys near the private bar.

“Your friend won’t listen to me,” she said with panic in her eyes.

I narrowed my eyes in confusion, until I noticed Lena exchanged in a very heavy lip lock with some frat guy who had his hands all over her tiny body. Rage tore through me as the frat guy’s buddies cheered him on and encouraged him to slip his hands under her dress.

I angrily pushed my way through the hormonal dickwads and latched onto Lena’s arm.

“Get the hell off her!” I snarled, pulling my very drunk friend behind me.

“E,” she slurred, her eyelids heavy. “He likes me.”

“Lena,” I said, shaking my head. “He’s really gross and stupid.”

“But, but—”

“She didn’t say no,” the conceited frat guy sneered, reaching for her arm.

“Because she’s super drunk, you asshole,” I shouted at him. “You’re taking advantage of a woman.”

“Get the fuck out of here,” Will ordered, breaking into the group, and standing between the cocky college kid and me.

“She invited us up here,” he taunted, pointing to Lena, who was now under Alex’s protection.

“Oh yeah?” Fire danced in Will’s dark eyes. “Well, I’m taking the fucking invite back. Get the fuck out of here.”

“Whatever, man,” the guy said, shaking his head and giving us all the finger as he and his buddies headed down the stairs.

“Thanks, Will, for having my back,” I said, giving him a smile.

“Anytime,” he said, shooting a worried look at my friend.

After thanking Alex for her concern and asking Will to grab some water, I took Lena’s hands and squeezed them tightly.

“He was a good kisser, E,” she mumbled, laying her head on my shoulder.

“He was also a fucking jerk,” I said, smoothing back her hair and kissing her forehead.

“One of his friends dared me. And you know I don’t back down from a dare.”

Yes, I knew how adventurous my girl was. I knew she liked to grab life by its balls and squeeze. Sometimes I wished I had her courage.

“Is everything okay?” Kyle asked with a slight frown as he gazed at Lena.

“Yeah,” I said. “Lena has her beer goggles on and is making some really poor choices.”

“Am not!” she protested, accepting a full water glass from Will, and drinking half of it within seconds.

“Are you having a good time?” he asked, nudging my arm.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I don’t want the night to end.”

I talked with Kyle and Will a little longer, and Kyle swore on his mother’s life that he would watch Lena when I excused myself to use the restroom. As I weaved through the dancing bodies in the crowded VIP area, my eyes fell on Tyler, sitting by himself in a booth near the entrance of a long hallway that led to the restrooms.

With one arm resting against the back of the booth and the other holding a glass of whiskey, he looked so damn fucking sexy.

“Alone?” I asked, raising an eyebrow as I slipped into the booth beside him.

“Just needed a second,” he said with a shrug.

“Wanna take that second with me? I promise you won’t regret it.”

“You promise?”

I swallowed when his fingers caressed my thigh and inched higher.

“Yup,” I said, popping the “p” at the end and turning my body slightly into him.

“Can you guarantee I’ll be satisfied?”

I spread my legs wider under the table, giving his expert fingers more room to work their magic.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said, with a small hum, as I leaned in and placed tiny kisses on his jawline.

My mind didn’t even bother to warn me of the dangers of losing my self-control, because my body and my sexual needs overwhelmed any logical thought in me. I couldn’t think or even see clearly when I was around him.

I moaned when his fingers inched closer to my sex. A few inches higher, and Tyler would find a very nice surprise. The thought of getting caught excited me even more because we were sitting near the entrance to the restrooms. But I fucking didn’t care. I needed Tyler’s hands all over me. Now.

“You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep,” he warned, nipping at my neck.

“What if I promise you that I’m not wearing any panties?”

He shot me a combined look of suspicion and surprise as his fingers immediately swept over my wetness.

He growled as he pushed two fingers inside me, and his thumb rubbed my clit. I threw my head back and threw an arm around his shoulder.

“Holy fuck, Elle,” he grunted, burying his face in my neck.

“More,” I breathed, leaning my forehead on his shoulder as I rode his hand.

This was what I'd needed all night. Him. His touch. His sounds. Everything. I needed him.

But the gorgeous douchebag continued to tease me, slowly thrusting his fingers in and out of me. *Damn him and his magical fingers.*

I opened my mouth to whine again when he slid out and pushed his fingers into my mouth. I sensually sucked at his fingers, watching him smirk.

"I think I'll just let you suffer," he said.

What? Suffer, my birthday girl ass.

I pouted and shook my head. "But it's my birthday. Therefore, I should get what I want."

"You should always get what you want, Elle. Birthday or not."

How could I not fall for man who made my heart flutter with those sweet words?

"Even if I want you?" I asked, giving him a small smile.

He nudged my arm, pushing me toward the edge of the bench. "Get up."

I sighed as a wave of disappointment and a tinge of sadness washed over me. Obviously, he didn't want me as much as I wanted him.

"You coming or what?" Tyler asked, standing in the hallway, and holding out his hand.

I bit back a smile as I reached for his hand, letting him lead me past the communal restrooms and further down the hall.

He opened the door to a single restroom, allowing me to walk in first, and locked it when he stepped inside. I bit my lower lip, suddenly nervous, as he stared at me with a crooked smile.

Before I could speak, he pressed his soft lips against mine and gathered me in his arms. I sighed happily into the kiss, wrapping my arms around his neck. The gentleness and

tenderness drove me wild with need as my tongue tasted a mix of strawberries and whiskey on his lips.

His hand gripped the back of my head as his fingers tangled in my hair. My hands slid under his white t-shirt and caressed the ridges of his torso.

Just as our tongues began to dance together, Tyler turned me around to face the simple counter with a sink and mirror. His fingers glided down my exposed back before finding the hem of my dress and lifting it up around my waist.

He knelt behind me, tracing the back of my thighs with his fingers before kissing my warm skin. I moaned and squirmed with anticipation as his kisses crept higher and higher.

“Tyler,” I cried out when his wet tongue glided over my entrance.

I gripped the edge of the counter, holding on for dear life, as he continued to pleasure me. Just as I felt the tension start to build, he stood up and fumbled with his jeans. As he pushed his pants down to his ankles, I stuck out my ass, positioning myself for him.

His erection slowly eased inside me as I caught his gaze in the reflection of the mirror. Watching us felt kind of dirty, yet so exciting and erotic.

Our pants and moans filled the empty space, where we could hardly hear the dance music but felt the pulse. As he thrust inside me deeper and harder, the sound of his skin slapping against mine joined our mutual groans.

A sigh of pleasure escaped my lips when his hand wrapped around my neck as his pace grew faster and faster. I rested my head on his chest, feeling a strong and silent connection between us. Nothing else existed—just him. Me. Together.

I whimpered when he pulled out, but he quickly turned me to face him, picked me up by the waist, and placed on the edge of the counter. I didn't even want to think about how filthy the sink probably was, but at the moment, I really didn't care. I needed to feel him again—that's all I desired.

Tyler grunted softly, pushing himself slowly inside me. His hands gripped the backs of my knees, keeping my legs wide, as I planted my hands behind me on the counter. As his thrusts increased with speed and intensity, I threw my head back against the mirror and snaked a hand down south to play with myself.

When his mouth captured mine, my legs began to shake, unable to hold onto the tension in my body. The moment his tongue slipped between my lips; my body exploded into a million tingling sensations.

My hand fisted his shirt as I moaned out my orgasm and tried to catch my breath. A guttural moan broke free from Tyler's throat as he pulled out and released himself on my thigh.

I fought to keep my eyes opened as I leaned against the mirror and felt my body go limp.

Tyler pressed his forehead against mine. "Happy birthday, Elle," he mumbled lazily.

Best. Birthday. Ever.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

elyse

“YOUR TURN, ELYSE,” Alyssa said, reaching for a card in the middle of the dining room table.

My sister and I realized we hadn’t had a proper game night in a long time and decided to spend the afternoon playing games and drinking wine. Luckily, Lena had the day off and joined us for the afternoon. We would’ve made it a proper game night, except Alyssa and Lena had plans.

“Shoot,” I said, sipping my wine. “I’m all ears.”

“Where did you have the best sex?”

I choked on my wine, feeling my face flush as Lena and Alyssa stared at me impatiently.

“We don’t have all day, sis,” my sister said playfully, placing the card at the bottom of the deck.

“It happened recently,” I muttered, pulling my knee up on the chair and resting my chin on it.

“What?” Lena’s eyes went wide and wild. “When? Who? Where? Give me all the dirty details! And don’t leave anything out.”

Alyssa laughed. “Oh, so, you didn’t know she’s fucking Tyler?”

I reached over and punched my big-mouth of a sister in her tiny little arm. “I hate you!”

“Oh, stop being overdramatic,” Lena said, rolling her eyes as she sat directly across the table from me. “I knew you and Tyler were going to hook up eventually. Why didn’t you tell me?”

She looked a little hurt, and I felt a little guilty.

“I don’t know,” I said lamely, shrugging. “It’s just sex. We’re not in a relationship or anything.”

“Please answer the question,” Alyssa said exasperatedly as she sat at the end of the table.

Well, shit. I couldn’t dodge this question.

“In the bathroom. At the club. On my birthday,” I grumbled.

Alyssa and Lena both opened their mouths wide in shock.

“What?!” Lena shrieked. “Really?”

Alyssa placed her hands on my shoulders and shook me vigorously. “Who are you? And what did you do with my sister?”

I laughed at their reactions.

“I need to know everything!” Lena screeched so loudly that I was sure a few dogs in the neighborhood heard her. “Best sex ever, huh? Is he big? Like how big? Does he last long? Does he make you come?”

I laughed again at Lena’s rapid-fire questions, feeling relieved and a little eager to gossip with my best friends about boys. As I thought about the questions, my phone chimed with a message from Tyler.

Tyler: You ladies having fun? You’re still coming grocery shopping with me later, right?

Me: Obviously, you can’t shop worth a damn, so yes! And we’re having fun. We’re playing a question game, and the question happens to be about ... you.

Tyler: About me? What was it?

Me: For me to know and for you to find out :)

Tyler: I’ll remember that.

Me: What does that mean?

Tyler: For me to know and you to find out when you’re horny and can’t get any.

Me: You wouldn’t do that.

Tyler: Try me :)

“Earth to Elyse!” Lena waved her hands in front of my face, breaking me away from my phone. “Hello?”

Alyssa grabbed my phone. “It’s the man of the hour!”

“Are you gonna leave and go fuck him in the bathroom?” Lena asked with a giggle.

“Shut up,” I said with a laugh, taking my phone back from Alyssa’s greedy little hands. “No, I’m going to kiss some random strangers in a club later. And the answer to all of your questions is yes.”

My best friends screamed in unison and demanded to know more. With Lena using her hands as a measurement scale, we figured out Tyler was definitely packing a baseball bat between his legs.

“So, what are you going to do?” Lena asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, looking everywhere but at them. Their curiosity made me nervous. “I try not to think about it, because he’s allowed to do whatever he wants.”

But I knew my heart would break if he became close with someone else.

“I think he has feelings for you too,” Alyssa said confidently, tapping her fingers on the table. “He really doesn’t like you talking and laughing with other guys.”

“I agree with Lyss,” Lena said. “A guy doesn’t plan an epic surprise party for just a friend. Plus, he stared at you the whole night.”

“Maybe,” I said slowly. “I don’t know. He’s a man. Men probably can’t tell when you’re in love with—”

My hands immediately covered my mouth as I realized what I’d just said out loud.

“Do you *love* him?” Alyssa squealed, her eyes wide.

“I don’t know. It-it just came out.”

But part of me knew I loved him. Falling for him was inevitable, but my mind always tried to distract me from the obvious.

“I think you should tell him, babe,” Lena said seriously. “Or else, he’ll never know and might assume you just want to be friends.”

“He doesn’t want a relationship,” I countered.

“He might if he knows how you feel about him.”

“I just don’t want to get rejected,” I confessed, feeling tears prick my eyes.

Rejection would definitely be bad, but I also didn’t want to lose Tyler as a friend. I had never felt this way about anyone, and because of him, I’d stepped outside my comfort zone more than once. Crashed a wedding reception. Swam near a waterfall. Had sex in a bathroom.

“And you think holding onto your feelings will be easy?” Alyssa asked.

No. Absolutely not. Now that I knew I was in love with him.

“Even Lyss and I can see he likes you,” Lena said, reaching for a card from the pile. “If he denies his feelings, then the guy has some real issues and is the biggest fucking idiot in the world.”

“Maybe,” I murmured.

“Come on,” she said, with a smile. “Let’s finish this game and talk about how much you *love* Tyler.”

“Why are you such a man-child?” I asked with a laugh as I pushed the shopping cart slowly down the aisle. “Why do you need to touch everything?”

As much as I loved cooking for Tyler, I hated cooking at his place because his refrigerator lacked most ingredients. Most of the time, he only stocked it full of eggs, milk, and

beer. We made a deal: I would go grocery shopping with him and teach him to cook something at his place.

“You have a problem with that?” he snickered. “You of all people should know that I like to touch *everything*.”

I turned my head in the opposite direction to hide my blush. He knew his innuendos drove me crazy and turned me on at the same time. I loved that he took the effort to playfully get under my skin, because at the same time, he made me feel sexy.

Tyler leaned against the cart and stared at the selection of coffee brands on the shelf.

“Which one should I get?” he asked, standing behind me and wrapping his arms around my neck. “The one I usually buy is out of stock.”

“Well, what’s your second favorite?”

“I’m asking you because you make it more than I do.”

Aw, the little things. And his statement was true. Whenever I spent time at his house, I had a habit of making coffee for the smell.

I pointed to the McCafé coffee brand, and Tyler released me from his hold and grabbed the package.

“Oh!” I said excitedly, bouncing a little. “Every year, there’s an awards ceremony that honors chefs and restaurants in the area. Alyssa and I get dressed up and take advantage of the open bar and free food, which are just appetizers. No actual meal. We should go!”

“Do I have to wear a tux?”

“No, a suit will do just fine.” Warmth spread between my legs as I thought about the last time I saw him in a suit—the night we crashed a wedding reception. “Anyway, do you want to come with me? We will have to sit through the boring awards part, because neither Eleven nor its staff have won anything in years.”

“Yeah, I’ll go,” Tyler said with a smile. “Text me the details. And don’t doubt yourself, little lady. If you don’t win

anything, I'll blow up the entire building.”

I laughed as we wandered into the produce section. I shook my head at him when he tossed an eggplant into the cart because it looked “pretty.”

“Question of the day, Elle,” he said, holding his hands behind his back. “You ready?”

I gave him a suspicious look and nodded.

“What’s the difference between an onion and a shallot? You have ten seconds. And go!”

I laughed as he revealed an onion and shallot in his hands.

“Shallots are sweeter and milder, with a garlicky taste, and onions are pungent and strong. They become sweeter when you cook them,” I explained with confidence and a teeny bit of cockiness.

“I think it’s sexy that you’re a food nerd,” he said with a grin, throwing the onion into the cart.

“Oh yeah?” I arched an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” he said, tapping my nose with his finger before he disappeared into the cereal aisle.

“How many boxes of cereal do you need, Tyler?” I asked, watching him throw two boxes in the cart and grab two more from the shelf.

“Take my hand,” he started singing, tossing the boxes in the cart. “Take my whole life too. For I can’t help falling in love with you.”

Was this a sign? My heart quickened as the previous conversation with Alyssa and Lena jumped into my mind.

“Don’t quit your day job,” I joked, quickly setting two of the cereal boxes back on the shelf.

The grocery store run reminded me of shopping with my parents. Alyssa and I thought we were being sneaky, hiding all sorts of junk food into the cart when our parents weren’t looking. We couldn’t hide our disappointment when mom

unpacked the bags at home, and we couldn't find the chocolate bars or the cereal that had an insane amount of sugar in it.

He whirled on me with feigned hurt. "Hey! This is my dad's favorite song. He would blast it every day and every hour of the day when I was younger. Just drove me fucking crazy."

"I think your dad and mine would've gotten along perfectly. My dad loved Elvis and Elton John."

After walking through every aisle, we headed toward the checkout lanes with a full cart. His refrigerator would be packed for at least a week.

As we picked a line, Tyler slapped his forehead. "Shit! I forgot bacon and trash bags."

"Ugh," I said overdramatically, starting to pull the cart back. "Let's go back and get it."

"Nah, you stay in line, and I'll go grab them," he said, walking away, but then called over his shoulder. "And don't talk to strangers!"

I smiled and shook my head. As my eyes started to read the headlines on the nearest magazine, I heard a familiar voice call my name. "Elyse?"

Fuck! Shit! Seriously?

I gripped the bar of the cart tighter, hoping if I didn't acknowledge him that he would walk away.

"Elyse? What are you doing here?"

Fuck.

I swallowed and slowly turned around as my happy mood quickly faded at the sight of Jason standing behind me with the stupidest look on his face.

I seriously could not believe I'd wasted three years of my life with him. I'd even cried over the shallow jerk.

"It's a grocery store," I muttered, yanking the cart back from the line and pushing it anywhere to get away from him.

“Wait!” he said desperately, walking beside me. “Can we talk? Please?”

I stopped and pinned my arms over my chest. “You lost that privilege when you cheated on me, Jason.”

I resumed pushing the cart when he grabbed my wrist but quickly dropped it.

“Five minutes,” he begged.

“Fine,” I said with a huge sigh. “I seriously don’t have time for you.”

Jason huffed, wiping his hands down his face. “I’m fucking sorry, okay? Elyse, I made a mistake cheating on you. I regret it every day. I—”

“You cheated on me for months,” I argued heatedly. “With my best friend. Now, it’s all a mistake?”

“I don’t care about Alana. I don’t want to be with her. I want to be with you.”

Was he fucking serious?

“How do I make this right between us? Give me a second chance. Please.”

“Are you serious?” I yelled, not caring if people started staring at us. “You seriously believe I would take you back after you betrayed me? After you knocked up someone else?”

“The baby’s not mine,” he said softly, looking at the floor.

I wished I could say I was surprised, but I wasn’t. Alana had a very short attention span when it came to men.

“Elyse, please. I want us. I want to marry you.”

I scoffed. “Karma’s a bitch.”

I was so much better than him. I was definitely not the girl who cried over him all those months ago, and I was damn sure I wasn’t going back to her either.

“I love you,” he pleaded, pinning me with a small glare. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you? That I would do anything for you?”

“Anything?” I asked as his face lit up with hope. “Why did you cheat on me?”

The hope he had crashed as he looked uncomfortably away from me. “I don’t know.”

“You wasted three years of my fucking life. So, answer the goddamn question.”

“Because I was pissed,” he snapped. “I was pissed you cared about your damn job more than me. Than our relationship. You didn’t even want a baby with me.”

Excuses. Again. Blame poor Elyse because she would never stand up for herself. She would gladly accept the blame. Not anymore.

“You fucking piece of shit,” I hissed, standing in front of his pathetic and worthless face. “I did everything I could to make us work. I had to work because you didn’t have a fucking job, Jason. Someone had to pay the mortgage. And, apparently, my cooking was so bad that you couldn’t support my dream. You made me feel fucking worthless. But I realized something—I am way too good for your sorry ass.”

Jason sighed loudly and looked defeated. “Please, Elyse. I’ve changed. How many times do I need to say I’m sorry? Everyone deserves a second chance. I can prove I’m a better man.”

“You don’t deserve anything,” I tossed back, taking my place behind the cart and pushing past him.

He laughed as disappointment and anger clouded his eyes. “Seriously, babe? You’re rejecting me? You will never find someone like me. You will remain alone for the rest of your pathetic life, and I know how much you hate being alone. I won’t ask for a second chance again. You and I both know you can’t do better than me.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

CHAPTER FOURTY

elyse

“SHE ALREADY DID FIND SOMEONE BETTER,” Tyler said curtly, standing behind me. “Ten times better, actually.”

“Aren’t you the guy from next door?” Jason asked with a smirk, glancing between Tyler and me.

“Your point?” he asked angrily, tossing the bacon and box of garbage bags in the cart.

“My point is stay the fuck away from my girlfriend!”

“Is there something seriously wrong with you?” I snarled. “I’m not your fucking girlfriend.”

Tyler laughed with amusement. “You heard the lady.”

Jason’s face turned blood red and his hands curled into fists. “You know what? You can have the whore. You’re getting my sloppy seconds anyway. Oh, she’s also boring as hell, which is why I cheated on her—along with every other guy she’s ever been with.”

I was a whore now? What did I ever see in him?

“I don’t know what I ever saw in you,” I said, shaking my head in disgust.

Tyler quickly pushed his tall and athletic body in front of Jason. “Call her that again, and you’ll regret it. Walk away.”

“Whatever, buddy,” Jason said with a bored voice. “You don’t have to act all tough for that worthless piece of shit.”

Tyler’s hands immediately shoved Jason to the ground before forming fists, as his eyes blazed with fury.

“Have fun with your slutty-ass sister, Elyse,” Jason spit out, remaining on the floor with rage in his eyes. “I should’ve

picked her over you. From what I heard, she knows how to actually satisfy a man.”

“Fuck you!” I thundered, realizing I’d been moving in front of Tyler with the original intent of stopping him from beating my ex-boyfriend’s pathetic ass. But now, that honor belonged to me. Begging for me one second and calling me a whore in the next, he was a fucking child, lashing out when he didn’t get his way.

“I never loved you,” he continued angrily. “I doubt anyone could ever love your mopey and pathetic ass.”

I felt Tyler wrap an arm around my waist just as I wanted to throw myself at Jason and hit him repeatedly.

“I don’t care.”

“I said that’s fucking enough,” Tyler barked, tightening his hold on me. “What kind of piece of shit are you? First, you beg her to give you a second chance, and now you drag her? You are a complete waste of space. And if you ever come near her again, I promise you won’t have the legs to do it again.”

I managed to twist myself around in Tyler’s arms and placed a hand on his chest that heaved with anger.

“Let’s go, please,” I said softly.

He nodded silently at me, grabbing the cart with one hand and my hand with other. Neither of us said a word as we checked out and headed home.

Once again, Jason’s true colors had destroyed my carefree and relaxed mood. He’d pointed out all my flaws, fears, and insecurities. Although I no longer cared for him, his words still hurt. I wasn’t perfect, and I’d never claimed to be. But I still deserved to be loved. Didn’t I?

“Elle, you okay?” Tyler asked softly as he pulled into his driveway.

“Yeah,” I said with a small nod as my hand rested on the door handle. “I think I’m gonna go home.”

“You don’t want to stay with me and teach me how to cook?”

A hint of sadness laced through his voice.

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not in the mood right now.”

I hopped out of the car without saying another word and headed for my house. As soon as I closed the door, I leaned against it and took several deep breaths as my mind replayed the scene at the grocery store.

“I never loved you.”

Had he ever loved me at any point in our relationship? Or had my mind simply believed what it had wanted to believe? Had I wanted someone to love me that badly? Was it so wrong to want someone to be there for me?

As the older sister, I felt I had to be strong for Alyssa, because she relied on me. An older sister had no right to rely on a younger sister. I was a teenager one day, and an adult the next.

I truly believed Alana and Jason had understood my sense of loneliness, but they had both used it against me.

“Oh, she’s also boring as hell, which is why I cheated on her—along with every other guy she’s ever been with.”

He was right. All my relationships had ended because the guy cheated on me. Was I really that boring? Uptight? Serious? Was that why they’d all cheated?

“You don’t have to act all tough for that worthless piece of shit.”

If I was a worthless piece of shit, then why had he begged for a second chance?

After lounging in a hot bath and listening to my favorite music, I still felt restless as I laid on my back and stared at the ceiling. I was incredibly proud of myself for not shedding a

single tear over the asshole. I was done wasting my tears on him. But my mind still wouldn't let go of his words.

I sighed as my thoughts shifted to Tyler and how he'd stood up for me. How he'd pushed Jason. How he'd wanted to pummel the shit out of him right then and there. Guilt seeped through me as I realized I'd shut down on him and ran—again.

“Fuck!” I muttered, covering my face with hands and groaning.

I rolled onto my side and grabbed my phone. A smile spread across my face as a naughty idea formed in my mind. I jumped out of bed and dug through my dresser, realizing Tyler was my answer. I needed him. Now.

Wanting to feel something other than regret, I slipped into the red lingerie set Lena had bought for me and paired it with a long, black jacket that fell to my knees and tied at my waist. After running a brush through my hair and applying a quick swipe of lip gloss, I headed to Tyler's house. When I got to his porch, I reached out and rang the doorbell, my heart pounding.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea, I thought nervously.

Whenever I was around him, everything around me simply disappeared. My thoughts. My anxieties. My insecurities. We were the only two people that existed. And, right now, I needed to feel that.

I lifted my hand to ring the doorbell again, but the living room light turned on. My hand returned to clutch the belt of my jacket.

“Elyse?” he asked, rubbing his sleepy eyes when he opened the door.

Without asking for permission, I impatiently pushed past him as he closed the door.

“Are you okay?” He ran a hand through his messy hair as he gazed at me.

I shook my head and opened my jacket, letting it drop to the floor.

“I was hoping you could make me feel better,” I said, biting down on my lip as I watched his eyes drop and then slowly study the red teddy.

His jaw tightened as his feet shuffled closer to me. My heart pounded fiercely as I searched for any type of reaction. His facial expression was simply blank, and he didn’t say a word. Not one word.

Tyler reached out with his left hand and tucked some of my hair behind my ear. His hands gently cupped my face as he lowered his head, his lips only a breath away from mine.

“I’ll make you feel better,” he said softly. “But not by having sex with you.”

My eyes widened with horror and embarrassment as he grabbed my hand.

What the fuck had I just done?

“Come on,” he said, heading toward the stairs. “I’m not letting you hold in what you’re feeling, but I know sex won’t make it go away.”

I silently let him lead me into his room, where he handed me one of his t-shirts and instructed me to change. He turned around, giving me some privacy as I pulled off the lingerie and slipped the t-shirt over my head.

“Thank you,” I said softly.

Tyler slipped into bed and patted the other side, inviting me to join him.

“Talk to me,” he murmured, winding an arm around my shoulders as I rested my head on his broad chest.

“Do you think I’m stupid for staying in a relationship for three years when I knew it wouldn’t work out?” I asked, my voice cracking at the end.

“No, I think you had faith it would work. So, you stayed and waited. Elyse, it’s not your fault that he cheated. He was the one who fucked everything up.”

I drew small circles on his chest with a finger. “I know. I just can’t help but feel like an idiot. I just wanted someone to love me.”

“Jason said he and other guys cheated on you. Is that true?”

“Yes,” I whispered, feeling ashamed for some reason. I had to be the reason why guys cheated on me.

“Well, none of them were good enough for you,” he said sternly as his fingers lazily ran through my hair. “Elle, you’re one hell of a woman, and all of those guys are fucking morons.”

I smiled at his comment.

“You know he said all those things to get under your skin, right?” Tyler continued. “You outright rejected him, and he’s the type of guy that doesn’t like the word ‘no.’ He likes to get his way.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Look on the bright side. At least you didn’t marry the douchebag. You got your promotion. And, best of all, you met me.”

I giggled, nuzzling my face against his chest.

“You should be proud of yourself, Elle. I know I am.”

“I am proud of myself,” I admitted reluctantly. “I just don’t know why I let Jason get to me when I know I’m doing so much better without him.”

Tyler yawned and rolled onto his side, spooning me from behind and laying an arm protectively around my waist. I was extremely proud of myself and everything I’d accomplished over the past few months.

If I’d still been with Jason, I would have never even had the courage to try for the promotion. I would’ve believed Jason needed me more. He hated my dedication to my work. To my passion. My love for cooking. He held me back due to his own insecurities.

Tyler had faith in me, though. He always encouraged and pushed me to my limit—sometimes even beyond. He constantly reminded me to use my strengths and had made me realize what I deserved. I deserved happiness. Love.

I smiled at the thought and snuggled deeper into his arms, feeling truly content. Without Tyler’s insane comments, his humor, the scent of his cologne, and his natural charm, I would still be stuck in a rut. Maybe still crying over Jason. Or maybe not. Tyler’s faith, support, and words of wisdom were invaluable. Everything about him made me want him. Truly want him. He had always been there for me.

Maybe I should take a chance, I thought, as I replayed Alyssa and Lena’s words from earlier in the day. Maybe he felt the same way about me.

“Tyler,” I breathed out softly and slowly, feeling his heartbeat against my back. “I probably shouldn’t say this right now, and I hope it doesn’t ruin our friendship. Because that would hurt so much if it did ...”

I sighed happily, “I’m in love with you.”

CHAPTER FOURTY-ONE

elyse

“ALYSSA, I TOLD TYLER LAST NIGHT,” I admitted, turning the stove on to warm the broth for the risotto.

My sister stopped what she was doing at the kitchen table and faced me with her mouth wide open.

“Oh. My. God! Tell me everything! What did he say? How do you feel?”

I sighed and shrugged. “I don’t know. He fell asleep.”

As I waited for the butter to melt in the pot, I tossed in some shallots and salt, thinking about how proud I’d felt after my confession but then the tremendous disappointment that had washed over me when I’d realized he’d been asleep.

Right now, I felt like I was walking on fucking eggshells, wondering if he felt the same way or if I’d just fucked up.

“No!” Alyssa shrieked in horror. “That’s not good news.”

“In other disappointing news, I saw Jason yesterday.”

“Are you serious? What the hell did he want? What the hell did he say? I hope you walked away. Did you slap him? I would’ve slapped him.”

I snickered as I added the rice and continued to stir until every piece was coated with butter.

“I tried walking away,” I admitted. “But he kept begging me to give him another chance. Then Tyler showed up, and Jason seriously went off, saying some really crazy shit about me.”

“Is he on fucking drugs? What the hell? Give him another chance? Oh my God, what did Tyler say? Did Tyler do something?”

“He shoved him, but I stopped him before anything got out of control.”

“What a man,” she cooed, returning her focus on what she was doing.

I frowned slightly when I checked my phone for a new message from Tyler. But there was nothing.

Me: Hi. Good afternoon, Ty.

That sounds so lame. Delete.

Me: Good afternoon! How did you sleep :)

Delete. Too happy for no reason.

After a few more failed attempts, I reluctantly sent the first message I’d drafted.

“So have you heard from Cory at all?” I asked, stirring the risotto.

Alyssa shook her head. “No, but I’ve been hanging out with Will a lot more.”

“Was that your plan all along?” I teased with a smirk but noticed her serious expression. “What’s wrong with Will?”

“He’s older and looking for something serious. And I don’t think I’m ready for anything like that. I’m young and have so much more to experience before settling down, I guess.”

“I think you should’ve been the older sister.”

When I got off work later in the day, I noticed Tyler’s jeep wasn’t in his driveway and I hadn’t received any messages from him. Not wanting to overanalyze or think the worst, I brushed the thought off, figuring work was keeping him busy. *That happens when we’re adults, right?*

To keep my mind busy, I headed toward the furniture store after a quick shower and change of clothes. I’d texted Lena to

see if she wanted to help me pick out some décor and other home goods for my new basement, and she'd happily agreed.

As I waited for Lena in the parking lot of the home interior store, I quickly shot Tyler a message, giving him the details of the awards ceremony and hoping he would reply.

A loud knock scared the bejesus out of me, and I screamed bloody murder to find Lena peeking in my window with a murderous smile.

“Bitch,” I said, scowling at her as I climbed out of the car.

I could have a heart attack at my age, right?

“Hey, beautiful,” she said, ignoring my glare as she pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head.

“Thanks for meeting me on such short notice,” I said as we walked into the store, which was part of an outlet mall.

“You don't need to thank me. I was sitting at home binge watching *Will and Grace*. I honestly had nothing better to do.”

We continued to gab as I grabbed a shopping cart and let my eyes wander around the huge and colorful space, admiring items I didn't even need. A girl couldn't have too many comforter sets, right? Because a beautiful floral comforter set in a rust and dark blue color scheme caught my eye.

“Aren't we supposed to be looking for furniture for your basement?” Lena asked, watching me study the photos on the packaged bedroom set. “You get distracted so easily.”

“I can't help it,” I countered with a shrug. “I love decorating my house. What do you think?”

“Hmph,” she hummed as her eyes slowly scanned the other sets on the shelves. “I like this one better.”

Pointing to another floral set with a maroon and gray color scheme, I studied the one in my hands and the other on the shelf. So many decisions. So many pretty designs. Seriously, how was a girl supposed to choose?

“I think you're right,” I agreed with a smirk, handing her the one in my hands as I pulled the other from the shelf and

threw it in the cart.

Half an hour later, we finally entered the furniture section after I'd found new curtains and lamps that matched my new comforter set.

"Hey, in about two weeks, I'm going to an awards ceremony for my job," I said, giggling as she dramatically threw her curvy body on a gray couch display. "Do you want to come?"

Her eyes widened with excitement. "Do we have to wear fancy dresses?"

I nodded.

"Count me in!" she shrieked, reaching out a hand for me to grab as she struggled getting off the couch. "Don't buy this one. It's too hard."

I laughed, pulling her off the couch. "Noted."

"Hurry up and pick some stuff out," she demanded. "We need to find the perfect dresses!"

After spending more money than I had planned at the furniture store and buying a few dresses from different boutiques, Lena and I satisfied our craving for Chinese food at the food court.

"So, this award ceremony ... are you winning anything?"

"I doubt it," I said with a shrug. "It's an annual event that chefs and restaurateurs attend to mingle and drink for free. The restaurant has never won anything."

"You won't get very far with that attitude, E!" Lena said with a scowl, waving an empty fork in my face. "Even if you don't win, which I highly doubt, we'll still be the best dressed there."

"I know," I said before shoving a spoonful of rice into my mouth.

"Who else is going?"

"I invited Tyler and Alyssa."

She cocked an eyebrow as she sipped her iced tea. “Make sure you behave yourself.”

“I can’t promise that, but I’ll try.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Tyler

“HEY, Tyler, I needed this sketch by the end of the day,” my boss, Kelly, reminded me with a fake smile. “It’s the end of the day—and no design.”

Shit. I glanced at my progress, noticing I barely had anything down.

“I’m sorry. Time just flew by today, but I’ll work on it now and have most of it done for you by tomorrow,” I apologized, slapping my forehead with my palm. “Is that okay?”

She nodded in approval. “Just make sure you lock up when you leave, okay?”

Under normal circumstances, I would’ve worked on the design from home, but I feared running into Elyse. I wasn’t ready to talk to her. She believed I’d fallen asleep when she’d confessed she loved me. The truth was, I’d pretended to sleep because I wasn’t ready to talk about our feelings or even acknowledge hers. And I still wasn’t ready.

I figured she needed some space because she had been in a vulnerable place and we had been spending so much time together. It made sense. But what confused me was that I knew this was coming, and I seriously liked her more than I’d wanted to. And it felt wrong.

Was I ready for a serious relationship? Was I simply replacing Jordyn with Elyse? So many questions haunted my mind, but no answers magically appeared. As much as I didn’t want to lose Elyse as a friend, she knew how I felt about relationships.

We both needed some time away from each other. I didn’t want to be one of the men in her past that hurt her. If I did, she

would hate me forever. And she would probably think I was a piece of shit just like her jackass of an ex. The guy pretty much begged for a second chance but didn't hesitate to tear her to pieces when she'd refused. *What a piece of shit.*

I sighed as I focused on the unfinished sketch before me, forcing my mind to concentrate on work and not Elyse.

Just as I'd started doodling, my phone vibrated with a message from Elyse.

Elyse: I know you're probably at work, but I just wanted to check on you. It's not normal to not hear from you all day. I hope I'm not being annoying at all.

Me: I'm still at work.

Elyse: Damn. You're working really late tonight. Do you want me to make dinner or something?

Me: Nah. I'm probably going to be here for a while. I'll talk to you later.

If I was being completely honest with myself, my heart just wasn't ready for anything serious. But at the same time, I enjoyed whatever Elyse and I were doing, even when we weren't in bed.

I sat on a bar stool, slowly sipping the beer in front of me, waiting for Will to arrive at a dive bar near the office. Because it was a weekday, only a handful of people sat at the counter or nearby high-top tables, sipping their drinks in peace. Even at eleven at night, my head wouldn't stop spinning.

"Long day, princess?" he joked, patting my shoulder before grabbing the empty stool next to me. "I would've stayed if you needed me to."

"Nah, it's all good," I cracked with a weak laugh. "I left like ten minutes ago."

"Did you get the design done?"

“Most of it,” I said, calling the bartender over and ordering another round of drinks. “But I’ll finish it tomorrow.”

“So, what’s going on? You had to have called me to the bar at this time of night for a good reason.”

I rubbed my temples, as I breathed out slowly, not sure what I wanted to say. “I don’t know, man, but something’s wrong with me.”

“You must really be going through something,” Will said with a chuckle, shaking his head. “You never call me to talk. I’m always calling you.”

“I just have a lot on my mind, and I have no clue what to do.”

“What’s on your mind, bro?”

I took a deep breath and shared the short version of the story of Jordyn and my unborn son. Will knew I had been married before, but he hadn’t known how it had ended or how it had affected me.

“So, last night, Elyse told me she was in love with me, but she doesn’t know I heard her,” I admitted, taking a sip of my beer.

“We all saw that coming, Sully,” Will said with a shrug. “But what’s the problem?”

“The problem is, I don’t know if I’m ready for all that. I love what Elyse and I have, because it’s easy and fun and not tied up with titles.”

He shook his head and furrowed his black brows at me. “I’m confused. You guys are always together, basically in a relationship, but you don’t want a relationship? You, of all people, know how women are when it comes to casual sex. But you didn’t stop it.”

“I kinda thought she hadn’t wanted anything more because of what she’s been through,” I said, chugging the rest of my beer and ordering another one. “I just got it all wrong, I guess. And I couldn’t stop it. It wasn’t supposed to happen after Vegas, but I couldn’t fucking stop.”

“Do you feel the same way?”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “I feel like I’m ... how do I put this? ... I feel like I’m kinda cheating on Jordyn. I mean, Elyse is perfect in more ways than one, but I can’t help but feel shitty when I admit that I might love another woman after what happened. I told myself that I wouldn’t fall for someone again.”

Will clenched his jaw, looking in my direction. “I get where you’re coming from, but I don’t have a good answer. All I can say is, I know you love Jordyn more than anything, and I know it may feel like you’re not being loyal, but I don’t think she’d want you to be miserable either. You shouldn’t live your life pushing people away when they get too close. Sex doesn’t always cure everything.”

“I’m not pushing her away,” I clarified quickly. “I just need space. I need to clear my head, think of other things, and do other things before I can settle down. Shit, I’ve been doing that for the past three years, and then Elyse came along.”

I had been so busy dealing with my past that I hadn’t figured out who I was without them. I had some growing up to do. *I should probably figure out my shit before throwing myself into a new relationship.*

“Take your time. If you need space, get space, but she won’t be single forever, Ty,” Will warned. “You have every right to grieve and figure shit out, but don’t let your past dictate your future. She’s a good girl, and you can’t say that about most people nowadays.”

I dropped my head into the palm of my hands. “I know. I just need time away from her, but I don’t even know how to do that. She’s my fucking neighbor, and I’m always with her.”

“Give yourself a break. What you went through is enough to break anyone, and frankly, Elyse should know that.”

“I’ll figure it out,” I admitted, nodding my head, even though I had no clue where to begin.

When it came to important decisions, I typically did the opposite of what my logical mind believed was the correct.

When I returned home, it took everything in me not to knock on Elyse's door, knowing we both needed time and space.

Instead, I sat on the couch and flipped through photos of Jordyn on my phone. Almost three years had gone by, and I still couldn't figure out how to process her loss. We had spent so much time together, and she was taken away in seconds. I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye. Those thoughts ate at me every single damn day.

As much as I wanted to be with Elyse and show her how she should be treated, I needed to work on myself first.

We both deserved that much.

"I'll have whatever is on draft," I said to the bartender at the crowded dive bar I'd visited the past four nights.

I had been working overtime, catching up on neglected projects and avoiding Elyse, but I kept finding myself at the bar after work.

Elyse had become such a huge part of my life that it just felt weird not to be around her. My mind and thoughts hadn't helped me at all as I desperately tried to figure out what I wanted. What seemed like the best decision was the hardest thing to do.

"Make that two," an unfamiliar feminine voice spoke beside me.

I glanced to my left to find a beautiful woman with long, blonde hair wearing the most minimal of clothing. A short, denim skirt that barely covered her ass. A red, cropped shirt with a v-neckline that plunged dangerously low.

She gave me a flirty smile and batted her long eyelashes.

And guess what I did?

With a half-smile, I said, "You can put that on my tab."

“Thank you for the beer,” the blonde said, hopping on the empty stool next to me as the bartender set our beers on the counter.

I shrugged. “I’m Tyler.”

“Avery,” she introduced herself. “Nice meeting you, handsome. So, Ty, what do you do?”

“I do a bit of everything.”

“Why you here alone?” She didn’t beat around the bush.

“I can ask you the same question.”

“I just got out of a horrible relationship, and I’m looking for some fun,” she admitted, pushing her thin, pink-painted lips together. “What’s your excuse?”

“Just have a lot of shit on my mind, and the bar just seemed like the best place to be right now.”

Avery and I spent the rest of the night flirting, and for a moment or two, my mind enjoyed the quiet buzz instead of the more pressing and important questions and thoughts that had plagued me over the past week. But the more Avery animatedly chatted about something I didn’t give a damn about, I desperately wished Elyse was sitting in her place. Elyse’s stories made me laugh. I cared about what she had to say.

“Nightcap?” Avery asked when the bartender shouted last call.

I glanced at my watch and hesitated, knowing that wasn’t the best idea. She slid off the stool and adjusted her very short skirt.

“We going to your place?” I asked finally, allowing my other brain to make a bad decision.

She shook her head and huffed. “My roommate has company right now, and I’m trying to stay away from that.”

This is a really bad idea, the brain that made the smart and logical decisions warned.

“We can go back to my place,” I offered, caving into the alcohol in my system and the brain in my pants.

My eyes landed on Elyse’s house the moment I pulled into my driveway. Alyssa’s car was parked in her driveway, and all the lights in her house were on.

Suddenly, I felt like I was not only disrespecting Jordyn but also Elyse. We hadn’t said a word to each other since her confession, and I’d invited a stranger home.

I was so fucked up.

I told you so, my logical brain said smugly.

“Wow!” Avery said, in awe, skipping to my front door and taking in the neighborhood. “Good looking guy and a nice house? Score!”

Avery shrieked with excitement and energy as she stepped inside my house. If Elyse wasn’t sure if I was home, she knew now.

As I closed the door, Avery threw her purse on the couch, adding a seductive sway with each step as she slid off her jean jacket.

“So, I hope your version of a nightcap is the same as mine,” she purred, with heat and lust dancing in her eyes.

I stared at her as my two brains continued their internal battle. But as soon as she pulled her teeny tiny crop top off, revealing her heavy tits, I knew I was making a mistake. A huge mistake.

“What’s your version?” I asked, stalling for time.

“I didn’t give you all of my attention and come all the way here for no reason, Ty,” she admitted, walking toward me as her breasts bounced with each step. “I’ve been with one man my whole life, and now, I’m a free woman.”

Shit, shit, shit.

“I, um, thought we could have a normal nightcap,” I explained lamely, running my hands through my hair nervously and clenching my jaw.

Why had I believed Avery would be the answer to my problems? Why had I thought she could take my mind off Elyse? She had absolutely nothing on Elyse because Elyse was, well, everything.

Avery rolled her eyes dramatically before narrowing them at me suspiciously. “Are you gay?”

I choked out a cough. “Definitely not gay.”

“Prove it,” she challenged, taking another step closer as her fingers lingered on the hem of my dress shirt.

Just as my fingers closed over hers to stop them from unbuttoning my shirt, a loud banging on the front door shook the entire house and startled both of us. Avery screeched with terror, rushing over to the couch and picking up her tiny shirt as I opened the door.

“Alyssa?” I asked blankly.

Shit, shit, shit.

“Surprised?” She flashed me her best fake smile as she barged past me, coming to a halt at the sight of Avery clutching her shirt to her chest.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

She whirled around on me as one of her hands gestured wildly between Avery and me. “Have you lost your fucking mind?” she yelled at the top of her lungs.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, running a hand down my face.

“My sister is in love with you!” she screamed as her face turned red and her eyes filled with fire. “She’s crying her eyes out because you’re about to fuck some blonde bimbo. Are you fucking serious right now? What the fuck is your problem?”

“Hey,” Avery protested. “You’re blonde too.”

Alyssa laughed sarcastically before pointing to her own blonde tresses. “Yeah, a real one, sweetheart.”

Avery just scoffed and turned around to throw her shirt back on.

“Are you really this stupid?” Alyssa asked angrily.

“No, I’m not stupid,” I snapped. “Elyse knew how I felt about relationships.”

“Don’t you dare blame her! You fucking led her on.”

“She and I were just having fun.”

“Fuck you, Tyler,” she spat out, shaking her head. “Elyse might not say anything because she has a pure heart. But me? Not a fucking chance. I’ve seen the way you look at her. I’ve seen the way you take care of her. And I’ve also seen how crazy jealous you get when you watch her talking to another guy. But at the end of the day, you’re just like every other shitty man from her past.”

Something dawned on me during Alyssa’s honest rant. Even though I’d felt a tremendous sense of guilt about caring for another woman, I was also scared as fuck. I was terrified of the idea of loving someone again only to lose them. What if I lost Elyse? Losing her would honestly just kill me.

And I felt like complete shit. I wasn’t a shitty man, but the way I had ignored Elyse was complete shit.

“I wasn’t going to fuck anyone,” I argued heatedly, narrowing my eyes at Alyssa.

She scoffed. “Seriously? She just fell right out of her shirt?”

“This has nothing to do with you, Alyssa.”

“It does when my sister is crying her fucking out eyes out because she took a fucking chance on you.”

Avery sighed loudly, pulling her jean jacket on and edging her way toward the door.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, not sure who I was apologizing to—Avery or Alyssa.

“That’s it?” Alyssa laughed with little amusement. “Do you even like her? A little bit at least?”

I wasn’t sure who she was talking about. If she was referring to Avery, the answer was no. But if she was talking about Elyse, then I more than liked her. But unfortunately, all my good decision-making skills flew out the window when I was under a tremendous amount of stress.

“I’m done with this conversation,” I said firmly, holding the door open for both women.

“Answer my question!” Alyssa yelled.

“Leave,” I said, raising my voice with anger. “You don’t know half the shit I’ve been through, but I’m really trying here. I really don’t want to hurt Elyse.”

She stomped towards the door but turned when she had one foot on the porch. “Stay the fuck away from my sister, Tyler. You honestly have to be one miserable ass of a man to ignore her and hurt her like this.”

She stormed away but stopped momentarily, narrowing her eyes on Avery. “Oh, blondie. I wouldn’t fuck him if I were you. I heard he has crabs.”

“I really don’t want to hurt Elyse.” Those words replayed in my mind because I had hurt her. She was crying over me.

I shook my head and glanced at Avery, lingering by the door. “You gotta leave.”

“You’re really a waste of time,” she said, shoulder checking me on the way out.

“I guess so,” I said with a sarcastic laugh.

As soon as I closed the door, I picked up my phone, knowing my apology was too late and probably wouldn’t fix anything. But I had to try. The idea of Elyse crying over me killed me. I had never wanted to hurt her. She had to believe that.

My fingers simply ignored all the thoughts and emotions flying around in my mind as I sent my first message.

Me: Elyse, I wasn't going to fuck that girl.

I waited.

And waited.

Elyse: It doesn't matter, Tyler. You're single. But to ignore me?

Me: I know. I thought I was doing both of us a favor because I needed space. Elyse, I don't want to hurt you, but I'm confused right now. It wasn't right to ignore you, I'm sorry.

Elyse: And I would've given you space, Tyler. I didn't expect us to run off into the sunset happily ever after. I just thought you felt the same ...

Me: But you have to understand where I'm coming from.

Elyse: I get it, and I set myself up. I just think we have to stay away from each other.

Me: Is that what you want?

Elyse: I'm not going to keep going back and forth with you. You don't want a relationship, and I can't force you. I'm hurt that our friendship is probably dead because of this, but I just have to accept it. So, yes.

Me: That's it?

Elyse: Tyler, you ignored me for almost a fucking week. I'm not begging anyone to love me back anymore. Take care of yourself.

Me: Don't do this ...

Elyse: Please stop texting me.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Elyse

“WHAT CAN I do to make you feel better, Elyse?” Alyssa asked, staring at me intensely.

Over the past few days, I’d found myself back at square one, crying and hurting. Even though I knew Tyler had always had trouble coping with his past, I never believed he would hurt me. Nothing was worse than loving someone who didn’t love you back.

That was my mistake. I’d made the mistake of falling in love with him.

When I’d told him to stop contacting me, I regretted it and kept checking my phone to see if he’d ignored my request. Why did I even want him here when he’d broken my fucking heart? And why did this hurt more than the demise of my relationship with Jason?

Because Tyler and I had clicked instantly. We’d had an undeniable vibe. I had never met someone like him.

“Am I stupid for crying?” I asked, wiping my stuffy nose with a tissue and feeling incredibly defeated. “I shouldn’t have told him.”

“No, you’re not,” my sister said, rubbing my shoulders. “You’re one of the best people I know, and I hate watching people hurt you over and over. But don’t let him ruin what you worked so hard for—that position. Stop hiding in your house and stop calling off work.”

“And, no, you didn’t make a mistake telling him how you felt,” she continued. “He should have known that you would be there for him for whatever he was going through. But

instead, he pushed a young and beautiful woman with a huge heart aside. That's his mistake. His fault. Not yours."

"Everything was perfect, though. You would have thought we were in a relationship, but I guess it was just about sex," I admitted, taking a deep breath.

"He's a man. Men will do anything for sex. Just please don't let this stop you."

"You really think it was just friendship and sex between us?"

Alyssa huffed, sucking in her bottom lip. "I love you, and I'm saying this as your sister, but Tyler's not here, right? I'm here trying to fix your broken heart. Not him. No matter what he's going through, if he felt the same, he'd tell you."

She was right.

"I set myself up and fell in love with him. I'm so stupid."

And like clockwork, I started crying again and wondered if everything had been one-sided. He'd run circles around me, making me dizzy and confused. His random kisses. The way his thumb drew circles over my wrist to soothe me, comfort me. His words of encouragement and honesty. The passion and need that consumed me when we'd slept together.

Alyssa quickly got off the couch as her fists landed on her hips. "You know what? We're getting out of the house. I'm determined to make you smile."

I furiously shook my head, determined to stay home and watch TV, but I knew my protests were worthless. Whatever Alyssa wanted, I gave her. Thirty minutes later, after thoroughly washing my face and throwing my hair into a messy bun, my sister looped her arm through mine and we headed toward her car.

I remained silent during the ride, closing my eyes, basking in the warm California air and tuning out the music. When the car came to a final stop, I peeled my swollen eyes back and took in the surroundings.

"We're at the beach? I don't have a bathing suit," I said.

“We’re not swimming! Unless you wanted to?” Alyssa said with a shrug.

The sun shone brightly on the water, making the sand shimmer. Tons of people filled the boardwalk, and dozens more sat in the warm sand. Shoppers bustled in and out of the many, many stores. Overall, it seemed like everyone was having a good time. What a contrast to how the last week of my life had been.

My sister ran over to my side and quickly pulled my hair from the messy bun.

“What was wrong with my hair?” I asked suspiciously when she refused to meet my gaze.

“Well, just promise me you’ll be open?”

“Open to what?” My mouth dropped wide open.

“Well,” she said nervously, running her thumb under my cheek and eye. “I invited two of my friends, so we can all hang out. Well, I knew this guy from college. He and his brother are here, and I haven’t seen him in years.”

My blood started to boil with anger. “Alyssa, come on! You’re trying to set me up *again*?”

She dramatically huffed and rolled her eyes. “I’m not setting you up. I just think you need more human interaction ... with other people.”

“I really hate when you do this to me. I’m not in the mood to talk—much less fucking flirt—with anyone.”

“No one said anything about flirting. We’re just going to hang out. You don’t need to mope all the time and you damn sure don’t have to be miserable.”

I threw my arms to my side. “Fine. Whatever.”

I didn’t hate Alyssa—I just hated the shit she pulled and how she always tried to justify her actions. She’d thought Caden would help me, but that had ended badly. I knew the best way to get over someone was to get under someone. *Yeah, yeah, yeah*. I wanted to meet someone else, but I also wanted

to do it on *my* terms. But then again, how could someone else top the adrenaline rush Tyler gave me?

Moral of the story, I had an attitude—a bad one.

We approached a wooden picnic table where two guys were sitting across from each other talking. My eyes landed on the guy wearing simple beach attire, with long fawn-colored hair pulled back in a low bun, bright blue eyes, faint hair dotting his jawline, and deep indents in his cheeks. The man was beautiful, but he was nothing like Tyler.

Alyssa and the older brother hugged while the other guy and I stood and watched them awkwardly. After introductions were made, we all sat around the table in uncomfortable silence.

“Are you okay, Elyse?” Dawson, the older brother with the man bun, asked hesitantly. “You look like you’ve been crying.”

“Uh, yeah, I’m fine,” I lied quickly. “Allergies, you know? The pollen is crazy around here.”

He nodded in agreement, seeming to accept my fib, as Cole, the younger brother who had gone to college with Alyssa, shared some memories of them back in the day. Even though I wasn’t the best company, I forced a smile when I needed to, and hey, I wasn’t wallowing in my house.

“So, Elyse, what do you do?” Dawson asked.

“I’m a chef,” I said with a polite smile. “You?”

“Police officer. I’ve got some really crazy stories. I got involved in a shootout and a high-speed chase one. It started when—”

Even though I wasn’t in the mood to hold a conversation, I sensed Dawson had a little bit too much confidence, the way he told story after story about his time at the academy and some of the cases he’d worked on. But maybe he’d sensed I was shy and didn’t like talking about myself. Either way, I had no problem nodding along and letting him talk.

An hour later, I wanted to go home so badly. But Alyssa appeared to be having a good time with Cole, laughing and nudging each other when they returned to the table with food. As much as I wanted to leave, I didn't want to make the situation worse and ruin her reunion.

Even though I had no appetite, I stuffed a handful of fries in my mouth.

“Alyssa?” I turned my head when I heard a familiar voice call out my sister's name.

“Will?” She shot me a nervous glance as he gave me a small smile and noticed the two brothers at the table. “Uh, what are you doing here?”

“The guys and I are hanging out.”

I focused on the fries in front of me, hoping Will didn't notice my red, puffy eyes. Did he know anything about Tyler and me?

“This is my old friend, Cole,” Alyssa said, breaking the awkward silence. “We went to college together. And this is his brother, Dawson.”

Just as the guys mumbled “hi” and “hey” to each other, Kyle approached without a single care in the world, oblivious to the tension. If Will and Kyle were here that meant Tyler was here too. Shit.

“Elyse! Alyssa!” he exclaimed with excitement. “My two favorite girls!”

He then plopped himself down on the bench between Alyssa and me after he introduced himself to the Dawson and Cole.

“What's going on here?” he teased with a laugh. “Why weren't we invited?”

I cleared my throat. “Uh, it was a last-minute thing.”

“She’s on a date,” Alyssa said confidently as my eyes widened in horror.

Shit. Is she being serious right now?

“I’m sorry,” I mouthed to Dawson, who didn’t appear fazed at all.

Kyle nudged his shoulder into mine. “How would Tyler feel about this?”

“That’s enough,” Will snapped at his friend.

“Where the fuck is he anyway?” Kyle asked, turning his head to scan the area. “I want him to meet Elyse’s date.”

Fuck. Shit.

I quickly slid off the bench and stood up, hoping to leave before Tyler arrived. As soon as I’d smoothed out my shorts, my eyes landed on Tyler, who seemed surprised to see me. I felt my heart sink into my stomach.

That was so fucking weird. *Fuck. I can’t do this ...*

I turned and headed toward the beach, ignoring Dawson’s calls for me.

“Elyse!” Dawson easily caught up with me and stood in front of me, stopping me in my tracks. “Are you okay?”

I’m not ready for anything. I can’t do this again.

I faked a laugh. “I just really have to go to the bathroom. Fries got my stomach feeling ... a little funny.”

His face turned red, as if he’d never heard a woman say she needed to go to the bathroom before. “Oh, okay. I’ll just, uh, see you back at the table. Yeah?”

“Sure. Definitely. Of course.” I hoped I’d sounded convincing, but I’d said whatever I could to be left alone.

Shortly after Dawson left and I’d started my walk with no real destination in mind, I heard Alyssa yelling at me to stop.

“Elyse, wait! You know I’m out of shape.”

I stopped and whirled around on her, anger in my voice. “For what? So you can set me up on another date? Was this all

part of your plan? I don't want to meet anyone else, Alyssa. I don't care about another man right now. Ever, actually. I'm so fucking mad that you did this to me—again. We could've just spent time at the beach together, but of course, that's not what Alyssa wanted.”

As much as I didn't want to cry again, the tears poured out of me.

“I wasn't trying to set you up!” she protested. “It was just so you could talk to other people and make new friends, Elyse. What the fuck? I only said that out of spite to piss off Tyler.”

“I don't want to meet anyone. I don't want to be with anyone. I'm done with the whole dating scene. And I don't give a shit if Tyler's mad or not. I just want to go home.”

Her lip quivered with emotion. We hadn't had a serious argument in a long time. But sometimes I just wished for once that she would fucking listen to what I wanted.

“Yeah, we can go now,” she said, defeated.

“Actually, don't worry about it,” I said quickly. “I need to be alone for a little bit.”

“I'm not letting you wander by yourself. I'm taking you right now. No more surprises, I swear.”

“I need air. I'll text you later.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” she demanded. “I'm fucking sorry I made you meet someone. I thought you'd enjoy a friendly conversation.”

“Just go talk to your friend. I'll be fine,” I said stubbornly, starting my walk again.

“I'm trying to be here for you, and you're pushing me away. I don't fucking care about him; I care about you.”

I knew she cared, but she didn't understand what I needed or wanted.

“Fine,” Alyssa called after me. “Whatever. I'll be here, because I am taking you home. Text me when you're ready.”

I heard her stomping away as I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, fighting my thoughts.

“Elyse!”

For fuck’s sake! Seriously?

“Elyse, can I talk to you for a second?” Will asked, panting as he caught up to me and touched my shoulder.

I stopped and shouted. “When I don’t want to be alone, I’m fucking alone. But when I want space, no one will leave me the fuck alone!”

“I know what’s going on right now, and it’s not what you think.”

Seriously? It’s not what I think?

“I don’t care,” I spat out. “I really don’t care.”

“You do, though.”

“Will, I don’t have time for this.”

“Just listen, please?”

I angrily glanced around the beach before sending him a serious look. “I don’t want to talk about Tyler. I didn’t come here to get swarmed with questions. Whatever Tyler and I had, or whatever you call it, is over. I get it. I don’t need a thousand people telling me what I already know.

“When he ignored me, I got the answer I wanted,” I continued. “I get it. I’m wrong, and I own up to that, I do. I’ve been through enough heartbreak to last a lifetime, Will. It took everything in me to tell him how I felt. But he’s a coward, and for that, I don’t need him. I don’t need anyone, and it took me long enough to realize that.”

“I’m sorry. He just needs time to get himself together,” Will said softly.

I already knew that.

“Well, I don’t have time anymore. I need to work on myself and focus on my career.”

“Is there anything I can say to explain what the hell is going on?”

“No.”

I stormed away once again, but this time, no one stopped me.

I didn't need anyone.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Tyler

“SO, let me get this straight ... she told you how she felt, and you ignored her, but you’re pissed that some guy is talking to her?” Kyle asked exasperatedly as we walked down the boardwalk of the crowded beach.

I was beyond frustrated. Everything had split into fourteen different directions so quickly. I hadn’t expected to see Elyse at the beach. I hadn’t expected the sight of her to make me miss her even more than was humanly possible. I hadn’t expected to feel shittier than I already did. I hadn’t wanted to be the reason her eyes were red and puffy.

“I get that I ignored her, but I thought I was doing the right thing,” I huffed. “Nothing makes sense anymore, and she probably fucking hates me.”

“Yeah, I’m not gonna lie, man,” Will said with a resigned sign. “She’s pissed. She said she doesn’t care anymore, and she wants to focus on her job. She also called you a coward.”

I was a coward.

“If you really want her, you need to fix this,” he added. “If not, you need to leave her alone. She’s pretty messed up right now.”

“We know you want her, Sully,” Kyle agreed, nodding his head. “I’ve seen you two together plenty of times, and I don’t understand why you would let her go. I knew you were stupid—but not that stupid.”

“I just needed to think. There’s a bigger reason, and I don’t want to talk about it,” I said stubbornly.

The guys stopped walking for a moment and shuffled over to the side to avoid the heavy foot traffic.

“I know about your wife and kid,” Kyle said, pursing his lips together. “We got drunk one night, and you told me everything. I respect your privacy, which is why I never brought it up. I know you need space, but you shouldn’t allow your pain to kill your happiness.”

When had he become so damn poetic and thoughtful? Shit.

My eyes wandered through the crowd as I stayed quiet.

“Damn, do I tell everyone my business when I’m drunk?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Kyle and Will said at the same time.

“I fucked up,” I said, rubbing my face with the backs of my knuckles. “I’m going to go find her.”

I left the guys to wander around on their own as I headed toward the last spot where I’d seen Elyse. Alyssa’s car was still parked, but I couldn’t find her. Where was she? Was she with that guy?

Kyle mentioned they were on a date, but I didn’t want to believe that. Because that didn’t sound like Elyse. If anything, it sounded like Alyssa meddling.

I carefully scanned the beach area, hoping to catch a glimpse of her somewhere in the crowd. I’d had no problem spotting her before, but today was a different day. Suddenly, I noticed familiar blonde tresses swishing gently across her back. *Maybe my luck has changed*, I thought.

“Elyse?” I placed my hand on her shoulder, praying she wouldn’t flip out.

But when she turned around, I wasn’t staring into the pair of beautiful blue eyes that made me smile or my heart jump.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, quickly taking my hand off the stranger’s shoulder. “You look like someone I know.”

“I can be,” she offered with a wink.

“No thanks,” I said before walking toward a string of restaurants and shops.

My mind raced with a million different thoughts. The longer I waited to talk to her, the more she would despise me. She had been hurt so many times, and like the rest of the men in her past, I hurt her too. I was a stupid, stupid asshole.

How could I have hurt her when I thought about her all the fucking time? I loved every single thing about her because we'd taken the time to develop a friendship. We'd learned more about each other every time we'd hung out.

With a tired sigh, I messaged the guys to meet me somewhere and ended my search. As I waited, I called her, but her phone didn't ring. Maybe it was dead.

"Did you find her?" Kyle asked as we headed toward a different parking lot.

I shook my head. "I should've followed her to the beach."

"Everyone makes mistakes," Will said. "Everyone needs time to figure shit out. We're not kids anymore. We have the future and shit to think about."

"I hope I can fix it. I need to get my girl back."

My girl. The words had just slipped out, but I loved how it sounded. *My girl.*

I thought I'd needed space, but my damn mind kept thinking about her. How she'd stayed with me when I'd talked about Jordyn. How I missed her smile and the sound of her laughing at one of my lame jokes. How I loved listening to her talk about cooking and her job. I just fucking missed her.

And I'd just added myself to the list of men that had broken her heart, because I'd desperately wanted to believe this was just a meaningless fling. But deep down, I knew it wasn't. I hated watching her flirt and laugh with other men. The idea of her looking at another man the way she looked at me just killed me.

Honestly, I'd known the whole love thing would strike sooner or later, but maybe I'd refused to believe it could happen. I was a fucking coward.

"You okay?" Will asked as we hopped into his car.

I nodded silently, tucking myself into the passenger seat.

The moment Will and Kyle dropped me off at my house, I strolled over to Elyse's and prayed Alyssa wouldn't be with her. I had no doubt she'd talked shit about me—deservedly so.

As I knocked confidently on the door, I hoped for two things. One, that Elyse would answer and not Alyssa. Two, that she wouldn't go off on me before I'd had chance to explain myself. On the other hand, I had no clue what I was going to say other than, "Sorry I hurt you." I just wanted another chance to prove my worth to her, because I really missed my best friend.

I sighed heavily when no one answered the door. I couldn't even hear any movement inside. Sitting on the top step of her porch and stretching out my legs, I whipped out my phone and texted Alyssa without a second thought.

Me: I know you hate me, but I really have to talk to Elyse. Can you tell her to meet me or call me?

Alyssa: Tyler, leave her alone. She's staying with me for a few days.

Me: I need to talk to her.

Alyssa: She doesn't want to talk to you. She's staying with me because she doesn't want to see you. I'm sorry, but what's done is done. I'm asking you to leave her alone.

"Fuck," I said with a sigh as I balanced my phone on my knee, trying to figure out what to do next.

A second later, my phone buzzed to life as my dad's name lit up the screen.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey," he said with a loud cough. "You haven't called me or even returned my calls in a few weeks. Everything good?"

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I breathed out, standing up from the step and walking toward my house.

“You sure about that, son?”

Yeah, I probably didn’t sound fine.

“Dad, I fucked up, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Fucked up doing what?”

“I think I lost her because I didn’t think I was ready for another relationship.”

“Well, are you ready now?” he asked.

“I know I don’t want to lose her,” I said truthfully, flopping down on the couch when I entered the house. “I haven’t felt this way about anyone in a long time, but it feels wrong.”

My dad sighed. “Let me tell you this, Ty. Jordyn wouldn’t want you to be miserable or push people that care about you away. I almost lost Diana for the same reason, but one day, something inside me told me to hold onto Diana. She knows she’s not your mom, and she will never replace her. I will always love your mom, and she will always be in my heart. Our hearts and our minds can love more than one person in one lifetime.”

I remained silent as his wise words floated around in my mind.

“Jordyn and your boy will always be with you, but you have to stop punishing yourself. And you have stop thinking you don’t deserve to be happy again.”

“When Elyse told me she loved me, I ignored her,” I confessed, wincing at my foolish actions.

“Why?”

“I freaked out. I thought I needed time away from her because we were always together. I thought my feelings would be different if I didn’t see her all the time.”

“And what happened?”

“I couldn’t stop thinking about her. And I couldn’t stop missing her, Dad,” I said, leaning back into the couch. “I really fucked up.”

“You’ve always been smart,” he said. “You’ll figure it out. But if you really love her, don’t let her go or you will regret it for the rest of your life, Ty.”

“I won’t,” I said with a renewed sense of confidence. “Even if I have to wait outside her house every day.”

My dad was right. About a lot of things. Jordyn would always be in my heart and my memories, but I deserved a second chance. Elyse had given me that second chance, even though I’d believed I hadn’t wanted or needed it. Hell, I hadn’t even been looking for one.

I’d fooled myself into believing I could survive on my sexual needs, but I’d been completely wrong. I’d wanted to have sex with Avery to prove to myself that I didn’t have feelings for Elyse. To prove that she’d made the mistake of falling in love with me, knowing I hadn’t wanted anything more.

But unknowingly, I *had* wanted more. I wanted Elyse.

I was an asshole. And a coward.

Regret filled my mind as I sat on the couch, trying to figure out what I needed to do, when I suddenly realized I needed to be in Los Angeles for about a week for a project and a few meetings.

Fuck.

This was going to be a lot harder than I thought.

Shit.

CHAPTER FOURTY-FIVE

elyse

LIVING without seeing or talking to Tyler over the past two weeks had been fucking hard, especially since we were neighbors. Thankfully, Alyssa and her annoying roommate, Natalie, hadn't minded me crashing with them until a few days before Christmas. As long as I cleaned up after myself and cooked for them, they were happy. Although I never could get a straight answer out of Alyssa about what made Natalie so annoying, because to me, she seemed like a perfectly normal roommate.

I figured Tyler would take off to Florida a few days before Christmas, and I could return home when my new furniture for the basement was being delivered.

After crying and moping around for the first few days became exhausting, my anger kicked in. I was pissed that he'd ignored me after I'd told him how I felt. Pissed that he hadn't even made an effort to try to talk to me. Pissed that our friendship had apparently meant nothing to him. Pissed that *I* had meant nothing to him.

Although Alyssa and I rarely celebrated the holidays because they seemed too painful without our parents, we decided maybe we needed to celebrate the season to honor their memory.

"I feel so weird picking out a tree without Mom and Dad," Alyssa admitted as we walked through a maze of different trees at a nearby tree farm.

"I know," I agreed, breathing in a huge whiff of pine, only to end up coughing for a solid minute or two. "It feels weird without snow too. I miss waking up to snow everywhere on Christmas morning."

“I remember Dad and me trying to wake you up one Christmas to open presents, but you were in the deepest sleep ever. Dad convinced me to go outside, make a snowball, and throw it at you. You were mad at me for weeks.”

I laughed at the memory. “Because you smacked me in the face with a snowball! The face, Lyss! Not to mention, Dad had taught you how to throw a baseball, and you never throw anything soft. My face was red for the entire day. And I ignored Dad too.”

“What about this one?” she asked, pointing to a tree that had been spray painted in gold. “It’s so pretty!”

I shot her a skeptical look, and she shrugged in defeat.

“I thought we were looking for something traditional?” I pointed out.

“Oh yeah,” she said, smacking herself in the forehead. “Maybe I’ll buy a gold tree next year. I’m surprised we’re the only ones buying a tree three days before Christmas. I figured more people would wait until the last minute.”

My phone chimed, and I quickly read a message from Lena, reminding me that she would be at my house later in the afternoon to get ready for the awards ceremony.

“Don’t forget Lena’s coming over this afternoon,” I reminded her as I continued to search for the perfect tree.

“I love that we’re doing this. Picking out a tree. Partying later tonight. I love that you’re smiling again.”

Me too.

My smile grew as my eyes landed on a pine tree that reminded me of my childhood. “Lyss, what do you think about this one?”

She carefully circled the tree, checking for brown branches and bald spots, as I began envisioning it decorated with ornaments, lights, and gold tinsel.

“I love it!” she squealed, jumping up and down and clapping her hands. “This is it!”

We headed back to my place after paying for the tree and watching two teens with zero upper body strength awkwardly secure the tied-up tree to the roof of my car. Karma bit my judgmental ass hard when Alyssa and I realized *we* had to remove the tree from the car and haul it into my house.

I knew for a fact that if Tyler had been home, he would've rushed out of his house to help us. Okay, maybe he wouldn't have rushed out, because he more than likely would've stood by the window and laughed at our struggles for a good five minutes.

With his jeep nowhere in sight, I figured he was already in Florida spending the holidays with his family. Maybe Alyssa and I would've been there with him if everything hadn't gotten so messed up. His family and I had mutually and genuinely adored each other.

What I'd loved most about spending Thanksgiving with his family was that everything had seemed so natural and comfortable. They'd made me feel at home without even trying.

The thought made my heart ache so much.

After successfully dragging and setting up the tree in the living room, Alyssa and I spent the next few minutes decorating it as we shared more childhood memories.

"Oh!" she said suddenly, jumping to her feet and running outside to her car. "I have a gift for you."

I smiled as I packed the extra decorations into the box and pulled the lid on.

Alyssa burst back into the house and handed me a little red box with a small white bow taped to the top.

"I've had this for years, but I think you should have it now," she said, breathless from the quick sprint, as she sat on the couch.

I sat down beside her, lifted the lid, and pushed through the white tissue paper. My mouth dropped and my eyes watered at the sight of a glass ornament with a family picture tucked inside. In the photo, dad cradled a three-month-old Alyssa in

his arms, and I sat on mom's lap with the world's biggest smile.

"I didn't know you had this," I cried, wiping away the tears. "I thought we lost it in the move or something. Why didn't you show this to me sooner?"

"For moments like this," she said, shaking her head to hide her own waterworks. "I didn't even have the heart to look at it when we stopped celebrating the holidays. And there never seemed to be a good moment to share it with you until now."

I carefully put the ornament back in the box and yanked my baby sister into my arms. We sobbed, feeling the loss of our parents tremendously. Feeling the ache of their absence. Wishing they were still here with us.

A loud knock on the door startled us and pulled us apart as we stared at each other. I knew we were both thinking about whether Tyler was at the door. My heart desperately wanted it to be him, but my mind knew it wasn't. He was in Florida with his family.

My eyes darted to the clock on the wall, and I realized it was three. Lena. I threw open the door and found Lena dropping her duffel bag and barreling through to give me a tight hug.

"Have you been crying?" she asked, pulling back from the hug to examine me suspiciously.

"Tears of joy," I said, with a small smile. "I promise."

"If you want me to kick someone's ass, I'll do it. No questions asked."

"Well, you can kick Alyssa's ass, because she gave me a present that made me cry."

"Hey!" my sister said indignantly. "Thanks for throwing me under the freaking bus."

"Thank you for coming with us tonight, Lena," I said, throwing an arm around her small shoulders.

She waved a dainty hand in the air, dismissing my gratitude. "You know I'll do anything for a good party—or

even a bad one. This is your night. And I'm here to support you. Consider me your bonus sister."

"Hey, Lyssy," Lena greeted and hugged my sister as I grabbed her duffel bag from the porch. "Thanks for inviting me to stay over for Christmas."

"Well, thanks for inviting me over for Thanksgiving," she said. "I had a great time."

"I know who else had a great time," Lena said, with a wink. "A little cutie named Daniel."

"Who's Daniel?" I asked, frowning, because my sister had never mentioned a guy during her stay with Lena.

Then I watched Alyssa turn fifty shades of red as she quickly headed toward the stairs.

"We should get ready! Time is ticking!" she yelled from halfway up the steps.

"Yeah!" Lena cheered, throwing her duffel bag over her tiny shoulder. "Let's get dolled the fuck up and turns some heads tonight!"

"You guys! Who the fuck is Daniel?"

I huffed my way up the stairs, listening to Lena and Alyssa cackle like witches.

For the past two years, Alyssa and I had absolutely loved dressing up to the max for the annual restaurant awards ceremony. Neither of us could remember the exact name of the ceremony—or the specific details, other than that the awards were handed out to restaurants and chefs. Neither of us actually cared, because we loved spending an evening sampling hundreds of appetizers and meeting other kitchen staff from different restaurants.

Although Eleven was a highly acclaimed restaurant, it had only won a handful of awards since opening about ten years ago. It was recognized as Best New Restaurant the year it

opened and then received the Outstanding Restaurant award five years later. The new executive chef at the time was awarded Outstanding Chef that year. The competition was brutal in California, which was why I went for the food and the people—in that order.

Alyssa whistled loudly when Lena stepped out of the bathroom dressed in a full-length, one-shoulder, black dress that accentuated her curves and small frame. The raven-haired beauty seductively walked toward the room, stopping in the doorway, and lifted her arms above her head as her fingers trailed down the frame. She swung her sleek, straight, black hair behind her shoulders and popped a hip out.

“Does this look alright?” she teased, a small pout on her red-painted lips.

Alyssa whistled again. “Wow! I can’t believe you’re wearing black.” Red was Lena’s signature color.

“Tonight is all about Elyse,” she said with a dainty shrug. “Tonight is her night to shine. And, trust me, I found a killer red dress, but I’ll save that for another time.”

Even though I wouldn’t have minded Lena wearing a red dress tonight, I was secretly happy she chose black, because I absolutely adored my red satin gown with a thigh-high slit. The v-neckline showed off the appropriate amount of cleavage, and the straps crisscrossed in the back.

My blonde locks were straightened, and Alyssa had painted on me a dark, sultry look for the night, finishing it off with a nude lip gloss. A simple pair of diamond stud earrings matched the thin diamond necklace around my neck. I felt absolutely beautiful after misting myself with my favorite perfume.

Lena returned the whistle when Alyssa slinked back into the room, wearing a full-length, sequined, emerald gown with a tasteful plunging neckline and a thigh-high slit. Her blonde locks were curled and swept to one side of her neck.

“Are you sure I don’t look like a freaking Christmas tree?” she asked, smoothing the skirt of the dress as she stood in front

of the full-length mirror.

“Yes!” Lena and I answered together before bursting into laughter.

Alyssa rolled her eyes and grabbed her phone as we headed down the stairs. While waiting for our Uber driver, we snapped a million photos of ourselves. None of us were skipping on the open bar tonight, which meant we would either rent a room at the highly expensive hotel where the awards ceremony was being held or order a reasonably priced Uber driver.

“Hopefully, I can find me a chef boyfriend,” Lena said, stepping outside when the driver honked the horn. “He can feed me chocolate-covered strawberries and fan me as I eat them.”

I shot her a questionable look. “Is that all?”

“No,” she admitted, shaking her head and climbing into the back seat. “It’s a bit more explicit, but I don’t want to corrupt Alyssa’s pretty little ears.”

“Corrupt my ears?” Alyssa shrieked, turning around in the passenger seat. “Oh, please. You know what Daniel did to me over Thanksgiving, right?”

“Who is Daniel?” I asked, irritated. “Wait, I don’t think I wanna know now.”

“Yeah, okay, says the girl who fucked in a public restroom because she couldn’t wait to go home,” my sister shot back as the driver chuckled but immediately stopped when he caught my glare through the rearview mirror.

“Don’t start with me, Lyss,” I warned. “I’m more than happy to tell Lena about that one time you—”

“Stop!” she cut me off, turning back around in her seat. “You win.”

“Yeah, I thought so.”

Lena leaned forward, gently tapped Alyssa’s shoulder, and whispered, “Was it dirtier than what Daniel did?”

“So much dirtier.”

“I’m so fucking proud of you,” she said with a maternal smile as she leaned back in the seat.

Who the fuck was Daniel?

Twenty minutes later, the driver pulled in front of a ridiculously state-of-the-art luxury hotel that boasted forty floors, room service, two VIP pool areas, and whatever else I couldn’t imagine at the moment.

Even though the weather was perfect, with a slight warm breeze drifting through the air, we hurried into the huge front lobby with groups of other attendants gawking at the gorgeous, and strategically placed Christmas decorations. As we moved with the crowd toward the main banquet hall, my gaze fell on a beautiful red carpet staircase that led to the public restrooms.

I sucked in a breath when we entered the enormous banquet hall, marveling at the crowd of people dressed so elegantly and the gold Christmas-themed decorations that filled the area. This was the first time the ceremony had been scheduled so close to the holiday, but the organizers had definitely made the yuletide theme work.

Huge Christmas trees decorated with gold tinsel and ornaments stood in each corner of the room. The round tables for eight were covered with black tablecloths, and poinsettias served as the centerpieces.

Mom, you would absolutely love this, I thought with a tinge of sadness.

Then my stupid brain thought about how Tyler should be here too because he had been one of my biggest supporters. My heart sighed a tiny bit, missing his presence.

Once we checked in with an usher, who gave us our assigned table and pointed out the bar area and appetizers, I spotted Dave standing by our table.

“Chef, this is my guest, Lena,” I introduced after giving him a quick hug.

“Nice to meet you, Lena,” he said warmly, extending a hand. “I thought you were bringing two guests, Elyse. Do you still need an extra seat?”

“No,” I said, pasting on the brightest smile. “Just me and Lena tonight. And my sister’s on her own ticket, of course.”

“No problem.”

I was thankful he didn’t ask more questions, but I was sure he had more important matters on his mind than wondering about a staff member’s guest list.

“This is gorgeous,” I said, scanning the room for familiar faces. “Hey, wait. Why aren’t you dressed up? You’re wearing your whites.”

In previous years, Dave had worn either a tuxedo or a black suit, and I hadn’t minded seeing him dressed as a human. Even though he wore his normal uniform of black pants and a white chef jacket, the pants looked pressed and fancier and the jacket seemed more fitted without any stains. *Hmph.*

“I’m speaking tonight,” he explained with a chuckle.

“Oh,” I teased. “That’s exciting. Break a leg.”

A few seconds later Alex, who was dressed in a gorgeous sparkly black dress, with Ricky and Dean, who both looked dapper in their simple black suits and ties, joined the company table.

“How many years do I have now?” Ricky asked with a cute little smile after a quick hug.

I returned his smile and shook my head at my “boyfriend” the rest of the staff loved to tease me about. We both knew his crush was harmless, but we still liked to tease each other.

“Well, I just turned 27,” I said, tapping my index finger on my chin. “And you’re still not 21.”

“Damn,” he said playfully.

“You’re cute,” Lena added, tapping his nose with her finger.

Ricky blushed and wandered off with Dean to check out the appetizers.

“I’m ready for a drink,” I said, facing Lena. “What do you think?”

“I think you read my mind.”

We stood in line behind the heavy crowd of people surrounding the bar.

“This place is gorgeous,” Lena marveled, her eyes studying everything in the room. “Everyone has been really nice and welcoming.”

“That’s why I come every year,” I said. “I mean, there are a few pretentious and snooty people, but most people here are really down-to-earth. It’s really refreshing to talk with others who know what you’re going through.”

As we made our way to the front, I ordered a vodka tonic, knowing the alcohol would give me courage, and Lena requested rum and Coke.

“To friends, the future, and allowing whatever happens to just happen,” Lena toasted, her drinking glass in the air, once we stepped away from the bar.

“Amen,” I added, clinking my glass against hers before taking a long sip.

We slowly circled the room, socializing with other staff from different restaurants in the area. A head chef from an elite and high-class restaurant about an hour away immediately became smitten with Lena and promised her an open table anytime she wanted, despite the six-month-long wait list. I made her promise to take me with her, because I had heard nothing but amazing reviews about that restaurant. And maybe I would try to sneak into the kitchen for a quick peek.

As Lena and I met Alyssa back at the table, about half a dozen directors stepped onto the stage and welcomed everyone to the event. The ceremony was a combination of handing out awards and revealing winners from various raffles. One year, Dave had won a weeklong vacation for two to Hawaii, but

being the good man he was—despite being bossy and occasionally cranky—he gave the tickets to his parents.

I sighed as I continued to sip my third vodka tonic, tuning out the various speakers until one of the female directors I recognized and admired stepped up to the microphone.

“These awards recognize the tremendous talent of multiple individuals who have worked and excelled in a full-dining facility. These individuals have demonstrated not only their expertise and knowledge in their distinct fields but how to work as a team, keep their culinary skills sharp, and maintain professionalism in the industry. Without further ado, the Distinguished Chef Awards!”

I became ridiculously restless thirty minutes into the ceremony and excused myself from the table to take a small walk. My relaxed mood soured as I made my way up the staircase, wishing Tyler was here. With me.

When I thought I’d lost my chance at the promotion, he had been there for me. He’d helped me use my voice and become a boss. I was still working on becoming a badass boss. In a way, I felt like everything was wrong. Wrong because he wasn’t here. Wrong because I was still thinking about him after all this time. Wrong because I wished he were here.

Suck it up, Elyse, I silently scolded myself, thinking of Alyssa and Lena, who had always supported me.

As I made my way into the bathroom, I glanced at my reflection in the mirror and gave myself the worst little pep talk in the world.

How could Tyler not text me? Or even try to call? Even if he didn’t love me, I thought he cared about me and our friendship. Why hadn’t he even checked on me? Maybe everything we’d shared was just in my head. Maybe I’d turned whatever we’d had into something unexplainably amazing. I had never been that happy and carefree with someone.

“Stupid vodka,” I muttered, cursing the alcohol that was supposed to give me courage.

A single tear rolled from my eye, and I quickly wiped it away with a finger. I sighed. I was so fucking tired of being weak and sad. This was my night to have fun, not wonder about someone who clearly didn’t give a rat’s ass about me.

I left the bathroom and headed back down the huge staircase to return to the ballroom. A huge group of drunken guests momentarily blocked my path. As I weaved in and out of the crowd, scanning the area to make sure I was headed in the right direction, something caught my eye.

Standing across the room was a guy that ... kind of looked like Tyler. He was tall and wore a black suit very well, but that was all I could make out. When was the last time I’d had my eyes checked?

“Stupid vodka,” I mumbled under my breath, figuring the alcohol was blurring my vision already.

Convinced my mind and my eyes were fucking with me, I entered the ballroom and quietly headed toward the table. My heart skipped a beat when I recognized Dave’s clear and strong voice speaking to the room.

“This person began working for me straight out of culinary school and has shown nothing but improvement ever since. She is always ready to learn something new and is always willing to teach others what she has learned.

“Not only will she own up to her own mistakes, but she becomes so incredibly determined and careful to not make the same mistake twice. With her commitment and eagerness to learn and listen to those around her, her leadership skills will only become stronger over time.

“With that being said, please welcome Chef Elyse Acklin to the stage!”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Tyler

WHERE THE FUCK IS SHE? I thought frantically as I scanned the ballroom for any sign of her.

The past few weeks had been a living hell for me, with thoughts of Elyse completely invading my mind and my attempts at contacting her unsuccessful. I knew she'd been staying at Alyssa's place to avoid me, even though I'd barely been home due to my crazy work schedule.

The awards ceremony was the one event I knew she would never miss. And I'd promised her I would be here. For her. Only her.

A familiar bald guy approached the microphone on the stage and began to speak. "This person began working for me straight out of culinary school and has shown nothing but improvement ever since. She is always ready to learn something new and is always willing to teach others what she has learned."

I've seen—maybe met—him before, I thought absentmindedly as I scoured the millions of tables. *Where was she?*

"Not only will she own up to her own mistakes, but she becomes so incredibly determined and careful to not make the same mistake twice. With her commitment and eagerness to learn and listen to those around her, her leadership skills will only become stronger over time."

My shoulders slumped, believing she'd decided not to attend the ceremony after all. This was all my fault.

"With that being said, please welcome Chef Elyse Acklin to the stage!" the man on the stage announced proudly.

My neck snapped up, my eyes went wide, and my mouth stretched into a huge smile. The audience clapped, but loud cheers bellowed from two tables somewhere in the middle of the room. Alyssa and Lena were on their feet screaming and clapping.

And she said she wouldn't win anything, I thought to myself, amused. *Holy fucking shit. She fucking did it.*

Then I saw her. I saw the woman I'd had no business falling for, shyly walking across the stage in a red gown. Red was definitely her color. She looked so damn beautiful up there, hugging the guy who'd given her the Rising Star award. Even with a surprised smile on her gorgeous face, she still radiated confidence.

I was so fucking proud of her, but I also knew I was probably the last person she wanted to see. She'd had the courage to tell me her feelings, and I had selfishly pushed her away. I wasn't sure who was worse—me or her ex-boyfriend. Him, the guy who had manipulated her and preyed on her insecurities, or me, the guy who had run away without saying a single goddamned word.

I thought the space between us would help me prove to myself that I didn't need her. Didn't want her. But I was wrong. So terribly wrong. And stupid. I missed her more than I'd ever thought was possible.

I had convinced myself that I didn't want a relationship, but the real reason I'd pushed her away was because I was fucking terrified of losing someone I loved again. And I'd lost her due to my own cowardice. My own insecurities and fears.

She had every right to hate me. Even I hated myself for being such a fucking dumbass.

A few seconds later, the audience went crazy and jumped out of their seats as a forty-something-year-old man with blonde hair stepped onto the stage with Elyse, who looked like she would pass out at any second. They exchanged a few words and smiles before the guy focused on the crowd as they began to take their seats.

“The culinary world can be brutal and challenging, and many of you know, it’s not easy,” the guy said confidently. “It’s high stress with a ton of pressure. But great chefs know none of that matters when they watch a guest or customer take the first bite of their creation and smile with delight. None of that matters when guests give their highest compliments or cry because a dish has invoked a certain memory.”

His voice sounded familiar. I squinted my eyes for a better look. *Shit. I knew him!* Jacob Stone. He was the famous chef who owned dozens of restaurants around the world—with at least two in Los Angeles—and his own cooking show.

Even though I knew Elyse’s heart belonged to Gordon Ramsay, she’d admired Jacob Stone for years, telling me how he’d started out as a dishwasher in a fancy restaurant before he’d worked his way up the kitchen hierarchy. Even on his worst days when he wanted to quit, his passion for food and his curiosity for learning had kept him motivated.

As I remembered her gushing over the famous chef, I recalled how I’d actually met him a few weeks prior for business in Los Angeles. Jacob and his team interviewed half a dozen companies for the renovation of one of his restaurants in the area. After submitting dozens of designs and a proposal, my team won the bid for the project.

However, Jacob had reached out to me personally a few days later and offered to hire me to renovate part of his house. My initial presentation and designs had impressed him so much that he’d invited me to stay at his house—which, honestly, was a mansion—to collaborate on a few ideas.

He was a cool, laid-back guy who seemed genuinely interested in my ideas and sketches. Having a celebrity client in my pocket was huge. And maybe fated.

“Chef Acklin,” Jacob said, turning his head to look at her. “I want to offer you the position of executive chef at my new restaurant in Pasadena.”

My jaw dropped at the announcement. Just a few months ago, she’d cried when she’d thought she messed up her shot at the sous-chef position, and now a fucking millionaire and

celebrity chef wanted her to basically run his restaurant. Even though I actually had no idea what exactly an executive chef did, I had to believe the position was a big deal.

I was so fucking proud of her. I knew she could do whatever she wanted. Her drive and passion had led her to this insane accomplishment. That was my girl. Well, I hoped she would be. I was ready to do whatever it took to win her back.

I smiled, watching her accept congratulations from different people in the crowd as she made her way back to her table of friends and coworkers. I took a deep breath as I summoned up the courage to talk to her.

The nerves in my stomach made my mind go blank. What would I even say? What would I do? Should I kiss her on the cheek? Should I hug her? Wave? *Shit, I've gone soft.*

And what would happen if she spotted me? Would she yell at me? Would she tell me to leave and never come back? Or would she simply ignore me? I deserved anything and everything she threw at me—hurtful words, her drink, Alyssa—but I was determined to win her back.

Fuck. Elyse radiated pure happiness as she hugged her sister. She truly deserved all the happiness in the world, and my presence would take that away. I couldn't do that to her. I didn't want her beautiful smile to disappear because of me.

As much as I wanted to man up for my stupidity and actions, tonight was her night. I didn't want to see her cry. And, if I was being completely honest, I didn't want to deal with Alyssa either. That little smart mouth would be up my ass in a heartbeat, probably tearing me a new one. I admired the way she protected her older sister, but right now, she was a relentless tiny bodyguard with a huge bite.

I stole another look and cupped my jaw, my heart feeling whole from her success. Confidence looked really good on her, and she had done all this by herself. She was one hell of a woman, and I was so incredibly stupid to hurt her. I would do anything to have her back in my life again—but on another day.

With a heavy heart, I headed toward the exit as the ceremony continued. I stopped suddenly, wanting to take one last look, when someone crashed into me.

“Excuse me,” the stranger said politely, not tearing his eyes from the phone in his hand.

“I know I’m good at what I do and all, but do you really need to follow me?” I joked, brushing my hands against the folds of my jacket.

Jacob Stone looked up and smiled widely. “Sullivan!” he exclaimed, shaking my hand with his free hand. “Please don’t tell me you’re a chef too. How many talents can one man possess? Any other hidden talents besides your stunning designs?”

I laughed as we both scooted away from the exit area.

“I can’t cook for shit,” I said, shoving my hands into my pants pockets. “I’m here supporting someone. Elyse actually.”

“Elyse Acklin?” A blonde eyebrow rose with curiosity. If I didn’t have his attention before, I definitely had it now.

“Yeah, her.”

“Impressive woman and a talented chef,” Jacob praised. “I would have never offered her a position if she wasn’t. Girlfriend?”

Shit, I wish.

“She will be,” I admitted tentatively, wishing my heart would stop calling me a coward.

“Lucky guy. She’s beautiful.”

I didn’t care if Jacob Stone was a millionaire. Or he was a famous chef with his own cooking show. Or that he knew how to intimidate someone with a fucking handshake. This guy needed to stay away from my girl. As much as I liked him, those feelings could change in a fucking heartbeat. And I wouldn’t even care about losing his business. Well, the company would care, but I wouldn’t.

The image of Lena gushing about all of Stone's wonderful qualities and, no doubt, encouraging Elyse to flirt with him at the next available opportunity had my stomach turning sour. I could imagine their conversation.

Damn, I really have gone soft as fuck.

To keep my temper and jealousy in check, I changed the subject. "So, you're opening a new spot in Pasadena? Don't you have enough projects already, man?"

Jacob laughed. "Ah, the culinary world changes every fucking second, Sully. As much as I want to taste the sweet butter on the biscuits, I need to keep moving forward. Yeah, my team found a location for me to inspect tomorrow."

"Oh yeah?"

"I've seen the pictures, and the place needs a major overhaul. I was actually going to have a member of my team reach out to you and see if you wanted to check it out. Care to join me tomorrow?"

"Yeah, man," I said eagerly, rubbing my hands together. "You have my number. Just text me the details and the time. I'll be there."

Even if I wasn't free, I was now. I had no problem owing Miguel, Will, or Kyle a favor or two.

"My assistant will message you within the hour," he said, giving a short nod to his security team that escorted us to a side exit in the hotel.

"See you tomorrow," I said, shaking his hand once again as the cool night hit my skin.

Before I pulled up to the address Jacob's assistant had given me, I spent a good twenty minutes looking over the neighborhood and noting all the different restaurants already in the area. It wasn't as popular as downtown or some of the other areas, but local foodies and bloggers believed it was a

hot spot for trendy and unique establishments. If a restaurant couldn't compete with the more contemporary places like Eleven, owners and chefs only had to dig deeper into their creative minds.

I mean, I passed a fucking mason jar restaurant where diners eat food from the damn jar. *What? That was a thing?* I knew I was getting old, but I'd believed I was young enough to keep up with some of the trends.

When I stepped inside the rundown building, my boots automatically crunched down on the debris on the floor. From my research last night, the restaurant had been built in the 1960s, originally as a supper club. Over the years, it had changed to a seafood restaurant, then to an Italian restaurant, and most recently, an all-you-can-eat pizza buffet. The building had stood empty for the past five years.

My phone chimed, and I saw a notification that the bouquet of flowers I'd ordered had been delivered to Elyse's house. Unfortunately, no one was at home to sign for them, and the delivery service had left them on the porch. When was she coming home? She couldn't live with Alyssa forever ... Right?

I couldn't even remember the last time I'd sent flowers to a woman—maybe Diana, for her birthday a few years ago. I knew flowers wouldn't make up for my behavior, but it was a small start.

"Tyler thanks for stopping by," Jacob said, reaching out to shake my hand. "I promise this shouldn't take long. It's the holidays, and no one should be working anyway."

I bit my lower lip to disagree with him because I honestly had shit to do. My dad—my own father—had banned me from coming home for Christmas.

"The next time you come down, Elyse had better be with you," he had warned the last time we'd spoken.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who loved her.

"So, what are we working with here?" I asked, surveying my surroundings and knocking on walls with my fist. "What

are you looking for?”

“Sully, I know it’s a walking shit show right now,” Jacob said with a sigh. “Just tell me I’m not in over my head here.”

Even though he was a famous chef with more than a million dollars in the bank, I kind of felt for the guy. He was actually a good guy who didn’t mind getting his hands dirty. He had thick, blonde hair that was pulled back into a man-bun, and he wore faded jeans and a simple blue t-shirt that showed off the impressive ink staining his arms. No fancy suits. No gold rings on his fingers.

“It’s actually not that bad,” I said honestly. “I’ll have a better idea if I know what you’re plans are.”

A popular restaurant he owned in New York relied on different chefs each month, bringing their own unique styles and flavors. Diners actually sat in front of a man-made waterfall in his restaurant in Hawaii.

Jacob sighed heavily and shook his head. “I’m thinking of doing something different. I mean, I want to do something different. I’m tired of the shady-ass reviews that say the prices are too high, the foods are unpronounceable, and the atmosphere is too stuffy, too high-end. The list goes on and on.”

The reviews aren’t wrong, I thought silently. Most of his restaurants catered to the rich with expensive tastes. What exactly was chutney?

“My team was thinking about French,” he revealed. “With a heavy emphasis on frites and crêpes.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, Jacob, but did your team actually research the area? Did you not see the mason jar restaurant a mile away? Sure, a French restaurant is nowhere in sight, but have you thought that maybe the neighborhood doesn’t want one?”

“That’s a good point.”

“Sure, you could open a fancy restaurant here, and I’m sure people will flock to it because of your name and

reputation. But do you think the interest will last more than a year or two?"

I prayed I wasn't seriously overstepping my boundaries as a contractor. I might not know a ton about the restaurant business, but my impressions about neighborhoods are pretty spot-on. This area, filled with millennials, wasn't interested in a high-end restaurant. They wanted something unique and completely different.

"Agh!" he said, throwing his hands up in the air. "You're right! If Christmas wasn't right around the corner, I'd fire the team that did the research."

Shit, this guy didn't mess around.

"What about breakfast with a twist?" I suggested, pulling this idea from all the time I'd spent with Elyse. "People, especially the young, love brunch. What about stepping it up a notch?"

I had been hooked on eggs benedict since the first time Elyse had made it for me. If that was on the menu, I'd hit the place every day.

Jacob raised an eyebrow at me that had me sweating bullets and thinking my idea was pure shit. *Fuck. Me and my big mouth.*

"I think you're onto something, Tyler," he said, tapping his chin with his index finger and taking another look around the building. "Like making comfort food more innovative."

"Yeah, something like that," I agreed.

If Jacob took my advice, then I definitely had some solid ideas to make this a comfortable working environment for Elyse. If she accepted his offer, she would spend most of her time here, and I wanted to make it perfect for her. Well, for Jacob too.

A smile crossed his face, and his head started bobbing up and down with excitement. "You're right! Fuck, you're absolutely right. A bar could go over there, and some booths over there. I want a modern look—with glass. And colors!"

I quickly opened my portfolio and jotted down all the ideas he rattled off as he pointed in different directions.

“Oh! What about a coffee station with a drive-through window?” he asked excitedly. “Put Starbucks right out of business. Some skinny teenager asked me where the nearest Starbucks was as I was coming in. She didn’t even know who I was, which was kind of an insult. She looked like she was 13! My parents never let me have coffee until I graduated high school.”

“My dad gave me my first beer when I was 16,” I said with a shrug.

Knowing I would try to sneak one anyway, he and I sat in the backyard and drank a bottle together.

“Speaking of parents,” Jacob said thoughtfully. “I was thinking about naming the restaurant Rose Wind in honor of my mom. Does that sound too fancy?”

I found the idea of him wanting to honor his mom endearing, but Rose Wind sounded way too fancy for this neighborhood—and for a restaurant serving innovative comfort food. The way Jacob spoke about his mom reminded me of how Elyse talked about hers—with fondness, tenderness, and love.

“So,” I cleared my throat nervously and jumped headfirst into a risky move. “How open are you about the name of this place?”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

elyse

IT WAS funny how things worked out.

As cliché as it might sound, surrounding yourself with the people you love made life a little easier. They made you smile a little harder, laugh a little louder, and hurt a little less.

But I'd learned something from my time away from home. Despite all the fair play and logical thoughts, everything came down to me in the end. I had spent so much time thinking the world was against me and fucked me in the ass any chance it got. But I'd never taken the time to focus on myself, always worrying way too much about my surroundings, draining my every second of my existence.

Nothing was perfect. Life wasn't perfect, and neither was I. When I looked at everything I had, it was much better than what I wished I had.

I'd begged for someone to love me unconditionally, but I was too blind to see the other kind of love I'd had right in front of me. My love for cooking had led me to a career opportunity that I honestly never thought I'd see. My hard work and my passion had helped me stand out.

Jacob fucking Stone wanted me to work in his new restaurant. He hugged me and believed I was good enough to work with him. A millionaire. A culinary legend. My own restaurant didn't seem like that much of a stretch now. I couldn't believe my dreams were coming true.

"I'm going to ask one more time," Alyssa stressed, palming my shoulder. "Are you going to be okay? I was just joking when I said you had to pay rent at my apartment. Well, half joking because you're about to be rich anyway." My little sister laughed, tugging at the giant bag in her hand.

Alyssa, Lena, and I celebrated Christmas in my house with a ton of spiked hot chocolate, wine, and old holiday movies. My first Christmas in years. And for the first time, I couldn't wait for a fresh start to the new year. I couldn't wait to look at life a bit differently.

I shook my head and leaned against the frame of the front door with my arms crossed to my chest as Alyssa stood on my porch.

“Alyssa, I promise. I had to come back home eventually and stop avoiding my life. And I don't want to be the girl everyone worries about all the time. I'm just going to clean up for now and see where the day takes me. Nothing else,” I assured my baby sister, who never failed to remind me how worried she was about me.

But I'd honestly been doing okay. I'd been crying less and keeping myself busy. I was still working at Eleven, even though I'd accepted Jacob's offer to be the executive chef at his new restaurant. Although the finalization process would take a while, Jacob assured me he would keep me close during the transition. How could I say no to that?

Alyssa looked over her shoulder to see if Tyler was home, and he wasn't. I'd assumed he was still in Florida, and I tried not to care. Although he hadn't tried to contact me, he'd been sending me flowers. I had a damn near entire garden on my porch.

Even though I had hoped he would surprise me at the awards ceremony, he wasn't there to congratulate me or even wish me a Merry Christmas or even give me an “I'm sorry I'm such a dumbass.” My heart believed Tyler was different, but in the end, he was like all the guys before him. The only difference was the pain. Like being physically stabbed in the heart kind of pain.

“I'm going to help you,” Alyssa said, tightening her lips with sheer determination. “Yeah, I'm going to help. It looks like Santa took a shit in your living room, and it's too much for one person.”

I rolled my eyes, as I hadn't planned on taking down the holiday decorations immediately. They brought back wonderful memories that I wanted to hold onto for a bit longer. Every plate, pan, pot, bowl, and anything else in my kitchen had been used over the holiday break, because Alyssa, Lena, and I had been too lazy to actually throw any of the dishes in the dishwasher—even for a super quick cycle.

Bits of popcorn and other food crumbs littered my living room floor because Lena and Alyssa had the bad habit of throwing food at each other. Dirty dishes eventually sat on the dining room table when the kitchen counter became too full. In short, my house was a disaster.

“Thank you for always being here for me, but I need to do this alone, Alyssa. I dragged you down with Jason, and I'm not doing that again. I'm taking care of you now. Besides, didn't you say you were hanging out with someone? Go. Have fun,” I pushed, wanting some alone time.

Usually, I hated being alone because I had time to overanalyze every little thing. But now, I was taking the first step to accepting there was nothing wrong with being by myself. Also, staying with Alyssa and her roommate, Natalie, wore me out. One day, they loved each other, and then the next, they were arguing like an old married couple. The cops were almost called twice, and I caught myself playing mediator way too many times.

“Well,” she bubbled. “*He* can wait. *My* sister comes first.”

“Does *he* have a name?”

Alyssa gave me that look she gave when she was about to lie and pushed her hand out while vibrating her lips.

“Barry,” she said, clearing her throat. “Yeah, Barry with the ugly-ass name. And that's not an invitation to ask either.”

That was off the table. She couldn't do that to me.

“You know that's wrong. And what? Is Barry the name we use now for people we're not supposed to be messing with? Or *fucking*?” I emphasized *fucking* because I knew that too well. And it wouldn't end on good terms.

I desperately wanted Tyler to pop up out of nowhere and express his love for me, but at the same time, I couldn't fall back into that trap, no matter how tempting he was. He wasn't going to hurt me twice.

"For your information, Elyse, Barry and I are not fucking. Not yet, at least," Alyssa said, crossing her fingers. "But when it's worth explaining, you'll be the first person I tell. I'm working on keeping secrets."

Yeah right. Keeping secrets, my ass.

I pushed my body off the frame and dropped my arms to my sides. "And will it ever be worth explaining?"

"Not in the slightest bit," she said, strolling away, still facing me. "But we don't need that to be the focal point right now."

"This conversation isn't over," I shouted, playfully rolling my eyes.

My sister walked backward, giving me a cheesy smile, like she was about to do something reckless. Or get involved in something she shouldn't. Most of the time, I stayed out of it. She was young and adventurous, but she would slow down eventually. Right?

Alyssa stopped in place. "Elyse?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm really happy we celebrated Christmas this year, and hopefully, we continue to do so. I miss Mom and Dad so much, and I know this was hard for you, for the both of us, but we did it. We did it together, because we're the fucking Acklin sisters, and never forget it," she said, gesturing her hands. "I'm not trying to get all soft and shit, but I love you. You've been the best substitute mom a girl could ask for. I wish I was more like you. And I'm proud of you."

Was someone cutting onions? I never knew how much I'd wanted to hear those words until she'd said them.

I held my hand against my chest and used my free hand to cover my mouth. "Thank you, Lyss. Do you really mean that?"

“I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it.”

“I love you so much. I needed to hear that I was doing something right.”

“You’re doing *everything* right. Plus, a few setbacks don’t define you,” my little sister yelled, holding off on closing her car door. “You call me if you need anything. I don’t care what it is or what time it is. Unless you fuck with my tai chi.”

I narrowed my eyes in confusion. “When did you even start tai chi?”

“Today. And you should try it.”

I playfully rolled my eyes and waited for her to pull out before going back into my house. These past few days had been nice, but I needed to get back into a routine. It wasn’t like I had run away. Well, who was I kidding? I had run away as fast as I possibly could because I couldn’t be near Tyler.

But now, I was ready to move forward. The new year wasn’t going to start with me having one foot stuck in the past. Nope.

I pushed my hair back, gripped my neck, and puffed my cheeks as I took multiple deep breaths and trudged into the living room. My eyes surveyed the room, and my heart warmed at the immediate wholesome feeling of the decorations. The small, blinking lights in shades of red and green wrapped around my fireplace, and three red stockings hung from the stone mantel. Alyssa had tried writing our names on them with a marker to be creative, but the writing turned into a blurb of ink that had ruined the fluffy material. She’d wanted to toss them, but I’d kept them so we could laugh at the memory years later.

Garlands, ribbons, bows, and streamers decorated every inch of the room, making it look like a scene from a Christmas movie. And I loved all of it.

I rubbed my pendant and stared at the ground. “Thank you, Mom and Dad. I haven’t done this in a while because I’ve been so focused on the wrong things, but I did it. I worked my

ass off, and I can finally say I'm going to live your dream. I probably shouldn't have said ass, but it's too late."

I laughed under my breath and shook my head slightly. "Although, it's hard to see right now, everything is coming together. And I know you both have been looking after us, but it's so hard. But I promise I'm going to continue working on myself and my career and make you proud. And I know I've said this before, but I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't stay at that stupid sleepover, and I know you forgive me. And I know I will eventually forgive myself. I have to—"

The doorbell rang, making me jump out of my skin. I quickly patted my cheeks for any signs of tears. I figured all my tears had dried and that I was incapable of crying anymore. Crying at the drop of the hat should've been an Olympic sport, and I would've won a gold medal.

"What did you forget, Ly—" I stopped myself and inhaled a large breath of air.

It was as if I'd spoken him into existence, and I couldn't exhale, wanting to choke, feeling the oxygen trapped inside of my lungs. I sent a frantic signal to my brain to move, go back in the house, but my body simply froze on the spot.

How long had it been since we were this close—face-to-face? How long since I'd stared into those golden brown eyes and inhaled the aromatic scent of his cologne?

You can do this, Elyse. You're strong, and you're enough.

Ignoring him had become so exhausting, because I couldn't stop loving him overnight. I couldn't change the way I'd felt about him over the past month. I needed more time. He'd managed to steal my heart in a small amount of time. Even though he was the last person I expected to hurt me, my heart still fluttered at the stupid sight of him.

Why had he sent me so many flowers over the past few days? Were they an unspoken apology for his behavior? Were they Christmas gifts? Or did he simply send them because he felt sorry for how things ended between us?

I had spent so much time blaming myself for falling for him, but didn't he understand that I wouldn't have forced anything on him? That was how much I loved him.

I stole a quick glance and looked away, feeling the burn from his stare. I absolutely hated having no control over my damn emotions when it came to him. One second, I was crying, and the next second, my tears were nowhere to be found. All my life I'd believed I was weak, allowing people to walk all over me and giving them every reason to do so.

But in the end, I was strong enough. I was strong enough to raise a tough girl that I could call my sister. I'd worked in an insane environment that involved knives and hot temperatures. And I'd finally accepted that my parents' deaths were not my fault.

But apparently, I wasn't strong enough not to fall for him. Maybe being friends with an incredibly hot neighbor might work for the next girl, but it had completely fucked me. I was fucked from ever loving someone again.

Aw, man, he has flowers. Shit.

"Tyler, what are you doing?" I spoke first, standing my ground.

I took a decent step back, praying I didn't look eager or hopeful. Tyler stood with one foot on a step and the other on my porch with the flowers pressed to his chest. Lilies and roses, to be exact.

"I saw your car," Tyler said, clearing his throat. "Actually, fuck that. We need to talk. I need to talk, Elyse."

His voice was demanding and possessive as he dropped his hand and tried moving closer. I wished he didn't look so attractive, letting his facial hair grow out around his jaw and the way his half-buttoned collared shirt showed some of his chest.

I shook my head and brought my tired eyes to his, noticing his stiff posture. "We had weeks to talk. And now because *you* want to talk, we have to talk? It doesn't work that way, Tyler,

and I can't do this. We're neighbors, okay, but let's just cut the shit and forget it."

Putting myself first for once, I turned around to go back into my home.

Tyler gently grabbed my arm and stopped me. "Elyse, wait."

The sincerity and sorrow in his voice was obvious. My eyes clamped shut as the warmth of his skin burned against mine and stoked a fire in my body.

"No," I snapped, ripping my arm from his grasp. "I'm not waiting anymore. I shouldn't have told you I loved you."

My eyes went wide as soon as the words left my mouth. I could've said I liked him or wanted to be more than friends, but *love* came out. Love flew out of my mouth, and I knew how much that four letter-word could change everything. In a heartbeat. Change your life. For better or worse. Because I still loved him, and I didn't believe I would stop anytime soon. We needed to keep our distance so I could move on without him.

If I was doing the right thing, then why did my words feel so wrong?

He sighed and rubbed his hands down his face. "Why?" he asked, as if he didn't know the answer.

Are you fucking kidding me? Maybe because he'd run away from me. I wasn't some random girl. I was someone who would've done *anything* for him, and I knew he would've done the same for me.

I huffed and swallowed the lump stuck in my throat. "You know why. Love is scary and unexpected, and I shouldn't have thrown the word at you. I should have ignored it and chosen our friendship. But I got in over my head because I'm fucking human, Tyler. I didn't ask for this either, it just happened. And no, I'm not sorry," I yelled, my voice cracking. "Part of me knew this would happen. And maybe I'm selfish for letting it, but you led me on too. Look me in my eye and tell me it was just sex."

He cupped his jaw and looked at me as if he just noticed the rage inside me. “That was our deal at first.”

“Tell me it wasn’t just sex, Tyler,” I said determinedly.

“You know it wasn’t, Elyse. At first, that’s what I wanted, but it was more than that.” His tone sounded stressed, and bags formed under his beautiful eyes.

“I wouldn’t know that. And why? Because you ignored me. You shut me out. Once again, I was there for someone that wasn’t there for me in the end. I sat there while you cried, drinking yourself to death, after you yelled at me for being supportive. You treated me like garbage, and all I ever did was stick by your side.”

The pain in my core rippled through me. So much for trying to control my emotions, but the words needed to be released. He needed to hear them. He needed to know how he’d made me feel.

“Please let me explain, Elle,” Tyler said, reaching out for my hand, but then stopped himself. “Give me five minutes. Please?”

No, my mind happily sang out.

“Clock starts now,” I sighed. *That damn sure wasn’t a no.*

Tyler clenched his jaw and looked down at me with worry in his eyes. “When we first met, I was in a bad space. I had no intention of letting anyone close to me, but somehow, you managed to get through to me. I tried being friends with you,” he said with a small, badly timed laugh. Nothing was funny. “But we were honest with each other, and you knew I wasn’t looking for a relationship.”

Did he just put the blame on me? Oh, hell no.

I rotated to my more dominant leg and rolled my eyes. I was so tired of hearing that bullshit excuse.

“You have four minutes left,” I reminded him, gritting my teeth.

“At first, I was afraid I was betraying Jordyn somehow, as crazy as that sounds,” Tyler said quickly, his eyes shining with

emotion. “Even though I knew she wanted me to find happiness, I told myself I didn’t deserve a second chance. But what I finally realized was that I was fucking terrified of loving someone again.”

I stared at him, sucking in my bottom lip.

“When you said you loved me, I should’ve manned up and talked to you. I struggle with that. I fucked up, Elyse, and I’m sorry. I ignored you because I wanted to prove to myself that I didn’t need you. That I didn’t want you. We had spent so much time together that I thought I needed time away from you. To prove this wasn’t real. But this *is* real, and I’ve missed you every fucking day.”

I kept quiet and let him finish talking. “My life has been a living hell. But the moment I met you, each day became a little easier. And, honestly, every day I spent with you, I didn’t feel as empty as I did the one before. So, I can’t let you walk away because I need you. I’ve needed you from the moment I laid eyes on you,” he choked, repeating the words.

And still, I couldn’t cry. Which was an improvement because all I’d done was cry.

“Why didn’t you call or text me?” I asked. “Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

“I tried,” he said with a confused look. “I tried calling you every day—well, multiple times a day. I thought you’d blocked me.”

“I didn’t get anything. Absolutely nothing from you.”

And I would’ve known, as I’d checked my phone multiple times a day with a bit of hope in my heart.

“Alyssa,” he said, solving the small mystery. “I texted her, asking to talk to you, but she shut me down. I’m guessing she blocked me on your phone.”

I couldn’t even get mad at my sister, knowing she’d wanted to protect me from continuing to get hurt.

“Why aren’t you in Florida with your family?”

“I skipped this year,” he answered, letting his eyes roam.

“Why?”

“Because my dad told me I couldn’t come home unless you came with me.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I’d waited so long to hear those words from him, but somehow, I still felt disappointed. He said he’d missed me. Needed me. Thought about me. Tried to reach me every day. But he didn’t say he loved me. And, somehow, that just hurt even worse, especially when the wounds were still fresh.

What happened if he got scared again? What if he ran away and ignored me? What would I do then, besides fall apart all over again?

“I never got to tell you congratulations,” he said huskily. “I’m so proud of you for getting your dream. I never doubted you, not once.”

I swallowed and stared into his eyes with a surprised look on my face. “How do you know about that?”

When I’d signed the contract and hundreds of other papers accepting Jacob’s offer, one of the documents was a non-disclosure agreement, stating that I wouldn’t share the specifics unless I had permission. Even the media didn’t even know anything.

“I was there,” Tyler said confidently. “The whole time. I said I would be there for you.”

Now, I was really speechless. “I didn’t approach you because you looked really happy, Elle. I saw the smile on your face, and I didn’t want to fuck that up. I didn’t want to ruin your night because you looked so fucking beautiful up there.”

“Oh,” I said softly.

“That night, I wanted to tell you that I want you. That I would do anything for another chance. Please let me show you that I just want you. And only you.”

He wanted me. Wanted a second chance. Still didn’t love me.

“Say something,” Tyler begged, looking at me as if his life depended on it.

Everything in my mind was foggy as my heart focused on the fact that he’d come to the awards ceremony. He was there for one of the biggest nights of my life. The wall around my heart started to crumble at the mere thought of him dressed to perfection in a suit.

Elyse, you’re stronger than that. Stop. Abort.

I had to stay strong because I was flipping a new leaf. New year. New leaf. I wanted to prove to myself that I didn’t need to chase after a guy who’d hurt me so badly. Everything in me wanted to jump into his arms and forgive him, but I knew I would end up hating myself if I did. Sending me flowers and telling me what I’d wanted to hear wasn’t working right now. I needed something more than lilies and roses.

“No,” I admitted, not quite believing how easily the word fell from my mouth. “You had your chance, Tyler. Not once did you consider how I felt, and I don’t know if I even trust you anymore. We’re not teenagers, but that’s exactly how you reacted. Like a goddamn teenager. What happens the next time you get scared? Will you take off again? Ignore me because you need time to think?”

“I don’t believe you have any idea what I went through. I trusted you, and you fucking hurt me. Just because you’re ready doesn’t mean I am. I’m still hurting. And you don’t get to call the shots when it comes to my life, because I make them now.”

Tyler stared at me with a stunned look as his mouth dropped open. “Elyse, I’m not—”

“Let me finish talking!” I spat out, losing a bit of control. On one hand, it was kind of scary, but on the other, it was exhilarating. *Was I becoming a badass boss?* “You don’t get to come here with flowers and assume I fall into your arms. You didn’t speak to me for weeks. A month. And I just don’t believe anything you say right now.”

“Can I talk now?”

“You should leave,” I said, ignoring his request without looking at him as I walked back into my house. “And put my key back in my mailbox, because I know you kept it.”

As soon as I closed the door, the very tears I’d been fighting for weeks shot from my eyes without warning. Leaning against the wooden surface and frantically trying to catch my breath, I covered my mouth with my hand and cried. Why didn’t I feel relieved for standing my ground? Why did I feel worse?

I’d completely lost the only man I’d ever fully loved with every crazy inch of me. The kind of love I didn’t believe was possible. The kind that made people do crazy things. The kind that made the future look exciting instead of terrifying.

The kind of love every part of the body felt when it was gone. Not just the heart.

The kind of love that I just lost.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

elyse

“ELYSE? ELYSE ACKLIN?”

“This is she,” I answered, holding the phone between my shoulder and ear while I stuffed a handful of popcorn in my mouth.

My finished basement, complete with new furniture and décor, had been my haven over the past few days. The new couch was my new best friend as I sat binging all things romance and eating half my body weight in snacks. Also, it was a place to hide and avoid certain handsome neighbors.

Has this really become my life?

“May I ask who’s the person behind this, ruining the best part of the movie?” I figured a good dose of snark would annoy a bill collector or scammer into hanging up.

I took a sip of water, getting ready to hang up the call, when I heard a small laugh. *Not today, scammers.*

“Jacob Stone.” I heard a male voice answer confidently as I choked on the water in my throat. Literally choked. Shooting up into a seated position, I stretched out my legs and set the water glass on the coffee table.

Jacob Stone called me? I had his number. On my phone. No. This had to be a joke. Yeah, I’d accepted the offer, but the only person I’d communicated with was his assistant. Not him.

“Nice try,” I scoffed, shaking my head. “I don’t even know how you people get access to people’s names and numbers.”

Or what’s going on in their lives. I had no clue why I was entertaining this phone call. Maybe because I hadn’t had a conversation for longer than five minutes over the past few

days. Or maybe because I'd desperately hoped Tyler would reach out after I'd unblocked his number on my phone.

Nothing but radio silence. I wanted someone to fight for me. I wanted Tyler to fight for me. Maybe I wanted too much.

"Well, sometimes it happens when someone offers you a job that you accept," the deep voice replied, making one of my brows raise in disbelief.

Shit. I felt a twinge in my chest and started pacing around the basement.

"I hope you don't mind that I called instead of my assistant. I'm trying to be more *involved*," Jacob said, emphasizing the last word as if he were using air quotes.

A hand slapped over my mouth to stifle a groan. I had just accused Jacob Stone of ruining my movie. My new boss. I wasn't being rude, was I? Did he laugh? I couldn't remember. Why was he calling me? *Shit.* Wow. His voice sounded much deeper over the phone. A phone he'd held in his hand that had probably touched millions of dollars. Or Gordon Ramsay. *Calm down, woman. He's human.*

"I'm so sorry, Jacob," I rushed out before stopping myself and slapping my forehead. Fucking nerves. "Is it okay if I call you Jacob? No, of course not. Is there something wrong? You totally didn't ruin my movie. I knew what was going to happen. I've watched it a hundred times. Okay, I'm rambling."

I'd been obsessed with this man growing up. Still was. Every day when I came home from school, I'd watched all the new episodes and recorded the ones I hadn't had time for. I had all his cookbooks, making everything a dozen times until I'd perfected it.

Jacob laughed, which was oddly calming. "Relax. Nothing is wrong. Are you busy?"

I glanced around at my mess—snack wrappers, blankets, and half-finished water bottles.

"Not busy at all," I answered, keeping my voice at bay but frowning at my flailing hands. What did I normally do with

my hands when I talked on the phone? And my pulse never raced like this during a normal conversation.

“I hoped you would say that,” he said. “Since you will be basically running the new restaurant, I want you actively involved in everything. I give talented and dedicated chefs the opportunity to work alongside me. The job will be far from simple, but I have a feeling you can do it. Anyway, I’m inviting you to meet the designer and contractor, so you have a better understanding of my vision. My idea for my new *hip* spot.”

Hip? My eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Jacob had built his empire on high-end, exclusive establishments.

“Are you kidding?” I exclaimed, jumping up and down. “It would be an honor.”

“I’ll have Jenn, my assistant, send the location and further instructions to your email. How soon can you get here?”

I burst into the kitchen and stalked toward the living room in search of my shoes and keys.

“As soon as possible,” I said, holding my breath afterward, so I didn’t sound like a whale that had just ran a marathon.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

As soon as the conversation ended, I rushed around the house, looking for my damn car keys and slipping on my shoes. I had no reason to leave the sanctuary of my basement. Work had kept Lena busy, and the fictional Barry character was occupying Alyssa’s attention.

Five minutes later, I found the keys where I’d assumed they wouldn’t be and ran out of the door before halting to a complete stop to glance at my outfit. Old, gray, ratty sweatpants. An oversized hoodie with a noticeable chocolate stain from falling asleep with a Snickers candy bar in my hand. The messy bun on top of my head hadn’t been combed or cared for in days.

Fuck, I thought to myself. *I should probably shower.*

Two hours later, I stepped nervously into a luxury sky rise in the middle of downtown Los Angeles. Although “two hours” was nowhere near “as soon as possible,” I was still happy I’d taken the time to shower and change. I would’ve stuck out like a sore thumb in my sweats and chocolate-stained hoodie. Honestly, I was pretty sure security probably wouldn’t have even let me in the building.

This place, the staff. Everyone crawled with style. Modern, sleek designs. Designer suits and dresses. Even everyone’s hair looked like they’d stepped out of a salon. My hair was pulled back into a low bun, and I’d added a touch of gloss to my lips. Because I didn’t have a manual showing me what to wear for a multimillionaire, I’d tucked a simple, white tank top into slim fit, dark jeans and threw on a caramel-colored blazer. This was the closest I could get to looking somewhat business casual.

People were everywhere. Walking toward the elevators. Crowding the waiting area. Chatting casually. I wondered how many celebrities were actually *in* the building. Speaking of which, what the hell was this place? It looked too elegant and trendy to be an office building, with bright colorful artwork hanging on the walls, crystal ceiling lights dangling above, and the floor shining brightly underneath everyone’s feet. I almost regretted wearing heels because I didn’t want to scuff the floor.

“Ms. Acklin? Ms. Acklin?” a receptionist called out, breaking me from my staring contest with the interior.

I cleared my throat and ran my hands down my blazer. “Yeah? I’m sorry.”

She lifted herself from her seat and pointed across the lobby. “Take elevator J, and it will take you to the Stone Suite.”

Wow, that sounded so fucking official. The Stone Suite. I hoped this wasn’t his home. That would be kind of odd, right?

After thanking her, I stepped into the already-crowded elevator and took deep breaths when the doors closed.

Don't freak out, my mind warned me. Don't be weird. Don't ask for a hug. Be normal. You got this. You've always had this.

I took one final deep breath as the elevator stopped at my floor.

Make it happen, my mind cheered me on.

I clutched the strap of my purse as I approached a reception desk with a young redhead with fair skin and black-framed glasses sitting behind it.

“Hi, I’m—” I began, but the receptionist looked up from her computer and cut me off with a friendly smile.

“You must be Elyse. I’m Jenn. It’s so very nice to meet you,” she said in a welcoming tone as we quickly shook hands.

I returned the smile. “Nice to put a name to the face, and I’m so excited to be here.”

Ever since Jacob had offered me the position, Jenn had been my contact person, sending me documents and answering any questions I’d had.

“Likewise,” she said, with an eager nod. “You’ll be in room B. If you follow this hall, it’s the second room on your left. Jacob will be in shortly.”

I repeated the directions in my head because I didn’t quite trust my mind or body right now. I had no idea what to expect. Every loud click of my heels against the marbled floor matched the rhythm of my heart.

Framed pictures of Jacob, his restaurants and staff, and his food hung neatly on the dark, sapphire-colored walls. My mom would have stopped and studied every single photo if she’d been here.

I easily found room B and plastered a smile on my face before entering.

We're just talking to a damn contractor, I reminded myself. Get it together. This was much better than lounging on the couch, I decided.

A chill hit me immediately when I proceeded into the room and locked eyes with the person standing at the end of the long business table. Tyler. *Seriously? You've got to be kidding me.*

How the fuck did he know Jacob? He never mentioned knowing a famous chef. I wondered what else he'd kept from me.

And dammit! He looked so gorgeous, wearing a stupid white collared shirt and dark jeans hugging his hips and other places my traitorous mind wandered to. Looking like a complete professional, with a trifold detailing the restaurant's design and neatly stacked documents in front of him, I wasn't sure if I should be proud or pissed at him for snagging the job.

He and I couldn't even be damn neighbors. How the fuck could we ever work together? Did I even have the strength to listen to the man I loved talk about dimensions and statistics? Of course, I could, but that didn't mean I wanted to. What I wanted was to seek refuge in my basement.

As I slowly shook my head at him, his jaw tightened. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his jeans as we continued staring at each other in some sort of lame contest.

No. Fuck this. Not today, Satan, not today.

I heaved a sigh and turned around to walk away only to bump into Jacob. I took a step back and gasped, feeling like an even bigger fool. He caught me about to leave a meeting that he'd invited me to. Shit.

"Elyse," he exclaimed, with a happy smile. "You're going the wrong way. Aren't you?"

Why is this happening to me? I thought with an internal scowl. *Goddamn you, Tyler, for being so skilled at what you do.*

I wondered if Jacob knew that Tyler and I had already known each other. Had Tyler even mentioned me? Should I act

as if I didn't know him?

"Yeah, um, right. Oops," I said, finally gathering myself. "Thank you for inviting me here, Jacob. Once again, this opportunity means the world to me, and I won't let you down."

"Did you make it in okay? I know they like to be a little handsy downstairs," he joked, referring to the security team.

"Yeah, everything was perfect. Thank you for asking. I can't wait to see what you have planned."

"Good." The celebrity chef gracefully moved to the other side of the room, taking a seat in a plush black leather chair. "Have you met the man making it all happen?"

Oh, God no.

"We know each other," Tyler said quickly.

"We've already met," I said firmly at the same time as him. At least we were on the same page.

After I took a seat across the table from Jacob, Tyler handed us thin, black binders and started his presentation, running through the restaurant's design and look. I listened to Jacob passionately talk about his ideas of trying something innovative and new, admiring his thought process. He appeared incredibly relaxed and made a few jokes, loosening the tension between Tyler and me.

Not only was Tyler's crew working on the project, but a few other crews were also called in to meet the four-month deadline. As much as I didn't want to be impressed with Tyler's work, I was. I'd had no idea he was so talented. He'd never showed me any of his designs.

"Here's where you come in, Elyse," he said smoothly, handing me a laminated piece of paper that looked like a mock menu. "We need your opinion."

"Well, what do you think?" Jacob asked impatiently, gesturing at me to study the almost-blank document.

I wasn't sure why my opinion mattered so much on a mock menu, but Jacob and Tyler stared at me as if their fates were in

my hands.

My eyes quickly scanned the laminated menu and roamed two simple items. Fuzziness overwhelmed my mind as I simply stared at the name of the restaurant and one single entree on the menu. Alice Rose. Eggs benedict.

Is this a dream? I thought, as my fingers ran over the logo and name.

My mom's name. I had no idea where Rose came from, but I assumed the name had meant something to Jacob.

My eyes kept blinking, as if I'd somehow misread the name, but no, the name remained the same. Alice Rose.

How was this even possible? My chest tightened, and my eyes stung with emotion.

Eggs benedict. The breakfast dish I'd once hated as a child but learned to love after my mom had encouraged me to try her recipe. Day or night, she'd loved making that dish. And it was the first dish I'd made for Tyler, who had loved it so much he'd requested it numerous times.

"Elyse?" Tyler asked carefully.

I sucked in a large breath of air as my heart shivered with unexplainable tremors. Was I even breathing? Was it possible to forget how to breathe?

My mom's dream. My dream. This was really happening. For the first time in a long time, I felt her presence radiating in the room. Somewhere, I thought I heard my dad cheer for me, "Never give up, squirt."

Alice Rose.

"Elyse?" Tyler repeated more firmly, with a concerned look.

As soon as my head shot up, dizziness hit me fast as tears stung my eyes. I simply stared at him, not knowing what to say.

"This is me fighting for you," he said shakily, palming his hands on both sides of the table.

Did he just say that? With Jacob right there? Did Jacob know what was going on? Should I be worried? After all, the man held my future in the palm of his hands. A declaration of love didn't seem professional. *Fuck.*

Alice Rose. My mom's name was set in a simple print font in capital letters, and Rose was printed in an elegant script font with a single line underneath.

"I'm so sorry," I cried, feeling tears slip down my cheeks, as I grabbed my purse and jumped out of my seat. "Excuse me."

And I ran. Well, I ran to the nearest bathroom. My purse dropped to the floor as my back slammed against the nearest wall. I cried. Harder than I have ever cried before, not even caring if anyone was in any of the five stalls.

For once, sadness or heartbreak hadn't caused these tears. Shock, amazement, and so much damn pride had led to me sobbing uncontrollably in a bathroom at my boss's office.

In four months, my mother's name would be displayed on a famous chef's restaurant. The start of her amazing legacy was all thanks to Tyler. I was a step closer to opening a place of my own, but for now, I knew I needed to learn everything Jacob was willing to teach me.

I was so close. I had one foot in the door, even though I'd wanted to scream with pure joy, bliss, and happiness and push it wide open.

I didn't even need to look at him to know Tyler had quietly entered the bathroom. I had been so accustomed to his scent that I could probably pick it out of a lineup. I knew his scent anywhere.

What could I say to him? "Thank you" didn't seem like enough. No one had ever done anything like this for me before. He not only knew about my passion for cooking and what my mom meant to me, but he fucking understood it. He understood where my passion came from and what had driven me to succeed.

“Please don’t cry, Elle,” Tyler begged, standing in front of me, as tears continued to pour down my face.

He gently cupped my wet face with his hands and stroked the tears away with his thumbs.

“How?” I mumbled as I closed my eyes for a moment. I didn’t quite have the strength to look into his eyes. “How did you do it?”

“Do you not know who you’re talking—” he began to brag proudly but stopped himself, noticing the severity of the conversation. “Eh, well, I’m basically working for free for the next four months.”

My eyes opened with shock as Tyler revealed that Jacob had wanted to name the restaurant after his mom, Rose. But they’d worked out a deal to add Alice to the title, in exchange for Tyler basically working for free. Not the crews or anything. Just him. And as the lead contractor, he could’ve made a boatload of money.

He dropped one hand to my shoulder and rubbed small, soft circles, making me relax. His simple touch shot strands of electricity through me and sent heat waves up my arm. Being away from Tyler for so long was like having withdrawals even an addict couldn’t come back from.

“Well, he also hired me as his personal designer and contractor on his house out here,” he continued. “But I really don’t care about any of that.”

My heart wanted to fucking explode.

I sucked in my bottom lip to prevent it from quivering. “Why did you do this?”

“Jacob and I met at the building, running through some ideas. Every idea Jacob has right now is because of you. When he wanted something innovative and different, I immediately thought of you. He picked up on my happy memories with you, Elyse. Cooking for me. Making eggs benedict,” he explained. “You became my life. I’m so sorry it took me so long to realize that. You didn’t do anything wrong. When you told me you had fallen in love with me, it was one of the best

moments in my life. Yeah, it scared the fuck out of me because I believed no one could ever love my fucked up ass. But it had come from you.”

I breathed out, believing he could hear my heart beating.

“You did this for me?” I squeaked out, still not quite accepting the reality. “You got my mom’s name on a restaurant. Jacob Stone’s restaurant.”

Even though I strongly suspected my mom was watching over me, I still couldn’t wait to tell her the amazing news.

“And I’d do it again. In a heartbeat. I would do anything for you, baby. You’re my girl.”

He called me baby. My knees went weak, and I was thankful his other hand was softly holding my waist as the other remained on my shoulder. I had no idea a stupid pet name could make my heart skip multiple beats.

“What happened to Elle?”

He chuckled, and my body felt small, amused vibrations. “You got a promotion.”

I laughed softly, reveling in his touch.

“Tell me you’ll give me another chance,” he said softly, lowering his other hand to my waist. “I will spend every day proving to you that I deserve it. Because I can’t do anything without thinking about you. I can’t even drink.”

Dammit! He was saying everything I wanted to hear, but was it enough?

I stayed quiet for a second and wiggled out of his grasp, watching his eyes fill with worry.

“I don’t know. What if this becomes too much for you and you leave me again?” I asked, my resolve solid. “I want to be happy, Tyler. I want *us* to be happy. I also don’t want to feel like I constantly have to look over my shoulder and watch my back.”

I just wanted to protect my heart by any means possible.

“You have to trust me,” he said. “I am so fucking sorry I hurt you in the first place. But I never want to hurt you again. I never want to be the reason you cry. I want to make you smile and laugh every single day. I want to look at you every day, hoping you know you mean the world to me. And I want to be the person to straighten you out when you’re acting crazy.”

And my heart melted into a pile of mush right there, as he remembered how I’d described the perfect partner. I wrapped my arms around his waist and looked into his eyes.

His lips softly brushed my forehead as his hands hesitantly wrapped around me in fear I would pull away again.

“So, what are you saying?” I asked, with a small smile.

“That I love you, Elyse.”

He loved me. Tyler James Sullivan fucking loved me.

“Remember, I love hard, and right now, I can’t imagine my life without you,” he warned playfully.

Cue the waterworks—again.

“Say it again,” I demanded, tightening my grip on his solid waist.

He smiled broadly. “I fucking love you. I love everything about you.”

Tyler pushed his body against mine, closing every bit of space between us. I’d missed the feel of him. I’d missed the way he looked at me. The way he supported me. And now I could add the way he loved me. The man was working for free for me.

And then I felt his warm lips on mine, taking every ounce of my breath away. I’d needed to hear his words and feel his body for weeks. I wanted him touching and kissing every ounce of me.

I slid my arms around his neck and squeezed him tightly, never wanting him to let go of me again. I never wanted to miss him as much as I’d missed him these last few weeks ever again.

My lips parted, letting his tongue ravage my mouth. The taste of salty tears and my cherry lip gloss lingered. The man was simply intoxicating.

His tongue slowly slid across mine as his hands cupped my face and his body pressed mine against the wall. This kiss ignited a new beginning between us. One filled with promises, hope, honesty, and love. So much fucking love.

I reluctantly pulled my mouth from his. “Can you promise me something?”

His lips glistened, and I was eager to feel them against mine again. We’d become friends, looking for company and believing neither of us were ready to give our hearts to someone else.

“Anything.”

“Don’t hurt me. I’m begging you not to hurt me again,” I said throatily, making myself completely vulnerable to him.

I’d fallen in headfirst with my heart on my sleeve. And now I’d gotten the guy. The hot one that loved me.

Tyler nodded and traced his finger over my lips. “I promise. Can you promise me something?”

“Depends on what it is.”

“Don’t leave me again.”

“I don’t plan to,” I said with a smile.

He scooped me off my feet and twirled us around in a few circles before setting my weak feet back on the floor.

“Second best four words,” he said, leaning his forehead against mine.

I loved this man so much, but the best part was he loved me just as much. He was the man I’d wanted to introduce my parents to. The man my father would’ve loved and approved of. The man my mom would’ve thought was “yummy.”

We’d been destined to become neighbors to heal each other. And then we’d been destined to become soulmates to love each other.

“What does this mean for us?” I asked, catching my breath.

“Uh, it means I’m going to ask you to be my girlfriend and hope you say yes,” he said. “And you never have to wish for love ever again. If anything, you might hate love after dealing with my annoying ass every day.”

I smiled at the thought. “So, Elyse Marie Acklin?”

Aw, he’d remembered my middle name. The little things.

“Yes. A thousand times, yes.”

Tyler wrapped me tightly in his arms and kissed my forehead. “Good, because I have never met someone like you.”

EPILOGUE

Tyler

Two Years Later

“BABE, are you feeling okay? Do you have any pain? Can you breathe? What the fuck?” I cursed, pacing around the hospital room as Elyse breathed out in pain.

I couldn’t stop sweating and thinking the worst. “I can’t fucking lose you. Elyse, I will fucking die.”

I palmed my forehead, staring at my girlfriend. I couldn’t wait to have kids, but I was also terrified of losing my family again. I just wanted this to be over because she’d been in labor for hours. I silently prayed everything would run smoothly, or I would completely lose my shit.

The doctor hadn’t said anything. That must be a good sign, right?

Elyse screamed in agonizing pain as the doctor instructed her to breathe steadily. Sweat formed at her temples as her eyebrows angrily narrowed.

“Just breathe calmly,” Dr. Carter ordered.

The moment we found out Elyse was pregnant, it had been a whirlwind of craziness. I’d known what to expect until I’d heard we were having twins. Twin *girls*, to be exact. I had no doubt I would become the overprotective dad, making sure no one fucked with my two little girls. Honestly, I would’ve gone to jail for all three of them.

Over the past two years, Elyse and I had been inseparable, unable to keep our hands off each other. We’d talked about having kids but hadn’t made any definite plans. Then one day, she surprised me, announcing she was pregnant. I was ecstatic

and did everything I could to make sure the pregnancy would go smoothly.

When we found out the sex of the twins, I almost shit myself. Then again, girls are typically daddy's girls, right? I couldn't wait for these monsters to run around the house and yell, "Daddy!"

I read book after book, learning the best way to care for my daughters. I wanted nothing more than to be the best father and man. Elyse deserved the world, and I promised to give her that. I even learned how to cook because she always seemed hungry. And she was; she was eating for three. Damn, this girl was my life.

Alyssa rubbed her sister's forehead, talking to her in a calm voice. Elyse winced. "You got this, sis. Come on."

Her screams of pain killed me, because I couldn't do a damn thing to take it away. I stayed by her side the entire time, even when she yelled and cursed at me. Even though she was a sweaty mess, she looked amazing.

I rubbed her arm, hoping it would soothe her.

"Take deep breaths. Breathe through them," the doctor said over Elyse's loud moans.

It seemed like I'd read more than a thousand baby books, and I didn't remember if any of them had mentioned this much pain.

Fuck.

"Baby, say something," I said in a shaky tone.

Elyse breathed, "Babe, please stop talking like that. We'll be fine."

She dragged out the last three words as her face contorted in agony. The doctors checked how dilated she was as they rubbed her swollen stomach.

Without thinking, I said, "Marry me? I don't know what I would do without you, and I don't want to find out." *Yeah, I panicked.*

Coming down from her fit, she yelled, “Tyler, what the fuck? It’s not the right time! I’m about to push not one but two fucking babies out of my vagina.”

I pestered the group of doctors that crowded around her, making sure everything was running smoothly. Elyse had her legs uncomfortably raised as they ordered her to keep breathing.

Alyssa wanted to watch the babies being born, but I didn’t. I was perfectly happy to hold Elyse’s hand and stay by her side instead of looking over the doctor’s shoulders. Call me a coward, but I knew I would pass out. I applauded women for their bravery.

“Tyler, hold my fucking hand!” Elyse shouted.

I clasped her hand with mine as she squeezed tightly. She looked into my eyes, and I watched a tear slip down her cheek. Her face was red and flustered.

I mumbled about how great she was doing and asked if she felt okay, but she swore viciously at me.

As the doctors moved around, instructing her what to do, I held onto her.

“Push your chin to your chest and breathe out. It’s starting,” one doctor commanded.

My eyes widened. I felt my heart almost ready to jump out of my chest.

“Push as hard as you can,” Dr. Carter ordered. “Come on! Come on! You’re doing good.”

“I can’t,” Elyse cried, closing her beautiful eyes. “Please get these babies out of me. I’m never having sex again.”

Yeah, right.

The pain was evident on her face as she ignored the doctors’ instructions.

“She’s in fucking pain! Do something!” I roared, on the verge of losing control.

Just as I started to panic, one of the doctors asked me to leave the room. As soon as I stepped in the hallway, with Alyssa right on my heels, I went off. I needed to see my daughters being born. I needed to know if the delivery was successful. Alyssa told me to calm down, but she also understood my overwhelming fears.

My dad and Diana hurried over to my side when they either noticed my presence or heard my rants.

“Everything okay? Why are you out here?” my dad asked.

I breathed out, trying to control my racing heart. “I don’t know. She’s fucking screaming, and they won’t do anything about it.”

Will patted my shoulder and told me to be strong as Alyssa slipped back into the delivery room.

Diana ran her hands down my arm and reassured me, “Sweetheart, that’s part of giving birth. She’ll be fine; everything will be fine.”

My dad placed both his hands on my shoulders, making me face him. “Relax, son. Elyse needs you to remain calm. Can you do that?”

I took a deep breath and nodded my head. “Yes.”

So, we waited.

Lena paced around the hospital waiting room, waiting to hear something—anything—from the doctors.

I knew Elyse was pissed that I’d caused a scene, but at the same time, she knew what I was going through too.

During the pregnancy, she had occasionally kicked me to the couch whenever I’d tossed and turned too much with worry. My girl needed rest, and me sighing loudly didn’t help her. As much as I wanted to be strong and be there for her, my fears overwhelmed me at times.

What felt like hours later, Alyssa rushed out, pushing her hospital mask down her face. “Ty, she’s screaming for you. Come on.”

I raced back to the room, pushed through the doors, and my heart dropped. I froze in place as Elyse's eyes met mine. She cried happily as one of our daughters laid peacefully on her chest. I knew what love was, but it was nothing like this. My legs refused to move. My mind couldn't think properly. All my prayers had been answered.

I was the happiest man on earth right now. *What the hell did I do to deserve this?*

Two years ago, I'd almost lost this fucking woman because I was an asshole. I'd had no clue what I'd wanted in life and was allowing my past to override all my decisions. I was so scared of moments like this, but now I had it all.

"You want to hold your daughter?" The doctor asked as she cradled my other daughter.

I breathed out, unable to take my eyes off the little bundle of joy, as she walked towards me. I carefully held her head, staring at her perfect face. I instantly fell in love. I already knew she would be the spitting image of her mother with my hair color. She was so tiny, playing with her hands.

I gently rocked her in my arms, as if the rest of the people in the room didn't matter. Dr. Carter left to give us some space with our girls.

"Have you picked out names?" one of the nurses asked with a warm smile.

When we'd discussed baby names, we'd decided we would each choose a name for our daughters. Elyse mentioned a few names she'd liked, but only one stood out. Ava, Hazel, and Willow were my three top choices, but none of them seemed to fit the tiny angel in my arms.

Knowing Elyse had chosen the name Beth after my mother, I immediately decided on the other name.

I said, "Bella. Her name is Bella."

I carefully walked over towards Elyse, who was showing the same amount of love to Beth. They were both so damn beautiful. I couldn't imagine anything more perfect.

I placed a light kiss on Bella's forehead, mumbling, "Daddy is never going to let anything happen to you. I love you more than anything."

I stared at her closed eyes as she cuddled into my chest.

"Wow, I'm a dad." An unwanted tear slipped from my eye and rolled down my face.

Damn, I never thought I would be a father again. I never thought I would have the perfect family.

Breaking me from the trance, Elyse said, "Yes."

I slowly turned to face her. She breathed out slowly, stroking Beth's head full of hair. Her tired eyes rose to mine as I said, "What was that, babe?"

"Yes," she repeated.

"Yes, what?" I asked, with a confused look.

She giggled as a tear rolled down her pale face. "I'll marry you. A thousand times, yes."

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As always, thank you, Mom. Your support has meant the world to me, even through all the crazy you witnessed on this journey. I don't know where I would be without you.

About the Author

Olivia Jones is an author, coffee addict, and romance novelist. She discovered her passion for writing at a very young age. When she isn't binge watching romance or horror movies, she's brainstorming new book ideas. She is a sucker for a love story with a happy ending and all the feels.

She writes steamy, sweet, swoon-worthy books with flawed, complicated good guys. Not everything is about bad guys, right?

She has been writing professionally since 2010 and has no intention of slowing down. If you'd like to connect with Olivia, get in touch if you have any comments, questions, suggestions, or just want to say hello. Olivia Jones would be more than happy to hear from you.

You can follow her on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), and sign up for her newsletter to stay up to date with new releases, exclusive content, giveaways, and support. She loves supporting other authors.