

A romantic couple embracing in a scenic landscape. The man is shirtless and has his arms around the woman. The woman has long, dark, wavy hair and is wearing a black top. They are looking at each other with soft expressions. The background shows a vast, hazy landscape with rolling hills and a blue sky with light clouds.

the
SURPRISE
Seduction

LANDRY LOVE SERIES **BOOK FIVE**

AMY ALVES

THE SURPRISE
SEDUCTION

LANDRY LOVE SERIES #5



AMY ALVES

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ISBN (ebook): 978-1-7774301-9-1

<https://amyalvesbooks.com>

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PREFACE

This book contains lots of sexy scenes, but also some serious subject matter. (And— as always—a happily-ever-after)

TW: A miscarriage scare is depicted in this story, however there is no pregnancy loss.

PROLOGUE



ARIA

NINE YEARS AGO

“*Y*ou’re only eighteen, Aria.”

I bite my lip and give him a coy smile. “Aw, you remembered. Cute.”

“*Aria.*”

“*Dr. Coldwell,*” I mimic, matching his chastising tone.

“It’s Caldwell. Does Chloe know her supposed best friend doesn’t even know her last name?”

“She knows I like to give her brother shit for always giving me the cold shoulder.”

“I don’t give you the cold shoulder. I simply ignore your little games.”

“It’s not a game, Doc. You know you’re hot. I know I’m hot. What’s wrong with a little flirting?” If he ever flirted back, I might actually pass out.

“You are practically still a minor, and I’m a grown man. I’ve reminded you of this before. Many times.”

“I’m technically an adult now. Regardless, I have a boyfriend—kind of. So our beloved interactions are really just harmless fun.”

One day, I’d also appreciate other kinds of fun. What if when I came home from college in the winter, Garrett suddenly noticed me in the same way I’ve been noticing him, and we snuck out to his car to get just naked enough to have a lot of fun? A girl can dream . . .

“Are you listening to me?” Garrett asks, snapping me out of my little daydream.

He pinches the bridge of his nose and mutters under his breath.

“Were you by chance asking what you could do for me today? Because I was going to suggest you join your sister and

me for a beach day. Food, drinks, and a nice float down the creek. Chloe was saying you're barely around anymore, and she misses you. I promise not to hit on you more than five times."

"Zero times, Aria. You will hit on me *zero* times."

God, he's so easy.

I scrunch my face in what I hope is adorable confusion. "That doesn't seem possible. Do you even *know* me?"

"Unfortunately, I'm starting to learn some things."

He shakes his head and storms away.

I reach out to stop him, but he swerves away like I'm contagious. I'm a confident girl, but Garrett definitely tests that some days.

"Wait! You know I'm kidding. Well, mostly. I *do* want you to come to the beach with us today. I'll keep all flirty thoughts and Garrett hassling antics to myself. I'll also make sure only to look and not touch." I hold my hands up innocently while my eyes inadvertently check him out again.

"Goddammit," he mutters. Opening the door to the side entrance of the house, he shouts, "Chloe! Get your friend away from me." He escapes through the door, and I let it roll off my back.

I do have fun teasing and flirting with Garrett whenever I see him, but today wasn't about seeing if I could ruffle his feathers. It was about Chloe. She misses her brothers, and soon, we'll be moving to San Jose for school so she'll probably end up seeing even less of them. She's had it rough lately with all the town drama revolving around her and her ex-boyfriend. So if my messing with Garrett and arranging activities or acting foolish makes my beautiful friend laugh or smile, I'm all over it.

I pop my head back into the house.

"So you're coming, right?" I shout in the direction I think he went.

“Who’s coming where?” Chloe asks, stepping into the kitchen with her beach attire already on.

“Garrett is coming to the beach with us! He needs some relaxation. He’s really looking forward to it.”

Garrett comes striding back into the room and leans one muscular shoulder against the wall. *Oof, those shoulders.*

“Aria says you’re coming with us! Eek! I’m so excited. I didn’t think you’d want to spend the afternoon with a bunch of loud, obnoxious teenagers.” She jumps in excitement and gives him a quick side hug.

I move in for my turn but find my advances thwarted when a large palm presses against my face. His arm is locked straight, keeping me several feet from embracing his lean, tall, rock-solid form.

Oh well. Can’t blame a girl for trying.

Chloe giggles. “Aria, leave him be. He’s not as into displays of affection as you are.”

Here’s the other thing I’ve decided to do as Chloe’s best friend: not tell her that my playful interactions with her brother—the ones she finds amusing because of how different we are and the guaranteed reaction I get out of her stoic, much older brother—are not as innocent as she thinks.

I’ve developed a deep, gnawing, unwavering infatuation with my best friend’s brother, but I can’t tell her. I can barely admit it to myself.

It’s not worth telling Chloe for several reasons. First, because I don’t intend to do anything about it. Second, I’m pretty sure I have zero chance with the guy. And not just because he’s nearly ten years older than me or that we are complete opposites. The disinterested vibe he puts out—and frequently vocalizes- is abundantly clear. Sometimes, I wonder if he knows I’m not just messing with him.

“Grab your Speedo, handsome. I’ve already told some of the girls that you’re coming, and I need to deliver on the eye candy.”

“Don’t be gross.” Chloe’s nose wrinkles in disgust before turning to her brother. “No one is going to ogle you, Gar. You’re practically thirty.”

Oh, sweet, naive Chloe. All of our friends think your brothers are hot.

Even my boyfriend.

“I’m not practically thirty, squirt. I’m in my midtwenties.”

And looking fine as all hell.

“Twenty-seven is closer to thirty than it is to twenty,” Chloe argues. He scowls playfully before a sweet, amused smile sweeps across his face, making my insides turn to mush.

Garrett doesn’t have your typical hot-guy allure. He has this quiet, brainy, reserved quality to him that draws me in like a moth to a flame. And I am ready to burn.

If only he’d look at me as anything other than his little sister’s ridiculous, wildly inappropriate, flirty best friend.

One day . . . one day, he’s going to beg for my affection. Until then, I’m going to experience a little love and live a whole lot.

CHAPTER 1



ARIA

Over the weekend, I broke into my ex's storage unit and rounded up the last of my things—the things he had moved into it without my consent. I left it unlocked and walked away without a care. Technically, I wasn't provided a key to unlock it either, but that's not my concern at this moment.

If it weren't for my tablet, wardrobe, and cozy blanket Nanna knitted me, I'd have been tempted to leave it all behind.

After I packed it all up in my car, I decided I was done with my life in San Jose. Unfortunately, my employer was done with *me* after I issued Matt a little bit of payback post-breakup. Again, not any of my concern at this moment because I never planned to stay there anyway. I just took a little detour while I was trying to fill my life with what I thought was missing.

The only reason I stayed in San Jose after finishing my bachelor's degree in photography was because of Chloe. She was camped out in the city, avoiding her past and our hometown.

Now, I'm on my way home to Landry with all of my belongings crammed into my small, fairly unreliable car with my tail tucked between my legs. I'm alone, homeless, unemployed, and bordering on desperate. The sudden implosion of my relationship and the public demise of my career weren't the only reasons I was in this state of mind.

I feel lost. I clung to Matt hard, probably because I've been unhappy. I was trying to mend myself with men. I've come to terms with the fact that I can't fill the void or feel fulfilled and accomplished simply by getting dicked down.

Men can't make me happy. They keep certain parts of me happy though—namely my lady bits. I need to make my own happiness and then find a man who loves me for me. The problem is that I *love* giving and receiving love. I search for it, crave it.

I've traveled plenty, dated a lot, and have had a wide variety of jobs, but nothing except photography has ever resonated with me. The men never lasted, and the cities never sparked that sense of belonging and warmth. Only one place ever has, and that's Landry.

I follow my heart to happiness because I always have. Moving back to Landry means I'll at least be happy, even if I'm unemployed and alone.

With the nineties music blaring at a near-deafening volume, I reach Landry's neighboring town, Vaughn. I stop for an overpriced coffee and to call my mom. I haven't told her about my job, man, or relocation situation yet. She's so positive about everything, and I wasn't ready to deal with her usual head-in-the-sand approach to obstacles now that I've decided to tackle my life head-on.

The call connects with Mom picking up on the first ring.

“Ari, baby, are you in Vaughn? You were planning to come visit your mama, right?”

I should have known someone would have already sounded the alarm. Vaughn and Landry are too close not to share some social circles. Landry's information network—gossip group—has informants everywhere. They call themselves The Landry Life League, but most people just call them The League. While they are often very helpful and a large part of the community I love, some residents—like my mom—might describe them as meddlesome busybodies. Unless, of course, she benefits from it like she is right now.

“I’m on my way, Mom. Just grabbed a coffee and thought I’d give you a heads-up that your baby, your only child, your one true blessing, is heading your way. Tell Stella her spies can stand down. I wouldn’t dare come this close to Landry without visiting.”

She laughs softly. “It was actually Ruth Henderson who notified me. She’s there visiting her sister and saw you drive in.”

“Hmm. I’m surprised it wasn’t on the scanner, or maybe Landry acquired drones while I’ve been away?”

“Well, we haven’t seen you since Thanksgiving, so you never know. Landrians can get a lot done in eight months.”

“Ah. The ‘you barely visit me anymore’ guilt. You could have leaned harder into it. Made sure I knew you were getting older, complain about your clicky hip.”

“I’ll have you know that I do yoga now, and my hip is much less clicky than it was. And my bedroom prowess is even better now than it was in my thirties.”

“Mom! No,” I draw out, hiding my laugh. “We’ve talked about boundaries. This is a firm one for me. You keep your sexcapades to yourself unless it’s someone who you’re going to marry or needs a beatdown.”

“He doesn’t need a beating to go down, that’s for sure.”

“Mom!” For fuck’s sake. From the sound of it, my mom is getting better action than I have in years. Matt provided mediocre oral for about eight seconds before deciding that was enough and chased his own release instead.

“Oh, please. Like we’ve ever kept anything from each other. You told me the night you lost your virginity.”

“Yeah, because I was worried I’d screwed something up.”

“He was gay, sweetheart. I’m sure he was just as confused as you were, probably more so.”

“Looking back at it, yes, that makes sense. But then? I was a teenager crushing on a jock who was actually in love with his brawny best friend, and I didn’t see it.”

“And if I could have shielded you from that, I would have.”

“I know, Mom. At least he was nice about it. He always treated me well, which is more than I can say for several of my friends back then. I mean, even Chloe had no idea the kind of prick her ex Brendan was.”

She hums in agreement. “Oh! Her engagement party is this weekend, right? Is that what this impromptu visit is about? You’re coming down early to help out and see some friends?”

“Partly, yes.” That’s still the truth. I just don’t want to get into the rest on the phone.

“Well, swing by the salon first so we can catch up. Chloe is at the clinic all day anyway. She can meet us at the salon, and you two can get manicures or a blowout or something.”

“Deal.”

After I put my phone back in my bag, I head to my mom’s salon, Bangin’ Hair & Beauty. I need to face this next step, and for once I think I’m going to be just fine doing it solo.

CHAPTER 2



ARIA

“So, what happened with Matt? I thought things were going well. You moved in a few months ago, and the sex was great—at first anyway. Was he not opening up like you wanted? Or did he do something awful? Gah! I’m almost afraid to ask.”

I pick up the decadently gooey cinnamon bun Dani at Baked Delights rushed over to greet me with and take a huge bite. Chloe taps her fingers on her coffee cup as she waits. I try not to look directly at her because the girl tends to see right through me. Though, she always had one notable blind spot.

“Shit. It was a bad one, huh?” she guesses.

I put down the roll with a shrug. “This one wasn’t quite as bad as some of the others, but I was homeless for about a week. I stayed with one of Matt’s baseball player friends who lives in the same building for the first night. Then with a work friend. I even ended up staying with Lars for a couple of nights. Until he paid me a nighttime, naked visit.”

“Aria! Why would you stay with your ex? How was that even an option? Lars was a total creep who tried to spring a surprise threesome on you. Am I the only one who remembers this?”

“Yes, but he has that separate apartment above his garage. I thought it would be perfect. Though, I may have forgotten how creep-tastic Lars is for a moment.”

“Aria . . .”

“I know—I do. I bolted out of there and got a hotel for a few days, which was actually kind of nice. Like a vacation. I’d just gotten fired from my job, so I relished the amenities like I hadn’t a care in the world.”

“You were fired?” She looks at me in alarm. Clearly, she doesn’t keep up with professional baseball.

“Yes, and I’d love to put all of the blame on Matt, but I made my choices and can own up to the consequences. I regret nothing. And I’m glad I didn’t end up moving to Houston. That’s too far away from my favorite people.”

“What? Houston? Why? Why didn’t you tell me any of this, Ari?”

“Matt got called up, and apparently, I did that thing I do when I jump into full-relationship mode before all parties are ready. Naturally, he took off the moment he saw an out. A few days later I came home to my shit packed and a surprise eviction.”

“Wait, he kicked you out?”

“Yeah. The douche canoe had movers stick my shit in storage and then had the locks changed. He had already relocated. Wasn’t even in San Jose anymore. The little twat basically called me a squatter—even though I paid rent. He only admitted this over the phone—once I could finally get ahold of him.”

“Twat? Have you been bingeing *Ted Lasso* again?” Chloe closes her eyes and waves a hand in front of her, dismissing her own question. “Aria, I’m going to need so many more details than that.”

“You’re not going to like the details,” I murmur between clenched teeth.

“It gets worse than getting evicted by your lame-ass boyfriend and staying with *Lars*? Should we ask Dani for Irish coffees next? She doesn’t officially sell them, but I can almost guarantee she’s got whiskey in the back.” My best friend gets comfortable, knowing she’s in for another of my stories.

2

ONE WEEK EARLIER

I'm so excited to talk to Matt that I may have called him four times in an hour. He's been away for games all week, and I've been lonely. Also, a little concerned. I know he has to be out of the ballpark by now, and I'm starting to get worried about why he's not answering. And why he didn't tell me this monumental news.

He finally picks up, but the background noise makes it hard to hear him. "Hey, babe! I heard the news! I'm so excited. Tell me everything!"

"Oh, uh, yeah. I've been called up to Houston. It's quite the move but I'm ready for it. I meant to call and talk to you about all this, but it's been pretty crazy, and I needed to focus on my career."

"You've fought so hard to get there. I knew it would happen for you soon." He's been working his way up in the Minor Leagues for a couple of years now, hoping to get called up by a team. "Well, where you go, I go, babe. I bet I could even get a photography position with one of the teams there." Do I want that? I hadn't even given that any thought before calling.

"Yeah, about that. Did Ina talk to you?"

"Ina? Your housekeeper? I saw her yesterday morning but she didn't say anything. She was in a hurry."

"Yeah. I take it you didn't pack your things, then?"

"No, but I'm a quick packer. I don't have a lot of things. Well, I mean, clothes—I have a lot of clothes, but that's pretty much it. Do we leave soon?"

"Uh, well, yes, they need me right away. But, babe, listen . . ."

"What?"

"Now that I'm headed to Houston, I was thinking—oh, shit. That's my agent. Let me call you back."

“Okay. Love y—” The sharp silence has me pausing, knowing he’s already hung up. I have to admire such a focused athlete.

He may not always be around, and he may not be the most attentive boyfriend, but I care about him—love him—and I’m willing to relocate and make this work. Probably. Do I want to move to Houston? Not specifically. I always meant to move back to Landry.

Stepping out of the elevator, I head toward our apartment only to find the door open. Is Ina here again today? I kind of hope so. Otherwise, I’m walking in on a robbery in progress, and I just don’t love my stuff enough to risk my life.

I see Ina and a few other people packing up things in the house. I proceed with caution.

“What’s going on in here?” I ask Ina.

“Matt had the moving company pack your things. They will be done today or maybe tomorrow, and then I will clean.”

Shit. I had no idea this was such a quick move. Are they shipping my stuff directly to Houston? We haven’t even talked about this yet. I still need to quit my job, find another there, wrap things up in San Jose . . .

“These are your things.” Ina points at the boxes and several totes on one side of the living room. “Movers will put them in the storage compartment downstairs. Yes?” she asks with a brusque inflection and heavy accent I’ve come to recognize as her irritated tone.

“Um, I’m not sure yet. Let me call Matt. I didn’t realize we were moving so soon.” She frowns at me.

Great. My things are all in boxes, Matt doesn’t tell me shit, and Ina is being pissy with me when I haven’t got a clue what’s going on.

I pluck my phone out of my back pocket and dial Matt.

It goes straight to voicemail. “What’s going on, babe? I didn’t hear from you for days while you were away, then I find out you were called up and moving to Texas, and now the

movers are trying to put all my stuff in storage. I won't be ready to move for at least another week, and we really should talk about all of this before packing up and relocating. Call me back as soon as you can, please."

Over the next two hours, I leave three more messages and several texts. Until I finally receive one pathetically short text message.

MATT: Talk to Ina. I'll be in touch soon.

Apparently, he's not overly concerned that the movers have taken all my things into storage without telling me how to access the compartment. How am I supposed to retrieve said things once I know where I'm taking them? And where the hell did they put Matt's things? Why didn't they get stored too?

I try Matt one more time just to irritate him. He hates it if I call him more than once or twice a day.

I pause, then put my phone in my back pocket. There's one way to find out if he's screening his calls.

I head over to Matt's friend's apartment. He's an old teammate who also lives in our building.

Feeling like a fool but having few other options, I knock on Troy's door. He answers and looks surprised to see me.

"Hey, Troy. Can I borrow your phone for a second?"

"Hey, Aria. Um. Sure. You lose yours?" He hands his phone over.

"No. I just need to see if Matt will pick up for you when he's apparently too busy to answer my calls." Eyes wide, his hands come up in a gesture that tells me he wants nothing to do with the drama I brought to his door. "I'm not usually a sneaky jerk, promise. But Matt got called up and is moving. He had movers pack our place up, and my things are in a locked storage in the lower level of the building. There's not even any furniture in the apartment. So it's important I talk to him. Okay?" I'm holding the phone away from him, scrolling for Matt's number. Even if it's not okay, I need information, and he's going to help me willingly or not.

“Uh, yeah. The guys and I were super excited for him. We took him out for drinks when he got back from his away game the other day.”

I freeze. He was *back*? He told Troy days before me?

What the actual fuck is going on?

Matt picks up on the first ring, and I’m already frowning. “Hey, man! What’s up?”

“Matt. What is going on? Some movers have already packed up most of our place while I was at work. I think I would have remembered you mentioning movers and the fact that my things would be locked in storage.”

He blows out a breath. “Ah, shit. Listen, Ari, I didn’t know how to tell you, and then shit got crazy. I’m already in Houston. I came here straight from my last game.”

I scoff audibly. Liar. “Was that before or after you had drinks with Troy and forgot to tell your girlfriend you were called up and moving?”

He curses under his breath. With a sigh, he starts talking. “Okay, listen, I was going to tell you this morning on the phone. Honestly, I thought you’d have figured it out already, or Ina would have told you, but I guess not. I’m going to Houston alone. I don’t want you coming with me. I didn’t tell you my news or ask you to move with me, yet you assumed that’s what was happening. You and I are done, babe. I thought I made that pretty clear when we talked about what would happen in this exact situation.”

“What? Matt, you said our relationship would change. I thought that meant we would take things to the next level. I would be there to support you and be understanding about your schedule.”

“Jesus. When has a guy ever talked about a change in relationship and meant it as a good thing? Come on, Ari.”

My jaw drops in confusion and understanding all at once. “So you’re breaking up with me over the phone, after you’ve moved, like a chicken-shit pussy? Did I get that right?”

“Don’t try to turn this around, alright? You knew we weren’t serious. You were just trying to get yourself a Minor League player before they made it big. I mean, shit, you stealthily moved in without even asking and then just stayed. You were always at the apartment, always around, always all over me. I never signed up for a wife. I just wanted a hot girlfriend for when I wasn’t busy. You worked for the team and are sexy as hell. Of course I was going to get in on that. But now, you’ve gotta go.”

“Excuse me?”

“What? Like it’s not the truth. You’re so fucking sweet and idealistic all the time, I couldn’t stand to tell you. But now that I’m gone, and it’s obvious we want different things, we’re done, and you needed to know.”

“Oh, and you couldn’t have told me this weeks ago? Or maybe you could have been straight with me about the type of relationship you wanted from the beginning? Then I could have told you to kiss my ass because I don’t do fuck buddies or booty calls.”

I think he mutters something like, “That’s why I didn’t say anything.”

“And, by the way, we were very fucking serious. I moved in because you said you missed me when you were gone and were upset that we didn’t get to see much of each other.” I’m growling into the phone, and Troy is backing away with a distinct cringe marring his dark face.

“I just said that to make you feel good. I didn’t mean it. It’s just something guys say. If I had wanted to see you more, I would have. Simple as that.”

I blink, my heart crumbling into a mass of rubble.

“So when you said, ‘Love you too,’ that was just bullshit?”

“Jesus. They’re just words. Maybe I felt it at that moment or thought I should say it—I don’t know. It’s pointless to hash this all out now. It’s not like I made any promises. Bottom line: I don’t live there anymore, and we were never committed to each other.”

“I fucking was!”

“Fine, but I didn’t ask you to be. You knew I was seeing that makeup artist when we first met.”

“Yeah, and you stopped seeing her before we got together.” He’s quiet. Too quiet. “Right?”

“I’m not sure what you expect me to say, and none of it changes anything anyway.” So he *was* still fucking her? Goddammit. “Look, I gotta go. Hopefully, Troy will let you stay with him for a bit.”

“I’m not staying with Troy. I pay rent in *our* apartment, so I’m staying there until I find another place to live. I can give the keys to your real estate agent at the end of the month and make sure it stays clean, but you are not kicking me out with nowhere to go.”

“It’s already done, babe. I don’t have time to bullshit with you. Don’t worry about turning the keys in because the locks have already been changed. I know how dramatic you can get and didn’t want the hassle.”

What? The nerve of this fucker.

“Where the hell am I supposed to stay?”

“That’s not my problem anymore, doll.”

Doll? Oh, it’s a good thing he’s nearly two thousand miles away. He planned this to make sure he didn’t have to do it in person.

“First, I’m not your doll. Second, you’re an asshole.”

“Pretty sure you thought that was hot at one point, so don’t pretend otherwise.”

I hate that he’s right. Even if it’s only in this one tiny way. Why did a part of me think that making tough assholes love me would result in a bigger kind of love—the kind that would be all-consuming?

The reality is that shitty men make shitty boyfriends who do shitty things because that’s who they are.

“Go fuck yourself, Matt.”

“Didn’t you hear? I’m in the majors now. There will be plenty of chicks lining up to take care of me.” I can hear the grin in his voice. “But if you’re ever in town and want one last fuck, I’d be open to it. I just won’t marry you or let you move in this time, so don’t get any ideas.”

“Wow. I hope you get chlamydia, Matt!” I don’t know why I shouted that.

“I’ll take that as a no to the fucking when you’re in town. I should have just kept it to fucking when we were together, but you were sweet, seductive, and eager to please. You’re a hard woman to say no to, Aria.”

“Oh, but I was easy enough to fuck around on, evict with no notice, and leave behind like an old shirt that no longer fits?”

“You did cling pretty tight—nearly smothering—if that’s what you mean.”

I screech loudly into the phone.

“See? Drama. I ain’t got time for this. Be good, sweetcheeks.”

I look down at Troy’s phone, realizing the call has ended.

“Before you toss my phone, just know that I was not the one who dumped you or left you stranded. That was Matt. I’d appreciate not being dragged further into his mess.”

I roll my eyes and slap the phone into his waiting hand.

If Matt thinks *this* is dramatic, he hasn’t seen anything yet.



When I finish recounting my latest awful breakup story to Chloe, she slams her hand on the table and grumbles, “What a piece of shit. I knew it within moments of meeting him. I should have said something.”

I laugh and remind her, “You did, babe, but I wasn’t in the mindset for listening. I know how I get. It’s not your fault.”

“So?”

“So, what?”

“What did you do to him?”

I can feel my brow furrow. “What makes you think I did anything?”

“You said you got fired, and you had your smugly satisfied vengeance face on while you were saying it.”

“I may have made use of some photos I had of him drunk humping the mascot statue outside of the stadium. And ones of him urinating on it. I blurred out his skanky cock and sent it to some sports reporter friends. They ate it up and even had me answer a few of their questions. They warned me that this would likely cost me my job since Matt would know who took the photos.”

“*That’ll do, pig. That’ll do.*”

“Did you just quote *Gilmore Girls* to me?”

“You know it.”

“This is why we’re friends.”

CHAPTER 3



GARRETT

That was a bust. My free time is too scarce to waste on people or activities that don't contribute to my goals. Yet I was desperate enough to attempt it.

No matter how desperate, letting The League set me up with “the perfect woman” was a miscalculation on my part. That's what happens when you start feeling antsy and lonely. I did my due diligence though. I gave them a list and explained what kind of woman and future I required.

They found me nearly the opposite of that list. I'm confident they didn't even look at it.

Georgia was sweet and smart, yes. Maybe if I could overlook the fact that she talked incessantly about her multilevel marketing business selling some kind of supplement. However, when you try to tell a doctor how an herb positively affects your metabolic rate while balancing liver pH and neutralizing ketones, I'm out. That's not medically correct in any way. There was also the open-mouth chewing, fixation on reality TV, and my inability to squeeze in more than three sentences the entire night.

Sadly, she was better than the last woman—a nurse still in love with her ex. She spent nearly half our date either crying or maniacally upbeat, trying to convince herself she was ready to start dating. Still-in-love-with-her-ex lady was a setup from a woman in my hot yoga class. Once Stella, who is the head of The League, found out I was “looking for romance” as she phrased it, there was no turning back.

I feel like the whole damn town is now involved in setting up the local doctor with the county's top female candidates between the ages of thirty and forty. There's been a wide variety of women residing as far as San Francisco.

Needless to say, I moved on to dating apps and have been avoiding Stella and other love-obsessed Landrians intent on finding me their version of a love match.

The problem is, dating apps suck. I've heard this from others but hadn't experienced it firsthand. The thing about them is everyone is looking for something different, and there are some really messed-up people out there looking for a whole lot of shit that isn't a committed relationship. The upside is that it allows me to field my dating candidates personally and make sure they check all the boxes on my potential girlfriend list.

- Single (apparently, that now needs to be specified)
- Financially stable
- Tidy
- Drama free
- Smart, strong, and sharp-minded
- Type A personality
- Health conscious
- Likes cats (I now have one I can't seem to get rid of)
- Quiet homebody
- Enjoys/tolerates football
- Wants a family
- Not clingy, needy, or emotionally dependent

Was that really so hard? I have a solid career in rural family medicine, so I'm more than financially stable. I'm neat, take good care of myself, am pleasant enough—when warranted—and am a fantastic cook. In most aspects, I'm a damn catch.

But the part of my life that has me sitting here in my car contemplating dating apps and dragging myself to blind dates set up by well-intentioned friends and family is that I put my career first for too many years. It was smart, and the correct

order of things. It made sense, but it was a long, lonely journey. Routine, discipline, and rational decision-making are the things I pride myself on, and that's what my life has revolved around for the past fifteen years.

Now though, I've turned as much attention as possible onto the next stage of my life. It's more than ticking boxes and shifting gears to include a companion and family.

My younger brother, Jess, my baby sister, Chloe, and my best friend, Taylor, all found love. When they met their partners, it wasn't the perfect time. They weren't searching for the one and weren't even open to finding love. Sometimes, I wonder if, this whole time, I could have experienced what they did, perfect timing be damned.

So how the hell did love just happen for them?

I figure if I have a list and a plan of action, I have an even better chance of finding a suitable candidate to share my life with. To build a family with. To step into the next stage of life with. And my process should ensure good compatibility and longevity.

I step out of my vehicle, ready to face the town, my matchmakers, and my family.

Once a week, I join the Landry Lightning high school football team in case on-site medical care is needed. Taylor coaches the team and has created an incredible opportunity here for athletes. I played in high school. Taylor talked me into it by saying it would help get accepted into college. While I let him believe that excuse convinced me, I actually let him drag me to the tryouts when he declared it would help me get a girlfriend. I wasn't a girl-crazy teen. I was focused, even back then. That's not to say I was a virgin going into college. I'd been with three girls before I headed to medical school. I wasn't a casual dater, frat party experimenter, or fuck-buddy kind of guy, and I'm still not. I don't like wasting my time. I enjoy monogamy—it's a predictable, stable type of relationship that suits my physical and social needs.

I hear the coaching staff's whistles sound as they wrap up some last-minute drills before the game. The dressing room

door is only twenty yards away, so I quicken my pace and keep my head down.

“Hey, Doc.” I close my eyes for a moment, recognizing that voice immediately. “Long time no see. You look good . . . as usual.” She winks at me, and I can feel my jaw tighten to the point of pain. The way she messes with me always puts me on edge.

I turn to give her a cursory glance, making sure I don’t linger. “Minx.” I don’t even know when I started calling her that, but it fits. Since I’ve known her, she’s sported a coy smile and teasing tone—both of which have only intensified over the years. “You look the same.”

Don’t even think about looking farther down than her nose. Don’t do it.

“You mean hot. I look hot. It’s okay, you can say it.” She leans in and puts a hand on my arm. My sister and niece come up beside her, glancing from Aria to me and back, assessing the situation.

I take a jerky step away that has Chloe snorting. Aria’s scent lingers like she’s marked me, and I can’t escape it. It’s this fresh floral scent that has changed very little in the past ten years.

Fuck. I shouldn’t even know what she smelled like ten years ago. She was still a teenager then. Yet she was a teenager who was constantly around, circling me like I was her prey.

Tenacious doesn’t even begin to touch the level of persistence this woman has had for as long as I’ve known her. Even when she brought around those moronic boyfriends of hers who didn’t deserve a passing glance from the enigmatic beauty. Every time she’d catch me glaring—probably thinking my hostile stare was directed at her—she’d provide me with that flirty smile, the kind I knew was just for me.

Over the years, I’ve seen less of her, but the punch she packs only gets stronger with time.

A sharp tug on my pants breaks our staring match.

“Uncle Garrett, aren’t you going to help her?” the cute blond pixie standing beside me asks.

I crouch down. “Help who, Kins?”

“Aria says she’s hot. That means she has a fever, and you are a doctor.”

“Yeah, come take my temperature, Doc. I’ll be a good patient, promise. I hear sponge baths can really help bring a fever down.” She’s grinning, and her rich brown eyes are sparkling with mirth.

“Those are the worst. They are always so cold. You don’t want that, Aria. Trust me,” Kinsley tells Aria solemnly.

“No sponge baths. Maybe Aria can have a cold shower instead. Quick, easy, and solo. I’m sure she’s had lots of practice at that.”

Aria flips me off just as Hayden walks up and scoops up his six-year-old daughter.

“I beat you here, Daddy! That means I get an extra book at bedtime tonight.”

“Yup. You won fair and square. Even though, technically, I had to bring all of our stuff and grab the hot dog you asked for first.”

“Can Chloe read the extra book to me tonight?”

“Sure can, honey.” Chloe answers for him, a sweet smile on her face as she proudly looks at her soon-to-be stepdaughter.

“Kinsley.” My mom practically skips over to us from her spot in the bleachers where she’d been tied up chatting with friends. “Come give Nonna a hug, and then Grandpa will take you to get your face painted for the game, okay?” Ever the caretaker, my Italian mother has stepped into the grandmother role with enthusiasm.

Kinsley hops out of her dad’s arms to give my mom some love, just as Jess and Emma show up with baby Maddie in tow. Good. Another grandchild to distract Mamma. I wave at them as they remove their daughter from her car seat. I’m

reminded again of the aspect of my life I've secretly longed for and put on the back burner for too long.

"I'm going to head—"

"No, no. Don't run off yet. Tell me how your date with Tammi went. Stella was telling me all about her, and she sounds like she could use a good man after that *bastardo*"—she covers Kinsley's ears and uses the nearly identical word for bastard in Italian—"left her for a new job, new life, and new wife all the way across the country."

I glance around, not really wanting to air my dating problems with everyone. I made one comment—*one*—during a Caldwell family dinner, and it snowballed. At least it put an end to the endless "What's up your ass, Garrett?" questions I was getting from my family . . . and even some patients at the clinic.

They might think it's merely a dry spell easily fixed by getting laid. The truth is I want a relationship—the full deal with romantic dates, affection, cohabitating, marriage, and procreating. Preferably in that order to make sure everything goes seamlessly before we enter a lifelong commitment.

Getting laid isn't as hard as some people make it seem. Women look for certain things in a hookup or a man they're interested in. All you have to do is get the formula right.

I'm not interested in easy. I'm interested in *right*. I don't do things in half measures, and choosing someone to spend my life with is not going to be where I cut corners.

"Yeah, tell us about Tammi," Aria prods, her tone teasing.

The last thing I want to do is discuss my ineffective dating life with a walking, talking, seduction-laden siren.

Mamma motions at me with her hands in a way we all know means "spill it."

"Actually, Tammi was the date before. Last night's date was with Georgia."

"Oh right, yes. Fran set up that date since she knows Georgia's family. Well? Tell us about it. She's the one who

fosters dogs, right? She treats them all like her little babies by dressing them up and even has them join her at the dinner table. So sweet.”

I frown. “No . . . but now I’m a bit concerned about future setups.” I scrub a hand down my face in annoyance. I’ve been trying to keep that involuntary tell in check. “Georgia lives in the city and sells supplements . . . I think.”

“What do you mean, you think?”

I shrug. “She talked a lot, Mamma. And I have a pretty high tolerance from listening to self-important, highly educated people drone on at medical conferences and workshops. I might have a knack for making sense out of drivel, but I wasn’t capable of grasping half the things Georgia spoke of. It could have been because I found her discussion topics irrelevant, dull, and full of inaccuracies.”

“Hey!” Chloe gives me a little shove as Aria covers her mouth to smother her laughter.

“Garrett! Are you saying she was boring?” Mamma asks.

“No.” I step closer to Mamma and lower my voice so the two women openly eavesdropping can’t hear me. “She was perfectly nice but entirely off-target for the list I provided.”

“Well, maybe you need to get to know her better? How was the physical chemistry? Did she do it for you?” My mom waggles her eyebrows.

“Mom. No.” She knows I’m serious when I start calling her Mom.

“She didn’t? I thought you liked brunettes? Well, your next date is another brunette, and there’s not much we can do about that now. Canceling with less than twenty-four hours’ notice would be incredibly rude. I won’t be in town, but Dad and I are coming down again next weekend, so you can give me the details then.”

“You and Dad should just move back here already. You’re here nearly every weekend now that the whole family is back in Landry,” Chloe suggests.

“I bet she’s already looking for a house, right, Mamma Millie?” Aria asks, and Mamma just shrugs with a silly smile on her face. She probably wants to keep the secret so she can make a big announcement at our next family dinner. “Let’s get back to Garrett’s date. So, she didn’t make your man parts tingle, huh? What does it for you? Other than brunettes, of course.” Slowly, she deliberately flicks a lock of shiny, chocolaty hair behind her and bites her lip so suggestively, so wickedly, I nearly groan.

“Nope. No more details.” The women all bristle, looking ready to protest, but I hold up a hand. “I have to get over to the team. Taylor wants me closer to the bench today. And Mom? Get The League ladies to call off the blind dates. I’ll figure it out on my own.”

“*Bambino* . . . let us try just a few more, okay? We will look at the list.”

“What list?” Aria perks right up.

I ignore her.

“No more, okay? I have a plan.” Before she says anything else, I lean over, kiss her cheek, and head toward to the team.

Taylor is in the locker room, talking to his assistant coaches when I stride up to him.

He continues chatting after glancing at me but does a double take after assessing the look on my face. “Hey, buddy. What’s going on? Coming to wish us luck?”

“Something like that. I’m going to hang out on your side of the field today.”

“What? Why? You can go sit with your fam. I’ll call you over if we need you. Or if I need some of those cookies Mamma Millie always brings to the games.” A grin slips through my irritated scowl. “Oh, wait. Is Aria with them? Is that why you’re hiding on my side of the field? Lauren’s excited to meet her and has been trying to pry information from me for weeks, knowing she’d be in town for the engagement party. She’s going to be pissed if she misses

meeting the one woman who gets under your skin, but Brady is teething and she's running on fumes."

"Yeah, she's here, but this has nothing to do with Aria." Though it doesn't help.

"Sure, it doesn't. What? Are you worried the woman won't be able to keep her hands to herself and you'll be taken advantage of? I can get you a whistle if that makes you more comfortable. Blow twice and I'll come running to pry the little vixen off you."

"This is why I don't tell you things. In case you were wondering."

"Well, you did, and now I can't unknow it. You and Aria. I mean, I know how she is and the way she pushes your buttons . . . but, dude. I thought she was just fucking with you—not actually wanting to *fuck you*."

"It was that one time at Thanksgiving. That's it. She was a bit of an emotional mess after breaking up with her boyfriend, and I was just comforting her. Nothing happened."

He doesn't need to know the details. I was being gentlemanly and considerate but mostly wanted the crying to stop. Most of the time Aria is adept at putting up a front, but she got vulnerable with me. Instead of listening to her continue silently weeping, I comforted her, got close—too close—and I almost kissed her.

Taylor doesn't know that part. No one does. He thinks she made a move on me, which isn't hard to imagine given her flirtatious nature. But those tears were shredding my insides apart. There's no fucking way a woman like her should get her heart broken over a dumbass who wanted to share her with another man.

Fuck no.

And now, I can't stop myself from reminiscing about her soft mouth, her smell, the sound of that soft gasp as I leaned in, or how breaking the one rule I set for myself years ago—don't touch Aria—felt so right at that moment.

“Yeah. You two would have been sideways on that swing if I hadn’t walked out there.” He flashes a smug grin at me, proud of his little quip. “You talk to her since?”

A dark chuckle leaves me. “No. I . . . That would have been a bad idea. She called and texted a few times, so I temporarily blocked her number.” Seeing her name pop up on my phone and reading her words, was too much. Too tempting.

His eyes widen with surprise. “You blocked her? Harsh.”

A hint of guilt stirs in me. “It was necessary.”

He tips his head back and lets loose a deep laugh. “Dude. You have no idea how to handle that woman.”

My best friend walks off without waiting for a response. Why would he? We both know he’s right.

CHAPTER 4



GARRETT

SIX MONTHS AGO

The sniffles coming from the back deck of my brother and sister-in-law's house make me pull up short. I don't want to intrude on someone's private emotional breakdown—or whatever this is.

I came out here for some fresh air and to be away from the chaos for a moment. Mamma is very excited about Chloe's new boyfriend, who happens to be the same guy we heard her cry and rage about growing up. For now I'll bide my time until she finishes gushing over Hayden and his sweet little girl before I move in to grill him.

I ease back toward the sliding doors as silently as possible.

"You can stay. I'm done with the tears. I know you're allergic but it's safe now."

"Aria?" I move toward the voice and see her on the porch swing, sitting sideways with her legs curled up.

"You didn't know I was coming, did you?" she asks, a smile pulling at one side of her tear-laden face.

"No, I didn't. Chloe must have forgotten to mention it."

"I only told her a couple of weeks ago when Thanksgiving plans with my boyfriend fell through."

"Ah. Trouble in paradise?" I'd actually heard very little about Aria's current guy, but it's hard to keep up with someone you actively avoid.

She snorts. "Paradise was always a stretch with Lars, but we were comfortable. I thought he was different than my last couple of boyfriends. I mean, he treated me pretty well, was financially stable, loved cuddling, and the sex was pretty great—or so I thought."

I'm going to regret asking, but . . .

"What happened?"

"Oh, you know. The usual. For me anyway."

“The options are too vast for me to choose one Aria-type incident that may have befallen your relationship. Care to clarify, or will you be hanging out here all night feeling sorry for yourself?” I wince, knowing I’m being an asshole, but I’m unable to stop the words from leaving my mouth. An unfamiliar burn of anger and overprotectiveness has overridden rational thought.

“Good point. I mean, at least this guy didn’t steal my car. I’ve started ID’ing guys I meet in bars now. It’s a beloved icebreaker I tell guys when they hit on me.”

“You tell strangers that you’ve been duped before and invite them to join you? Take them home? Aria—”

She rolls her eyes in a way that’s practically a full-body experience. “I already feel shitty. Can you skip the lecture, please? Just for tonight. Tomorrow, you can come find me, and I’ll listen to your dissertation on bar safety.”

“Fine. So what did the jackass do?”

She grimaces and her cheeks pinken slightly.

My hand moves to her face, needing to touch the intriguing color. I trace the hollow area beneath her cheekbone with my thumb. Her mouth drops open, and my thumb moves to that plump lower lip practically on its own.

I want to grab her chin and drag that mouth to mine.

Shit. This is why I avoid her and keep my distance. Aria is an alluring distraction I have struggled to stay away from. She fucks up my head, and most of my other parts too.

Removing the wandering hand from her soft skin, I take a seat beside her on the swing.

“Tell me.”

“Um,” she starts, her eyes slightly glazed as she stares at me. Maybe I’ve finally managed to rattle her, and all it took was giving in to her sweetness with a simple touch. “It was our six-month anniversary—yes, I like celebrating those, so don’t give me shit about it—and Lars told me he had a surprise planned. He was so excited and extra affectionate the week

leading up to our anniversary. We hadn't gotten to spend much time together lately because I had just started a new job as a sports photographer for the San Jose Vultures the month before. Normally, I love traveling, but I prefer staying closer to home when I'm in a serious relationship. With the new job, I didn't have much choice and was out of town for half the month."

She looks down at her hands, but I grip her chin between my thumb and finger and tilt her head back up to look at me. A half smile twitches at her lips before she continues, "So when Lars said he had a surprise, I assume he had something romantic planned. A night of our favorite things or dinner somewhere special, maybe visit the Municipal Rose Gardens or the drive-in movies." Her eyes sparkle with happiness just talking about these places that a guy who supposedly treats her well should have already taken her to. "Want to know what he planned?"

I'm quite sure I do *not* want to know. "Let it out."

"Sexy time at home. Which, okay, I get it. We hadn't seen each other much lately, so yeah, reconnecting physically should be a part of our anniversary date. But it was the *only* thing he had planned. Just shuffled me into the bedroom and tore off his shirt. When I laughed and asked what my surprise was, he unzipped his pants, took his dick out, and said, 'It's right here, baby.'"

My jaw clenches. "He sounds like a disgustingly shitty boyfriend."

She sighs. "I realize that now."

"So you broke up with him and are sad about it? What? Were you in love with him?"

"No. I don't think so. I cared about him and liked being around him. But his horndog tendencies and lack of proper anniversary plans weren't the reason we broke up. There was more to our anniversary evening."

Is she pausing for dramatic effect? I'm already hooked.

"What was the rest?"

“He had instructed his buddy to wait in the bathroom to watch us and then asked if the creep could join us. *Surprise!*” She buries her head in her hands. “How do I always pick such fucked-up guys? Or guys who say they want something more but actually just want someone to fuck for a while until a new, shiny fuck toy comes along. Oh! Or what about that guy who was dating me for my apartment and wouldn’t leave? I had to call the police. Am I that stupid? Or maybe I’m just so hard up that I’m willing to kiss all the frogs in hopes that one will turn into a hot, available, relationship-worthy prince.”

A tear streaks down the smooth cheek my thumb explored just minutes ago.

I clear my throat, not sure what to do in this situation. If I get too close, I’ll be tempted to make her feel better, and I really only know one way to make women feel good. And it doesn’t involve chocolate.

“I’m fine. Really. I’m just really disgusted and disappointed in myself. Men want me for the short term. I’m good for one-nighters, flings, housing, transportation, and now, sharing.”

She sucks in an unsteady breath.

“Those guys are idiots.”

“You’re just saying that because you feel sorry for me, and Chloe would be mad at you if you said ‘maybe stop being a wanton flirt and you’ll attract the right guys.’”

My mouth tightens into a thin line, not liking that she believes I think so low of her.

“You’re a flirt, yes. A talented one. But you’re more than the front you put on or the fun, friendly way you interact with people. If your boyfriends never really got to know the real you or never realized you’re the one they need to work their asses off to keep—that’s on them, not you.”

Her hands slowly slide down her face, giving me a clear view of her tear-streaked, makeup-smearred face. “That was sweet, Garrett. Thank you. It still means that, for whatever

reason, I pick these losers and even give my heart to some of them, but it was still very sweet of you to try to cheer me up.”

The radiant smile and playful twinkle have returned to her face, allowing her usual gorgeous features to shine.

“Alright, good. If we are all done with the waterworks, I’m going to head back inside.” I lean forward to get up off the swing, but soft fingers find my leg while she scoots closer to me.

“Wait. Stay. I just need to recharge a moment.”

“Okay,” I say, leaning back, uncertain what recharging means.

Aria swings her legs to the side and molds her body to the side of mine. Snuggling. That’s what she meant by recharging. She enjoys physical affection and has chosen the wrong person to get it from.

I shift away slightly, moving to get up again.

“It’s just a cuddle. Or if you prefer, we could hug it out. I’d go get Chloe since she’s always up for some Aria love, but I don’t want to take away from her introducing Hayden to the Coldwells. So you’re it, mister. What’ll it be? A few minutes of cuddling or a really good hug?”

The hug is quicker so then I can bolt.

“Fine. Hug.”

“Good choice.” She dives into my chest and wraps her hands around me. A quiet snicker leaves her as she says, “Loosen up, *Coldwell*.” She tries jiggling me, but my back is ramrod straight. Grabbing my arms, she pulls them behind her before moving her hands up to my shoulders. “It’s not a real hug unless you hug back.”

A grumble leaves my throat as I tighten my arms around her. Somehow, she gets closer to me, plastering herself against my chest until she’s practically in my lap. Her fingers dig into the strands of hair at the back of my head that have gotten longer than I usually keep it.

My palms skim across her back, and she arches against me reflexively. I squeeze my eyes closed, trying not to think about other scenarios when she'd arch against me. Trying not to feel her lush breasts pressed against me and the quickening of her breath.

“You smell good, Doc.”

I grunt at her. She smells real fucking good too. Like lilacs, and sex, and everything I can't have.

“Do you really think I'm worth keeping?”

“Yes,” I answer, a quick, gruff assertion. “And you need to believe that too, or you'll continue letting shitty guys into your life. You don't need to fall into a relationship just to be in one. Find someone worth caring about.”

My mom would probably argue there's also such a thing as being too picky and never giving anyone a chance. That's probably not something Aria needs to hear though.

“Thanks, Garrett. I let these breakups get to me. I put too much of myself into the relationships, and then I'm crushed when it all falls apart, and I'm alone and unwanted again. Sometimes, I wonder if it's me—if I'm the problem. I'm always getting into these stupid situations.”

“You're not the problem. Those assholes are taking advantage.”

She shifts her head from my chest to look up at me, her eyes glossy again. Goddammit. Aria is the most caring, fun-loving, upbeat person I have ever met, and these pricks are crushing her spirit.

She blinks, and the well of tears tips over her lid to cascade down her cheek. My hand moves from her back to her face, cupping her jaw as my thumb swipes at the fallen tear.

Aria bites her lip, drawing attention to the softness, and the fire of rage at her asshat ex-boyfriends turns to burning need. Her lips part as she takes in a shuddering breath, and a new tear falls on the other side of her face. I move my other hand to rid her beautiful face of the remnants of her sorrow.

I'm cupping her face now. Her eyes are locked with mine, only inches away. Then those sultry eyes flick to my mouth, and a soft rush of air leaves my lips.

Her hands creep farther into my hair, her elbows resting on my shoulders. She shifts, rising up slightly and putting our mouths so close her breath tickles my chin.

Shit.

Oh, fuck.

What the hell am I doing?

"Aria . . ."

She looks up at me, raw need and desire still clouding her eyes, and I'm tempted to lean in. So fucking tempted to taste her. My cock throbs, wanting something we can't have. When she shifts on top of me, I bite down on my lip to keep a moan from escaping, but it's too late. She can feel my response to her.

"Garrett? Come on, man. You're up to grill Chloe's—oh . . . Oh, shit. I'll just head back in solo." Taylor backs away slowly, hands raised with a grin on his face.

Fuck.

Aria's still breathing hard as her eyes flicker back and forth between mine, waiting for me to say something.

I give her hips a little squeeze and shift her away from me.

She scrambles off me and smooths down her shirt. I didn't even get to explore what she feels like, and I'm a little disappointed about that because I sure as hell won't get another opportunity.

"We should head in," I say as I stand and awkwardly adjust myself, hoping now that we're not touching, my erection will fuck off so I can walk into my family's Thanksgiving dinner with some level of decency.

"Garrett. We should probably—" she starts, but no matter what she's about to say, I know what my response has to be.

"No."

I skirt around her, giving her plenty of space but little time to say anything else.

“Alright, Caldwell, guess I’ll see you in there.”

I don’t turn around because I can’t stand to see all the feelings she always leaves on display.

If anyone knew what I was about to do out here or how I’ve been thinking about Aria, I’d be fucked. Not because she has a giant brother who would beat my ass—she’s an only child. No, it’ll be my parents, the town, and my sister. They’ll have a lot of feelings about this, and I’m sure the main one will be that you don’t fool around with your sister’s best friend. Especially when she’s a decade younger than you.

Mostly, I’m pissed at myself. I never lose control. I don’t let anything get in the way of rational decisions. Flings, one-night stands, and random sex aren’t for me. I’ve never been tempted. I don’t *need* a constant supply of pussy like some people I know. I prefer reliable, compatible, committed relationships.

And having that with Aria isn’t going to happen.

CHAPTER 5



GARRETT

I don't have a reasonable excuse to miss out on the post-game celebratory drinks at the local bar and grill. Not one I came up with quickly enough anyway.

It's a short car ride to Taps, leaving me little time to strategize how to keep my distance from a certain vivacious young woman who perpetually looks like she wants to devour me whole.

Goddammit. The mental image of her on her knees devouring me is not one I can afford to have as I walk up to the entrance.

Chloe and her fiancé, Hayden, are the first two people from our group I see. Cursing, I dart my eyes around. Wherever Chloe is, Aria is likely not far behind.

I avoid them and head straight to the back booth on the bar side where I see my parents. My family choosing to sit on this side of Taps means Kinsley isn't here, and I'm a little disappointed. Not only is the kid cute as hell, but she's also a great buffer. You bring up T-ball, baking, or her favorite unicorn island television show, and she'll talk for twenty minutes straight.

Sliding into the booth, I heave a sigh of relief. Aria's not here.

"Mrs. Henderson just messaged to let me know she found you another date. Her name is Jeri. She lives in the Bay Area, has three cats, is a gorgeous brunette, and loves hiking. Oh,

and she's a Sagittarius. Apparently, she thought that was important for you to know."

"No, Mamma. Remember, I'm pulling the plug on the setups for a while? You ladies go back to trying to find someone for Sawyer. Chloe broke his heart, right?"

"Hey! I did not." Chloe strides up, her face filled with indignation while her fiance's is looking a bit smug.

My parents scoot over, letting them in. "Oh, yes. We are working on Sawyer, but he's been a bit . . . obstinate about it."

Could be because The League actively messed with his love life, and now he's a bit hesitant.

"How about one more date? We'll pick the best of the bunch."

"No. Thank you. I already have a date set up." I've found a few candidates on the dating app I'm using. My mom and her friends might know all the eligible women in a hundred-mile radius, but that doesn't mean they truly know what I'm looking for—the kind of woman I need.

My mom's eyes spark with curiosity. She opens her mouth to question the date I mentioned. Holding up one hand, I cut her off. "I have it handled. Let's stop talking about my love life."

"Leave the boy alone, Millie. He's a grown man, and if the women he's met so far aren't right, that's for him to decide. He's a handsome doctor still in his prime, for shit's sake. He'll be just fine," Dad says, giving me a wink.

I appreciate the support but wonder if I should be more concerned about the fact I've had a hard time finding someone. Dad slaps my shoulder before pouring me a beer. It's almost like he knows what I'm thinking.

"Scoot," a raspy voice demands from beside me.

Aria has one arm up on the back of my seat and is leaning down toward me, waiting to get into the booth. I pause for a moment. Just one second, really, as her cleavage fills my view.

I move over, a hint of panic rising as her thigh grazes mine and her sweet, fresh scent envelops me.

“What were we talking about?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I say firmly, glaring at my family members one by one.

“Alright . . .” she drawls. “I’m ordering a bottle of wine. Who’s in?”

“Me!” my sister says, snagging a menu.

“Where are Jess, Emma, and Maddie?” Aria asks. “Emma’s usually down for wine.”

“They’re staying home tonight. Emma hasn’t felt well this week,” Chloe explains.

“Ah, maybe she’s pregnant again. I cannot wait for more grandbabies!” Mamma squeals a little at the end, and I grin while rolling my eyes.

We spend the next hour eating, talking about the game, making summer plans, and discussing the housing market, which Aria seems particularly interested in.

After nursing my second beer for so long it’s warm, I’m just waiting for the next person to take their leave so I can follow suit. I need to get out of this booth and away from all the questions and idle chitchat. Mostly, I just need to get away from the woman sitting next to me.

I nearly hug the wall, trying not to make physical contact with the owner of the incredible scent and delectable ass beside me. My back will be sore tomorrow from leaning awkwardly for so long.

Aria stands to say goodbye to Chloe and Hayden, who have a babysitter waiting on them. Yes! This is my chance.

I rush out of the booth like a trapped animal finally set free. Then I hear my sister say, “You going to be okay making your way to Sadie’s on your own? It’s already dark out and at least a twenty-minute walk to her place. We took Hayden’s motorcycle tonight, which means we can’t take you, but I don’t want you walking on your own.”

“Sorry, Aria. We don’t get to ride the bike too often since Kinsley’s usually with us. I could come back for you with my truck,” Hayden offers. “Or I can see what time Julio’s done with his bartending shift. I know he’d give you a ride.”

Julio? The guy who has come out from behind the bar multiple times tonight to flirt with her? That’s a no.

“I’ll take her.”

Why would I say that? I was finally free.

“Oh. Thanks, Gar. Sorry, I didn’t even think to ask you. I just assumed you’d be gone the moment we let you out of the booth,” my sister says, looking surprised.

I frown at my sister. As if I’d let one of her friends walk across town in the dark.

“You weren’t keeping me here. I agreed to come, participated in conversation, drank a beer, and tried the dill pickle atrocity you forced on me. Now, I’m offering your friend a ride because she didn’t plan. Is it really so hard to believe I’d help out?”

“Of course not. But you *did* look like you were struggling through the last hour. You’re not exactly a people person, and we did a lot of people-ing tonight. Every time someone came over to talk to us, you practically growled at them. Julio and Liam piss you off lately or what?”

I ignore her questions, mostly because it’s what I’m good at.

I turn to Aria. “We going or not, kid?”

As soon as it left my mouth, I knew I shouldn’t have said a damn thing and just motioned to the door. Adding “kid” sealed my fate.

Both women tilt their heads at me like some kind of female autonomic warning system for impending danger.

Hayden makes a tsking sound and rocks back on his heels. He puts an arm around Chloe. “Let’s get going, Princess. We don’t want to be here for this.”

“He just meant it in a big brother way. It wasn’t an insult. He’s just being a stodgy old grump. Right, Gar?” my sister asks, trying to save me.

I nod this time. Words are risky right now.

“Mm-hmm. Because you’re so much older and wiser than us, right? Maybe you need a reminder of what it means to be a young hooligan like me.”

Aria’s tone is icy, but it registers too late. “I’m not sure I’d physically be able to get into that much trouble in just one night.”

Fire rages in her normally playful eyes. See? Words get me in trouble. Keeping my mouth shut was the plan, yet somehow it opened up and spewed more crap anyway.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Chlo.” Her voice is deceptively sweet, but her incinerator eyes haven’t left mine.

Hayden is whispering in Chloe’s ear, and I’m pretty sure she’s not paying attention at all anymore. Aria finally breaks eye contact with me to lean over and get my sister’s attention.

“Babe. I’ll see you tomorrow, right?”

“Oh. Yeah, sorry. Hayden was just planning a little pit stop—uh, never mind.” Her eyes flash to mine, and her cheeks blaze a dark pink. Great. They’re stopping somewhere to fuck. Didn’t need to know that.

I glare at Hayden, and he avoids looking in my direction.

Just as they turn to leave, Chloe says, “No fucking around with my best friend. She’ll chew you up and spit you out. Got it?”

“I won’t touch her,” I blurt.

She frowns at me in immediate disgust. “What? No! I meant like be freaking nice to her, you perv.” She scoffs at me as Hayden leads her away. Aria and I both watch them leave.

I take a breath and blow it out, preparing for whatever lecture or bit of torture Aria has in store for me.

“But also, don’t touch her, Garrett Caldwell! I can’t believe I had to say that.” Chloe’s voice echoes throughout the bar.

“I’m not touching anyone. Jesus.”

“Don’t you ‘*Jesus*’ me. You brought it up. Plus, I’ve heard you’re kinky, and Aria doesn’t need a peek into that part of your life. She has enough shit going on.”

“Chloe.” I scrub a hand down my face and huff out an aggravated breath. “Can we not shout false accusations about my bedroom proclivities, please? I can’t believe *I* had to say that!”

She points at me with a serious but tipsy expression and holds my gaze as Hayden guides her back out of the bar.

By this time nearly every person in the bar is raptly eavesdropping on what should have been a private conversation—or perhaps never discussed, ever.

“What kind of kink?” Aria whispers, having moved closer to make sure I’m the only one who heard her.

Under no circumstances will I be talking kinks with Aria. Not that I have any. Do I like to have control in the bedroom? Yes. Have I been known to cuff or tie up my very willing partners? Sometimes—it depends on the woman. But that tends to take a lot of trust, and I haven’t exactly gotten close enough to many women to make it something I do regularly, for Christ’s sake.

“Absolutely not,” I say.

“Mmm . . . a mystery. Almost makes up for your patronizing earlier.”

“You’ve always been a kid to me. It was a slip of the tongue.”

“Oh? Was I still a ‘kid’ when you hauled me onto your lap and almost kissed me last year?” She uses air quotes around kid.

I pull her away from the nosy patrons surrounding us, all while she smirks at me.

“That was a mistake, and we agreed not to talk about it.”

“Um . . . no.” She points at me. “You wouldn’t answer my calls or texts after that except for that one text you sent shortly before blocking me.”

I mutter a string of expletives, and her eyes widen in delight.

I may not outwardly curse often, but it’s not like I don’t know how.

“Shh! Dammit.”

She smiles sweetly at me, expectantly.

“Yes, I texted you to stop.”

“And my response was? Do you remember?”

Fuck, do I ever.

“You said something vulgar as expected.”

She leans in and places a hand on my arm, swaying a little from the wine she’s had. “I told you that one day I’d get to taste you and finish what we started. Keep in mind that I was still pretty worked up then and had just gotten out of a shitty relationship. But at the time, I figured if I ever got the chance to unleash the monster cock that was testing the tensile strength of your slacks, I would have made sure we couldn’t be interrupted.”

I swallow, my throat dry. She watches the movement and glides her hand farther up my arm. I lean against the end of the bar and signal the bartender to grab me a water.

“I didn’t respond because your text was incredibly inappropriate.”

“I disagree. You left me hanging—for years, if we’re being really honest with each other. I had gotten over it—mostly—but then you were sweet, and intense, and hot. You, Garrett Caldwell, were hot for *me*.”

I take a sip of the water set down in front of me, not even looking at the woman next to me. “Don’t be dramatic. You had

a little crush and messed with me.” And were really fucking good at it.

“Ha. I was messing with you because I wanted to mess around with you, idiot. If you had given me even a scrap of affection or a hint of interest back then, I would have gladly climbed all up on your dick.”

I spew water all over the bar, coughing uncontrollably. She pats my back, but tears have blurred my vision, so I have no idea if she’s laughing at me or not.

“You okay?”

I croak out, “Yeah, fine.”

I’m not fine. She has wanted me for a lot longer than she should have.

“Don’t say shit like that.”

“Why? It’s true. Though Chloe doesn’t exactly know that, and I did promise her a long time ago that I’d never go there with you or Jess—”

“Jess?” I practically shout.

“Yes. You might know him? He’s related to you,” she sasses.

“Is that how you were with him too? Always in his face, flirting, saying inappropriate things, showing up all the time, sliding by him and making sure your ass grazed his cock?”

Her smile widens and her face shines in triumph.

“Nope. Jess is good looking—hot, even—but don’t worry, you were the only one who got all my attention. Who knew you’d be the jealous type? I like it.”

“I’m not . . . I wasn’t . . .”

“Oh, and flustered. That is an absolutely delicious look on this stupidly handsome face.” She grabs my chin and looks at me. People had called me a pretty boy for most of my teens and assumed that was all I had going for me, but I didn’t care. Once I started growing facial hair, my features sharpened a little. People found out I wasn’t the fun charmer they assumed

I was, and they usually left me alone. Yet hearing Aria call me “stupidly handsome” was oddly satisfying.

“You ready to go yet, or are we causing a bigger scene before leaving?”

“Let’s dance.”

Scene it is.

I draw back to create some space between us as if I thought she’d start dancing with me against my will.

“No.”

“Yes. Come on, you need to loosen up. It’ll be fun.”

“Doubtful.”

One long-lashed eye squints slightly at me, and her cute, slender nose wrinkles in disapproval. “Do you ever just let go? *Break the rules?*”

“I have fun.”

“Right. Let me guess . . . you’re in a cross-stitching group?”

I grin at her, amused. “Fern promised me that memberships were kept private.”

She grins back, grabs my hand, and drags me behind her. Could I stop the small-statured, curvy ball of energy from moving me wherever she wants?

Actually, I’m not sure. Maybe if I picked her up and tossed her over my shoulder, but the idea of having her ass swaying so close to my face and putting my hands on the backs of her soft thighs would be counterproductive to my “stop thinking about Aria” goal.

We reach the dance area and I pull back. She lets my hand slip from hers as she shrugs and slinks off to the middle of the moving bodies. I could be home right now. Then I wouldn’t have to watch her attention-grabbing hips and tight waist move to the music. I wouldn’t have to coax her into my car, her glistening body exuding that delicious scent as I take her to Sadie’s.

I just have to keep telling myself that this is only temporary. She's only here for a week, and then she'll head back to San Jose, and I won't see her again for a few months. I can handle Aria in small doses. I've been handling it for years now.

CHAPTER 6



ARIA

The thing about moving back to a small town is that not only do you know everyone and everyone likely knows your business but you also can't escape your teenage crush. Sure, maybe that crush lasted a hell of a lot longer than just my adolescent years and continues to pop up every time I see him, but it's not something that should still be lingering.

I used to believe my draw to him was the fact he couldn't be charmed. He didn't fall prey to my flirtations or "wiles," as Chloe called them. I have no problem making new friends, picking up a guy at a bar, or connecting with people.

It's why my best friend didn't think much of the way I acted around Garrett. Back then flirting was my outlet—my way of acquiring the love and attention I craved.

With Garrett it was different. I'd built a relationship on our differences, on the occasional way he'd react to me—which, in turn, only encouraged me. Chloe thought it was hilarious because not much frazzled her brother.

Now, I'm back in town for good, and her brother will likely go back to ignoring me, glowering, or lecturing me between bouts of indifference. I lived for all but the avoidance and disinterest. It was equal parts thrilling and sad.

I don't know why I still flirt with him or why he's still burrowed somewhere deep in the crevices of my heart where teenage crushes are usually sent to be extinguished. There has always been something about Garrett and the quiet, intentional way he handles himself.

Even now, as I dance and let my body move the way I've been dying to all night while cramped in that booth, I can see several women checking him out. Garrett's quiet, sexy, serious, and mysterious way draws women like catnip. Unfortunately, I've seen it a lot while being around him growing up and when he was home visiting. Women either think they can get him to fall for them or they can crack the mystery. That *they* are the one he'll bend for. *They* are the one he'll go soft for.

Fat chance.

I've been trying for years, and other than that one blip at Thanksgiving that he refuses to acknowledge, it seems flirtations are not the key to gaining his affections.

Julio comes to dance with me, briefly distracting me from my Garrett musings. He grabs my waist and spins me toward him. I beam up at him and give him my best hip swivel, dancing against him.

"Yes, chica!" Julio shouts in excitement.

His current boyfriend lives in Vaughn and is also a bit shy. He's only recently come out to his family and wanted to keep their relationship at a slower pace for now. Julio has been understanding, but I can tell it's been difficult for them. The last time I was here, Julio told me they don't go out much and never go dancing.

"Anytime you want to go dancing, you call me, Julio. I'll gladly be your partner. I now know that going with Chloe and Hayden means watching them practically hump each other. And don't even get me started on Sadie."

"She hasn't been here in ages. Something up?"

"I'm going to find out. I'm staying with her for a couple of days while my mom has her man friend over this weekend." Sadie is one of a handful of other friends from school who has always loved Landry and stuck around to build her life here.

"Uh-oh, incoming." Julio spins me around so I can see the problem.

Garrett. Looking slightly more murderous than he usually does when forced to socialize.

I wave and act excited, like I actually think he's joining us for a dance when I know he's coming to bark at me about leaving.

Grabbing his hand as he approaches, I spin myself and twirl around him, singing a country song he probably doesn't know.

“So glad you decided to—”

His shoulder dips as he bends down, his head at my side and his arm locking around my knees. Before I can protest, he's got me upside down over his shoulder and is storming toward the exit.

“Garrett, what the hell? Put me down.”

“We're leaving. You've danced enough and made your point. I'm not a patient man.”

No shit.

“You can't just pick me up and haul me wherever you want.”

“Our current situation disproves that.”

“Put me down! I'm no waif.”

“I noticed.” He smacks my ass, and my mouth gapes in shock. How fucking dare— “And I'm not complaining.”

What the hell does that mean?

“I don't know if you're insulting or complimenting me, but if you don't put me down, Doc, one of us is going home with one less testicle.”

He puts me down and I huff in outrage. That's when I notice we're beside his Audi. It feels less like a victory when we're already where he meant to take me.

“Done feeling me up, or are you just looking to change positions?”

He looks me over and his eyes darken.

The car behind me beeps. “Get in. I’m taking you to Sadie’s, and then you’re her problem.”

“Mmm, you always know the sexiest things to say at the end of a date. It’s how you get girls to go home with you, right? Or is it the Audi?” Apparently, his car is worth a shit ton of money, and he treats it like his baby. That car gets waxed more than I do.

He just looks at his car, a cute smile pulling at his usually stoic face.

“Really? Chicks fall all over you because of your car?”

The playfulness in his tone remains, but his smile fades. “I don’t ‘pick up chicks.’ I’m not a one-night-stand kind of guy, Minx.”

I tilt my head at him, seeing for the first time what I can’t believe I hadn’t really noticed before. He may draw a fair amount of attention, but I’ve never seen him go home with anyone. In years past, it was rare if he had a woman around. A few girlfriends in college and after he finished his internship, but that’s it. I thought it was because he was private, but maybe Garrett really doesn’t date.

“Well, if you’re not going to put out, you can take me home.” I give him a quick grin before stepping aside to open the passenger door, but he’s already there, his hand gripping the handle.

He lets me into his fancy vehicle, and I slip into the plush leather seats.

Once we’re out of the parking lot, he glances at me. “You staying with Sadie for the rest of your trip? I didn’t think you two were that close.”

“We’ve grown closer since Chloe and her reconnected. Sadie and I were friends in school. I still messaged her from time to time to stay updated on things here. She’s incredibly sweet and fun, organized, and well-spoken.” I chuckle a little. “She’s probably a good influence on me.”

He glances at me again but doesn’t say anything. I expected maybe a comment on the things I could work on to

get my life back on track.

“When do you head back home?” he asks.

Shit, I forgot Garrett probably hasn't heard that I'm staying for good. “Why?” I ask.

“Always good to know what direction the storm is heading next.”

I scoff. “Well, batten down the hatches because Hurricane Aria is here to stay.”

His grip tightens on the wheel, and he shifts in his seat. “What?”

“I've moved back for good. I love it here and wanted to come back years ago. Through my various photography gigs, I'd done some traveling and gained some experience, but nothing felt quite right. Chloe wasn't quite ready to move back yet, and by the time she was, I had just gotten a new job with the Vultures and wanted to see that through. Since that blew up spectacularly, nothing was holding me back from coming home.” He better not say I came back home because I had no other choice.

It's quiet for a long while as he seems to chew on this information.

“Where are you staying?”

“With my mom for now. I'll get my own place eventually. I have a few things to think about. I might actually have to plan a little. Smaller towns mean fewer opportunities that pop up.”

He nods but stays quiet. The silence only allows my mind to spin, its thoughts uninterrupted.

Before I can come up with something else to talk about, he pulls up in front of Sadie's. Her porch light is still on so I can find my way to the door in the dark.

I turn to Garrett to find a frown dimpling the scruff near his mouth. “Are you angry I'm moving back?”

“Not really.”

“That’s not a no,” I point out. “Come on, it’s not like you hate me. Right?” I ask, and this time, my usual self-confidence wanes.

“I don’t hate you.”

“You just don’t want me living in the same town as you?”

“Yeah.”

My jaw drops. I bug the shit out of him, yes. But sometimes, I know he enjoys it. He smiles when he thinks I’m not looking, his cheek twitches in that way I know means he’s amused.

“Great. Another person who only wants me around temporarily. I think there are T-shirts. Make sure you order one size up. I hear they shrink.” I reach to grab the door handle, but his hand lands on my arm and grips firmly.

“Aria . . .” he says, his tone soft. I look back at him with a sigh and see his eyes are filled with concern.

I sigh. “It’s fine. I’m being dramatic. I get why you don’t want me here. I’ve always been a pain in your ass.” His hand pulls me closer. I’m leaning against the console between us, and he keeps his hand on me, probably worried I’m about to bolt before he tells me whatever he feels the need to say.

“That’s not why I don’t want you here.” Fingers trail down my bare arm, but I don’t look down because Garrett is looking right at me for the first time, seeing me. His guard is down, and his eyes burn with intensity. Something about the way he’s staring at me has me frozen.

“Then why?” My voice is so soft, so timidly curious. It’s barely more than a whisper.

He doesn’t answer me. His eyes simply move to my mouth, and I can’t tell if it’s because he didn’t hear me or because . . .

Garrett leans in slowly and I gasp. Those fingers that just moments ago were causing confusion now flutter along my shoulder right before finding purchase at the nape of my neck.

His mouth is mere inches from mine, his eyes dipping to my lips before coming back up to mine. Heat flares through me right before he tilts his head and captures my lips in a kiss that sears all the way down to my toes. I flush, desperation clawing its way to the surface. Surprise keeps me immobile for a few seconds before I bury my hands into his ashy-brown hair, finding the longer strands on the top.

Full, firm lips suck at my lower lip, and I moan into his mouth. His grip tightens on the back of my neck, and I can barely catch my breath with the feel of his hands on me and the scruff of his face scraping against me.

I chase his mouth as it pulls away, but his forehead pushes against mine, keeping me in place as I pant. My blood is pounding in my ears, and every part of me has come alive in want, need, hope.

“That’s why,” he says, panting slightly. “That’s why I don’t want you here, Aria. This can’t keep happening.”

I’m not a teenager anymore. I’m an adult, one perfectly capable of having physical relationships with whomever I please. The red *X* he’s placed over me in his mind no longer applies. Does he really still think of me as someone he can’t be with?

Chloe. Would she still care? I know she would probably think Garrett and I would be a disaster. She’d also be pissed if it affected our gatherings or caused awkwardness within our friendship.

My hands leave his hair and drop to his chest, clinging to his shirt. He watches me with a mixture of emotions I’ve never seen on his face—intensity, desire, and the sharp sting of regret.

Conflicting feelings war within me as well. I decided not to pursue any more relationships just because I was lonely or horny. I need to love myself first. Is Garrett capable of loving anyone but his family and his career? Is this strictly a physical, hormone-induced event? There’s one way to find out.

“Well, if it can’t keep happening, then at least let me shoot my last shot, Doc.”

Decision made, I grip his shirt tighter and pull him back toward me. I crush my lips to his, worried he won’t react—or worse, he’ll push me away. But one of his hands moves to my waist, and the other moves from my neck to cup the side of my face in a move so gentle and caring, it’s nearly my undoing.

Frantic need has me opening up the kiss, delving into his mouth, and I get a hint of the deep-fried pickle he was coerced into eating. A chuckle leaves me and I pull him closer, my hand going back up to that dark, thick head of hair that has a sexy sprinkling of gray at the temples.

I want to press against him, but there’s no room to maneuver with the console between us. How easily could I hop over it and into his lap?

He breaks away before I can give it any more thought. “You were laughing?” He’s perplexed and slightly out of breath.

I smirk and drag a finger down from his hair, over his cheekbone, along that jaw I want to press my face to, and up to his lips. The bottom one is fuller, almost pouty compared to the top lip. I give that plump lip a soft swipe before whispering, “You taste like fried pickle.”

A hint of a smile has the left side of his mouth twitching. “The ladies in my family don’t really take no for an answer.”

I kiss the side of his mouth where he’s trying to contain his smirk. “You barely put up a fight. Chloe gave you that sad, glassy-eyed look, and you broke.”

He hums at me, his eyes drinking in my amusement. “I don’t like it when she’s upset with me.”

My eyes scrunch up as I realize something huge. “Garrett Caldwell. You’re a softy. Who knew.”

“I am not. I simply prefer to avoid the explosion of feelings and lengthy discussions that my sister and mom are particularly fond of.”

I mouth, “Softy,” at him before placing another kiss on his mouth.

“Aria . . .” He sighs my name, and I come to the sad realization that our time together is over.

“Why not, Doc?”

A hand scrubs at the scruff that was scratching the sensitive skin around my mouth just moments before. “You’ll always be off-limits. You’re a part of our family, and now you’re a part of this town again. You’re young and sweet, Aria, and it wouldn’t be right. You need to find someone more like you—wild, fun, carefree. I’m looking for someone practical and ready to settle down. Being attracted to each other doesn’t mean we should be together.” He leans back and turns to face the windshield.

“That’s the most I think you’ve ever said to me at once, Garrett, and I have to say, it was a bit disappointing because most of it was utter crap.”

“Doesn’t change the truth.”

“I’d love to hear the truth, Doc. I’ve seen the way you look at me. You like me. You’re not just attracted to me—you like me. You feel almost as protective of me as you do the other women in your family. And if that messes with your perfect categorical system of how I fit into your life, tough shit.”

His head whips around as fierce indignation shines in his eyes.

I grab the door handle and ease it open. “Oh, and Garrett, I’m not too young to know how to fuck you until you let go of all your logical, rational bullshit.” I step out of the car and lean over. Letting go of the last glimmer of hope that Garrett and I might have been something, I say, “Sadly, by the time you figure that out, I’ll have moved on, and you’ll be the one with all those pesky, unrequited feelings.”

Slamming his car door only makes me feel marginally better. Resisting the urge to look back at him makes me feel stronger than I have in years. With the previous men in my

life, I tended to say and do whatever was necessary if it meant they kept caring about me.

It made me feel weak. And the person I was weakest for is still waiting outside Sadie's house as I grab the key from inside the mailbox and let myself in.

For too long I've been confused about what a loving relationship should be. Loving being in a relationship isn't the same as loving the person I'm with. I don't need romance to feel loved if I have family, friends, and self-respect.

CHAPTER 7



ARIA

Unlike my mom, I'm fine with gossip—good-natured gossip. It's how I've been catching up on the town and its people. But a fiery ball of tension sits deep in my stomach as I overhear tidbits about Garrett's dating adventures.

When I stop by the clinic to pick up Chloe so we can get ready for her engagement party, I know I'll have to see him. The man kissed me last week—finally—and now he's pretending it was nothing, that he barely knows me. He's so fucking stubborn.

No. I shouldn't be upset by this. It's actually good. This is how I finally get over my ridiculous feelings for him.

Even knowing this, the way I reacted to him was unexpected. I hadn't meant to stir shit up with him. I had every intention of being diplomatic, elusive, sweet, and alluring.

Our kiss wasn't a fluke or a whim. I've been kiss-starved and craving his body on mine since. His hands were pulling at my hips, his hungry mouth dominating my willing lips.

He pretended he barely knew me and wanted nothing to do with me. I mean, he couldn't give me one longing look or even a shameful glance? Come on.

But now is not the time to focus on Garrett. It's Chloe's engagement party. It's so incredibly romantic, I'm practically drowning in happy tears for them. And maybe a little—a teensy, tiny bit—of self-pity tears too.

I can't help looking at what Chloe has found—what so many people in Landry and in my life have found—and wonder why nothing even remotely close to that has happened to me.

I'm lost in my own thoughts as I take my seat again, having just finished my speech. I teared up the entire time, and now I'm watching as my beautiful friend moves to the dance floor with her charming man.

Sitting here alone, contemplating life, love, and happiness probably won't help me shake off the feeling of defeat. With any of my exes, did I even have half of what Chloe and Hayden have? God, no. Thankfully, I'm still young, and my past love mistakes don't have to dictate my future happiness.

Some of those mistakes have reasons though. Loneliness, horniness, the need for companionship and affection, and a deep-seated desire to both be loved and in love. I need to get a handle on these things before embarking on a new romantic journey. Before I so carelessly give my heart, time, or body to someone again.

So why the hell do I keep panting after Garrett?

“Ari, come dance! What are you doing over there?” My best friend looks concerned, and for a moment, I can see the understanding in her eyes. She knows where I'm at emotionally and mentally right now.

I flash my friend an exuberant smile to reassure her I'm just fine. “Coming!”

After this last breakup, I've concluded that I'm less disappointed and more angry—with myself. No more settling. No more forgetting my value or what I bring to a relationship. No more staying with men who don't love me, who never will, or who aren't capable of the same level of devotion I am.

Those hot but heartless losers can fuck right off.

Which means I need to stop trying to get close to Garrett. Because if anyone falls into that hot, heartless category, it's probably him. I never thought of myself as a masochist, but

maybe I have been—just in this one particular aspect of my life.

Chloe envelops me in a hug the moment I get close. “You okay, babe?”

“Of course.” It’s not a complete lie. I *will* be just fine now that I’m home and have given myself some rules to abide by. I’ve never been the best at following rules, but this one is pretty basic.

“Watching you two just makes me so happy. Now, where did that cutie pie of yours run off to? She and I are going to tear it up. Be ready for the forever memories that are about to happen, Chlo. This is just a warm-up for your wedding!” I look around, searching for my dance partner. “Kinsley!” I shout.

My eyes land on Garrett instead. I frown and promptly look away, but my eyes, my damn eyes, flicker right back and see that he’s still staring with a confusing intensity. His dress shirt molds to him like he was fitted by the designer himself. He’s seated with his family and is leaning over his lap, elbows propped on his knees, strong hands clasped together—just staring.

I purposely move to the other side of the dance floor, Kinsley’s hand wrapped in mine.

I get the DJ—aka Jess—to play some hip-hop and teach my favorite six-year-old some moves. Eventually, she drags her dad over to the dance floor, and I snag my camera to capture some of the magic that’s sprinkled throughout my best friend’s celebration.

Kins is showing her dad a few moves, Chloe is laughing and trying to help move Hayden’s body the way his daughter is showing him, Millie and Rian Caldwell are slow dancing to a 50 Cent song, and Chloe’s cousin Sean is making his rounds to the senior ladies of our town, giving them each a twirl before moving on to the next.

Then there’s Garrett. He’s standing against one of the support posts near the DJ table, not smiling, barely blinking,

and when he catches me watching him, he walks back to his table to sit and drink by himself.

New rule: no stick-in-the-muds either. I want someone unafraid to have fun or express how they feel. Someone who can give as good as he gets. Someone social, adventurous, and with the innate ability to care for others.

Look, Garrett, I can make compatibility lists too.



I've barely sat down at our table at Hot Beans coffee shop, and Emma is already looking at me with questions and concerns swirling in her honey-brown eyes.

“So, what’s your plan, Aria?”

“Plan?” I ask.

“Yes.” Emma tilts her head at me, probably confused about why I don’t understand her question. “As in, what are you going to do now that you’ve moved, left your job—or were terminated—and are living with Candi above the salon? I’m assuming all of that is temporary and that you have a plan for your future?” She examines my clueless, somewhat guilt-ridden expression.

“Maybe you’re in the middle of the planning stages? Did you need someone to talk things through with? Lauren is great at the hand-holding and pep talks, but if you’re looking for someone to strategize with, I’m your girl.” She beams proudly.

I still feel a bit lost and was hoping to mellow for a while before getting my feet back underneath me again. It’s okay for me to take a beat. I’m giving myself that.

“I might need a little of both, if I’m being honest.”

Lauren clutches my hand. “Hand-holding initiated. Now, are there any asses that need kicking? My strengths lie mostly in verbal bashings, but I’m pretty good at a physical beatdown too.”

“She really is,” Chloe adds, tugging me in for a side hug.

I chuckle. “Matt is a weak, baseball-obsessed, emotionless jerk who I thought loved me just because he didn’t mind my company and didn’t treat me like shit. Well, up until the end. He tossed my ass into the general direction of the trash as he sprinted to Houston for better opportunities—both professionally and personally. The first one I can’t really fault him for, but the latter makes him scum.” I scoff at my next thought. “I can’t believe for a moment I actually considered dropping everything and moving with him. I don’t even know why. It was just the next step. I didn’t even love him or feel anything other than a lingering fondness. We’d only been dating for five months. And I let my anger at the breakup set fire to my career.”

“Whatever, that was awesome. Plus, you were always going to move back here, weren’t you?”

I shrug. “I was actually going to move back after I finished school and did some traveling. With the photography jobs I’ve had, I was able to do a lot of traveling. Unlike my dad, I don’t feel as drawn to the nomadic existence. I enjoyed the new experiences, but I need more than a home base to return to occasionally. I want to put down roots and make a home. I want my favorite people around me.”

“So you’re returning home for good? Or is this a temporary visit to lick your wounds before you keep searching?” Emma asks, studying me.

“Emma.” Sadie smothers a chuckle and shakes her head.

I laugh lightly. “It’s fine. Those are good questions—ones I’ve been avoiding.” I let out a longer sigh than I intended. “No other place has ever felt quite like Landry.” I square my shoulders and feel some of the heaviness weighing on me lighten slightly. “I’m staying.” I nod, and with a stronger voice and a bright smile taking over my face, I repeat, “I’m staying.”

“Feels good to decide, doesn’t it?” Emma asks.

“It does. Thanks, Emma.”

“Of course. Now, your next step is employment.”

I look around at the successful, well-put-together women surrounding me. “I’m a bit of a mess.”

“This isn’t a mess, Ari. Pete Isaacson hangs the clothes his ex-wife left behind from the tree in his yard to air them out. He hardly ever showers, sometimes wanders the street calling her name in the middle of the night, and shows up each week at Karaoke Night to sing ‘their song’ hoping she’ll show up one day.” Chloe’s mouth stretches into a grimace. “*He’s* a bit of a mess. You? You’re in transition. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s how we get to better places in our lives.”

In transition . . . I like that. My eyes tear up a little in gratitude, and she tilts her head at me in sympathetic understanding.

“Do you want to continue with photography?” Lauren asks.

“Ideally, yes. But I doubt there are many, if any, positions in Landry for a photographer.”

A shadow falls upon our table.

“Good morning, ladies. Oh my, look at you lovelies! This is a table full of youth, brains, and beauty, that’s for sure.” Stella puts a hand on Chloe’s and Lauren’s shoulders.

“Good morning, Stella,” Sadie greets.

“Looking radiant yourself, Stella,” I add.

“Well, thank you, sweetness. Now, as much as I love this kind of chitchat, I’ve come over here with a purpose. I was just getting my half-sweet, nonfat, low foam vanilla latte and overheard you all discussing the town’s photography needs.”

I nearly snort. The woman must have a bug planted at this table if she ordered her complicated caffeinated beverage from across the coffee shop and still heard us.

“We were just talking to Aria about whether she plans to pursue photography as her career or if she’s changing fields,” Chloe explains.

“And? What’s the consensus, young lady? Because I have a bit of a suggestion if you don’t mind hearing from an old but

still radiant”—she winks at me—“woman.”

“I would love to continue doing photography, but I’m not sure there’s as much opportunity here as some of the other cities I’ve worked in.”

She makes a *pshh* sound and waves a dismissive hand at my comment. “Sometimes in a small town like Landry, you have to make your own opportunities.”

“What do you mean exactly?” I ask, leaning forward.

“Well, I know Ruth was looking for someone to take family photos of her extended family. And one of the law offices in Vaughn was looking for someone to do head shots of all the senior and junior partners. Oh, and Emma and Lauren, didn’t you two have to go to San Francisco to get maternity and newborn photos done? And our newspaper’s lifestyle photographer hardly ever shows up when he’s supposed to, and his images are just god-awful. It could be because he uses a camera that looks like it came out of a cereal box.”

“Hey! That’s a professional camera I use. And I voluntarily submit my photographic art to the paper. The paper doesn’t have a photographer, and I have a day job, Stella.” The photographer in question glares at our table, pinning me with a disgruntled look that has me mouthing a silent apology to him.

“Sorry, Phil. No disrespect, but imagine what we could get from a professional photographer,” Stella counters.

He rolls his eyes and leaves the cafe. She turns her attention back to us.

The barista at the front counter shouts, “Stella! Your snooty coffee is ready!”

Stella spins around. “Delores, you’re the one who suggested that drink, so don’t go acting like you don’t know why I ordered it!” She makes her way to the counter. “Do you want me to be like our overly health-conscious local doctor and just drink it black? That’s like drinking liquid depression. Do your black coffee drinkers seem happy to you?” Stella freezes and then turns around. “Sorry, Chloe, but your brother

could use a little sugar in his life. You know I'm not wrong." She points at Chloe for confirmation.

Chloe raises her hands, still laughing at the show we've been lucky enough to come upon.

"He could definitely use a little sugar in his life." I wiggle my eyebrows, making a crude joke under my breath to cover the feelings swirling at the thought of Garrett finally indulging in that kind of sugar. Sadie giggles, Lauren nods with a dramatic expression, and Emma is just drinking her coffee, watching us all. Chloe elbows me and mumbles, "Gross."

Stella's gaze narrows on me, and I can practically see the wheels spinning.

Thankfully, she continues to the front door. Before opening it, she stops and waves to catch our attention. Joke's on her—I've been watching her the whole time because the woman is fascinating.

"Make sure you all fill Aria in on the town events coming up. We could use a few more committee members and on-site organizers for the Fall Festival this year. And Aria, think about what I said about photography here in Landry. A lifestyle and family photography business could be just what Landry needs." With a tip of her coffee, she strides out the door.

The ladies start talking about the Fall Festival as I continue watching Stella out the window. She takes a tentative sip of her coffee, shudders, and then dumps it into the nearest trash.

I'm still laughing when I see Garrett running with his brother just across the street. His tight white running shirt stretches as he pumps his arms and his pec muscles dance. A fucking mesmerizing dance that has me biting the inside of my cheek. His bouncing hair is slightly longer than his brother's with hints of gray. It's something I've given him shit about for years but secretly love. Remembering the feel of my hands in his hair has my lady parts tingling again. That and the trickle of sweat running down the front of his shirt. I wait as they pass to catch a glimpse of his tight bubble butt.

Fuck. One glimpse of him with a little sweat and lean, bulging muscles, and I'm right back to panting after him.

Abstaining from relationships with guys uninterested in commitment, falling in love, and a forever kind of future means putting this decade-long adoration to rest.

"Oh! The Caldwell men are out for a run." Sadie nods toward their retreating forms.

"I'm surprised Garrett made time for a run today. He's always a stickler for his fitness routine, but Jess says he's been too busy lately to go on some of their runs. Is he still spending Sundays in the clinic catching up on all the paperwork and scheduling?" Emma asks.

"Unfortunately. Lisa put in her notice weeks ago, and we haven't found anyone to replace her yet. Well, there's Heidi, but she only lasted a couple of days before Garrett stormed up to her, glared, then pointed at the door. Didn't say a word, just pointed. The poor girl grabbed her bag and never came back."

"You hired Heidi? *Oof*. She was fired from the shoe store a couple of months ago for talking too much, spending too much time on her phone, and throwing a shoe at someone who said they weren't a Machine Gun Kelly fan," Sadie tells us with an amused smirk.

Garrett being forced to work with Heidi puts a delightfully evil smile on my face.

"Oh no, I didn't hire Heidi—Garrett did. God only knows why. Probably desperation." Her head whips around, eyes wide. "Oh, my God. I'm an idiot."

I tip my chin up, silently asking what she means.

"You need a job, Ari. A decently paying day job that allows you to consider your options and plan your dream future while still earning an income. It's perfect!"

"What's perfect?" I ask but I already know, and I need a moment to consider what she's about to offer.

"You working at the clinic. It'll also save us from having to find a suitable replacement. You may have zero medical

office assistant or reception experience, but you are still by far our best candidate.”

“Hey! I worked at that print shop for a while and sometimes had to cover the counter. That’s experience!” Why am I fighting for a job I probably shouldn’t take?

She tips her head at me in disagreement.

“Uh-huh. Well, given your robust experience, the job is yours if you want it! Garrett put me in charge of hiring because he said the process was”—she holds up a hand and starts counting on her fingers—“aggravating, a waste of time, disappointing, and he’s not enough of a people person to put up with interviewing idiots.”

That sounds about right.

“He’ll hate it if you hire me. He hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you. Though, you do seem to get on every one of his nerves. I’ve always been intrigued by that because Garrett is otherwise fairly unflappable. The only time I’ve ever heard him curse was that one time he picked up our mom’s birthday cake, and a cat ran across the street, and the cake ended up decorating the interior of his car. Then there’s the handful of times you’ve taunted or teased him to the point of madness.”

“I have a gift,” I say proudly.

“And I thought *I* annoyed Garrett. Can’t wait to see you work your magic.” Emma sets her chin onto her propped-up fist like she’s waiting for me to teach her my ways.

“That was only because you cried a lot the first few weeks he knew you. Big emotional outbursts make him uncomfortable. He’s kind of emotionally challenged that way. He makes up for it by being stubbornly practical, fiercely loyal, and neurotically responsible.”

“You’re not really selling this to the casual, easygoing, ‘come what may’ girl you just asked to go work with the killjoy doctor.”

“See? That’s the beauty of this. You know exactly how he is. You’ve known him for years. You know how to handle him—maybe even better than I do. You wouldn’t be offended by his gruff, authoritative demeanor, and you’d know what not to say and do because you know what pisses him off. You’ll do great!”

Uncertain, I scrunch my lips together, contemplating the ramifications of this decision.

Garrett and I press each other’s buttons, but it’s never been in a mean way. The magic is in knowing that the growlier he gets with me and the more he has to work to ignore me, the more I know he’s fighting his feelings.

“I’ll take the job.”

I can handle Garrett and his rejection of my presence in his life. This will be good practice. I have to keep it professional, but can still fuck with him a bit. Which will probably torture him a little, and that, in turn, will make me feel a little better. For now.

“Yes! Okay, I think this will be great. And anytime you decide to move on to something else, just let me know so I can start looking for someone else. I know don’t want to work at Caldwell Medical indefinitely.”

“I think . . . I think I’m going to look into starting up my own photography business. I’d actually love that. There are so many places around here that I photographed growing up that would be perfect for photo shoots. I ran into Marg from McKinley Farms, and she has set up a few acres as a wedding and special event venue. I could work with her to be their event photographer. I’m not sure I’d want to work for the paper. Don’t tell Stella that though. But lifestyle, family, and wedding photography would be amazing.”

“Once you come up with your business plan, come into the bank, and I’ll help you get your business accounts set up,” Emma offers.

“I helped my family set up Yoga Tree, and while I don’t manage the books, I can give you a basic rundown of what

you'd need to keep track of," Sadie adds.

"I have no business skills or advice, but I am very excited about your new venture." Lauren gives my hand a squeeze.

"It's settled, then! New job, new plan, new adventure."

She lifts her coffee in a mock toast, and we all follow.

CHAPTER 8



GARRETT

I did it. Not only did I make it through my sister's engagement party filled with the nosy meddlers of Landry and avoided the woman who was the star of the after-party but I also found a match on the least offensive dating app I've been trying.

Serena just turned thirty-three, owns an interior design company in Vaughn, has no pets but likes cats, acknowledges she's a bit antisocial, does Pilates, has a ten-year plan that includes kids, and is open to relocating or commuting. This appears to be a good match as long as she doesn't turn out to be a shitty human being.

"Hey, boss man." I hear as I walk past the reception desk on the way to grab lunch. I hold a hand up in a wave before my steps falter as my brain belatedly places the voice that's greeting me within my own clinic.

I pause and take a calming breath.

Spinning on my heel, I face the front counter. Aria is perched on the receptionist's chair with her hair in a neat bun at the back of her head, but a few soft pieces have escaped in a subtle cascade from her temples down her sharp cheekbones, past her angled jaw, and to her smooth, exposed neck.

"Aria. That's a restricted area for clinic administrative staff only."

"Oh, I'm aware." She winks at me. "Wait. Do you not know that I work here now? Did Chloe not . . . ?" She looks toward Chloe's office.

I storm past the front counter straight to Chloe's door.

I don't bother knocking before I walk in. "Did you hire clinical staff without consulting me?"

She puts down the tablet she was studying and sits back in her chair. "Good morning to you too, brother."

"Why is Aria at the front desk?"

"When Lisa quit, I believe you said, 'I'm putting you in charge of HR and hiring. Dealing with the staff is not one of my strengths.' Then you proceeded to list the many reasons."

I have to consciously stop my teeth from grinding together.

"Hiring friends is not a smart business decision. Considering the nature of the person you've chosen, it makes me wonder if you are at all concerned with the best interests of the clinic or if you are willing to risk it for a friend who seems to create more drama than *The League*."

"Aria just moved back and is looking for something for the next few months while she decides what she wants to do. She's friendly, smart, charismatic, and won't be manipulated or pushed around by patients."

"Does she even have experience? Didn't she work for a soccer team or something?"

"She was a sports photographer for the San Jose Vultures. You know that because we've discussed it before when you said something disparaging about her last boyfriend."

"Was I wrong?"

She purses her lips slightly before answering. "No . . ."

Raising my eyebrows, I give her a tight smile and shrug. "She's on a probationary contract, right?" Her gaze narrows at me, but she stays quiet. "Good. Today was her first and last day. Let her know she's fired and hire someone else."

My sister stands, shoulders set. "No. Aria stays."

"It's *my* medical practice."

“You said it was *ours*. I won’t be firing her, and you can’t fire her without cause. Not because it’s illegal but because it would make you a giant jackass. She stays.”

I glare her down for a few beats, her face unflinching. She strides past me, dismissal evident in her wake. I take a moment before heading back to the front. At lunch I’ll brainstorm a way around this.

As I come around the corner, I mentally prepare for the onslaught of inappropriateness that is Aria.

“Hey, boss. Looking good today. Did I mention that before you stomped off like a toddler? Anyway, that jacket fits *just* right. I bet it keeps your lady patients well *dickstracted* while you do any uncomfortable examinations.”

“Did you just say ‘*dick-stracted*’?”

“No. Noooo. Of course not. I said *distracted*. Your mind is fully in the gutter today. I’ll have to warn your patients so they’re not stunned by your very un-Garrett-like behavior.”

“I would prefer if you kept to basic information only—name, verify their contact information, appointment time.”

“Mmm. I have some preferences too, Doc Caldwell. Sadly, you have never asked about them.”

I stare at her, baffled.

”Oh, come on. You know what I’m implying.” I give her no indication that I know any such thing. “You *know*.”

“I can assure you, I don’t. What I *do* know is, if you are going to be here, even for the very short time you are employed with us, you’ll need to adhere to your duties and maintain a high level of professionalism.”

“Relax, boss. I’ll be a good girl.”

“Doubtful.”

“I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised. Plus, think of all the perks. You’ll get to stare at this face and hear this sweet, melodic voice all day long.”

All fucking day, five days a week. I’ll never survive.

“No. You’re fired. We’ll be hiring someone else.”

“You can’t fire me. I made sure before I took the job.” Her smug satisfaction makes me wonder if she’s bullshitting me or not.

“Chloe!” I bark, knowing this is *not* going to work out. I need to talk some sense into my sister. I think she might be trying to punish me.

I hear the clicking of Aria’s heels following me to the first exam room. She leans against the wall as I impatiently wait outside the room Chloe’s currently in.

“Nurse Chloe is with Mrs. Neidermeier right now. She’s sure she has a goiter. Fern from the floral shop dropped her off and disagreed.”

“It’s not just my old lady jowls!” shouts Mrs. Neidermeier from inside the room.

The door bursts open and Chloe’s head pops out. “Um, guys. Can you *not* stand out here, where we can clearly hear you, and talk about my patient? Thanks.” She goes to close the door, but I stick my hand out to stop it.

“This isn’t going to work for me,” I growl softly under my breath so Mrs. Neidermeier doesn’t hear me.

“Garrett.” She sighs and puts a hand on my shoulder. It’s not often I cause a scene at work, or elsewhere really, so Chloe must know how serious I am. “Pull up your big boy pants, and get over it.” Shock has my jaw dropping. “Give her a chance, okay? Just for a few weeks, then we can address any concerns you have.”

She shuts the door in my face.

“Yeah, boss. Give me a chance.” She lowers her voice. “Since you seem disinclined to acknowledge it, let’s just get this out of the way—our mouths fucked, no big deal.” I blink at her, unable to voice a single word in response to her description of our make-out session in my car. “Since I’m not what you’re looking for and you’re only somewhat attracted to me, it shouldn’t matter to you, right?” She sounds so casual that I almost believe she’s not pissed at me. Lifting off the wall

she was leaning against, she steps closer to me. “Are you heading out for lunch soon, boss?” Her tone is smug, knowing she’s won this round.

“Yes. I’ll be back at one o’clock.”

“Great. I’ll take a chicken club on a cheese croissant from the Sandwich Shop. No pickles. If you need anything, I’ll be at my desk, but remember it’s a restricted area, so you can just drop off my sandwich on the corner of the desk when you return. Thanks, Doc.”

She spins, and the sound of her heels echoes through the hallway. Her pencil skirt has my eyes dropping to her ass and the slit that’s begging for me to tear the damn thing in half.

I’m not going to make it a few weeks. I may not even make it a few hours.

CHAPTER 9



GARRETT

I left work early and decided to take in a hot yoga class before heading home. Saying I was a little tense was underplaying the state I was in. It's only been mere weeks, and the carefully planned system I developed to keep myself in check at work has failed miserably.

My AirPods are in, towel slung over a bare shoulder, gym shorts hanging low on my hips, and water bottle in hand when I arrive ten minutes early for the class, practically twitching in anticipation.

My knee bounces uncontrollably, and I drop my head back against the lockers. The bench shakes as someone else sits down. I can feel the heat of someone's body right next to mine.

There were only two guys in here when I arrived. Why is someone sitting that close to me?

I crack an eye open and scope out the personal bubble violator.

Brown hair, jacked arms, and an air of obnoxious charm swarm my senses.

Sean. Fucking great.

"Hey, coz. You look . . ."

"Like you should leave me alone? Correct." I shift over half a foot and leave my music on, wanting to wait in peace until it's time for the class to start.

“I was going to say enraged and tense as hell. Want to talk about it before we sweat it out in there?”

“No.”

“Rough day at work?”

I shoot him some side-eye and remain silent.

“Oh. Right. I know what this is about.” My eyebrow quirks a fraction of an inch, curious if he actually does know. “You’re jealous. Look, Chloe might be your baby sister and a decade younger than your old ass, but she’s in love and deliriously happy. She deserves all the good shit that comes her way. While that might make you have some uncomfortable feelings about your own somewhat drab lifestyle, let’s not take away from her wedding and the beautiful life she’s planning with the guy she loves.”

My head swivels toward him and I take the earbuds out. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You. Don’t be all Growly Garrett at Chloe because you’re feeling shitty about your own love life. I saw the way you were at her engagement party, and you’ve been a bit of a miserable prick ever since. The League says you won’t even let them set you up anymore. You can’t just give up and then do nothing about the loneliness. It eats at you all the same, trust me.”

“Please stop.” Calling me by the youthful nickname Chloe gave me when she was a teenager—likely created by her sexy best friend—will not reduce my stress.

Fuck. I’m thinking about Aria again. I’m a complete wreck. It wasn’t until she came home from college one year with some prick from school that I realized my feelings for her were nowhere near brother-like concern.

“Nope. We’re going to get this all out, and you’re going to find a way to be happy for Chloe and Hayden while working on yourself a little.”

I have yet to become the recipient of Sean’s ‘get your shit together’ speeches, but I guess today is my lucky day.

“I *am* happy for Chloe. My current mood has nothing to do with her.” I pause and my face tightens slightly. “Mostly . . .”

“Mostly?”

“She’s made some hiring choices at the clinic that I didn’t approve of, and she refuses to fix the problem.”

“The problem?”

“Yes. The staffing problem.”

Sean’s eyes dart to the side, and he settles back against the locker, deep in thought like he’s doing some mental calculus.

“This is about Aria?” he asks. My breath stalls and I release it slowly, neither confirming nor denying. “Oh, holy shit.” He lets out a sharp laugh. “Well, this conversation took an unexpected but fucking delightful turn.” The smile that spreads across his face probably means bad things for me.

“Don’t act like you know something.”

His grin widens. Sean stands slowly in some kind of dramatic, triumphant show and slaps a hand onto my shoulder. The idiot is staring into my eyes with a ridiculous smirk on his face, and I haven’t a clue what’s going on. He gives two firm taps to my shoulder and then walks out of the change room.

Somehow, somehow, that’s going to come back around, and the thought only winds me up more.

I push the door to the changing room open a little harder than necessary as I head to the studio.

Keeping my head down, I set up my mat, water, and towel at the back of the room, away from where I see Sean trying to sweet-talk our yoga instructor. She pushes him lightly, guiding him to his spot.

“Oh, come on, Sadie. Let me lead the class with you today. Or do you do private one-on-one sessions?”

“You know the answer to that. You’ve asked it dozens of times.”

“Yet it’s never the answer I’m looking for.”

She turns from him and moves to the front. “Alright, class. Let’s get into a seated position and start with our breathing. After a few sun salutations, we’ll be focusing on core engagement today.”

Groans echo throughout the room, knowing what Sadie’s core days are like. She just beams her teacher’s smile at everyone and guides us to get into our poses for breathing.

Someone sneaks into the room, and there’s some shuffling as they take their place somewhere at the front by the sounds of it.

The heat, breathing, and familiar music have my body relaxing almost immediately.

“Let’s head straight into our sun salutations,” Sadie directs.

And that’s when the whole class goes to shit.

Standing in front of me and slightly to the right is the reason I needed this outlet.

My biggest temptation and intermittent pain in the ass for most of my adult life is standing there, raising her arms over her head, chest out, firm legs held strong, ass looking fucking entrancing.

I groan, and she slyly turns to look over her shoulder, giving me a sultry wink and giggle.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Choked laughter sounds from somewhere on the opposite side of the room.

“Sean. This is a time to acclimate and meditate.”

“Sorry, sweets,” he says, laughter still evident in his voice.

Alright, so he either knows *something* or just finds amusement in my misery. With Sean it could go either way.

I focus on my poses and how warm my body is getting, how loose it’s starting to feel.

But I swear to God, she’s holding those bent-over exhale poses for a few extra seconds on purpose. By the time we get

to the third downward dog, I'm dripping with sweat and having to concentrate on hiding my visceral reaction to her.

I get through the next fifteen minutes of poses by keeping my eyes closed for most of it.

However, it doesn't change the fact that I have a front-row seat to her glistening, limber, and dangerously curvy body. How is she so fucking soft in all the right places while still flaunting a firm, lithe figure?

Aria takes a sip of her water during a short break, chest heaving slightly. As if she can feel my gaze on her in that lilac-colored sports bra and booty-molding spandex shorts so short they should be illegal to wear in public.

Her eyes wander over to me, and she gives me the same sweeping appraisal I just gave her. My body flexes involuntarily under the heat of her gaze. When she's done, she takes a shuddering breath, bites her lip while taking a second look, and I swear she mouths, "Nice," before slowly licking her bottom lip and twisting in the pose to switch sides.

Christ. Keep it together, man.

You don't eat processed foods, you work out six days a week, you are capable of making tough life-and-death decisions, and you have a tight rein on your emotions and your words. You can do—

"We are moving into a fun pose for the last bit of class today. I'm going to have you all pair up with a spotter for our wheel pose. You'll alternate attempting the pose and assisting."

"I choose Sadie!"

"No, Sean. Choose a member of the class, please. We have an even number today."

Sean mumbles some kind of disapproval, but my focus has already switched to the woman moving toward me, her eyes are filled with intent.

No. I've made it nearly an hour of watching her stretch and flex and bend. I will not survive touching her or having her

touch me.

Bail.

The logical part of my brain makes a short but compelling point.

Don't you want to feel her hands on your body again? Don't you want to get your hands on hers? Look. At. Her.

The hormonal part of my body is a bastard.

“Hey, boss. Want to be partners? I’ll be gentle, promise.” She steps close, reaching for my hand and placing it on her bare waist.

Fuck.

I whip around, snatch my water bottle and towel off the ground, and head to the doors.

“Garrett, class isn’t over. We don’t open the doors during hot classes unless there’s an—”

“Emergency! I have a medical emergency,” I blurt without turning around.

“Oh, I hope everything is—”

I burst through the door, grab my bag from the changing room, and get the hell out of this unexpected form of torture.

Aria works at the clinic and will figure out rather easily that there was no medical emergency, and Sean never minds his own damn business, so he’ll likely have the truth before I even wake up tomorrow morning.

I need to talk to Aria so she knows we need to keep our lives separate—professional.

I’m her boss. She can’t flirt with me and taunt me inappropriately anymore. She can’t or she’ll lose her job. Sexual harassment is a fireable offense.

Even Chloe can’t argue with that.

Then I can get back to my regular life—no chaos, no temptations, no rule breaking, no morally gray areas, no locking myself down or forcing myself to be good. I’ll

continue using dating apps and find someone appropriate, both in age and compatibility.

My phone vibrates, and I fully expect to see a message from Sean calling me out on the fake emergency since class ended a while ago now.

It's Serena.

I was supposed to meet her in Vaughn an hour ago.

How did I forget about our date?

I'm a goddamn mess, that's how.

CHAPTER 10



ARIA

I've been having a lot of fun at work. Maybe too much fun. I get to chat with all my favorite Landry people, reconnect with friends I haven't seen in years, and I get the scoop on all the things happening in town—people apparently love telling receptionists everyone's business.

I also get to do all of this in front of Garrett, and sometimes I even draw him into the drama. He scowls at me every time. It's almost too easy to rile him up. If he's going to pretend my presence is a blight on his life, I'm going to earn his disdain.

There's just one small problem. Sitting at the front desk and hearing the deep timbre of his voice as he greets and cares for his patients has been bad for me. So bad.

"Did you update Mrs. Odenthal's file? She's moving to the nursing home in Santa Rosa. I'll need you to send a copy over to her new doctor there."

"Yes, sir." I nod and grab the paperwork from him.

"Don't start." What the fuck did I do now?

"What? I didn't even sass you that time."

He leans one hip against my desk, and I take a quick peek at the way his slacks pull against his thighs.

"It was implied in your tone."

"No, it wasn't. There was no tone. I even said sir."

"Exactly."

I throw my hands up and spin my chair back around. That'll teach me to try being pleasant and professional.

“Aria, can you call the Langleys and schedule them to bring in the twins? I want to do a follow-up,” Chloe asks me, popping her head around the corner.

“Sure thing, babe. Oh, I have a bit of news. Remember when I said I spoke to Sheila at the market the other day? She told me that—” A throat clears behind me. “I mean, when I was speaking to *Mrs. Langley* at the market, she informed me that she has Fridays off, so I'll see if I can make some space for her this week. The rest of the news I will tell you in the staff room later.” She winks at me and calls her next patient.

“Aria.”

Oh, he's still standing there.

“Yes, boss man?” I add a little sauciness to my tone. Not intentionally, it just happened.

He huffs and walks off. Guess he's done with me. Story of my life.

After I send off some requisition forms and prescription refills, I check the time and decide I should go for a short break before appointments start again this afternoon. As I'm getting up from my chair, a brown bag with a Taps stamp on the front lands in front of me.

“You missed lunch.”

My eyes wander from his large, strong hands to his surprisingly sincere face.

“Thank you?” He tilts his head at me. “I mean, thank you,” I say, correcting my inflection. “I lost track of time and wanted to finish a few things while it was quiet.”

He hums at me, then his eyes travel down my body a moment so brief I wonder if it actually happened before he walks away.

“Want to eat lunch with me? I was going to pop into the staff room.” I put the bell on the front desk, so if anyone

shows up, I can hurry back. “Oh, I have some interesting information for you!”

“No gossip at work, Aria.” He doesn’t even turn around as he lectures me.

“It’s not gossip. It’s technically science. You like science.”

We stop at the staff room door, but he doesn’t enter. I take one step inside, so I’m technically in the staff room on my break when I begin my non-clinic chitchat.

“Did you know that echidnas have a four-headed penis?” His gaze darts straight to me, and his brow furrows. “They only use two at once though. Which I was oddly disappointed by. Sawyer is full of interesting facts. See? This is another reason you should get out and make more friends. You can’t rely on Taylor and me as your only sources of socialization.”

“Why would you have—?” He pauses to collect himself. I press my lips together, trying hard not to laugh. “How did you come to discuss penile facts with Sawyer?”

“We were talking about the weirdest animals he’s ever worked on. One thing led to another, and you know how it is. Penises eventually came up.” I actually just asked him for weird animal facts, and he had them aplenty. “If you don’t want to talk about four-headed penises, you can tell me about Judy’s appointment. I could hear her telling you about her sex drive issues and wanting advice, but I couldn’t hear your answer. It’s been killing me!”

See? We can do this. We can be friendly coworkers who don’t think about ripping each other’s clothes off.

He turns around and starts back down the hallway to his office. I follow, waiting for a response, but he doesn’t say anything.

“I make it a point not to share patient information. That falls under the category of gossip, which has no place in a medical clinic.”

Stone cold.

Accurate, yes, but cold.

“Right. Fine. I just didn’t think a staff consultation pertaining to someone’s medical issues as a means in aiding the patient with their maladies was against any professional code of conduct.”

“You have something to contribute in resolving her vaginal secretion issue? Or the increased occurrences of yeast infections? I can’t wait to hear your recommendation.”

Now he’s just being an asshole.

“Maybe not medical. But I would suggest water-based lubricant since that would help with the secretion issue. But let’s not use that term—it’s disgusting. I’d also recommend they spice it up in the bedroom. I wonder if they’ve tried sex toys yet because those can really stimulate areas that Judy’s husband—”

“Alright. You’ve made your point, but I like to focus on treating her medically relevant issues. I will not be prescribing sex toys to my patients.”

“Why not? At least list it as an option. You don’t have to send them your favorites or show them how to use them. Though you’d probably want to practice a little with them before administering expert advice, but that’s neither here nor there.”

“I have plenty of— You know what? No, never mind. This is why I planned on spending my lunch break in my office.”

“Because you anticipated a discussion about sex toys? Not because you’d already eaten or were too busy?”

“That too.”

I roll my eyes at his back.

“Good talk, Doc. Thanks for the sandwich and condescension. You’re lucky you’re pretty to look at.”

I watch him walk to his office and stare at his ass unashamedly this time.

“Stop it.”

I spin to turn into the staff room. “What?” I ask, not looking at him.

“You know what.” I eventually look up, and he’s giving me that disapproving glare again. I lift my chin and leave him to his glaring.



I hear a door click closed down the hallway and know it must be Garrett since the physician assistants and nurses, including Chloe, have already left for the day.

“Good. You’re still here. We’re coming in early tomorrow to do supply inventory. Thought I should remind you before you leave for the day.”

I glance around, confused. “Uh, okay. Have a great time. Just don’t mess up my desk area.” I look down at the coffee cup stain, Post-its, and smattering of loose pens, and cringe. I’m not a slob or anything, but my workspace looks a bit disastrous. I’ve brought my A game to this job even though I’m not the most organized individual, which means I’ve put some systems in place to help me stay on top of everything. Sticky notes and coffee are the core elements of my system.

“It looks like you’ve got that well under control.”

“I have a system.” He raises his eyebrows in mock disbelief.

“So, I’ll see you at seven tomorrow morning. Don’t be late and drink your coffee before you get here. No food or beverages are permitted in the supply room.”

An incredulous giggle leaves me—the kind that builds into a full belly laugh. “I’m not coming in here at seven o’clock.”

“Yes, you are. Monthly inventory is part of your job. I will show you how to do it this month, but after that, you’ll be expected to do it on your own.”

“Chloe never said I’d have to come in early. She knows my feelings on waking before the sun.”

“The sun rises well before seven.” I open my mouth to argue, but he holds up a hand. “I don’t want to debate this. It’s either early tomorrow morning or later this evening.”

“Evening. Easy decision.”

He scrubs a hand down his face like I’ve seen him do many times over the last week and a half. He thinks *I’m* frustrating *him*. I’m not the one who dropped a last-minute “come in at the butt crack of dawn” request.

“Fine. Be here at nine. Not five after. And it doesn’t count if you can see the clinic at nine o’clock. You actually have to be in here and ready to start work at nine.”

“Judgy,” I snark.

“If I’m having to spend my evening here instead of . . . being out with people just because you’re not a morning person, I’m going to have some feelings about it. Get over it.”

“Oh, feelings? That’s new for you. Tell me about these feelings—all your deep, dark, naughty feelings.”

His eye twitches right before he turns, mumbling, “Chloe should have to do this shit.” His hand smacks the front door as he pushes out of the clinic.

“Sad to see you go but love to watch you leave, Doc!” I shout at his back. He stops, glances back at me, shakes his head, then keeps going.

Technically, I was done with work ten minutes ago, so it’s not an inappropriate employee-employer interaction. Because it’s not during work hours.

That’s how it works, right?

CHAPTER 11



GARRETT

*M*y date was surprisingly pleasant. She was well put together, a little quiet and serious, but also smart and cute. She carried a conversation well and didn't talk incessantly about herself or any of her pets. Her questions were a suitable mix of personal and getting-to-know-you small talk. She chewed with her mouth closed, didn't ask me any medical questions, and insisted on splitting the check.

She was the best date candidate I'd had in a long time. No red flags or glaringly mismatched personality traits.

Yet I can't remember her name, what she does for a living, or much else about her after spending nearly two hours together. What has me so distracted that I'd mostly ignore a near-perfect potential girlfriend?

Aria.

Her sinful yet work-appropriate skirts. Her sassy mouth and fucking gorgeous eyes sparkle at me every goddamn day. She's a menace, and the havoc she wreaks is now infiltrating every aspect of my life.

All through the date, I fixated on the knowledge that in just a few short hours, I'd be stuck in close quarters with a woman who tempts me like no other. A woman I've successfully avoided for years.

Most people think it's because she makes me uncomfortable, or that I don't like her, or even that I'm a cold, emotionless asshole. Maybe it's a little bit of the latter, but mostly it's because everyone knows I wouldn't go there—

shouldn't go there. While the age difference doesn't feel as big now, she's still my sister's best friend, and you don't mess with that.

Chloe would hand me my ass. My sister loves me, but I know for a fact she thinks I'd be the worst thing to happen to her friend.

But this situation of ours is now messing with my head, my love life, and my career. A conversation is needed and will happen tonight after we finish the inventory.

Aria pulls to a stop in the parking spot beside me with a sharp screech of tires on asphalt. It's exactly nine o'clock. Little Minx barely made it on time.

She flies out of her piece of shit car, drops her bag, and scrambles to pick it up, flashing me her heart-shaped backside in shorts so tiny the bottoms of her ass cheeks peek out. I suppress a groan and get out of my Audi, mentally fortifying my resistance.

"I'm on time! Technically, I'm still on time until it turns 9:01. Plus, you're not in the building yet either."

I unlock the clinic door and ignore her rationalizations. Holding it open, I gesture for her to go in.

"Thank you, sir." She tips her head at me and practically skips inside, her floral scent wafting behind her as I follow her in. It smells sweeter tonight, with a hint of spice. The fact that I'm noticing disappoints me. My resistance didn't even last a minute.

I turn on the lights and grab the tablet so we can get started on the inventory list. I show her how to use the program, what to check for, and what reports she'll need to make copies of. Then we move to the tiny supply room, where I'm closed in with a woman who is like a fluttering pixie with constant movements—her elbow brushing my arm, her ass against my hip, her scent fucking everywhere.

I can't *not* breathe or move, so I'm fucked for the next hour.

She reaches up to grab the gauze pads bin to count them. Her shorts ride up as her ass pushes out.

“Mrs. Henderson was saying you had a date tonight.” I say nothing, but she looks back and easily reads my expression. “How’d that go?”

I clear my throat. “Let’s just focus on the inventory. Ask any questions you have now because you’ll be on your own next month.”

“Oof. It went that badly, huh?” she asks, not bothering to turn around.

“It didn’t go badly. It was fine. Now let’s—”

“Fine, huh? Were you nice? Complimented her hair, her outfit, asked her personal questions? Did you listen to her? Like really listen, not just do that thing some guys do where you know they’re waiting for you to stop talking so they can either talk more about themselves or make a move?”

Did she think I was that incompetent of a date? “I know how to date, Aria. Of course I was nice and listened to her.” Mostly.

She grimaces and tilts her head to one side, her expression doubtful. “Were you though?”

“Yes! Jesus.”

“Yeah, you seem to be in a great mood. Your vibe is very ‘nice, charming man I’d like to spend all my time with.’” Her eyes are wide, and her tone is teeming with sarcasm.

“It might have gone better if I hadn’t had to leave early.” I might be bending the truth to make a point, but I couldn’t stop the words from leaving my mouth.

She raises one arched eyebrow at me. For the next ten minutes, Aria is professional to the point where it’s starting to chafe a bit. Better this than her hitting on me or asking more probing questions.

Chloe is going to take all of the difficult patient cases for the entire month for bailing on inventory. Just because she had

to leave to coach T-ball doesn't absolve her of her other responsibilities.

“If there are any discrepancies, cross-check your list and the order form and make a note of anything not accounted for. Everything is then entered into the inventory software program, and you can reorder the supplies that are low online through McLeeson Medical Supplies.”

“Yes, I see that here on this itemized Inventory Procedure Checklist.”

I frown at her. “You have complaints about how I've made your job easier?”

She gasps. “I would *never*.”

“Why must you be so infuriating?”

“I don't think you find me infuriating. I think you find me captivating! Enthralling! And it drives you to sweet, sweet madness.” She looks up in a dramatically dreamy way that nearly has me reaching for her.

I laugh, a dark laugh that I know she'll probably take the wrong way. She's right but I'll never admit it.

“Look, I know you wanted me to stay away from you, and then I ended up working with you every day. You have to admit, I've toned the teasing and flirting *way* down. Yet you still treat me like I'm an annoying gnat, and I'm tired of getting swatted at. I'm pretty sure even Chloe tries to keep us apart to maintain the peace. She thinks we hate each other.”

“I don't hate you. I just hated how easily you riled me up. I never understood why you did it.”

She pauses for a while, seemingly collecting her thoughts. “When I was having a shitty day in college, I'd send you a message or post on your social media, and just your simple, ‘Aria, no’ or ‘Stop it, Minx’ was enough to make me smile. It was a gamble though, because some days you just ignored me, and then I'd have disappointment to deal with in addition to my crappy mood.”

I just stare at her as she reveals a little part of our past I never knew. One that softens me a little in a way that makes me nervous.

“Our history and remnants of past feelings have me slipping into less than professional behavior occasionally. I’m not used to not messing around with you.”

“Let’s just make sure it stays in the past or working together is going to be impossible.” It already feels impossible.

“No promises. Maybe I’ll have my way with you in this tiny storage room.”

“Aria, no.”

Her laughter fills the small space. “See, like that. Years ago, that would have made my day. Hits a little differently now, but I’m working on making better decisions, so I’ll behave. It’s just been fun working here and pushing your buttons in a new way. Consider it a little bit of payback for making me feel like I’m a bad kisser and an appalling choice for a bed companion.”

“You’re not appalling.” I want to say more, but I can’t—not without revealing too much.

She chuckles. “Oh, good. Still not good enough though, right?”

“It’s not about that, Aria.”

Don’t tell her that you crave her, that you think about her when you’re with other women. Keep it locked up tight like you always do.

“It’s okay, I get it.” She nods, straightens her shoulders, and forces a smile. “I’ll be more professional from now on. You’d actually be proud of me. I’ve been using the calendar app on my phone, setting reminders, and organizing my life. It’s taken some getting used to, but I need to turn things around. Not just personally either. I, uh, have been working on starting up my own lifestyle and family photography business called ClickPix Photography.”

My gaze swings back to hers, no longer feeling the need to avoid her stare. “That’s . . . that’s great, Aria. I think you’d be great at that. The business end might be a challenge at first, but you have the passion and talent.”

“I think so too.” Her eyes sparkle in that way I know too well. “Maybe I could get you to do a shoot for me?”

I shift uncomfortably. “Like for the clinic? Headshots or something?”

“No, I was thinking more of a lifestyle shoot. Outdoors, maybe on the hiking path behind your house? I’d want you looking casual. Jeans, an unbuttoned plaid shirt, hair mussed . . . lumber sexual, you know?”

Lumber sexual?

“Uhh . . .”

“I’m fucking with you, Doc. Last time, promise.” The sound of her sweet laughter coaxes a smile out of me. She stops laughing and just stares at me, her gaze on my mouth.

She clears her throat before adding, “I would love to do a session with your family though. You guys would be perfect for some photos I want to take out at the national park.”

“I’m sure my mom and Emma would enjoy that. The rest of us wouldn’t mind either.”

“Great. Okay, let’s get back to it so you can get on with your night.” She holds out a hand. “Friends?”

“Coworkers?” I suggest.

“Both,” she says firmly.

I take her hand, and a tingle of heat creeps up my arm, invading my body. Just from the heat of her palm and the softness of her touch.

If I ever got my hands on her again, it would be disastrous. And perfect. I can feel it.

“Fine. Subject to a one-month probationary period.”

She tries to hide her smile behind pursed lips, but I can see it in her cheekbones.

“Acceptable, Dr. Caldwell.”

“See you tomorrow, Ms. Davenport.”

She walks through the door I’ve opened for her but spins around quickly, smacking straight into me, her hands landing on my chest to steady herself.

“Oops, sorry. I was just going to . . .” She pushes herself off me a little but doesn’t seem to get far. Her eyes come up to mine, and I stare for a moment before a breath leaves her mouth in a rush, drawing my attention to it. She clears her throat, eyes fluttering down to look at my chest before giving another firm press.

My arm is wrapped around her. How in the hell did that happen? She’s trying to back up, but I have her locked in place against me.

“Sorry. You good?”

Her face heats, and the rarity of her coyness makes me pause.

“I was just going to ask if we could skip the titles and just use our names. Except when I call you Doc. Or would that go against the employer/employee part of our relation—er, friendship?”

“Do you always overthink things, Aria?”

“Only some things.”

“I see.”

“But I think you answered my question anyway.” She takes a few more steps back. “Good night, Doc.”

“Good night, Aria.”

I step over to the driver’s side of my vehicle, waiting to make sure her car starts before I get into mine and head home.

She puts down the window, gives me an awkward wave before turning the ignition. It makes its usual god-awful

squealing sound.

“Garrett?” she calls over the noise.

“Yeah?”

“You heading back to your date? I feel bad you had to cut your night short with your potential dream lady.” She’s turned fully toward me, hands gripping the door, wearing a concerned look on her face.

I look down at the keys in my hand, determining how honest I should be with her.

“No. I’m going home.”

She nods, but that worried wrinkle to her brow lessens. “Sorry this messed up your night.”

“You didn’t. I’m not sure she can be much of a dream woman if I can’t remember her name without consulting that ridiculous dating app on my phone.”

Her head tips back, and she lets out a loud bark of a laugh. After a few moments, she bites her lower lip right before a fake frown turns those plush lips downward. “No. Sadly, I think that’s probably not a good sign.”

She leans back into her seat and puts her death trap into reverse. I get my phone out to text Hayden and Sean to see who can have a look at her vehicle sometime this week.

Then I open the dating app and cancel my second date with Marissa.

CHAPTER 12



ARIA

Living the life of intentional organization and planning is exhausting. At first anyway. I've fallen into better habits and have been surprisingly on time and feeling more accomplished. Which is a good thing because I get my waywardness from my mom, and living with her these past few weeks has been enlightening.

Candi Davenport is on a whole different level of free spirit and following her whims. The fact that her business is doing well is a shock now that I know what all goes into running such an operation. Though, that could be due to her staff. She only works there part-time now and often takes off on random days, usually because she met someone or the ocean was calling to her or she needed to try something new.

I come by my delightful hot-mess syndrome honestly. But I see it now—the things that probably drive other people insane about me. I don't make plans in advance, I'm often late, and my day can be diverted in a moment with a single sentence from a friend or acquaintance. I get caught up chatting with people when I'm out and often bring new friends to events, even if those new friends are technically strangers.

I don't want to invite that kind of drama or potential problems into my life anymore. Which means I need to become more aware of my shortcomings and the things that tend to thwart my best efforts.

One of those things was the lack of planning.

The other was blindly seeking out love and fun. I already know where it tends to lead me. Sometimes, tons of excitement and interesting stories to tell. Other times, danger, heartache, and disappointment. However, I don't want to become someone who avoids all experiences and ignores her desires in order to completely avoid risk. There are just smarter ways to go about it.

“Aria. Can you call Mrs. Richardson and have her book an appointment to go over her test results, please?” Garrett asks.

“Sure. Oh, and you have a bleeder in Room Two. I had Annette take him in and get him set up for you. It's Sean, and he was swearing up a storm when he arrived. He said he cut his hand on something, but I didn't get much more out of him.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

I nod and pick up the phone to call Mrs. Richardson, but the phone is yanked from my hand.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Chloe!”

She grabs the chair on the other side of the desk and peers over the counter at the waiting area before lowering her voice. “You and Garrett are getting along. He's being . . . nice—polite, even. I haven't seen him like this in a while. I can't tell if it's a good thing or not. What happened when you two did inventory last week? Did you threaten him or something?”

I chuckle. “I'm not a violent person, Chlo. We just came to an understanding.”

“That you two would act oddly polite to each other? You didn't say anything when he wore those really tight pants that get the rest of the ladies in a bit of a tizzy. Oh, and yesterday, he rolled up his shirt sleeves *and* undid the top couple of buttons on his dress shirt and . . . nothing. Since when do I have to be the one who calls him on his oblivious swagger?”

I have to suppress a delightful hum at the memory of those pants. God, that man has a beautiful ass and intense thighs. When did thighs become a turn-on for me?

Chloe interrupts my thigh thoughts. “I’m so confused. It’s not like you not to pounce when the opportunity strikes. You flirted with John when he came in to book his yearly physical, and the guy is seventy-six years old, Ari.”

“Teasing your brother and gawking at him like the fine piece of meat he is would not be appropriate given my position at the clinic. Plus, my wiles are wasted on a man like Garrett. He doesn’t appreciate it, and I’m not sure he even notices anymore. I’m like white noise.”

“Well, I’m glad. Garrett avoiding you like he has in the past would have become tedious in a town this small, let alone with you two working together.” She smiles at me, happy with this turn of events. I’m sure she was expecting the worst. “So, how’s the photography business plan shaping up?”

“Great, actually. I’ve met with Sadie and she’s shared some advice. Yoga and photography are very different businesses, but she got me set up with some basic things to look into. I’m hoping to get officially up and running in a couple of months. I already have most of the equipment I’ll need, but there’s still the bookkeeping, website, and small business aspects to set up.”

“That’s so exciting. Let’s meet at Taps tonight, and we can go over anything you might need help with. I bet Jess would be able to do your website.”

“That sounds great. Let’s have Emma bring him along, and he can do his computer-whiz thing while we chat.”

“Absolutely. I’ll text Emma.” She squeezes my shoulder. “When Kinsley and Hayden get here for their appointment, send them straight back, okay?”

“Will do.”

“They’re my last appointment today, so I’ll be leaving with them. Garrett is running a little behind, so if you need to leave, just let him know because he’ll have to lock up.”

I nod and pick the phone back up to call Mrs. Richardson.



Garrett's last appointment is taking a while, and I imagine that's because it's his cousin, and the man came in here practically roaring in anger. Someone at the shop left out some kind of equipment that caused his accident. Working hands are kind of important to mechanics, and Sean was not pleased about having to come in for stitches.

I've cleaned my desk twice, so I move along to the waiting room and start rearranging the chairs.

Mid-pull, two hands grab the other side of the chair, plucking it out of my hands. "You don't need to be moving furniture, Aria," Garrett's rough, deep voice rumbles at me.

"I know. I just thought if I faced them toward each other, they'd talk and keep each other company while they waited."

He frowns at me but continues to help.

"I'd help but I've been gravely injured," Sean speaks up from across the room, sitting in one of the chairs Garrett just moved.

"Gravely? It was five stitches, and you stopped bleeding twenty minutes ago."

"Tell that to the front seat of my truck. It looks like a murder scene."

I laugh and head over to him, leaving Garrett to move the last chair. "Did he, at least, give you the good pain meds?"

Sean scoffs. "No. I asked repeatedly. He just numbed the area and told me to take whatever over-the-counter pain pills I had at home. I thought having a doctor in the family would benefit me in some way. Still waiting on that."

"You didn't have to go to the emergency room, and I stayed late to stitch you up. You're welcome."

Sean stands with a grin on his face, striding right over to Garrett.

“Oh, Jesus,” Garrett mutters, knowing what’s coming. I watch to find out because anything could happen when it involves Sean.

The most charismatic of all the Caldwell family members wraps the most reserved one in a huge hug, lifting him a few inches off the ground.

“Thanks, buddy.”

“Your relinquishing of my body is thanks enough.” He thumps an open hand on Sean’s back a few times.

Garrett’s cousin is several inches shorter than him, but he’s built like a brick house.

Sean turns to me and I hold out my arms, totally open to hugs anytime someone wants to give or receive one. Hugs are my jam. “I helped you too, Sean. I handed you all that gauze and then cleaned your blood from the front counter. Where’s my love?”

“Yes, ma’am. Don’t have to ask me twice.”

“Sean,” Garrett barks a mere second before I’m scooped up into big, strong arms.

My feet dangle from the ground, and I’m swung in a circle. Laughter falls from my lips as I hold on. He pauses and gives me a quick, final squeeze before easing me back down.

“Don’t touch my staff, Sean.”

“She asked for a hug. I’m not going to say no.” Sean turns to talk to a scowling Garrett. “Unlike some people I know,” he mumbles.

“Well, I’m off to go fire someone. Aria, do you still want to meet up later this month? I should be free that Thursday night. I’ve been meaning to check a few more town events off my list, and this one is right at the top. I’ll be glad to have you accompany me. Maybe I won’t get into as much trouble with you on my arm.”

“You’re going on a date?” Garrett’s tone is low and tight.

If that was jealousy in his tone, I might allow myself a moment of gleeful celebration for this long-awaited achievement.

Sean smirks at Garrett, letting the moment go on for an awkward amount of time.

“No. We are just keeping each other company at an event we both want to attend.” There’s no way I’m telling him where we’re going because he might spy or ruin the fun.

Sean heads out and I pack my things, keeping my eyes off the man locking up the front door. His sleeves are up again. Chloe and I both have an affliction for strong, manly forearms, and while she may not acknowledge this, her brother’s are a damn spectacle of prime forearm eye candy. I wonder if he’s ever considered getting tattoos. I laugh, thinking about Garrett with a tattoo. I have trouble imagining it, but it’s fun just the same.

I’ve gotten very good at avoiding eye contact, not staring at the way he fills out his professional attire, and keeping my thoughts and comments to myself this week. I practically broke out in a sweat from the effort I exerted. It goes against my nature.

It’s for the best though. Maybe it’s even helped me squash some of those naughty, obsessive, crush-like feelings that still linger.

Movement catches my eye, and I gaze up subtly to ensure I don’t look directly at Garrett. But he’s leaning over the raised counter of the front desk, forearms on display, jaw locked up tight, and fire in his eyes.

I looked for too long.

My gaze goes to his shoulders, then skims along down to his biceps. He’s not the bodybuilder type, but he has lean, strong muscles and likely the lowest body fat of anyone I’ve ever seen. In person anyway. I mean, can you even consider yourself a single, thirsty, heterosexual woman if you don’t follow at least a few gym rat accounts on TikTok?

The brawny arms in front of me and the glower in his eyes have my insides quivering in a way no body-obsessed gym rat ever could.

Shit. Now I've really been staring for too long.

A lock of his hair falls in front of his eyes. He needs a haircut. I can't imagine Garrett intentionally growing his hair out. I should book him an appointment with one of the ladies at Mom's salon.

But how do I offer without it coming across that I've noticed he needs a haircut and that I'd like nothing more than to be the one to run my fingers through his hair?

You don't! Settle your shit down.

"Did you need anything else before I head out?"

His eyes search my face expectantly.

"Did I forget to do something? Mess something up?"

His gaze narrows and he grumbles something indecipherable.

"Okay . . ." I drag out. "I'll head out then. Unless you need something else?" He keeps staring. This time his gaze wanders a little farther south. What the hell is going on? "Alright, well, good night, boss."

He says nothing, but I can hear him following me.

I reach the back door leading to the parking lot and my car, which now purrs like a content kitten. My hand barely grazes the door before I'm yanked back by my elbow, Garrett's warm hand firm but gentle as my back meets the wall.

"Enough." He cages me in, pressing his hands to the wall on either side of my head, arms locked, creating a delightful up-close display of what I was trying to sneak glances of all week.

"Enough what?" I raise my chin to look directly into his eyes.

He unlocks those arms barring my exit and dips his head, grazing my cheek as he whispers, "You know." Then he pulls

back slightly to look into my eyes.

My breathing falters. “I really don’t.”

“I don’t know why, but this professional, polite crap is driving me crazy.”

“*What?*”

“Are you doing it on purpose? Was this some kind of plan? Because it’s working in ways I didn’t expect, so kudos.”

What in the holy hell is he talking about?

“Are you fucking with me right now? Have you lost your —”

“I thought maintaining a professional relationship with you would make it all stop.” Throwing his head back, he barks out a deep, dark laugh, and it makes my thighs tremble a little as I watch his Adam’s apple bob with his sardonic delight. “I miss the comments, the flirty looks, the ridiculous teasing, and the obvious ploys to bait me into reacting to your irresistible brand of insanity. But now *I’m* the crazy one?”

“Garrett . . .” I say, but I’m not sure where I’m going with it. There are so many questions I want to ask. I think I broke the steadfast, even-keeled man in front of me. I finally, truly got to him, and I was supposed to do the exact opposite.

I never wanted to break him, but I’ve always wanted him to admit that he looks at me as more than just his baby sister’s best friend or the pathetic teenager infatuated with him. Like the way he’s looking at me now.

I can feel myself ignite in the heated blaze of his eyes.

“Dammit, Aria. Say something.”

“I don’t know what to say. I’ve been doing what we agreed. You seemed perfectly content with our interactions all week.”

“I’ve been trying to pretend you are just one of my staff, but you’re not, and it’s infuriating because I still end up thinking about you all fucking day. This was supposed to fix it, not make it worse.”

“I’m sorry?” I can’t help the grin from spreading across my face. I finally understand what he’s trying to say, and I’m floored. Delighted. Internally squealing.

He’s not as unaffected as he lets on.

My smile widens and he growls at me.

“Did you do this on purpose? Was this another way you planned to torture me?”

“Of course not. I had no idea you were having all these *feelings*.”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what?” I settle against the wall, perfectly comfortable getting close and cozy with him.

“Like I don’t feel.”

“Other than that one time you drove me to Sadie’s, I’ve never witnessed much more than disdainful irritation from you. Though, whatever this is seems to be irritation-adjacent, so how would I know?”

“I’m not of the mind that everyone needs to be aware of my every thought, unlike some people.”

I point a finger at myself in silent question. Me? I’m some people?

“Yes, you. You’re like an open book with a few pages stuck together. You keep very few things hidden.”

“Seems you left your book open today, Doc, because your feelings are showing.”

“You don’t know the half of it, Ari.”

“Care to show me?”

His eyes swoop down to my lips, and that’s the only warning I get before his mouth crashes against mine, brutal, needy, and hot—so hot.

I give myself over to sinking my hands into the too-long hair I’ve been itching to touch. With only a light tug, he’s growling into my mouth.

His hands still haven't left the wall, and I can feel how tightly coiled his body is. He's still holding back.

I pull away and look at him, silently asking him what he's doing.

"This doesn't change anything, Aria. It'll only be for tonight. You and me, just this once, and we don't talk about it again. No one knows."

My head, heart, and lady bits are all arguing with each other, but I nod. I can have this one time with the guy I've always fantasized about, the man I've watched and adored from afar, even when I know I shouldn't.

I sweep my tongue against his bottom lip seeking entrance, seeking more, much more. He sucks my tongue into his mouth, toying with it and making my eyes roll with how skilled I now know his tongue would be when unleashed on other areas of my body.

My back bows off the wall, and I press closer to him, making sure every part of my front makes contact with his. I move my hands from his hair to the back of his neck as we deepen the kiss and his tongue invades my mouth.

He's got me moaning, and I realize my leg has lifted and wrapped around his hip. The skirt I'm wearing has ridden all the way up, exposing my entire thigh and likely my underwear too.

Removing one of my hands from the grip I have on the back of his head and neck, I slide it down his left arm until I reach his hand. It's pressed into a tight fist against the wall.

I squeeze it and press down, attempting to guide his arm. He relents after a few tries. Without moving my mouth from his, I give him a playful little nip before capturing his lower lip between mine and pulling slightly. He grunts in a way that has my lower region throbbing. My playful nibbling has him distracted enough that he's not paying attention to his hand anymore. I lay it on the thigh wrapped around him, and he squeezes my soft flesh.

He draws back briefly. His eyes are shining, pupils wide, and his stark lust apparent in a way I'm not sure I've ever seen on anyone. Garrett letting me see him like this is everything I've always wanted. He's enthrallingly gorgeous and practically feral. I fucking love it.

Tilting forward slightly, he doesn't break the heated connection of our stare as he takes my lips again. This time, the kiss is slow, controlled, intentional.

His hand glides up my leg until it meets the bottom of my cheek. He backs me fully against the wall, his body pressed into mine. When his hand moves up to cup my ass, he finally breaks the trance of our kiss and closes his eyes. Garrett's head drops to my neck, peppering hot, open-mouthed kisses down it and along my collarbone.

"Oh, my God," I murmur. I need him inside me so badly I could cry. Every part of him touching me is on fire, and I need a release. I need to set the fire free and let it burn for as long as I can—for as long as he'll let me.

"Fuck," he grumbles as he gives my ass another firm squeeze. His fingers sweep to the edges of my panties, and I find myself chanting, "Yes . . . yes."

I'm finally feeling Garrett Caldwell's body pressed against mine again. Our last encounter was all too brief and much too long ago.

"Not here."

"Please . . . Garrett. Just touch me." I wrap my arms around his solid shoulders, holding on for dear life because right now, it feels an awful lot like a life-and-death situation if he doesn't keep touching me. I open the kiss and devour him, desperately, thoroughly.

"Exam room." His deep voice breaks through the haze, and I realize he doesn't mean we can't do this. He just means we can't do this out *here*—in the hallway.

"No. Fuck me here in the hallway. I don't want to move or wait. Take your pants off. Now."

“Ah, hell.” His other hand comes away from the wall and dives up my skirt.

“Yes!” I kick off my heels and realize this may become more challenging given our height difference. He’s nearly a foot taller than me, and I’m having a hard time reaching him without pulling him all the way down.

At some point his hands must have found the edges of my underwear. He’s moving them down my legs in a slow torturous journey to my ankles. Once they’re free, I step out of them while undoing Garrett’s belt and pants. His hands grip my bare ass, and his mouth is doing incredible things to that sensitive spot between my neck and shoulder.

I have his zipper down and my hand in his briefs, making him suck in a surprised breath.

Jesus. I could feel him pressing against me, but who the fuck knew Garrett was packing this monster cock? I’ve been with several men who have been blessed with an above-average dick, but Garrett’s? I’m pretty sure I accidentally whimper in need.

“Holy shit.”

“Your ass. Fucking hell.” He massages both cheeks again, and this time, he’s not just gently exploring.

I’m lifted off the ground, my hands stopping their exploration of his dick in favor of holding on to his shoulders, so I don’t fall on my face.

He’s moving, but instead of watching where we’re going, I take in his face, his neck, his freaking droolworthy jawline. I’m trying to decide what I want to taste and play with first. I run my lips and teeth over his jaw, reveling in the unfettered access to this part of him I’ve only ever admired from afar.

I’m scraping my teeth along his neck, where his spicy, clean scent must originate because it’s so strong, and his pulse is beating a frantic pace against my lips. It makes me shiver in anticipation. I’ve made him go wild, and I never want it to end.

He walks into an exam room and sets me down on the table. This will forever be my favorite room in the clinic.

Garrett's hands rub along the outside of my bare thighs, pulling my skirt up all the way until it's nothing more than a decorative band around my waist. He pulls me closer to him and the edge of the exam table.

His hands shift over the tops of my legs, thumbs leading a path up the tender skin of the insides of my thighs until he reaches the apex. I throw my head back on a moan and clutch his forearms.

"You're so wet. You ready for me, Aria?"

"Yes. So ready." I've been wet since he leaned over the front counter, those forearms flexing.

I take advantage of his distraction and push his pants and briefs down far enough to free him from their confines. Looking at it, I can't help but gape. Involuntarily, I lick my lips, thinking about all the ways I'm going to enjoy this man.

"Stop looking at my dick like that, or this will be over way too soon."

"I want that dick in my mouth, Doc. And other places too, but maybe we can start there."

"Something tells me you'd consider it a personal challenge to make me come before I want to."

"I'm just orally talented."

He muffles a growl with his hand before focusing his attention on my throbbing center. "Stop talking, or I'll end up fucking your mouth instead of this pretty pussy." One of his fingers lazily swipes up and down through my slick center. His hand slowly works as he leans over me, one arm propped up on the table behind me. I tilt my hips, giving him more room. Garrett's dirty talk is the best surprise. One I'll be thinking about for a long time later tonight.

"Aria . . ." he whispers reverently before dropping his head and taking my mouth in a demanding kiss.

Grinding against his hand, I'm close—so close—but I need more, faster. I need him inside me.

“More,” I say against his lips.

He slides two fingers into me, hooking them at just the right angle. I nearly come right then, but I want to hold off for more.

“You going to do something useful with that big dick or not, Doc?”

His fingers leave me, and I cry out in disappointment. He captures my mouth in another kiss, this one slow and seductive. I'm enveloped in his strong arms as they wrap around me. His chest presses down on me as he lays me farther back. My legs automatically wrap behind his back to draw him closer. With my panties gone, the tip of him rubs against my entrance, and I tilt my hips, trying to change the angle. Impatient, I squeeze my legs around him. He jolts forward, slipping in, drawing loud moans from both of us.

He freezes. His fingers dig into my sides, telling me he wants me closer, that he needs me as much as I need him.

I rotate my hips, encouraging him to move. His eyes find mine again, and he groans, pushing farther into me. His hands move to my hips, keeping me steady on top of the table as he pulls back slightly only to slam back in.

I cling to him, my hips grinding until I find the angle that gets him to the spot I desperately want him to hit. He lets go of my back and moves me to recline on my elbows. His arms press in on either side of me, leveraging the table as he thrusts in and out of me at a more frantic pace.

A slow tingle of awareness and impending bliss spreads through my body. I moan low and long. “Gar . . . right there.”

He keeps one arm locked on the table beside me, but the other comes up. I watch as he licks his thumb and drops it down to start massaging my clit.

Yes. Start out rubbing up and down, just like that.

He touches me exactly how I need him to, like he knows . . . How the hell does he know?

A hoarse voice answers, “You’re very vocal during sex, Aria. That’s how I know.”

I pant out a breath. “Well, good listening, then.” Shit, do I usually talk and make this much noise during sex? No one has ever said anything until now.

“How about we don’t talk about what you normally do with other men while my dick is inside you?”

Oh God, his pace is fucking perfect. My eyes roll back in ecstasy, barely registering what he’s saying.

“What? What men?” How can he even be thinking of . . . Oh, right. I must have said that out loud too.

He breathes deeply, loudly, and his hips pump faster. I kiss his neck, moving to scrape my teeth along that glorious jaw. But then he shifts his thumb to press in quick, firm circles, and my whole body explodes. It’s not a slow, sweet burn. It’s fast and hard and intense.

I throw my head back and let the waves of pleasure burn through me as my walls clamp down over and over. Garrett’s pace becomes erratic and fierce as he chases his own release, but I can’t speak or move, my legs now just loosely moving with him.

Garrett hooks an arm under my leg and opens me up wider. He looks down into my eyes—his are hazy with lust. His hips snap once more, and a growled moan leaves him. Watching Garrett’s face as he completely lets go—seeing that state of primal satisfaction—is easily the most erotic experience of my life. My body flushes anew with a heat that only he seems capable of triggering.

His pace slows, and I can still feel him twitching inside me. Just that little involuntary movement has me building up for another orgasm.

My gaze remains on his face, memorizing every feature I’ve rarely been close enough to fully appreciate. I let my fingers casually coast up and down his back.

He breathes out deeply, and my body follows his lead as I sigh in content.

That was so much better than I dreamed it would be—and I spent a lot of time and effort on those fantasies when I was younger.

“Shit,” he mutters.

Okay. Not exactly the glowing commendation I was expecting. Did we make a mess? He hasn’t even pulled out of me yet, so I doubt it.

Slowly, he rises up on his hands again, looking down at me. My skirt is still fully hiked up, but otherwise, there’s nothing else showing. Slowly, he pulls out of me.

“Ah, shit.”

That one was clearly a pissed-off shit.

“Huh?” Come on, brain, get on board here. “What’s wrong?”

He swipes a hand down his face, and I know the wild, lust-driven Garrett is gone, and the analytical, proper Garrett has returned. Desire no longer impedes his decision-making skills.

He tucks himself back into his pants. “A lot right now, Aria. Do you—? Are you on birth control? When were you last tested for STIs? When was the first day of your last period?”

“Whoa. I’m not sure I can handle all this sweet pillow talk, Doc. Reel it in.”

“I’m being serious. We just had unprotected sex. Fuck.” Garrett always has a tight rein on himself. He’s completely come unglued tonight in several ways. How did I not think this through? I should have known he’d regret losing control and succumbing to whatever this is we’ve been feeling.

The post-sex elation and glee at my fantasies becoming reality crash and burn in a fiery pit of sex disease talk.

He heads over to the sink and grabs some paper towels. Taking the few steps back to me, he reaches forward

awkwardly, offering to help me clean up. I snatch the rough, brown paper towels from his hand and wipe the remnants of him from my thighs.

I don't look at him, and he eventually walks back to the sink to clean himself up.

"I don't suppose you'd want to cuddle, huh? Maybe once I assure you that until today, I've never not used a condom, and I'm on the pill, so we're covered?" I'm only half kidding. Part of me is joking, but the other part hopes we can still turn this around somehow.

This could be the start of something great—if only he'd let it happen.

"Aria." He bows his head as he chooses his words. Chooses the words he's about to crush me with. "This can't happen again. We both agreed on that."

"We did. And that made sense at the moment. We have an attraction and we acted on it. For one of us it was a long time coming. But you have to admit that was more than sex, Garrett. You want me as much as I've always wanted you. So what's holding us back?" His face blanks, but the eyes staring back at me are conflicted. "This"—I point at the exam table—"was hot as hell and nearly perfect. I'm not sure how we go back to whatever our normal is after this."

His eyes search mine before his mouth finally opens to speak. It snaps closed just as fast, and guilt mars his sharp features.

"Nothing?" My jaw clenches. "Do we pretend this didn't happen either? Kind of like we pretended we hadn't kissed before today? Now we pretend your dick has never been inside me and you've never had any interest in me. Even after this, I'll always be Aria, the annoyingly perky 'Minx' you want nothing to do with?" My heart is breaking and I don't know why. I agreed. I knew he was attracted to me but didn't want a relationship with me. I settled for flirting with him and messing around, ruffling his feathers as a fun way of letting out my feelings and making him smile. Because it makes him smile, even if he pretends otherwise.

“I didn’t really think it through. I’m sorry. I don’t normally . . . Casual sex isn’t an activity I normally engage in. This isn’t a conversation I’ve had to have before. Usually, sex is a part of the relationship, and we don’t have to talk about what it does or doesn’t mean.” He looks away, already disconnecting.

God, I really do fall for all kinds of bullshit.

Why do I keep giving myself to guys who don’t give a shit about me? I should never have thought this would be different. He even tried to warn me.

I look around, praying for patience and sanity. “Great. So I’m the exception? The one time you’ve had sex and it’s meant nothing is with me? This keeps getting better. Got anything else?” I pat my chest like I’m feeling around for something. “There’s still some pieces of my self-confidence left. I wouldn’t want you to leave any behind in this ‘obliterate Aria’ moment.”

I’m being completely unreasonable, and I don’t even know if I’m doing it to piss him off or because I’m angry with myself.

He mutters what sounds like, “Fuck,” into the hands that have come up to cover his face. “That’s not what I’m trying to do.” He finally looks at me, and I see regret in his eyes. I’m not sure if that’s better or worse. “We shouldn’t have had sex, Aria. I’m not trying to hurt your feelings. This has nothing to do with the quality of the sex. That was . . . It was good. Too good. Good isn’t even a good enough word, and now I can’t stop using it.” He’s so frazzled it nearly has me smiling. But I don’t because I’m hurting, and I shouldn’t be. “What I mean is that you and I aren’t going to enter into a relationship, so we probably shouldn’t have become intimate.”

I kind of hate that practical, proper Garrett is back. Normally, I dig his measured tone and logical ways. For whatever reason, it’s comforting and gets me going a little. Probably because I know I can crack that facade sometimes. Right now though, when it’s aimed at me and decimating my tender heart? Not so much.

“Well, apparently, this wasn’t intimacy. We fucked. If you do the deed, you should at least be able to own up to the words.” The side of his mouth tightens in a half frown. “And you probably should have thought about what we should or shouldn’t have done before you kissed me. And I should have thought about it before letting you peel my underwear off. And we both definitely should have thought about it before you came inside me.”

His eyes close for a beat again, and I can hear his shaky exhale.

“Yes, you’re right. I should have. I lost control and I don’t usually do that. I apologize.”

“Please don’t apologize for fucking me.” I wasn’t sure I could feel worse, but I’m on a downward spiral, and the only way to stop is to walk away.

He clears his throat uncomfortably and nods at me.

I search his face for answers, wondering how the hell we get past this. What I felt five minutes ago—his passion, his unleashed desire, the connection we have, the way he looked at me, smiled at me, wanted me—I’m not sure I’m going to be able to put that behind me any time soon.

“I’m going to grab my underwear and leave. You can stay and sanitize this room. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

I need to put my business plans on the front burner before I sink any deeper into the shitty decisions I can’t seem to escape.

“I’ll walk you out,” he offers, following me.

“Please don’t.” I stride down the hallway, scoop my pink lace underwear off the floor, and charge through the exit, letting it slam closed behind me.

It bangs open seconds later before I’ve reached the refuge of my car.

“Aria, I think we should—”

“Fuck right off, Garrett.”

That stops him in his tracks.

I get in my car and hightail it home. Fuck this day and my weak, malleable heart.

CHAPTER 13



ARIA

“*A*ria, did you not take your lunch break today?” Chloe asks, concerned.

She’s known something has been up with me the last few weeks, but I don’t know if I can or should tell her I slept with her brother. I don’t even know if ‘slept with’ is even the phrase I would use. We had an epic fuck fest in Room Five, and then he had a cold case of regret and shut me down before we’d even adjusted our clothing.

“I’ve been feeling off. Mom thought she had food poisoning over the weekend, but now I’m wondering if it was a stomach bug because I feel like I’m coming down with whatever it was. And it smells foul in here. Do we need the cleaners to come in more regularly, or maybe a trash can was missed? Did someone throw up somewhere?”

“The Merrick boys have a gastrointestinal bug too and threw up in Room Five earlier, but you shouldn’t be able to smell that from all the way up here.”

Seems fitting that more horror happens in that room.

“Disagree. Anyway, it’s just gross in here today, and I’m already feeling queasy. I hope I’m not getting that stomach bug. I don’t do well with vomit. You know this.”

I have a slight fear of vomiting. Not so much if others do it, that’s fine. I mean, not great, but I imagine I feel the same about it as anyone else who watched another human being projecting the sour contents of their stomach.

I'm caught off guard by the short gag that grips my throat.

Has my phobia gotten worse?

"Right, well, if your symptoms worsen, go home, okay? We can have Annette and Carey take turns covering the front."

"I'm fine, really, Chlo. I'll shake this off. We have that outdoor yoga class tonight, and I bet the fresh air will help."

"Oh, right. Yes. You think it'll be okay if I bring Kinsley? It's not going to turn into a wine night like the Frisbee in the park thing they had last month, is it? Poor Alex had to call in for reinforcements when the boys' competitive streaks turned the game into ultimate Frisbee challenges—which were really just ways to use the Frisbee as a weapon."

"How the hell did I miss that?" Had I known, I would have loved to spectate that sport. Hell, maybe I would have joined.

"I think you were meeting with Sadie that night."

"Oh, right."

"Have you seen her lately? She's been MIA. The only time I see her anymore is at yoga. I know the start of the school year is rough, but I thought we'd, at least, see her at Teachers & Tequila night at Taps. Lauren says she hasn't been coming to any of their staff socials, but that's not super uncommon. There's usually more of Lauren and Taylor's high school teacher coworkers who participate regularly. Not quite as many of the elementary teachers."

"No, I haven't seen her much either. I think she's having some personal issues, or at least that's the vibe I picked up when I was over there." Sadie actually got in a big fight with Keith when I was at her place. I grimace, keeping that to myself. I doubt Sadie would want people knowing what they were fighting about or the fact that her boyfriend is a flaming douche canoe, so I keep that bit of awful gossip-like news to myself. "Oh, I forgot to tell you! I started creating my logo and Jess is nearly done with my website, which I am so grateful for. What took him a couple of hours would have taken me weeks."

Jess and Emma practically quizzed me on my business plan as we discussed website aesthetics, and now I am even more prepared, but in a way that has me feeling a little anxious.

“Well, come over tomorrow night. My parents are coming for a Caldwell family dinner and want to see you. And Kinsley says she hasn’t seen Aunty Ari in a while . . .”

“I just saw her this week.” I laugh, thinking about the little stinker who probably used her best pouty face on Chloe.

“She says that seeing you at the clinic doesn’t count.” Fair enough.

“I’ll be there. Is your mom taking dinner requests?” I ask, hoping Mamma Millie’s cooking will break me out of this funk.

“Always.” She gets her phone out with a grin. “List your requests.”

“That super savory Tuscan chicken she makes. Oh, with the creamy spinach and garlic orzo!”

I’m suddenly so hungry. If Mamma Millie lived in town, I’d probably be at her house every night begging for scraps. Her cooking might actually be worth the awkwardness of spending the evening with Garrett.

CHAPTER 14



GARRETT

Aria isn't eating. She's been here for an hour and has nothing other than a soda, water, and a few bites of fresh bread. Why is she not eating? She typically gorges herself on my mom's food. My mom loves it and always sends her off with leftovers. Is she trying to lose weight? She better not be. She's fucking perfect. Did she eat before she came over?

I shove over the platter of chicken, offering it to her and hoping she'll take it.

She looks down at it, wrinkles her nose a little, and leans back. "No, thank you."

"You're not eating, Ari?" Mamma asks.

Fucking finally, someone notices.

"I think I still have a sensitive stomach from the little bug I had last week. Or maybe it's stress or something? I was hoping the smell of your delicious cooking would fix me right up."

"Stress? Everything okay? Garrett's not giving you too much trouble at the clinic, is he?" My dad winks at me, and I smirk back. He doesn't realize she's the one doing *me* in.

From the grin he shoots Aria after, maybe he does know.

"Oh, yes. Great actually. I've been trying to set up my photography business, ClickPix, and it's a steep learning curve, but it's coming along. I hope to have it all up and running by November so that I can hold some holiday photo shoots at a few locations in town before it gets too cool." She takes a sweeping glance at the table. My parents, sister,

brother, Emma, Hayden, and my two nieces, Kinsley and Maddie, are all sitting or standing around the table. “I was hoping you guys wouldn’t mind being my first family. You’d get a ton of photos, I’d create the perfect images for your Christmas cards, whatever you want—all free because you’d also be consenting to me using your photos on my website and portfolio.” She smiles widely, breaking out her deadliest weapons—her beauty and charm. “You’d just have to spend an afternoon with me at a few different locations. The very last location would be where we’d have the whole group together. What do you think?”

“Can I wear a crown?” Kinsley asks, and Aria scoffs playfully.

“Of course! I insist.”

“Yay!” Kinsley shouts.

The rest of the family agrees and talks excitedly about it for a few minutes. Then Aria looks my way and raises her eyebrows. “What about you, Doc?” She hasn’t called me that in a while, and I’m worried the only reason she’s doing it now is because my family’s used to it.

“I can do that. Just the family shots, right? I mean, I don’t have anyone to, er, well, you know. It would just be the one of me.” I stop and try again. “I mean, it would just be me.”

Jess looks at me like I’ve grown a second head. Shit. I have to get myself together.

“You never know. You could have a lady friend by then, sweetie,” Mamma suggests.

“Doubtful,” I mumble. Especially since I’ve stopped looking. I promised myself that I’d put in a real effort at dating and building a life, a family, but I don’t have the time or personality for the shit show that is dating apps.

“Okay, Biscuit, it’s time for bed.”

“Daddy! I’m seven now. That’s a whole year older. Shouldn’t I get to stay up a whole hour later?” Kinsley asks.

He laughs, and Chloe bites down on her smile.

“No,” he says firmly.

Hayden scoops her up and starts walking her to bed, all while she shouts for Chloe to rescue her. Chloe giggles rush over, gives them both a kiss, and then tells Hayden to take the princess to her tower so she can get her beauty sleep. She cries for Aunty Ari, who half-heartedly tries to rescue her from her dad.

Hayden dangles her upside down and tells her to say good night to our family.

She then shouts for her uncles. We are third on the “send help” hierarchy as she tries to squirm free.

I hold my hands up. “Sorry, kid. I don’t make the rules.”

“If you did, would you let me stay up late with the grown-ups? I want to know what you guys talk about while I’m getting my beauty sleep.”

“Trust me, you’re not missing much. And I would definitely let you stay up. When you started to get grumpy, I’d take you back to your parents.”

“I don’t get grumpy, Uncle Garrett. I just get more interesting!” She tries to throw her hands up in the air, but she’s still upside down.

Hayden rights her, then murmurs something to her. She gives a pouty face before saying, “Night night. Love you all as big as the moons, and the oceans, and all the bunnies in the whole world.”

We all say it back, and she giggles the whole way to her room as Hayden pretends she’s too heavy to carry.

That’s one freaking cute kid. Maybe one day I’ll get one just like her. But to do that, I have to take finding someone more seriously. And I have to stop looking in all the completely wrong places. It’s not fair to either of us.

“Is it okay to lay Maddie down in your guest room, Chlo?” Emma asks.

“Absolutely. The playpen is already set up,” my sister tells her.

Aria excuses herself to go to the washroom while the rest of us top up our drinks.

“What’s up with you and Aria? You’re being so . . . I don’t know if nice is the right word. She’s not flirting with you, and you’re looking at her all weird,” my brother asks, turning his focus to me.

“I’m not.”

“You are. It’s almost awkward . . . and you hate awkward.”

“It’s fine.”

“Okay, so if I were to ask her why she’s pissed at you, she’d have no idea what I’m talking about. Don’t act like we don’t know her. She practically grew up with Chloe. Even when you completely ignored all her moon-eyed flittering and teasing when she was a teenager, it never fazed her. That woman has always loved messing with you, but tonight? Nothing. She’s barely looked at you.”

“You’re making her sound like an obsessed Garrett groupie. She just enjoys getting a reaction from him. I mean, who doesn’t?” Chloe shrugs and shoots me a teasing wink.

“You were either too blinded by your friendship or caught up in your own teenage drama to notice your friend crushing on your brother.” Chloe frowns at Jess, and a pinched look of guilt settles into her features.

“Jess, enough. Aria doesn’t always flirt with me, and we don’t always interact in the way either of you suggests. You two short on town drama this week?”

They’re quiet for a moment before Chloe chooses to ignore me. “They’ve been weird at work too. I think they had a fight, but Aria won’t talk about it.”

“Chloe, don’t encourage your brother,” Mamma says. I’m grateful for all of two seconds before she continues, “I’m sure Garrett will fix whatever he did to anger Aria, right? Because your sister is right. That woman is not happy with you. I can feel the cold shoulder chill from over here, and that girl is usually filled with love and sunshine. Something happened.

Even Mrs. Henderson noticed, but no one at the clinic is talking.”

I truly didn't think they paid that much attention.

“Let's just stop talking about it.”

“I came here prepared for a verbal showdown, and instead, you two have barely spoken, *and* you're getting along at work. Your whole relationship dynamic has shifted, and for someone who *loves* the amount of shit Aria dishes out and the way she gets under your skin so masterfully, I'm a little disappointed with the turn of events this evening.”

“You need to get out more,” is all I say before turning my attention back to my meal.

Aria comes back into the room, and I glare at my brother, daring him to say one fucking word.

“Boys, stop acting like children. Jess, stop looking at your brother like that. I see that glimmer in your eye. There will be no pranks in your sister's house, especially with Kinsley and Maddie asleep.”

Chloe looks at Aria curiously. “Aria, settle this for us. What is going on with you two? First, you two are overly polite at the clinic, friendly even. Now you barely speak or look at each other. Did you have a fight? Did he threaten to fire you? Because you know I won't let him do that.”

Aria freezes, looks at me, then glances around the table. Her gaze goes back and forth between my sister and me.

“I'm just having an off week. No energy to employ my usual verbal wiles and sultry ways on the good doctor. I'm sure he misses it terribly but would never admit it.” She smiles faintly, but it's the anxious gaze that flickers in my direction that tells me she's uncomfortable. Aria is confident, sweet, and vivacious. She is never uncomfortable around anyone, especially my family.

I've already fucked this up.

“Really?” Chloe asks, her forehead wrinkling in confusion.

My mom sighs. “Our hearts often make us behave in inexplicable ways.”

“What?” Chloe asks, confused.

“Who’s behaving inexplicably?” Emma asks, stepping back into the dining room.

Aria blows out a breath, her face going a bit tight. This level of inquiry really shouldn’t surprise her. I have no choice but to sit back and wait for this to completely blow up in my face. I wonder if I sneak out right now if anyone would notice?

“Apparently, Aria and Garr—”

Changed my mind. “Jess, shut the hell up,” I bark at my brother, and every person in the dining room stares, open-mouthed. “I can’t deal with any more meddlesome, well-meaning interrogations. Now eat your pie and shut your face.”

Emma leans in and whispers to Jess, “Don’t pout. You probably deserved that.”

My eyes shift over to Aria, an apology in my stare. She returns my gaze with scornful heat that appears to temporarily melt the icy chill she’s been blasting my way all evening.

I look away but catch Chloe staring at me. She shifts her gaze to Aria, and understanding flashes across her face. “Oh my God, you two had sex!”

“What!”

“*Cara!*”

“I think we’re just going to take this wine out on the front porch,” Dad says, grabbing Mom’s hand to lead her out.

“Rian, we should stay, don’t you think?” Mamma tries.

“Nope. We’re the parents. I don’t want to hear any of this.” His finger circles around at us as Mom grumbles. Dad looks at Jess and tips his head toward the door. My brother raises his brows and shakes his head, indicating he’s not leaving. Dad’s eyes narrow at him.

My brother turns in his chair to fully face me, not even looking at our dad.

“Jess and I are going to join your parents outside. Mamma Millie took the, um”—Emma looks around the table trying to find a believable excuse—“good wine.”

Jess gets dragged out and looks too scandalized to even pretend not to gawk on his way out.

“So? Did you?” Chloe asks again.

“Chloe. You just cleared our family dinner by asking your guests if they had sex. Want to rethink your talking points for our next dinner?” I ask.

“That was a weak attempt at deflection.” She shifts her attention to her friend. “You. Let’s go over the facts: you’ve been acting super weird, and you don’t toy with him anymore. No fighting, no mocking, not even a lewd grin when you pretend to check out his ass, hoping he’ll catch you. Something’s going on so please just tell me. Our work environment is getting very confusing, and now it’s trickling into our personal lives.”

“Chloe, our work environment is completely normal. You’re being dramatic,” I say, knowing it’s the wrong thing to say and won’t divert her from this conversation.

“I wasn’t talking to you, big brother. You don’t understand these things.”

Clearly not.

“Aria?”

She looks ready to burst into tears, and I know it’s over.

Aria looks at me, and I let out my pent-up breath.

“I didn’t know how to tell you, and I wasn’t sure how you’d react.”

“So you did? You slept with my brother?” Chloe shudders and backs away from her. “How?” She holds up a hand. “No, not how. Gross. I meant, why?”

Her eyes flick my way. “I don’t really know how to answer that.”

“Try.”

“Okay, well, I guess I started appreciating more things about him. He’s actually pretty funny, but you guys don’t usually see that. He’s sweet and protective, smart and closed off. He just, I don’t know. He was unavailable in several ways, so naturally, he held a draw for someone like me who always picks the guys who are best equipped to break me.”

“I don’t get it. Was it working together that drew you to each other? I would have never thought—” She whips her head at me. “Wait, so if all this awkwardness started after you two hooked up, what happened? And what does she mean, unavailable? Are you dating someone else and messing around with my best friend at the same time?”

I start to speak but Aria takes over. “No. I’m not a cheater or anyone’s other woman. We realized that it wasn’t a good idea—him and me. We are basically opposites, we’re looking for different things in relationships, and we also thought your family might not approve. Except those weren’t things we thought about before we fooled around, so now we’re dealing with the consequences of our actions.”

I hate that she’s reduced it to fooling around like becoming intimate was foolish.

It was though, wasn’t it?

“Do you really think my mom would turn down the chance for either of you to find love? She *loves* love as much as you do, Ari. As for me, years ago, I would have been upset, yeah. But if you two are into each other, I wouldn’t have stood in your way.”

My eyes widen, surprised by this. She’s always said to stay away from Aria, always been very protective of her. All the friends we had over, the times I’ve had to bail them out of whatever situation Aria got them into in high school, whenever anyone got a little too close to her friend, she’d give a warning lecture.

“I just didn’t want you two to get involved only to break each other’s hearts or for there to be any bad feelings. It would make events like this . . . Like how it is right now.” Chloe’s eyes widen in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Aria huffs out a half laugh.

“It won’t be. Right, Garrett?” Aria asks, but there’s a hint of malice in her eyes like if I disagree, she’ll tear my lips from my face.

“No. No awkwardness. It happened and won’t be happening again. It was an impulsive, weak moment on both our parts. That’s it.”

Her icy gaze shoots across the table.

Oh, I fucked up.

I can see it in her eyes. I can feel it in my bones. It’s not what I meant to say. For a moment—many moments over the years—I considered seeing what could be between us. If my family was on board, and we didn’t fuck it up, we could actually explore this thing between us. The feeling that’s haunted me, churned me up inside for years could be explored and sated.

Now, I’ve said something stupid and pissed her off again. There’s even a hint of hurt in her eyes. It’s the same hurt I’ve seen her ex-boyfriends leave there. I think my sister sees it too, and her surprised, confused expression turns to concern.

Chloe hums at my response while Aria remains decidedly quiet.

“Okay. Well, are you two going to be able to put it behind you? Because I’m sick of the awkwardness at the clinic.” She turns to face Aria again. “No wonder you’ve been cranky and complaining about weird things. I’m sorry I didn’t pick up on it sooner.”

“I should have told you, Chlo. I just didn’t know how as it’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Messing around with my tightly wound brother? Yeah, he’s a pain in the ass. I mean, I love him—” She glances at me with a warm half smile like she’s still a little upset with me but can’t help but love me. “But he needs to work on his relationship skills.”

“I can help with that!” Emma shouts from outside, clearly eavesdropping through the screen door. “What? Jess, I practiced a lot,” she explains. “Oh! You should help him! You helped me and look! I’m married to my dream man, parent to one adorable little girl, and have friends aplenty!”

“Yeah, babe, I helped you because you were a hot, adorable train wreck. I was half in love with you from our first conversation. Garrett doesn’t have quite the same draw.”

“I’m adorable,” I mumble. My family chuckles at me. “How about you all come back in so we’re not shouting at each other through the open door?”

They rush back in, and Mamma pauses as she passes by, cradling my cheek with her hand. She leans down but doesn’t have to go far since she’s barely over five feet. She whispers, “You are my handsome young man. I thought we’d have to beat the women off, but here you have a beautiful woman who has been trying to charm you since before she could drive, and you mess it up.” She tsks at me, patting my cheek and standing tall again. “A one-night conquest is not like you. Especially if you are looking for a relationship. For someone so smart, *caro*, you are making some decisions that are . . . *stupido*.”

She heads back to her seat as Jess practically chokes on his drink. “*Oof*. Killer burn, Mamma.” Jess goes in for a fist bump.

Mamma tries hiding a laugh but waves Jess’s hand away. “That wasn’t a burn. It was motherly concern. Maybe he stayed a little too focused on academics and pushed off finding his ideal woman until later in life. Now, he is alone, messing around with his sister’s friend and his employee instead of being in a relationship.”

Ouch. *That* was the real burn. Mamma is not happy, and when she’s not happy, everyone feels it.

I swipe a hand over my jaw, focusing on the rough scrape of my short facial hair instead of the reality of my loneliness being discussed at this awkward family dinner. In front of the woman I have deep, unwanted feelings for.

“It’s not like I’m sleeping with every woman I know, Mamma. Until Aria, I hadn’t had sex in well over six months.” Why in the hell did I reveal that information to my entire family? This dinner is plummeting faster than I could have imagined.

“Really?” Aria and Chloe squeak at the same time.

“Jesus,” I growl out. “Can we all carry on with this evening and forget everything that’s happened in the past five minutes?”

“That’s your answer for everything, apparently,” Aria mutters.

My jaw clenches as I try to release the frustration and anxiety from my tense muscles.

“What? Aria, are you implying—?” Chloe starts.

“Nothing. I agree with Garrett. Let’s move on with our evening and put this all behind us.”

It’s quiet for several moments.

“It would probably be too awkward to ask about how your dating app attempts are going now, wouldn’t it?” Mamma asks with hope in her voice. There’s a hint of cunning manipulation—or maybe I’m reading into that.

“Yes,” everyone at the table answers in unison.

“Hey, what did I miss?” Everyone then swivels to look at Hayden. “What? I was gone for like twenty minutes to put Kinsley to bed, and I obviously missed something. Princess, fill me in.”

“Later, babe,” Chloe tells him, pulling him to sit on the other side of her.

I toss back the rest of my wine and then look at Hayden and tip my head toward his liquor cabinet. He grins and gets up as I follow.

“Want to talk about it?” he asks.

“Nope. I’m sure Chloe will fill you in when I leave, and I’d prefer that.”

“Alright. Bourbon, then?”

I grab a glass and nod. “Might as well.”

CHAPTER 15



ARIA

I have a fan blowing on the desk right in front of me. At this point, I don't know if it's actually helping. It's keeping me cool, but it also blows odors directly into my face. The nausea hasn't left me, and the smells make it so much worse.

My whole body clenches as the smell of someone's tuna sandwich wafts up to the front area. Normally, I'm game for a tuna sandwich, and I'd be on my way to coax the owner of said sandwich to share. Lately though, I've been an odd mix of starving and disgusted by food. Tuna sandwiches are currently in the disgusting group.

The smell gets stronger and my body revolts. I grab the trash can under my desk and heave violently, my stomach glad to finally be able to do something about all the nausea. My forehead and neck break out into a sweat, and I'm panic-breathing between heaves.

I hate vomiting. It hurts, I can't breathe, and it feels like it's never going to end. A hand starts rubbing my back, and I focus on that. Mostly because I know whose hand it is, and my mind is slightly comforted by the fact that he cares enough to offer help. He's been abnormally nice and friendly since the disastrous family dinner, and I'm confused. And exhausted.

"You okay?" Garrett asks.

"No. I hate vomiting," I half cry, half pout.

He hands me some tissues. "I could tell. You seemed angry and panicked all at once."

“Yeah, that’s pretty on par for me. I have a lot of feelings, Garrett. You should probably steer clear because it only gets worse when I’m sick.”

He takes the trash can away, and I’m grateful. I think if I even caught a glance or scent of what’s in there, I’d be in for a few more rounds. “Let’s get you to the staff room, grab some water, and then I’ll take you home.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll be fine. Once the throwing up stops, I’m usually good for a while.”

“Aria, you’re sick. You need to go home and rest.”

“Oh no. Aria, are you still not feeling well?” She eyes the trash can in her brother’s hand, concern etched into the lines in her forehead. “Garrett, take her into one of my exam rooms, and I’ll check her out. I’m going to do some blood work. This has gone on long enough, and you can’t just pretend to be fine in the morning only to lose your lunch every other day.”

“How long have you been sick?” Garrett asks, but I just shrug.

“Annette, can you take over the front for a while? We’ll all need to take turns for the rest of the day, okay? Can you let the other ladies know?”

Annette looks at me with sympathy. “Sure, Chloe. I’ll also sanitize that area, just in case.”

“Thanks, Annette,” I mumble, feeling miserable.

“I have her, Garrett. I was on my lunch anyway, so I’ll get her checked out and then drive her home.”

Chloe leans in closer to guide me to her room, and I dive away from her.

“You had tuna for lunch, didn’t you? I can smell it. Oh, God.” I gag again, and Garrett produces the trash can, but it still has my vomit in it, and I just can’t. I race to the bathroom and make it just in time.

After the heaving stops, a tapping on the door lets me know I’ve had an audience. Great.

“I left a urine sample container in the box, Ari. When you feel up to it, go ahead and leave a sample, please. I’m going to go brush my teeth, and then I’ll meet you in Room Two.”

I can hear some mumbling on the other side of the door and realize Garrett and Chloe are arguing about who will examine me today.

“Don’t you think that would make her feel a little uncomfortable?”

“No, I’m a professional. I also have several more years of experience under my belt.” If I was feeling better, I would have made a joke about this . . . though maybe not at work. See? I’ve gotten much better at not crossing the line. “Don’t you want your best friend to have the best care?”

I place my sample in the box, rolling my eyes at this ridiculousness as I wash my hands.

“Oh? And you are better than me?”

“I’ve studied gastrointestinal pathogens and provided medical care for various digestive disease patients in a third-world country. So, yeah, in this case I do think I’m better.”

I open the door. “Thank you for your intensely competitive concern. Garrett, I likely do not have a third-world country type of gastrointestinal disease. I think I’ll be in very capable hands with Chloe checking me out today.”

He frowns at me, clearly disagreeing. It’s not until Chloe leads me to the exam room that he eventually wanders away.

She asks me a bunch of questions, draws some blood, and messages someone on staff to process my urine sample. Her brows are drawn together, and she looks concerned.

“What are you thinking?”

“Huh? Nothing. Just trying to come up with plausible explanations for these acute symptoms.”

“What kind of explanations?”

The sound of a bell being rung repeatedly filters in from the hallway. I raise my eyebrows at Chloe.

“They had to put up the Ring Bell For Assistance sign, and I think some of the kids in the waiting room are having fun with it. Before you started here, that’s what we were using all day. It’s not a great system, but I feel comforted knowing that Garrett actually hates it more than I do.”

I start to ask her why, but it’s cut off with a hard slam.

“And that’s Garrett putting the bell back into the drawer.”

We both chuckle as she makes some notes in the computer.

“Linda just let me know the urine test is done. She’s going to input the results but wants me to come check them first.”

My gaze narrows. “Is that normal?”

“Sometimes, if a tech doesn’t understand the results or there is conflicting information, they ask us to consult. It’s not uncommon.” Yet, her eyes say something different. She’s wearing her professional mask, but she’s my best friend, and I can see right through that. She knows something. What could she know from my urine test? Unless . . .

I start thinking about the types of questions she asked me, and a part of my brain dings with an answer I can’t even attempt considering.

As I spiral with unanswered questions and a nagging feeling in my gut that has nothing to do with digestion, Chloe strides out of the room to go look at the results, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Her heels click on the floor as she heads over to the testing area.

Moments later I hear her again. “Holy shit.”

Oh, God. I know. I don’t know but I *know*.

Five long minutes pass, and I am just letting myself down from the exam table to get Chloe when I hear footsteps moving toward the room.

She darts through the door, closes it quietly, and sits down. My eyes plead with her to stop the suspense.

“You are going to be fine, Aria.”

“Oh, fuck a duck, Chloe. You’ve got the ‘you’re dying’ face on, and I’m about to explode from nerves and possibly vomit again. Tell me.”

She sucks in a breath and looks into my eyes as mild panic zips through me.

“Chloe!” I say, exasperated as I nudge her with my foot.

“You’re pregnant.”

Whoosh.

All the air leaves my body.

I sway slightly, and Chloe places her hands on my upper arms to steady me.

“You don’t just blurt it out like that. Shit, Chlo.” I place a hand on my chest. “Oh, shit. Oh, fuck. You’re sure?”

“Pregnancy tests are incredibly accurate. The blood test can definitively confirm, but yes, you’re pregnant.”

“Is that why you kept looking at my stomach every time you asked a question? I thought you were afraid I was going to throw up on you.”

She looks again, her smile stretching widely. “I suspected but didn’t want to assume until the urine test. I ran it again. That’s why it took me so long.”

“And that accounts for all of my symptoms?”

“Likely, yes. I should have noticed sooner. I’m a shit best friend.”

“Chloe . . . I’m on birth control. How?”

She looks at the computer, searching for the information. “Did you use another method, or were you relying on the oral contraceptives?”

“If by oral contraceptive, you mean the birth control pill, then yes. That’s all the protection we, um, used.”

“Birth control pills on their own are only about ninety percent effective, and that’s with perfect use. Meaning, at

minimum, you never miss a pill, and you take it at the same time every day.”

Shit. I’ve gotten into a pretty good routine of taking them on time, but I’m not exactly the perfect user. I may have missed a dose this month. I’ve also always used condoms, so it’s never been a problem. Except this time, and I guess that’s all it takes.

“So you and . . . your partner had unprotected sex in the last three to four weeks? Or was it before you moved back?”

Is she asking if I had sex with someone else right after her brother decided I was a one-and-done hookup?

“Yes, it was in the past three to four weeks. Why do you keep acting like you don’t know the details? It was your brother’s sperm that did this. I know you’re trying to be professional here, but I’m freaking the fuck out, so I need best friend Chloe and nurse Chloe to work together here.”

She comes over and gives me a hug. “Thank God. I had no idea how to ask if it was Garrett’s while still being professional. Oh, shit. What if Garrett had examined you? Can you imagine?” She snorts with uncontrolled laughter before catching herself and taking a breath to calm the nervous giggles that seem to keep bubbling up. “And what about Garrett? What are . . . ? How are you . . . ?”

“Yeah. Um, I have no answers to any questions right now.” I fill my lungs with air and place both hands on my lower abdomen.

“Are you going to be able to keep this quiet until I’m ready to tell him?” It’s an incredibly difficult thing to ask her, but I’m not ready for this to be out in the open yet.

She looks torn but resigned. “Yes. I’m your nurse and I will keep this confidential. But more importantly, I’m your best friend and can respect that you need a moment before telling my brother he’s going to be a dad.” Her eyes widen and her face stills.

“Garrett is going to be a dad,” she whispers. “That’s my niece or nephew in there.” She squeals loudly while doing a

little jig and hugging me again. “We’re going to be sisters for real. Sisters-in-law.”

“Um, no.” I frown at her like she’s gone mad. “We’ll be family—probably closer than ever. We’ll be tied together in the most amazing new way. But the term sister-in-law implies Garrett and I are getting married, and that’s not likely to happen.”

“I don’t care what you call it. We are family! Garrett is very traditional and practical. He’ll want to do the right thing.”

The right thing? Nausea strikes again at the idea, and the horror must have shown on my face.

“Oh God, no, not like that. You know that’s not how I think. I just meant he’ll want to be there for you and the baby. Not that he would feel obligated in any way, he would want to. You two would be partners in raising your baby.”

Somehow that still doesn’t make me feel any better.

Finding love and happiness after my dad left us and all the guys I’ve given pieces of my heart to abandon me—it’s caused an intrinsic need to have my feelings and affections returned. I’ve been finding poor substitutes for real love and relying on others to fill this hole in my life. Maybe I’ve even been doing it on purpose. The last few guys may not have loved me, but I never expected them to. And if I have no expectations and never let myself fall fully in love, then I can’t be hurt. I can’t be left behind, forgotten, unloved.

It took this last breakup for me to stop and think about what *I* wanted for myself. Who *I* wanted in my life. I have to find my own joy, my own purpose and happiness first before inviting others to share in it with me. That’s what I’ve been working on, but now . . .

Now I’m creating a family with a man who only recently started acknowledging me. A man who thinks a relationship with me would be inappropriate. I’m nowhere near who he would consider his ideal girlfriend, yet he’s stuck with me in one very big way now.

This changes everything.

Chloe's right. He'd want to do the right thing, and it's everything I don't want. I don't want an obligatory relationship or him attempting to take care of us, or a bumpier road down the path of finding someone who loves me for me. Someone who loves me as much as I love him. I'm sick of being the person who falls all the way, only to realize after I've jumped that I'm alone. That he didn't jump with me and never intended to. I'm always the risk-taker, the one who feels first, tries harder, wants more.

I told myself not to plunge into relationships and definitely not with another unavailable man. And now I'm pregnant. With Garrett's baby. Someone I've had feelings for who has never opened himself to me except for a few short instances, most of which led to regret on his end.

Now he's stuck with me for many years to come—in a way he can't avoid.

Parts of my future have been locked into place, and the idea of finding love while pregnant or while being a single working mom is daunting. Especially when I have so many feelings already wrapped up in a man who will now always be obligated to be in my life.

"I'm going to get you on some prenatal vitamins, prescribe something to help with your nausea, and book your first ultrasound. Then I'll take you home."

"I'm not sick, Chloe. I can stay and help out here." I'd be a useless wreck, but it might take my mind off my current situation.

"And what will you tell Garrett when he asks why you didn't go home?"

Excellent point.

"Fine. Take me home. Or maybe we could stop by the pharmacy for the vitamins first?"

She shakes her head at me like I'm crazy. "You really have been gone too long. We can't get you those vitamins here in town. We'll have to go to Vaughn or Santa Rosa. Unless you want everyone knowing before Garrett. As it is, Linda knows

not to put anything in your file and that it's only the three of us who are to know about your test results today."

"I never even thought about that." Being back to small-town living takes some getting used to. I forgot that whatever you do or buy is fair game for people to talk about. Sometimes, it's good fun. Other times, it's intensely annoying how nosy the people of Landry can get. I guess it didn't matter to me as much when I didn't have juicy gossip to keep from spreading.

"I'll grab you some samples, and then we can go into the city this weekend."

"Okay."

"How are you doing, hon?"

"Okay."

"Do you have any questions?"

"Okay," I say again numbly, not quite paying attention.

Chloe hugs me again and I grab on tight. "Want me to come over after work, and you can hit me with all your questions? I can almost guarantee you'll have a ton."

"Okay." This time, I smile so she knows I mean it.

"Let's get going."

We open the door and head to the front counter to grab my things.

Garrett leans against the wall. His broad shoulders are tense, and his face furrowed as he stares at the piece of paper he's holding. His eyes glance up briefly, and then once he recognizes it's us, he strides over.

"Feeling better?" he asks me, and I nod. He turns to Chloe. "Let me see the blood panel you ordered."

"No. She's my patient. If I want a consultation or feel that I need one, I'll be sure to ask. I'm taking Chloe home to rest. I'll be back in"—she looks at me—"um, a little bit."

She probably doesn't know how long we'll be because she's not sure if I'm going to have a breakdown.

That makes two of us.

He sighs. His eyes are tight with worry. "Okay. Aria, call if you need anything."

I nod, unable to talk to him. Not wanting his sympathy. I want him to go back to ignoring me like he was after we had sex. It would make things a hell of a lot easier.

No, don't panic. Keep it together until you get home.

The car ride to my mom's place is short. We probably could have walked.

She leads me up to the back entrance, saying something, but I'm in a bit of a daze.

"Sorry, Chlo. I can't really process anything right now. Can you still come over later though?"

"You bet. Love you."

"Love you too." I reach over for another hug and draw as much strength from it as I can.



Chloe came over the other night and brought some reading for me because she said that, while I might be feeling overwhelmed, I'll probably have questions later. I also had her cuddle me in my bed while we talked. It was something we always used to do when we were sad or PMSing.

She made me promise to text or call anytime, but I just need some time to let it all settle.

I also decided to wait a couple of days before telling Garrett. If I had told him right away, I would have been focused on his feelings instead of my own, and I needed to figure mine out first.

Although, I'm not sure what exactly there is to figure out. I'm having a baby. Yet I have no home, no husband, boyfriend, or romantic partner, and I'm about to start a new business which will likely take a lot of time and effort over the next year. As will a baby.

I've caught myself staring at Garrett too many times at work today, wondering what he'll say or do. He keeps looking at me like I'm about to barf or faint or something. It's concerned eyes that meet my gaze, and that makes me equal parts happy and sad.

"Feeling better today?" he asks, coming up behind me and placing a hand on my arm. The warmth makes me shiver. His hand moves to my forehead, cups my cheek, then slips behind my hair to grip the back of my neck, and it feels incredible for all the wrong reasons.

I give him a questioning look. "Um, yes. Thank you. What's with the head groping?"

"I'm checking to see if you have a fever or feel clammy. Did Chloe get you back to full health already, then?"

"Something like that," I answer vaguely.

He searches my eyes and I look away. Shit, this is hard.

His hand slowly slips from my neck, and goose bumps rise in its wake. "Okay, well, try to take it easy today. And come see me if you're feeling off." He hesitates before walking away.

I've changed my mind.

Not telling him and having him worry about me while I worry about telling him might actually be worse than knowing his feelings while trying to figure out my own. I've never been great about bottling my feelings.

This tightness in my chest, the nonstop spinning of my mind's every thought, is agonizing. Maybe gathering all the information, including Garrett's thoughts, will help.

"Garrett?"

He turns around, his eyes darting toward me with a look I've never seen before. "You hardly ever call me Garrett and definitely never in that tone."

"It's your name."

"Yet, you rarely use it."

"I'm trying to be direct and serious."

"Is there something to be serious about? Are you really okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Promise. I was wondering if I could talk to you about something today after work?"

"Um, sure. I have a thing . . . appointment, uh, event thing. Let me just call and—"

"No, I don't want you to cancel your appointment."

"Actually, you'd be doing me a favor." He rubs the back of his neck. "My mom set me up with someone and just told me today. Apparently, she's coming from a few towns over, and I'm expected to be at my parents' place in St. Helena by six o'clock. However, if I'm tied up at work, either we'd have to cancel or I'd be there late and have to endure less of this event."

"You have a date?"

"No. I wouldn't do that. I mean, I didn't agree to it. I was actually also hoping we'd be able to talk."

I lift my chin. "Fine. I'll be brief so you can get back to finding your compatible dream lady."

A short grumbling sound leaves his throat. "I'm trying to tell you that my preference would be for you to keep me late so I didn't have to attend the event at all." He tilts his head toward me, and whatever he sees—confusion, hope, disbelief—makes him grin at me. It's such a rare treat that I soak it in for a few moments before rolling my eyes and turning around to face the waiting room again.

"Four thirty? In my office? Should I go grab us some coffee first, and we can make it five o'clock? You know, really

drag it out. Oh, and you could maybe do that thing you do sometimes when you trip on the entrance rug. If you tell me you hit your head, I'd have to run concussion protocol, and that could take hours. We might even have to go to Vaughn for some scans."

I turn around and give him my best "what the fuck" look. Is he flirting with me?

"They have a new taco place I think you'd like if that helps you decide. You love tacos, don't you? Isn't that a thing women love?"

I spin back around, biting the edge of my lip to keep from grinning. "I'll come see you in your office at four thirty."

"I can order in tacos. They won't be from the new place, but Taps has great carnitas."

"I don't need tacos, Doc."

"Fine." He sighs. "Just coffees then, but you'll have to promise to spill one on me. That'll buy us some time."

This is . . . Oh, sweet Lord. This is Garrett flirting?

It's awful. Yet I can't turn around because he'll see how well it's working.

"You have patients waiting," I remind him.

"I'm not sure I really care right now, Minx. Turn around."

I shake my head. No way am I letting him see my face right now.

Remember what you have to tell him. This will change everything. In a few short hours, he won't remember flirting with you because his mind will have exploded from the news that he's going to have a kid.

"If this flirting is because you feel bad about our dynamic changing and you want to goad me into my usual behavior, it's not happening, Doc. Move it along."

"You think I'm trying to goad you into ribbing and flirting with me again?"

That makes me turn around. “You’re not?”

He smothers a laugh with his hand. My gaze narrows at him, not wanting to be laughed at right now. “Wow. I’m really bad at this. You make flirting look so easy, but it’s clearly a delicate art form. I’ve never been great with art.” My face softens at his words, but all I can do is blink at him. “Everything I think to say makes me feel like an idiot. And now you believe I’m only saying nice things and wanting to spend time with you because I want to go back to how things were. That I’m just trying to fix what I broke. Don’t get me wrong, I do want to go back to when you actually liked me. I don’t want to pretend to be unaffected anymore. I’m trying here, Aria.”

I’m baffled. Shocked. Maybe even more than I was when Chloe told me I was pregnant. My lip is bruised and raw from all the biting and chewing.

“Four thirty, my office?” he asks gently.

I nod, and he gives me a soft, shy smile.

I thought tightly wound, practical, indifferent Garrett was hot and alluring with all his bottled emotions. The moments when he’d open up and show he cared were worth every instant he walked away from me.

But the Garrett with horrible lines and playful words? The one with cute, timid smiles and affectionate glances usually only reserved for his family? The Garrett that’s so fucking sweet I’m almost mad I haven’t gotten to experience this side of him before?

That Garrett is dangerous.

CHAPTER 16



ARIA

I've been watching the clock all afternoon, and by the time the last patient leaves, I'm a nervous wreck.

Even the backs of my knees are sweating as I knock on his office door with my chin held high. Knee sweat better only be a pregnancy thing.

"Come in, Aria."

"How did you know it was me?" I open the door and make a beeline for a chair to get this conversation over with.

His brow twitches so quickly I almost don't notice. "We arranged to talk at this time. Plus, I believe you're the only other person here right now."

"Right."

He sits back in his chair, and I try to remember the words I practiced in my head. I won't really understand how to handle the upcoming changes until I hear how Garrett feels.

I don't know how long I have been sitting here staring at him, stuck on remembering what to say, but it's long enough that he's looking worried.

"Have you eaten yet today? I can order some soup from the Sandwich Shop if you're still feeling off."

He's been checking on me all week. I must have freaked him out. Or maybe he doesn't want to hire and train another admin staff member. I've even received a few random texts from him. They were awkward, stilted, and almost . . . sweet.

“I ate. One of the girls left some cheese biscuits and fruit on my desk earlier today.”

He searches my face. “Okay. I’ve been meaning to ask you to sit down and talk for a little while, but I wasn’t sure if you would be open to that.” His cheek twitches, and that cute half smile pulls at his lips. “So I’m glad you wanted to talk.” Garrett looks down at his hands and spreads them out across the desk as if he’s trying to calm his nerves before looking back at me.

“Um, yes. Well, I have a personal issue I need to tell you about, and it’s going to change a lot of things.” A shaky exhale escapes, drawing Garrett’s attention and immediate concern.

“Aria, are you unhappy here? I know things with us have been difficult, and I’ve probably messed up at every turn. If you want, we can keep things strictly professional. I’ve been worried about you this week, but I can lay off the check-ins or whatever I’m doing that’s pissing you off. You’re a . . . Honestly, you’re a temptation I’ve always had a hard time resisting. But if you want me to back off, I understand.”

I’m taken aback, my forehead scrunching in confusion. Does he know?

“That’s going to be a little tough, actually.”

His mouth closes in a firm line, his eyes boring into mine, patiently waiting for me to continue.

“Before, you said our night was a one-time deal, that we couldn’t be together. That it was a mistake.” He frowns deeply and opens his mouth to speak, but I keep going, wanting to get it all out. “I was upset at first but I agree. We did let things go too far, especially considering the difference in what we each thought our moment of, um, intimacy meant. That’s what I have to talk to you about.”

He scrubs a hand down his face. “Aria, I was wrong. I—”

I cut him off. “I’m . . .” I freeze. Oh shit, I’m not sure I can say it.

“You’re . . . ?”

“Pregnant,” I let out on a whispered breath.

“Pregnant?”

I clear my throat. I know he heard me because his eyebrows have become one with his hairline. No point being timid now.

“Yes, pregnant. I’m pregnant, Garrett.”

He doesn’t move. He doesn’t blink. I’m not even sure he’s breathing.

“It’s why I’ve been sick lately. Pregnancy hormones and symptoms are hitting me hard. I’ve thrown up almost every morning and afternoon for days. The symptoms started a little over a week ago, but because the Merrick boys had that stomach bug, I thought that’s all it was.”

“You . . . Are you . . . ? Did you do a test?”

“Yes. Chloe tested my urine twice, and the blood test results came back this afternoon. They all said the same thing: I am very, definitively pregnant.”

“Pregnant,” he repeats.

My heart is pounding. This is the biggest moment of my life thus far, and I feel vulnerable. Part of me is hanging on by a thread, wanting him to say all the right things but not even knowing what those things are. The other part of me is trying to convince myself that it doesn’t matter what he says. It won’t change my mind or my heart. Though, I’m not even sure what those two parts of me are feeling from day to day anymore.

“Yes.”

“Alright.” He pauses, adjusting his shirt collar and huffing shallow breaths.

“Alright?”

“I don’t— What do you . . . ?” He tries again. “How are you feeling?”

“About the same. The nausea and light-headedness come and go.”

“Good. Good.” His eyes finally break from their wandering trance to look directly at me. “I meant, how are you feeling about being pregnant? Not that I don’t care about your physical health because I do. It’s been on my mind since that dinner at my parents’ house when I noticed you weren’t eating.”

“I feel . . . I don’t know yet. Worried, excited, panicked, curious, lost, determined. A little bit of everything.”

“How far along are you?”

There it is. Not sure which version of “whose baby is it” is better, his or Chloe’s.

“About seven weeks. Chloe says they start counting from the date of your last period.”

“Yes. You missed your period?”

“I spotted and thought that was it this month. Apparently not.”

“Spotting can occur during implantation.”

“I got the same spiel from your sister.”

He nods woodenly. “Right. So . . .”

“You’re the baby daddy, Garrett.”

“Yes, I gathered that.” He nods again but doesn’t say anything else. Not even a twitch in his expression. God, this is painful and so different than the Garrett from a few hours ago.

“Chloe has me on prenatal vitamins, and I go in for an ultrasound late next month. Once you’ve had time to digest this, we can figure out what the future looks like, but for now, we just see how things go.”

His jaw is tight as he straightens in his chair. When his eyes come back to meet mine, there’s something in them I don’t recognize. It’s not cold indifference, or resignation, irritation, anger, or even shock. What is he thinking?

“We should both take time to process. Let’s take the rest of the week to think. Then we can come up with a plan to move forward.”

“It’s Friday, Doc. That only gives us the weekend.”

“Did you need more time? I can always discuss my thoughts and ideas to get us started. Let’s meet on Sunday. Come to my place and we can have dinner.”

“That’s it?”

“I mean, I don’t normally keep sweets in the house, but I could easily pick up something for dessert if you’d like. Your favorite is cheesecake, right? The chocolate kind?”

My eyes narrow slightly. How the hell does he know that?

“Yes, but that’s not what I meant. I guess I’m just confused about your reaction. I tell you I’m having your baby after we indulged in an event you deemed a mistake, yet you seem fine. This is life-altering news, Garrett. Can we not freak out together? You’re making me feel like the crazy one here.”

“That might be the hormones talking.”

My eyes spark with barely restrained rage as he holds up a hand to apologize, seeing the intent in my eyes.

“Hormones? You think that being emotional about getting unexpectedly pregnant and having my whole life change is just hormones?”

“Maybe people need a change every now and then. I know I do.”

“So you change your shampoo, or you move, or you give golf a try. Hell, maybe even embark on a new career. Getting pregnant is not a whim or a life lane change. Having a baby is a whole different world.”

“Yeah,” he says with a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

I growl in frustration. “I don’t understand you at all. For years you were mostly apathetic toward me, and while you might have found me moderately attractive, you’ve said ‘get away from me, brat,’ on many occasions. When I was a teenager and liked toying with you, you used to tell me to go focus my ‘ridiculous teenage fantasies’ on someone else because you had no time for a ‘love-crazy, naive girl who can’t tell when a guy isn’t interested.’”

He scrubs a hand down his face. “Maybe I was a bigger prick than I realized back then, but I was far from apathetic. You were young, innocent, and obnoxiously tenacious. For most of your teens, you were basically a walking, talking, heart-eyes emoji and decided to fixate some of that on me. If I had given you even an inch . . .”

“I probably would have fallen all over myself in shock when I was younger and had no idea what to do. But in the last handful of years, if you had only given me an inch, you could be damn sure I would have been demanding the rest.” My gaze flicks to his groin, perhaps involuntarily, and he grins for a split second before schooling his expression.

“Christ. Aria . . .”

Shit. “Sorry, I’m stressed and confused, and it just slipped out.” I take a cleansing breath. “I mean, first, you’re telling me that us being together was a mistake and avoided me for weeks. Next thing I know, you’re texting me, checking on me, and seeing if I’m okay. I’m finding food and treats on my desk that I am now realizing was probably you.” I throw my hands up. “Then I tell you I’m pregnant, and you act like everything is just fine?”

“It will be. I have a plan. We’ll figure this out.”

“How the hell do you have a plan when I told you like thirteen seconds ago?”

He doesn’t answer me, just gives me that soft, cute smile. He’s looking at me like he knows something I don’t.

Not wanting to think about what that could be, I make my way out of his office. “Sunday at six o’clock?” he calls out after I’ve already left.

I stop and turn back to him. “Fine. But that chocolate cheesecake is required to ensure my attendance.”

“Done.” I move to leave again, but he says, “Wait. What about the coffee?”

“I probably shouldn’t drink too much caffeine, right? I thought you were the doctor, Doc?” I ask, unable to keep the teasing tone from my voice.

“No, not drinking the coffee. Spilling it on me. I have an unwanted setup to dodge, and I’m pretty sure you promised to get me out of it.”

I think about his situation, and I have a lot of feelings about it. Would pouring coffee on the man who hinders nearly every rational thought I have help in some way?

Only one way to find out.

I march back to his desk and pick up the coffee mug containing stagnant, cold coffee from earlier in the day. He opens his mouth about to say something, but before he can change his mind, I thrust the cup in a wide arc.

His hands are up, watching the coffee drip to the floor. Then he beams at me, wearing the biggest smile I’ve ever seen on his face as his eyes shine with delight.

“Thank you.”

I scrunch my face at him in confusion. He’s a hot, mesmerizing weirdo, and I like it. There’s something wrong with me.

I leave his office feeling mildly better but still flustered. He didn’t freak out or get upset. Yes, he was shocked, but otherwise, he acted cool as a cucumber like usual.

CHAPTER 17



GARRETT

I have a plan—a tentative plan. And when I have a plan and execute the plan, I remain in control of the outcome. I don't panic because I know what to do.

Which is why I have a plan for this too.

And why there's no need to panic.

Does this change things? Yes.

In a bad way? Surprisingly, no.

All week, I'd been trying to win back Aria's smile, her flirtations, and attention. Fuck, I missed it. Admitting what happened between us at Chloe's was enlightening. I'd been holding on so tightly to the notion that I couldn't like Aria, that I shouldn't feel anything for her, that I missed my chance. Should I have a relationship with my sister's best friend? Probably not the best idea in most cases, but I can't ignore that this has been years in the making. Years of denial and guilt and feigned indifference.

I felt I couldn't express my interest in Aria for a lot of reasons. But none of them seem important anymore. I wanted to have some time to test the waters and get her to like me again.

Hell, even getting her to *not* resent me over the next few weeks would have been a win. Now, not only has the timeline changed but the rules have too.

This might actually be perfect. Maybe not in the traditional way, and definitely not in the way I originally planned. That

alone should have me going off the rails, but I'm not.

Forgoing sleep last night, I formulated my plan. Which included texting Taylor early this morning to go for a run. I don't know anyone who loves talking about shit and problem-solving more than Taylor.

I hear his vehicle pull up just as I'm zipping my phone into the pocket of my running pants.

He meets me on the porch, jogging up the steps. I point at the path behind my house, and we start toward it. "You texted me really fucking early, man. Spill."

"You sound like Lauren."

With a grin, he says, "Yeah, well, we spend a lot of time together, and I kind of like her."

My brain is going a mile a minute, and Taylor notices, giving me a little shove. "Are you going to tell me what's eating at you?"

"Aria's pregnant."

My best friend stumbles, hands falling to the pavement to catch himself. "Oh, shit." He blows out a breath. "That's . . . Wow. Um. I'm not even sure where to start." He doesn't stay unsure for long. "Are you upset you missed your chance? Don't pretend you don't have feelings for her. I know you too well for that. You know she's a grown-ass, single, available woman, right? Regardless, I doubt the father would be in the picture. I heard that guy she was dating kicked her out. Do you think he knew? What kind of garbage human being would—" He stops dead in his tracks. "Wait. How did you find out before anyone else? Why would she—?" He spins around and gets in front of me, jogging backward now. "No. Fucking. Way."

"Yeah."

"No."

"Yeah."

"Hold up." He stops us on the path. Taylor never stops during a run. He's almost as bad as Jess. "Let's just take a

moment here. Aria is pregnant.” I nod. “And . . . the baby is yours, not the jackass baseball player’s?”

I nod again, my hands finding the back of my neck and tugging. “Yes. Can we skip ahead now?”

He simulates his head exploding, including the sound effects. “Hell no. I’m going to need way more details. Were you guys seeing each other this whole time?”

“No, it was only that one night I told you about.”

“That’s all it takes, Gar. Why only the one time? I thought for sure you’d come to your senses at some point. In fact, I thought that’s what this super early Saturday morning run was about.”

“We talked about this already.” I told him the night it happened because I needed to tell someone. He called me an idiot then, and I’m fully prepared to hear it again now. “At the time, there were a lot of reasons. How many would you like?”

I start jogging again, needing to feel something other than the guilt churning in my gut.

I can practically hear him frowning at me. Or maybe he’s grunting in annoyance while running.

“Three. I want three legitimate reasons you never allowed yourself to have her.”

“Allowed myself to have her? You make me sound like some poor sap pining away after a woman who can’t be mine.”

My steps falter. Shit, I *am* that poor sap.

He snorts. “You are. Gar, you’re my best friend, and we’ve seen each other through some shit. So I am going to lay down some truth. You are nearly impossible to read with only a few exceptions—when you are uncomfortable and when Aria is around. You react to her like I’ve never seen you react to anyone.”

“You’re only saying you noticed I behave differently around her after the fact. I kept everything on lockdown when I was around her. I made sure.”

He grins. “Exactly. You did feel something for her and had to shut it down. You never allowed yourself to show any feelings for the beautiful girl who kept you a tangled mess of discomfort and need. God, Lauren is going to eat this shit up. After telling her this story, I’ll probably get some extra enthusiastic sex tonight. Maybe I’ll tell her while giving her a back rub, really get her going. Lauren actually wanted to change our Christmas plans so we could be at your place for your holiday gathering this year. She said between you two and Sean’s new girlfriend, it might be the best Caldwell Christmas event yet.”

“You’ve twisted my current life dilemma into a way to get laid.”

“I know how to keep my wife happy. Sorry if that rains on the baby parade you seem oddly indifferent about.”

“I’m not indifferent.” I’m really good with it, and I’m not sure what to make of it.

“Seems that way. Does Aria know you aren’t super concerned? Are you questioning if the baby’s yours? Are you angry that this changes your ‘find the appropriate woman’ plans? Do you not want to be a part of the baby’s life?”

I shove a palm into his chest, and he moves a few feet away. “What the fuck are you talking about? Of course, I want them.”

His eyes widen in surprise before a grin appears on his boyishly charming face. Fucker. He’s messing with me.

“Just needed to break you out of whatever loop your mind’s in. Sometimes you need a push.”

“Push gentler next time.”

He shakes his head and starts running again. “Wouldn’t have worked if I had been gentle. You’re not exactly known for understanding subtleties.”

I’m quiet for a while and find Taylor looking my way every so often. He’s waiting.

“I’ve always considered her to be young—too young.”

“She’s what? Twenty-six? Twenty-seven? That might be quite a bit younger than us, but it’s not like she’s a college freshman and you’re her fifty-eight-year-old sugar daddy who she’s using to pay for her education.”

“Seriously? You’re supposed to be helping me here.”

He elbows me. “What else? Come on, get it all out.”

“She’s Chloe’s best friend. She’s been a part of our family for a long time.”

“And how much of that time have you wanted her?”

“That’s irrelevant to this discussion.”

“I disagree.”

“If things don’t work out or she figures out her feelings for me were just the thrill of the challenge I presented and she actually hates me, that would cause a lot of problems. With my sister, with my parents, and definitely with Aria and my kid.” I huff out a breath and stumble a little. “My kid.”

He claps me on the back. “It’s big, man. Congrats. You’re going to be a great dad.”

“Thanks, man. I’ve been trying to tackle one problem at a time. I’m not sure how many of them Aria will let me clear out of the way.”

“There are only as many obstacles as you allow there to be. What matters most to you? Think about that, and don’t let the rest get in the way. I’ve seen you do it too many times. You let planning and obligations interfere with what you want.”

“I seem to remember a time when you let things get in the way of what you wanted too.”

He shakes his head, but there’s a smile on his face. “Yeah, but then I stopped. I let go of the self-punishment. Garrett, there aren’t any good reasons not to let yourself have this future in front of you. Unless you want a different one. But don’t let a life you planned in your head—one you aren’t attached to—derail a possibility you’ve always wanted. I’ve seen you shut down because it was easier to stay aloof. You can’t do that here.”

“I know. I told her I have a plan, and we’ll figure it out,” I say confidently. But doubts have been creeping in. What if I’m not enough for the vivacious woman I’m desperate to keep?

“Good. What’s the plan?”

“Something she’s either going to welcome or intensely hate.”

Taylor’s laughter rings out behind him as he speeds up.

“Come on, let’s work off some of that stress. I can practically see it radiating off you. We’ll swing by the school gym, and I’ll get you on the squat rack. It’ll give you lots of time to think about what’s most important to you. You know, when you’re walking home contemplating if you’ll ever make it.”

I sigh and sprint after him.

“I didn’t tell you the third reason yet.”

“Is there one?”

“There was. It’s irrelevant now.”

“What was it?”

“I made a list of compatible qualities in a girlfriend and eventual wife.”

“A list? You think the right woman for you—the one you’ll want to spend the rest of your life with, the one you’ll crave and never let anyone or anything get in the way of her happiness—is going to perfectly fit every aspect of what you believe the right partner should be?”

“Compatibility is an important determinant in the longevity of a relationship. Isn’t it?”

“Sure. Maybe for things like what you both want out of life or your morals and spiritual beliefs. But do you think I could have picked the qualities in a woman who would have perfectly represented the woman I fell in love with? Most days, Lauren’s just barely on the right side of crazy, but I love everything about her. I would do fucking *anything* for her. She’s imperfect in the most perfect way. She’s perfect because

of the way she makes me feel, the way she loves me, and the man I am with her. Do you really believe your specified list of personality traits and tendencies will get you that kind of love? Think about the things you like about Aria. Are those traits on the list?"

"The parts of Aria I find endearing, even while infuriating, aren't on the list, no. She's never been on the list because that list is what I'm willing to settle for. It's what would guarantee an easy, if not somewhat boring, relationship. Aria isn't easy or boring, and that scares the shit out of me."

Taylor grins, his enormous shoulders twitching a little as he holds in his laughter. "Good. That means she makes you feel. Isn't that what you want?"

"What if it's not as simple as that?" I've never felt as uncertain and anxious about anything in my life. Making decisions based on emotions isn't something I'm adept at.

"Relationships aren't simple, man. Look, bottom line—do you want to be smart and practical about your love life, or do you want to open up a little so your feelings can take a shot at it? Because there won't be much of a love life without the love part."

The times I've opened up have led to me shutting right back down, guilt-ridden and ashamed that I lost control. If what Taylor says is true, she's been a possibility for years, and I've fucked it up by keeping her away and shutting her down for so long. This past week of flirting and buttering her up hasn't changed that.

"I flirted with her today—or tried to. I've been trying all week. After the family dinner you ditched last week, I decided to test the waters with her and go after what I wanted. I've been watching her, talking more, bringing her lunch. But the flirting was not successful. She barely looked at me. I want her. I want her so badly that it's eating at me. I have a plan for us, and it's this huge possibility. Something I've never allowed myself to consider. But what if I can't make her happy? What if I'm—"

“You’re *way* overthinking this. She’s going to make you work for it. You’ve been keeping her at arm’s length for a long-ass time. Didn’t she make a move on you last fall, and you ignored her until she moved back here?”

I clear my throat. “About that . . .”

His head whips around to stare at me. If he trips and injures himself, there is very little chance I’m going to be able to haul his giant ass out of here.

“She wasn’t making a move. I was. She was crying, some idiot made her feel like shit again. I just . . . I comforted her, hugged her, touched her, and I was about to take it further when you came outside. I didn’t correct you when you wrongly assumed she came on to me. *I* was the one who almost kissed *her*.”

His mouth hangs open for a moment. I give him a tight smile and a shrug. “And when you two were baby-making, who initiated that?”

“She was being so . . . I missed her messing with me, her crazy comments and playful looks. She wasn’t being herself and it was driving me crazy.”

“So, *you* did?”

“Yes.” I dart a glance to my right and see he’s still staring at me. “Each time. It’s been me who’s caved, me who’s lost control for a moment, and each time, it hurt her or pissed her off. Then I give her space, which somehow fucks it up more. She doesn’t like space—she likes talking and affection and chaos.” She’s chaos personified in my organized, careful life. And I miss it.

“You are so fucked.” He’s no longer looking at me, but I can see the amusement on his face as he picks up his pace. “Congratulations, man,” he calls back to me.

I increase my strides to match his, but my mind’s not in it, and I lag behind for the rest of the run, huffing like it’s my first time. Maybe it is. It’s my first time letting myself feel something that matters, something I have no control over.

CHAPTER 18



ARIA

I hold my breath as I ring Garrett's doorbell. Movement catches my eye, and I turn to look for whatever it was. The curtains flutter on the house next door to Garrett's—Jess and Emma's house. They definitely saw me.

Garrett opens the door, a delicate smile on his distinctly handsome face. He doesn't say a word as he ushers me in and closes the door behind me. I feel his hands on my shoulders as he goes to take my sweater. I hadn't planned on removing it, but he's being gentlemanly and I kind of like it.

He still hasn't spoken, but that's not unusual for Garrett, only for me.

His hand moves to my back as he leads me to the kitchen, and the gentleness has heat building in my lower abdomen and goose bumps skittering along my skin.

I take a seat at the island where he has food and drinks neatly set out.

"Hi," he finally says, hovering right next to me.

Looking up at him, I swivel on my stool slightly, knocking into his legs. One side of Garrett's mouth lifts in amusement, but he doesn't move.

"Hi," I say back. We look at each other until I finally cave. "I don't know what to say or do. I have so many feelings and so many questions, and you're just staring at me. The food smells amazing, but all I want to do is dig into the chocolate

cheesecake, and I think I might cry if you tell me you didn't get it because I've been craving it since you mentioned it."

His amusement turns into a bright, wide smile.

"Let's start with the cheesecake, then."

Yes! I bounce in my seat a little as he gets it from the fridge.

"You're cute," he announces, and I look at him in question. "Communication and appreciation are important in relationships. I've been doing some reading," he explains.

He's been doing some reading into relationships?

Questions begin to form at the edges of my mind, but then he passes me a fork and a pink cake box, and all thoughts vanish. I'm not sure if he opens the box or if I do, but I'm inhaling the chocolaty, creamy goodness within seconds.

"Should we talk about some of those other feelings and questions while you get your sugar fix, or would you prefer I lay out my tentative plan?"

"I don't think I'm ready for your tentative plan quite yet. Plus, maybe some of my points will result in a modification of the plan."

"Maybe," he says softly, but his tone hints at placation.

"Want some?" I ask, holding up a bite.

"I don't usually eat dessert."

"Well, maybe no one has offered you a tempting enough taste yet." I savor the bite he backed away from, delighting in its rich flavor. Scooping up another bite, I lick a stray crumb off my lips while offering him another chance. "Come on, don't make me eat the whole cake by myself. You know you want some. I can see it in your eyes." His eyes darken as he looks from me to the fork in front of him.

"It's not the cheesecake that tempts me, Ari."

I gape at him in surprise. Still holding the fork in front of him, I'm even more surprised when he swoops down and devours the bite.

I watch him unabashedly as he chews, a look of consternation on his face. One of his hands finds the high back of my stool while the other plants itself in front of me on the island.

My face is still tipped up to his, mesmerized by this side of Garrett—one who gets in my personal space, touches me with ease, and quietly flirts with me. He leans down, lips inches from mine, his eyes tracing each curve of my face. “That was truly awful. Thank you for offering me some.”

His hand comes up to cup my face, and I feel his thumb brush against my mouth. My eyelids practically flutter closed in delight. “You had some chocolate.” I mumble some kind of agreement. “Are you ready for the entree now?”

Fuck, yes.

Food! He’s only talking about feeding me.

“Yeah, his dick,” my horny mind claps back.

“Sure. Yes. Let’s eat.”

He passes me a plate and starts dishing up the food, asking before he plates up each item just in case I think it won’t agree with me. It’s sweet and a little overprotective.

I like it. I like it a lot.

“Want to tell me what you’re thinking about? You seem deeper in thought right now than you did when you walked in.”

“I was trying to be chill before. Now, my tummy is full of delicious food and sugar, and my mind is back to our situation.”

Something moves against my leg, and I flinch, looking down. A gray-and-white-striped tabby cat is rubbing against me. She looks up at me with her sweet little face, and I bend to scoop her up.

“Who are you, sweet thing?”

“It’s a cat.”

I roll my eyes at his answer. “Whose cat?”

“Mine.” My jaw drops again as I look from cat to Garrett.

“You have a cat?” He doesn’t answer, just quirks his brows and shifts his gaze to the physical evidence in my arms. “Well, looks like your daddy still has a few surprises up his sleeve,” I tell his fur baby. His eyes light with warmth as he watches me snuggle his kitty. “What’s her name?”

Hesitancy ebbs into his soft expression. “She was already named when I got her.”

I raise my brows at him. Oh, it’s going to be good.

“Petun . . .” he mumbles unintelligibly.

“What’s that?” His hand moves along his jaw, highlighting his discomfort. Not willing to wait, I check her collar instead, twisting it around to find the tag.

Princess Petunia.

“The family had to re-home her because of their daughter’s severe allergies.”

“‘Princess Petunia.’ That’s incredibly sweet.”

“I shortened it to Petunia, but usually just call her Cat.”

“That’s less sweet, but you get bonus points for taking her in, so I’ll overlook it.”

I coo to the cat and snuggle her into my chest. Garrett’s eyes never leave me, I can feel them everywhere.

“Come on, Ari. Lay it on me. What are you thinking?”

I take one long inhale before answering. “I’m not even sure where to begin.”

“Wherever you want.” Kindness and understanding lace his tone.

“You’re being too nice to me.” I frown up at him.

A laugh bursts from his lips. “I’m sorry. I’ll try to be less nice.”

“It’s just weird. I’ve seen you interact with other people like this, but I’ve always gotten the cold Growly Garrett.”

“I can still be that way sometimes. Usually, when I’m stressed or uncomfortable. I’ve gotten used to having to be that way around you.”

“Why? Is it because I piss you off?”

“No. Although . . .” He scrubs a hand over his scruff. “Maybe sometimes.” A grin stretches across his face, his perfect teeth then biting slightly into his lower lip. “Let’s focus on our pregnancy situation for now, okay?”

I sigh. “I guess the first thing you should know is that I am perfectly capable of raising this baby alone.”

He rears back. “What? I’ll be in this baby’s life, so why would you be alone?”

“I wasn’t sure where you stood or what you were thinking, so I wanted to just put it out there. I know you are a man who takes his responsibilities and obligations seriously, but I only want someone in this baby’s life who will be there for good. My dad, while generally good and kind, wasn’t around much, and when he finally decided he wasn’t meant for small-town family life, it crushed me. I don’t want my kid to have a dad who’s not really all in.”

He searches my face, assessing me. “I’m all in, Aria. It’s not even a question. I would never be that kind of man. I know you love your dad, and you say he’s a good man, but it sounds like he was a crappy father. You don’t have to worry about that with me.”

I clench my jaw, old feelings rising to the surface. “Okay.”

“What else?”

“We are both going to be the best people we can for this baby, and for me that means still following my career dreams. Before the baby comes, I want to have my business up and running. The nice thing about owning my own photography business is that, for the most part, I can make my own hours. However, I’d like to keep working at the clinic to supplement my income and put some money aside. Babies are expensive, and I need to try to find an apartment fairly soon.”

A scowl flashes across his face. “Is that it?” he asks quietly.

“I think we should wait to tell your parents until the end of the first trimester when the chances of miscarriage are lower. If something happened . . .”

“If something happened, I would think you would want your family and friends there to support you.”

“I might feel a bit awkward about that, considering it’s your family.”

“You’ve treated them as your own for years, Aria. You shouldn’t let anything change that.”

He’s right. If something happened, I would want to talk about it with Millie and Chloe. I know Millie experienced miscarriages before Chloe came along.

“You’re right. We’ll tell them this week.” He nods and goes around the island to pour us some water.

“Anything else?”

“We’ll need to come up with a custody agreement.” His hand freezes as he passes me my glass. I knew this would be awkward, but it’s necessary.

“We’ll figure out a schedule that works for the both of us,” he answers.

I chew on the edge of my lip, feeling uncertain about how that will work.

“My turn now?”

“One last thing,” I say as firmly as I can. “I know this isn’t how you imagined starting your family. Chloe told me how worried she’s been because you’ve seemed so unhappy the past couple of years. Then you started seriously looking for a relationship, wanting to find the right woman, date her, intertwine your lives, get married, and eventually have a family—probably at carefully timed intervals. You were looking for very specific traits to build a particular kind of life. She showed me that dating requirements list you made, and it’s nearly the opposite of me. Almost like you made it that

way on purpose, actually.” A soft, derisive snort leaves me. “You’re a ‘by the book’ kind of guy, and I—we—fucked it up.”

He leans forward to speak, but I hold up a hand, wanting to finish. “I know how that feels because I wanted something special too. I’ve come to realize that I chose to be in relationships with men who I knew weren’t the best but couldn’t really hurt me, and at the time, that was good enough. I’ve had a lot of men let me down, disappoint me, hurt my feelings, but I also had a lot of love to give. But it always ended in disaster. I left that behind, wanting to make myself happy first and not rely on others to do it for me. But I still want love. I’m not willing to settle for ‘he’s not an asshole’ or ‘he buys me pretty things’ anymore. That’s not the kind of affection I need or want. So while we may be having a baby together, I’m under no illusions that you won’t want to keep looking for a *Mrs. Doc*. And, at twenty-seven years old, I’ll be a single mom looking for a *Mr. Minx* who doesn’t mind my fun, affectionate kind of crazy. Maybe I’ll even find someone who loves it and me.”

Petunia purrs against me, and I look at her instead of the man who I want to be my everything but can’t be.

“No.”

I go over in my mind where in my soul-bearing speech I asked a question.

“Is it my turn now?” His eyes have turned hard, and his posture is no longer casual.

I nod, uncertain where this is going.

“Let’s start from the top. You can work at Caldwell Medical for as long as you’d like. Your maternity leave with the clinic is six months of full pay and an additional six months of—”

I shake my head. “No, it’s not. Chloe said—”

“It’s a new policy.”

“What? Do we live in Canada now? Everyone gets lengthy, paid maternity leaves? Is this policy in effect for all

staff?”

He pauses. “Yes, it will apply to all staff.”

“Wouldn’t staff have to work for the company for a full year before being eligible for leave benefits?”

“*Aria.*”

“*Garrett,*” I mimic.

“All of my staff have been there that long.”

“I haven’t.”

“You’ll be close enough by the time our baby comes.”

I tsk at him. “Breaking the rules, Doc?”

“Only for you.” My taunting expression softens at that. “Next.” His face turns serious. “There’s no need to save for an apartment. You should invest that money or put it into savings. You and the baby will be staying here. It’s one of the reasons I wanted you to come over tonight, so you could see my place, and we could discuss you moving in.”

Whoa. Pump the brakes.

A nervous bark of laughter rushes out of me. “I’m not moving in with you.”

“Not right away, if you want to wait until after the holidays or if you wanted to redecorate the place or something.”

“Why would I want to redec—” I shake my head and focus on the main issue. “I’m not moving in with you, Garrett.”

“It will be much easier to help take care of a newborn and work around each other’s schedules if we lived together. We can take turns with nighttime feedings, rocking, diaper changes. I’m up early anyway and can let you sleep in. Sharing some of the responsibilities and being near each other means we will both get more time with the baby.”

I try to find an argument against that but can’t. Not right now anyway. “I’ll have to think about it. But either way, that wouldn’t be necessary until after the baby is born.”

“Well, you’d want to get comfortable here, and we’d have to babyproof the house and get his or her room ready. It would be a good idea to have a routine in place.”

I roll my eyes. Him and his routines.

“Don’t you think that might get a little too comfortable? And awkward?” A horrible thought occurs to me. “What about our personal lives? Would I go knock on Emma and Jess’s door or trek over to Chloe’s when you had a date or overnight guest? I’d have to take little Caldwell-Davenport with me somewhere so you could have some naked fun with your mail-order girlfriend?” My cheeks flush with indignation and a burning emotion I’m not used to.

“Mail-order girlfriend? Is that a real thing? Is there consent involved? Is it part of the sex service industry? Or is this a potential human trafficking incident that law enforcement should be made aware of?”

“Garrett. I’m serious. Not about the mail-order girlfriend thing, but the rest had some merit.”

He grins. Why does he keep doing that, and why does it affect me every single time?

“It won’t be a problem, Minx.”

“For *you*, maybe. Look at you, a jawline women want to rub up on, those long, lean muscles that do that sexy twitching thing I doubt you’re even aware of, and eyes that are like a glowing emerald lake filled with mystery. You have that cool, dark, ‘come make me whole’ quality that draws women in like a magnet. You won’t be the one needing to vacate the shared accommodations.”

“You want to rub up against my jaw?”

“You picked up on the *least* important part, Doc.”

“It’s a moot point. I won’t be bringing anyone home.”

“Oh. Okay, so you’ll be going to their place? What if you find a girlfriend, and she’s not okay with your baby mama living with you? How long can this arrangement last?”

He growls a low hum in his throat. *He's frustrated? With me?*

“Don’t you growl at me, Caldwell. These are legitimate questions. I won’t be going out on dates without a lot of prep, some tears, and likely breast pumping. Not to mention finding a guy who doesn’t mind my post-baby body and being with a spontaneously lactating, sleep-deprived, busy, new boss lady mamma. You, however, will be continuing on your dates and don’t lactate or have any sex drive-altering hormonal changes, so you’ll be set.”

He stares at me for a long time after I end my rant. Shifting his stool even closer to me, he takes my hand, and a tingle goes up my arm as his thumb smooths a path along my knuckles.

“Sorry. I should have been more clear before. Your mind is jumping to a lot of scenarios that could have been negated if I had explained better.” I tilt my head in question. “You are moving in here, not only to share parental responsibilities and bonding time but also because I want you here. I don’t want to be with anyone else. We are a family now. We may be doing things a little out of order, but that doesn’t make it wrong.”

“A family? I mean, technically, yes, but we won’t be *together* as a family in the traditional sense.”

“Why not?” My mouth opens but no words fall out. “Giving it—us—a chance seems to be the best course of action. I’ve been avoiding what’s between us, and now there’s no need to.”

He’s smiling at me so sweetly, I almost miss the truth grenade he’s launched at me.

“You’ll move in, we’ll get comfortable with each other, do what you said about comingling our lives, and then get married. So dating other people and giving each other alone time in the house will be a nonissue. My family will be happy because, well, a new grandbaby is cause for a loud, highly attended celebratory event. Though, I expect to get a lecture and a swift smack for impregnating you so soon.”

My mouth flaps open and closed like a fish out of water. *Married?* I'm pretty sure the rest of what he said I'd take issue with too, but my brain is stuck on "married."

"Is that a problem? We are both looking for happiness and a long-term relationship. I can provide that. I know you're concerned with not exemplifying the traits on my dating requirement list, but that shouldn't—"

"I think you should stop talking," I warn. I rise from my seat and move around him faster than he must have anticipated because he's stumbling to catch up to me.

"Aria! Where are you—?"

"Look, I know that when I was a teen, I was head over heels in love with *love*. Honestly, I still kind of am. I've always enjoyed being in a relationship, being close with someone in every way, but sometimes I don't make the right choices. Both in terms of men and what is best for me. Sometimes *not* being in a relationship would have been good for me. Instead, I jumped to the next guy. It got messy, and I got my heart bruised a fair amount. Now though, with motherhood on the horizon, I want to be more careful." With Petunia still in my arms, bringing me comfort, I meet his gaze. "I think you might actually be on the right path with your curated list of girlfriend requirements. Being discerning is good. However, I would argue for needing to have chemistry too. A person can check all the boxes, or seem super sweet, or be stupid hot, but then you find out there's nothing there—no belly fluttering, panty-melting, need-inducing heat. Other times, you have all that and nothing else."

He hums in agreement. "And did you find you had that heat with all those guys you dated?"

I snort indelicately. "Hell no, but my relationships meant different things to me at different times of my life. Which probably wasn't fair to either of us. Though typically, I was the one being used, neglected, or taken advantage of. There have been some decent guys sprinkled in, but it never felt right, and even those relationships eventually fell apart."

“Dating is an inefficient, frustrating, and often fruitless venture.”

“That it is.” I spin around and set Petunia on the ground at my feet. “But what’s even more frustrating is my baby daddy planning our whole life together without consulting me. Was that really the plan you came up with for our situation?”

“Well, not the whole plan, but I knew on Friday that we’d likely be moving in together and that you and I were thrust into a future I want. So why not start planning that life now? We can finally—”

“No. You don’t get to make those decisions independently. You don’t get to decide where I live, or who I marry, or how comfortable I am around you or with our parental responsibility-sharing.”

“Do you not want this—want me? I know I’d have to work on some things, but I thought you’d want this too.”

“You thought I’d want to move in with you and marry you after telling you I want to find love and happiness, but that first I need to work on myself? I need to reset the old mindset of settling for *someone* instead of *the one*. I want to find someone to love me—all of me—the way I deserve and want to be loved. Yet you’re asking me to settle down with you when you can barely admit you find me appealing in any way. Your feelings for me seem to come and go, and I don’t have the time or desire to deal with that bullshit. I’m not sure you’re capable of loving me the way I need.” He looks stricken, pained. “You and I being in a relationship was never truly something I let myself believe would happen. Not even when we ended up in that exam room because five seconds after, you made it clear you’d made a mistake.”

It’s quiet while he looks off toward the kitchen, his repressed emotions closer to the surface tonight.

“The mistake was the way I reacted. It was hard to convince myself that being with you was okay. Hell, I’m still not sure how everyone will react. You deserve so much better than a man who struggles to connect and relies on facts over feelings. Ari, you’re a captivatingly beautiful whirlwind”—his

eyes wander my face and body in an adoring gaze that slowly makes its way back to my eyes—“and I’m an uptight, emotionally incompetent bore.”

Shit . . . I’m not a crier.

Who am I kidding? I’m definitely a crier, and those tears are about to spill over.

He makes his way to me in a few quick strides, his long legs eating up the space between us. Just as the first tear falls, his thumb swipes beneath my lashes. “Don’t cry. Please,” he whispers. “I feel like an asshole.”

“This is a lot, Garrett. And I don’t like people making decisions for me instead of with me.”

“I considered that but decided you might appreciate me taking charge of the planning since you seem to hate it. It stresses you out.” His other hand comes up, grazing my neck before settling at my nape. “Being together while having a baby together was a possibility I found more than just appealing.” He pauses, seeming to grapple for words. “You have to know that this isn’t a passing feeling. It’s *everything*. You’d be giving me *everything*.”

“Only because of our baby.” He shakes his head at me, but I continue, needing to get it all out. “Knowing someone only wants to be with me for circumstantial reasons and not because he loves me . . . Garrett, that breaks my heart. I can’t help but wonder if I’ll ever experience real love, and it makes me feel selfish because I should be focusing on our baby.” My head drops, unable to look him in the eye. “At least I’ll know our child has the love and attention of both parents. For now, that will have to be enough.”

I can feel his stare. He moves even closer, and I glance up through wet lashes. His thoughts and emotions flicker across his face in a myriad of tiny twitches and expressions. His thumb still smooths across my cheek in slow, rhythmic strokes, calming me.

“Will you think about it? Moving in, letting us share responsibilities? The rest can wait.”

I sigh, more exhausted and confused than I was earlier today. “I’ll think about it.”

Relief has his body relaxing a fraction. “Okay.”

Slowly, I ease out of his grasp, and he reluctantly lets me go. Gathering my bag from the entryway table, I open the door, needing to go home and rest. And think.

“Wait,” he calls. He jogs back to the kitchen and comes back out with the pink cake box. “Take this with you. Maybe it’ll earn me some brownie points as you’re considering my offer.”

“For that I require actual brownies.”

“Done. I’ll bring some into work tomorrow.”

“I was kidding, Doc.” The determined gleam in his eye tells me I’ll find brownies on my desk tomorrow morning.

“Aria?” I look back with my hand on the door. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I ignored you and pushed you away. I hated every minute of you ignoring me. Knowing I made you feel that way for years, made you feel insignificant when you were anything but . . . I’m sorry.” He shakes his head, hand in his hair, tugging like he’s punishing himself. “I’m really good at compartmentalizing, but when I let someone in, I don’t take it well when I can’t turn those feelings off. It pisses me off and I become an asshole.”

“You’re not an asshole, Garrett. Well, not all the time.” A tiny smile pulls at my lips, shaky and not quite ready to come out yet. “Your unbreakable willpower in resisting my tactics was impressive. I mean, it was maddening and devastating, but also impressive.”

“You broke my willpower many times, Ari. I’m broken, and I don’t want to be fixed. In case you were thinking of gifting me with your special attempts at temptation again, you’ll find that I’m no longer capable of resisting you.”

The young, easily charmed woman inside me rises up on a cloud of intoxicating glee and fluttery, longtime crush feelings. I squash them down as far as they’ll go.

“We need to stay focused on our future as parents.”

His lips purse as he nods, disappointed but accepting. “Will you tell me when you’re ready to discuss this more?”

“The baby or us?”

“Either. Both. I’m open to discussing anything you want.”

A tiny part of me perks up, delighting in the fact that he’s finally acknowledging this thing between us.

For all the wrong reasons, Aria.

“Let’s talk again after I’ve had my ultrasound.”

His head drops slightly with his nod. “Can I come?”

“To the ultrasound?”

“Yes.”

“If you want.”

“I do.”

“Okay, I’ll text you the date and time. Unless you blocked me again.”

“You were sending me sexy pictures, and it was fucking with my head.”

“They weren’t sexy pictures. One was from Halloween and one from a study session when I was worried about hives that had broken out all over me. It was stress, by the way—figured that out without your help.”

“In the first one, you were dressed as Wonder Woman, and you looked . . .” He blows out a harsh breath. “Never mind. Then the other one, you were half naked, Aria. What if I had been with my mom or anyone from town, and that image popped up on my phone?”

“Why aren’t your messages hidden until you unlock your phone? Rookie mistake.” I roll my eyes at him. “And I wasn’t half-naked. I had my shirt off to show you the rash on my chest. Maybe I put on a sexier bra before taking the picture, but so what?” I smile, remembering sending him that photo.

“You were basically sexting me, and I just about had a heart attack.”

“That’s because you’re old.”

He moves in, a hand at my waist as he backs me up against the door. “Old, huh? Do I look old to you? When you watch me running in town? When you check out my ass every time I walk by the front desk? Do I *feel* old to you?” He cages me in, pressing his chest to mine.

Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit.

Is this what he’s been keeping locked away? I would have been a fucking puddle if he’d done this every time I tried to taunt and seduce him. He might not know how to flirt, but he knows how to dirty talk.

Swallowing roughly, I shake my head.

He hums at me, dipping his head until his nose moves to my temple, breathing in deeply.

I find my voice. “Garrett . . .” I don’t know where I was going with that, but it’s enough to divert his attention.

He eases back and reaches over to unlock the door.

“Good night, Aria.”

I slowly let out the breath I’d been holding. “Good night, Garrett.”

I don’t remember the walk to my car, but the rumble of a deep voice catches my attention. I’m pretty sure he just said something about getting me a new car. I ignore that and the feel of his eyes on me as I give a quick wave without looking directly at the beautiful man standing on the porch.

I push it all out of my mind as I drive home. The moment I step into my mom’s loft apartment, the endless stream of thoughts starts back up. I’m worried about the future, confused at Garrett’s intentions, and even more confused about how I’m feeling. What the hell even happened tonight?

If I lived with Garrett, things would get complicated. My heart and my baby’s future are not things I’m willing to risk. I

have to be smarter. That doesn't mean I can't still be me. I just have to continue to rein it in around Garrett. He did it for years. How hard can it be?

A flush crawls up my neck as I remember feeling his chest as he pressed me up against the door, his fingers skimming along my ribs, his face so close to mine.

Shit.

CHAPTER 19



ARIA

Dinner is out of the oven, and it looks passably like some kind of intentional tomato-based casserole. It should be enchiladas, and all the ingredients are in there—probably. It’s the thought that counts. Well, and if it’s edible.

Footsteps ascend the stairs at the side of the apartment above the salon. I hurry to get the food to the table and wipe away my nervous look when I catch a glimpse of myself as I pass the hall mirror.

“Baby, it smells good in here. Did you order in?” Mom looks around.

“No, actually, I cooked! Why don’t you go get changed and comfortable and then join me.”

She plops down into a chair. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, go get ready for dinner. I still have to grab the salad from the fridge and pour the wine.”

She hesitates a moment, then she does that mom assessment thing where she scans my face like she’s a human lie detector. “Nope. I’ll get the salad. You pour the wine and talk while you’re pouring.”

I sigh. My mom can always read me. She doesn’t always react well to bad news though. She glosses over the bad bits and tries to twist everything until we both agree it’s actually good news. Growing up, sometimes I just wanted to wallow in my shitty feelings for a while. I wanted her to be angry with me, commiserate with me.

Then I remind myself that I'm lucky to have a mom who supports me so fully and shows me the kind of love that leaves no room for doubt.

"Mom."

"You can tell me anything. We'll get through it like we always do."

I smile and let loose a small chuckle. "Come sit, drink your wine."

"Where's yours? You look like you need it more than I do. Your stomach isn't still bothering you, is it? I thought you had food poisoning like I did, but this has lasted too long for that. Did you go see Chloe yet? If you're sick, she'll get you fixed up, and you never know it could just be—"

"Mom. Take a breath. I'm not sick."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm pregnant."

Her mouth snaps shut and her eyes widen. She blinks a few times before a small tic pulls at her mouth. "With a food baby? Is this your way of telling me you didn't save me any dinner?"

I bite the inside of my cheek, not giving in to her ridiculousness. "This is no time to tease me, Mom. I'm pregnant with a baby. A real, growing, tiny baby."

Her eyes dart back and forth between mine, and she's bouncing her knee like crazy.

"Say something."

"I can't tell how you feel about this, so I don't know what to say yet. Are we excited? Upset? Scared? Help me out here, honey."

"I'm . . . I don't know. I haven't even really thought about anything but what's going to happen and how to give this baby a home, a happy life, a family who loves him—or her. That's not . . . I don't usually get caught up thinking about the future, yet it's *all* I can think about right now. I haven't even . . ."

My mom takes my hands and gives them a squeeze, holding them for a few moments. “Take a minute, then.”

I look down at my still flat stomach and imagine it growing, the baby moving around, sleeping and kicking and getting cozy. I’ll spend nights reading to him. Play her some music in the mornings. I’ll take the birthing classes and do prenatal yoga to be ready and healthy. Maybe I’ll start looking up baby names soon. I’ll take bump progression photos and do something fun with them.

I look up at my mom with happy tears shining in my eyes. Not one negative thing came to mind when I thought about how I felt about this little, sweet life growing inside me. That’s what I need to focus on right now.

“Thanks, Mom.” My chin wobbles a little when she reaches for me, pulling me into a comforting hug. “I love this baby already. He or she is going to cause so much change but so much happiness. I’m going to be a mom, and it’s sooner than I planned but no less incredible.”

She brings me in for a hug. “Congratulations, honey. Can I be excited now?” I laugh into her hair and nod.

She squeals and pulls me up to stand, dance-hugging me around the dining room. She pushes my shoulders back and looks at my stomach. “Grandma is going to spoil you and feed you your first ice cream cone while your mom isn’t around so you love me the most.”

“Let’s get through the newborn stages first.”

She squeezes my arms before rubbing them. “Will you have help?” Concerned eyes drill into mine. “Is the dad going to be a part of your lives?”

“Yes. The dad is on board. Very on board, actually. I was worried about telling him because of our past, but he took it very well.” I might have taken that for granted during our conversation. He could have been upset or angry, maybe even disbelieving. Instead, he dove right in and wanted to plan our future. Together. Despite the feelings of responsibility and

parental obligation that may have driven his reaction, it was still a positive reaction.

“Are you enjoying keeping this information from me?”

“I wasn’t, but now I kind of am.”

“Aria, is it Matt?” Her arms tighten and her face is pinched.

“It’s not Matt.” She breathes a sigh of relief, and I can’t blame her. “Garrett is the father.”

“Garrett,” she repeats, drawing it out.

“Yes.”

“Garrett Caldwell?”

“Yes, Mom.”

Shock and excitement light up her face right before she smacks my arm. “You didn’t tell me you slept with him! You’ve had eyes for that boy since you met him. If he wasn’t such a good young man, I would have been worried that he’d have acted on what you so obviously flaunted every chance you got.” She laughs and continues. “Remember that time you arranged a charity car wash at the Caldwells just so you could wash his car? He found you soaping up his vehicle in a bikini, and you were pissed because all he did was ream you out for using the wrong type of washing cloths and then . . .” She stops, practically snorting with laughter. “He checked for scratches between shooting you scathing looks.”

A frown pinches my eyebrows together. How dare she! “I’m positive I never told you that story.”

“No, but Gwen Dwyer did. She and Martin lived across the street from the Caldwells. She saw the whole thing and called me, wanting to warn me that you might be coming home with your young, delicate feelings crushed.”

I huff a laugh. “Nope, I just planned my next encounter. What made you think I planned that event for him?”

“Oh, please. I might be a bit clueless in many aspects of life, but the feelings and inner workings of my daughter are

not one of them.”

That much is true. She always seemed to know how I felt, even if we occasionally differed on how to deal with some of the more challenging aspects of growing up.

“I, uh, didn’t tell you about him because there was nothing to tell. After we slept together—like immediately after—he told me it was a mistake and put an end to any hope of what I thought was the start of something. To be fair, he told me the score beforehand.”

“Poor guy.”

“What?” Did she hear me wrong?

“He’s probably liked you for a long time, Ari. Garrett doesn’t do things in half measures, and he certainly doesn’t date women he shouldn’t. The League tried setting him up with at least a dozen women in the past couple of months.” Awesome. Not something I needed reminding of. “But he had all these stipulations, and he didn’t take any of them out again.”

“I thought you didn’t listen to gossip?”

“I keep an ear out when it concerns people I like, and I like the Caldwells.” I glare half-heartedly at her. “Did you know your father had a talk with Garrett over the holidays one time when the boy moved back from school?”

“He what? What did he talk to Garrett about?” It better not have been what I think it was.

“Well, in your father’s defense, he wasn’t here enough to see how independent and capable you were. Once you decided to do something, that was it. You make decisions in the moment, and there’s no planning for or against that.”

“What did he do?”

“When he found out about your crush, he may have warned Garrett off and threatened him a little. At the time, he was working for that national paper, so he may have leveraged that as well.”

“How did he even know? Dad was barely around back then.”

“That one might have been my fault, honey. I didn’t know he’d get so protective. He thought it was more than it was. But a twenty-six-year-old doctor giving any kind of attention to our high school-aged daughter? That was bound to go over like a fart in church. Can’t really blame him, can you?”

“I guess not.” Would have been nice to know though.

“So how was it?”

“How was what?” She waggles her eyebrows at me. “Gross. No. I’m not giving you details.”

“Just tell me if it was as good as you hoped. Did he growl? He looks like a growler.”

“Jesus, Mom!” I shout at her and cover my ears. I’m laughing though, and so is she.

“Is there any hope that you two will figure it out and give a relationship a try?”

The smile drops from my face. “He’d only be doing it for the baby, Mom. He’d feel obligated to us, to try to make a family. That’s not what I want at all. I want someone to want me for the right reasons. It happened all wrong and I feel so defeated. How can something so amazing turn out so messed up?”

“That’s life, hon. You just haven’t gotten to the good part yet. There’s always good if you look hard enough, if you wait long enough. Okay?”

I close my eyes and nod, not wanting to argue. There’s no way to adequately convey to my Suzy Sunshine mother just how torn up I am that I’ll never know if Garrett’s actions toward me, his kindness and flirtations tonight, and any heartwarming gestures or seductive attempts in the future aren’t merely a means to an end—a determination on his end to do the right thing.

“Have you told the Caldwells yet?”

I shake my head. “We’re telling them next week. Do you want to come with us?”

“Do I have to pretend to be surprised?”

That gets a real chuckle out of me. “You would not be capable of that, so no.”

She sighs in relief. “Oh, good. I’d flub that up for sure. I’ll check with Jack and see if he has anything planned.”

We head back to the table and begin eating. She looks over every few minutes, and I can see the questions burning in her gaze.

“Mom, go ahead.”

“I’ve just realized this place is too small, and I’m trying to figure out what we’re going to do about that.”

“I only intended on staying for a month or two until I found an apartment. I’ll definitely need my own place. Both for the sake of my little guy or gal in here and for my sanity,” I say pointedly.

Outraged, she throws some lettuce at me. “I’m an excellent roommate.”

“You forget to pay the power bill regularly, you leave for days at a time and neglect to tell me, all your houseplants are dead, yet they still inhabit the window ledges, and you have a significant issue with boundaries.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“You walk around naked most mornings, usually with your latest bed companion.”

“It’s not like you haven’t seen me naked before. I’m your mother.”

“Yes, but I also got an eyeful of Jack’s dick last week, and that’s where we went from skirting the boundary line to leaping over it.”

“Who knew I’d raised a prude?” she teases, then pouts at me apologetically until I smile.

“It was time for me to go anyway. I know you joke about your wild ways and all your boyfriends, but I know you’re seeing Jack exclusively now, and I don’t want to get in the way of that.”

“Grandbaby trumps boyfriend, sweets.”

I grin. “Good. But I still can’t raise a baby in the tiny one-bedroom loft apartment above my mom’s hair salon.”

“Fine. I’ll ask Jack if he can look into some apartments. His realty company doesn’t usually deal with rentals, but he knows the guy who manages those three apartment complexes on Peach Street.”

“That would be great. Thanks, Mom. And thanks for not freaking out.”

“Me? Never. Though, can I request being present when you tell your father?”

Shit. I forgot about that.

“I think you should tell him.”

“Ha! Not a chance.”

CHAPTER 20



ARIA

While I'm more of a gut instinct, leap into action kind of girl, I need to at least consider all my options before deciding where my little peanut and I will be living. To be honest, the success rate of blindly leaping into decisions has only been about fifty-fifty.

I've had a lot of fun, made some incredible connections and friendships, and had some great adventures. I've touched a Grammy, flown on a private jet, been an extra in a movie, and I'm confident I met a mafia boss.

On the flip side, I've had numerous tear-riddled breakups and boyfriends who have tried to jack my car and my apartment. My travels were rarely incident-free either. I broke my arm hiking in Glacier National Park when the guy I was with thought he saw a bear and threw me out of his way. I'm pretty sure I have an outstanding warrant in Texas. I've been talked into many tight situations while leaping.

So, when my mom's boyfriend emailed me apartment listings, I knew I couldn't do what I usually do. This is a lot of change and requires careful consideration. Between the pregnancy, moving, and telling our families about this big change, this week has been a blur.

Garrett and I told his family last night, and it only brought me more confusion. They were elated. Millie didn't let go of me for at least a half hour. It was heartwarming and reassuring and everything I needed at that point. Though, I may have inadvertently agreed to let her choose our baby's middle name.

There were tears and laughter, and she was rambling in excitement, so I may have gotten caught up in the moment.

Garrett's reaction was fascinating to watch. Walking into their home in St. Helena, he was anxious. It was so subtle with lots of little movements that I almost missed it. His voice was low and terse, and he could barely look at anyone. Once we told them that our tryst—yes, I used that word and watched his full-body cringe—was going to meld our families together forever, Mamma Caldwell lost it. She kissed Garrett right on the mouth and whispered something to him before moving on to me. His dad had a huge grin on his face and excitedly opened up the “good” scotch.

Then Millie asked a question I expected, but Garrett apparently didn't. He should have, since she's his mother, but the spray of liquor all over his button-up shirt indicated otherwise.

“The League can plan you a fairly quick wedding if you give them a couple of months. Or are you planning a post-baby wedding? I'm all for modern ways, new family dynamics, premarital sex—testing the waters to see if you're sexually compatible is important. You need to make sure it works between the sheets before signing on for life. Now, I know my Garrett isn't a regular in church and doesn't believe God would . . . How did you put it, *caro*?” She looked at Garrett but he waved her off. “Something about how a legal document should not be the deciding factor between what makes sex an acceptable act in the eyes of God.” I looked at Garrett, and his shoulder hitched slightly in an agreeable shrug. “How's your relationship with God, Aria?”

With the spotlight turned on me, I straightened and answered, “It's pretty good, I think? But if you're asking if I'm conflicted about premarital relations and baby-making before the ring and the wedding, I have no such confictions. There are certain things I want out of life—happiness, mutual love and affection with a great man, and a few awesome kids to round out the close-knit family I've always dreamed of. The order isn't as important to me.” She wrapped an arm around me and squeezed me to her.

“A wedding would be wonderful though, and look at you two. I always thought you looked good together. It was just a matter of timing.” She glanced over at Garrett, but he still hadn’t spoken.

“Oh, um.” This was the part where Garrett was supposed to tell his mom that we weren’t together and would be figuring out the details over the next seven months. But he wasn’t looking at her and didn’t correct her. That left me to tell the woman I considered my second mom that her son and I wouldn’t be the traditional family she envisioned—the one I had just told her I wanted. “Garrett and I aren’t actually together. We’ll raise our little munchkin together, but we’ll be keeping to a strict co-parenting relationship.”

She blinked up at me with her mouth open in surprise. Her hand flew out to smack her son.

“Shit,” I breathed on a cringe.

“You obviously like our Aria well enough to get her pregnant, but you don’t want to keep her?” She looked at her husband and threw out a hand, muttering, “*Che coglione!*” I was pretty sure she was calling him a moron.

“Millie, marriage should be about more than just fulfilling presumed responsibilities. Sometimes, parents are happier apart rather than forcing a relationship for the wrong reasons.”

I was near tears as I told her this, my emotions getting the best of me. Millie knew about my family dynamic growing up, and concern flashed across her face, but she conceded by agreeing that a marriage should be more, and she hoped we both found that “more.” She was quiet as she studied the look Garrett shot my way.

The evening ended with more talk of the baby and how Garrett was as a child, and I realized that between the two of us, our kid is probably going to be a handful. And that’s an adventure I can’t wait to experience.

Now, I have to decide if we start that adventure with some awkward cohabitation.

Lauren, Emma, and Chloe are meeting me for lunch today. I already ordered wings to munch on before they got here. My appetite is back today, and I'm ravenous.

"Craving?" Lauren pops up beside me, Chloe beside her, an elbow shooting into her ribs.

"They aren't telling the town yet," Chloe whispers.

"Shit, sorry. I'm just so excited for you and forgot I'm not supposed to know yet. Can't reveal my source though. He'd get growly with me." Her head tilts to the side as she considers this, then clearly deciding she likes the idea of her husband's kind of reprimand, says, "It was Taylor. Anyway, did you have a thing you were going to do to announce it? I don't want to ruin that. Wait, let me sit down, and then you can do whatever you prepared."

I shake my head at her. She's everything Chloe said and more. She gives no shits, is a closet bleeding heart, and vulgar in the best possible way.

"I was just going to order a ginger ale while the rest of you drank your wine and see where that went."

"Solid. That wouldn't have gone unnoticed, that's for sure. I also heard Millie tried to prebook your wedding already," she whispers. "How was breaking it to her that you two aren't a couple? That you just did couple-like activities?"

"Lauren." Emma laughs and shakes her head. "Honestly, Aria, Millie is just excited. She's always considered you to be a daughter. And babies—she loves the babies. She wants you both happy, and while she's worried your arrangement might push you two farther apart, she knows you'll both be amazing parents."

My forehead tightens, and I push my plate away, suddenly not as hungry anymore. Stress always makes me more nauseous.

"Yeah. It's just . . . a lot."

Chloe scoots closer to me. "You've got a baby coming, your boobs look incredible, you'll have tons of help, a soon-to-be successful business that will be up and running well

before baby arrives, and the support of a man I know is going to put everything he has into being the best dad and parental partner—or whatever you two are calling it,” Chloe tells me confidently.

“He wants me to move in.”

“With him?” Lauren asks but corrects herself. “Sorry, of course with him. Ignore me. I got excited.”

“Yes. I’ve started looking for my own place because my mom’s is small, and it’s getting to be close-quarters in there with her boyfriend and their activities.” Emma scrunches her nose at me, smiling. “Garrett rationalized by explaining how it would allow both of us more time with the baby, and he’d be around to help.”

“That makes sense,” Emma says. Lauren widens her eyes at her. “Oh. But I can understand why that would be a difficult decision. Living with the man you have a history of a one-night-stand-resulting-in-pregnancy with would create an awkward atmosphere. Then there’s the living with Garrett part. He hasn’t lived with anyone since college, and he’s particular. That could cause some issues. Babies are messy. Garrett isn’t a fan of messy. It should be an interesting adjustment.”

“Em!” Chloe admonishes.

“And?” Lauren waves her hand, encouraging Emma to continue.

“There’s more?” I ask, worried they’ll talk me out of this idea completely. That alone tells me which way I’m leaning, and my stomach tightens, churning.

“It will also be a blessing. Not all babies sleep all the time and just look cute, happily allowing diaper changes and breastfeeding like champs. Jess has been my rock. He wakes up with Maddie when it’s his turn. Many times, he would take all the nighttime wake-ups if he knew we had a bad day and I was wiped. We laughed, cried, and celebrated through all the milestones—good days, bad days, poop explosions, first cold, first steps, sleepless nights, couch cuddles, all of it. I can’t

imagine either of us missing moments like that if we didn't have to."

I nod, my chin wobbling slightly.

Chloe takes my hand. "While Garrett may sometimes come off as insensitive or unreasonable, he is the most loyal, hardest working, responsible, dependable man I know. He will be anything you need him to be because he's fully invested in this. You just have to make sure to communicate what you need from him. He isn't as adept at picking up on emotional cues."

I scoff at the last part. I'm not sure I've met anyone quite like Garrett, and it's part of his charm.

"This might not be the ideal way either of you had planned, but you both wanted a family, and here it is. Maybe do it together for as long as it makes sense?" Chloe suggests. "Unless you think that will make it more difficult."

That's something I've been asking myself.

"She means if you have feelings for Garrett or vice versa. You'd want to consider if either of you is interested in pursuing more than just a co-parenting relationship," Emma clarifies.

The girls are quiet, giving me time to think.

I wrap my arms around myself. "I wish it was as easy as just going after what I want. It's more than that though. I've always gone after what I want. Even if I don't really know what I want. Even if it's not good for me, and I *know* it's not good for me. The decisions I make now aren't just going to affect me. They'll affect my baby and our future."

Chloe wraps her arms around my waist and leans her head on my shoulder, knowing I need that feel-good boost of a good hug.

"Um, are we still ordering wine? Because I did my pregnant, 'no wine, deli meat, sushi, or hot tub' time last year. Who knows how long it'll be before Taylor knocks me up again. We are super not careful." Lauren bites her lip and quirks her brows at us, causing us all to laugh.

“Get the wine. I’m going to get the deep-fried pickles. I have a sudden craving for them.” The last time I tasted them was on Garrett’s tongue, but the girls don’t need to know that. I’ll keep that little truth nugget to myself until I can get a grasp on my feelings.

CHAPTER 21



GARRETT

Taylor's house is on a couple of acres just south of Landry. He and Lauren decided that they wanted to build something of their own and have a small guesthouse on the property for her grandfather and his wife—the only people in her family she speaks to now. It's peaceful and almost has me wishing I had a little more space. Especially after Stella popped over yesterday with Petunia in her arms. My cat doesn't often wander, usually keeping to the yard and house, but occasionally, she causes some issues. Bringing Stella over is one of those issues. The lady has a huge presence in town and chairs a lot of events and charities, but she's also intensely invasive. She tells people she's heartwarminglly nosy. If that's even a thing.

Taylor hands me a beer before cracking open his own.

“She said no?” he asks.

“No. She said she'd think about it.”

He makes a face.

“Hey, assfaces. Thanks for picking me up like you said you would.” A satisfied smile stretches across my face, and Sean points at me, glaring when he sees it. I would have probably picked him up later. “I ended up driving, so one of you is going to have to take me home later, or I'm staying in the guesthouse. I need a drink or three and a distraction. Hit me with info. Taylor, what's the season looking like? Garrett, you nail Aria yet?”

Taylor coughs into his hand to cover his laugh. “Season’s shaping up well, but if you’re looking for a distraction, you’re better off focusing on your cousin.”

“Fuck off. Both of you.” I glower at them.

“You didn’t tell him yet?” Lauren materializes out of nowhere, resting her hand on my shoulder.

“Why does Lauren know shit I don’t? I practically pushed you toward her last time I saw you two.” He turns back to our friends. “You should have seen him when he thought I was asking her out on a date.”

Lauren drops into Taylor’s lap, getting comfortable and turning her watchful gaze on me.

“You’re not taking her to whatever event you were discussing,” I tell him.

“She wants to go. I want to go. It’ll just be a couple of friends attending a town event together.” Mirth shines in his eyes. He’s enjoying this.

“I’m taking her,” I tell him, my voice carrying an undercurrent of violence.

“You will *not* want to go. Trust me.”

“I’m taking her,” I repeat.

“What’s the big deal? Finally admitting you like her? Might want to let her know that. She seemed like she’d given up on your ass.”

“She knows how I feel about her.” At least, I’m pretty sure she does—to some extent.

“Oh, yeah? You tell her?” He looks serious for a minute. “Honestly, man, I have no problem bowing out if you and she have something going on. I wouldn’t want to interfere. She’s a fun, sweet friend, and that’s it.” He takes a swig of his beer before mumbling, “I prefer my women not to be in love with someone else.”

Lauren tuts at him sympathetically, and Sean looks away. He looks so miserable, and I have a feeling I know why. So I

decide to humor him and give him the news in a dramatic flair to appease his romantic heart.

“I’ve impregnated the woman I’ve never let myself think about, look at, or spend any length of time with until now. She’s either going to be everything I’ve ever dreamed of having or my complete ruin. Probably both.”

Sean leaps at me, going in for a hug. “Holy shit! Dude. My heart is beating so fast. Part of that was not knowing if you’d punch me for trying to take your girl out, but mostly it’s the fact that you are going to be a daddy. Aria’s baby daddy. Fuck yes! This is exactly what I needed today. I can tell you’re happy about this, so I’m not even going to pretend not to be excited for you. Congrats, coz.” A grin lifts one side of my face as I hug him back.

He asks an inordinate number of questions for the next thirty minutes, and I nearly regret telling him.

Lauren confirms that, as far as she knows, The League doesn’t know about the baby yet and won’t until we want them to. She and Aria have gotten closer, and they’ve been texting back and forth about symptoms and expectations. I’m happy that she seems excited about the baby, but I’m also sulky about her not asking me some of these pregnancy questions.

I’ve been plying Aria with little surprises and as much attention as I can while at work, but I don’t think that’s all she’s waiting for. She wants me to prove to her I’m in this, that it’s about more than our situation. If I push too hard, get too close, tell her all the things I’m thinking and feeling, I worry she won’t believe me—or worse, she’ll shut down on me. Or maybe that’s just something I would do.

Lauren’s gone to feed Brady while Sean messages Millie about the baby news.

“Hey, Garrett? Have you checked out the Landry Facebook group today?” Sean asks.

“Never. Why?”

He chuckles, scrolls some more, then his laughter turns nearly hysterical. That can’t be good.

“Lauren!” he shouts for her.

“Don’t drag Lauren into shit, Sean,” Taylor barks.

“I bet she already knows. It’s League business.”

Taylor leans back in his chair and rubs the back of his neck.

“What’s wrong?” Lauren comes onto the back porch, carrying a happy, babbling toddler on one hip.

“Did you know? About The Bachelor: Landry Edition?” He holds up his phone, showing her whatever the town has cooked up.

Her eyes widen, and she snatches the phone from his hand. “Oh shit, they did it?” She laughs so hard that she startles Brady. “That’s going to be . . . It’ll be a total shit show. I mean, I was only kidding when I brought it up! It wasn’t a real suggestion. Oh, my God. Oh, can you even imagine what—? Oh, fuck.” Her eyes dart to me. “Garrett, you’re probably going to hate this. A lot. But I think you should just ride the wave. Unless you’re not still looking for a special lady friend?” *Lady friend?* She makes me sound like a senior citizen. “Maybe you’ve already found her and can put an end to this awesome—I mean, *ridiculous* event.”

“What the hell are you two talking about?” I ask.

“Babe. You did not seriously suggest that they do a bachelor event to find Garrett a woman. Did you?”

She grimaces at her husband. “It was a joke, an offhand comment. No one took it seriously or even mentioned they were making it happen. Someone went rogue with this. Or they knew I’d say something and kept it from me intentionally.” She tips her head, thinking. “Damn, they’re good.”

“You guys going to eventually fill me in here?”

Sean is still laughing, his whole body shaking so hard his chair wobbles. I give it a kick, and the whole thing tips backward, launching its occupant to the ground. He stays there, hands resting on his chest, still laughing. Asshole.

“Sorry, Gar. You know I wouldn’t purposely make you do something like this. I mean, I coerced you that one time when you came back from Africa to help me get Taylor back, but that’s it. I’ve been a model best friend’s wife since. Mostly.”

She goes over to take her seat back on Taylor’s lap, Brady listening with rapt attention. Taylor grins at his wife, relishing her quirky, outspoken, give-no-shits tendencies. I roll my eyes. Of course, he loves it. They are both crazy for each other, and if it wasn’t biting me in the ass at the moment, I’d almost be jealous.

“What the hell is *The Bachelor: Landry Edition*? What does that mean?” I ask.

“You’ve never watched *The Bachelor*?” She frowns at me before rolling her eyes. “Never mind. You’ve probably never watched any reality television.” I scrub a hand down my face and glare at her. “Right! So basically, they help a guy looking for love—specifically a wife—by providing an assortment of female candidates to introduce to him. Each week on the show, he gets to know the women, both on group dates and a special one-on-one date with the woman of his choice. He eliminates candidates at the end of the episode by offering roses to those he wants to continue seeing. Those who do not get a rose are sent home via limousine and typically sob or cuss him out on the drive. It’s delicious, trashy insanity.”

“That sounds horrendous,” I tell her, the sneer immovable from my face. “How would the town even put that together?”

Taylor huffs at me. “You grew up here the same as I did, Garrett. You weren’t that much of a shut-in, and it’s impossible to remain completely ignorant to the happenings in town. The League has probably been interviewing candidates since you let it slip to Mamma Millie that you’d be open to some blind dates. Mistake, by the way. Though, I mean, maybe not. Maybe it’s going to work out exactly as it’s meant to.”

Taylor adjusts Lauren on his lap and kisses her neck.

“I don’t need some random woman.” I have the one I want. Or hope to have one soon—if she’ll have me.

“They are holding the event at Taps. I’m sure they’ll be contacting you soon.” She pauses. “Maybe you use this as an opportunity?”

“An opportunity for what? I don’t want any of those women.”

“Use it as an opportunity to express any feelings you might have. Serves two purposes, really. Gets the town to back off and maybe gets you a chance with the woman you *do* want.”

“I don’t think she’d want to tell people, especially given our complex situation.”

Sean, now back in his chair, leans over and whispers, “He means Aria. He’s in love with her, and she’s more than a little hesitant after years of his foolishly noble disregard.”

Lauren kicks the chair out, and Sean is sent tumbling to the ground once more. “She might not be telling everyone the details of her current life situation, but that doesn’t mean you can’t announce your romantic intentions,” she suggests.

If I go to that event, Aria might think I’m interested in other women. And don’t already know who I want in my life. She’s going to think I was talking out of my ass the other day when I told her I wanted her to live with me and be with me.

Lauren leans back and subtly changes the subject to football to distract the guys. A sly smile flashes at me as she messes up the name and position of a quarterback, causing a chorus of appalled sounds, almost like she personally offended them.

She’s good. So good, I almost wonder if she *did* know about this bachelor idea. If so, she’s assuming I don’t fuck it up. Given how my last conversation with Aria went, she might be betting on the wrong guy.

CHAPTER 22



ARIA

Nearly every chair and stool is filled. Drinks and appetizers are steadily making their way to each table. Excited chatter fills the restaurant. This kind of event is so far up my alley, I bought a ticket before I even considered who would be involved.

League-run event? Lonely single man looking for love? Dramatic and sometimes desperate women willing to do whatever it takes to bag the man of their dreams? Yes, please! This hits just the right aspects of too relatable and ridiculously silly entertainment.

Then I realized that one of Landry's most eligible bachelors is Garrett, and my previous excitement evaporated. The League was smart when they planned this event, insisting on keeping the bachelor and candidates a secret. This town eats that kind of shit right up. Mystery, love, and intrigue? This event sold out in two hours.

Lauren, Emma, and Chloe insisted we come because there's a good chance the bachelor is either Garrett or Sean. They hesitated slightly when I pointed out how awkward it would get for Garrett's baby mama to be present as he chose a woman to bring into his life. Someone who would be better wife material for him.

Especially after he assured me he wouldn't be dating because he planned for us to be together.

As an active member of The League, Lauren insisted that we attend. She claims it won't go the way we think, and it

won't be awkward. That's all she would tell us.

That's how I found myself cautiously awaiting the start of this event. I'm a mix of anxious and excited.

God, I hope it's Sean. Or Sawyer.

Or anyone else, really.

"Ladies and . . . well, mostly ladies, but I see a few gents out there too!" Stella shields her eyes from the nonexistent spotlight. "Welcome to our first-ever Bachelor: Landry Edition. Our community thrives on friendship, support, and love. Tonight and for the next four weeks, we will focus on love. One of our residents, a well-respected member of our town, is looking for love. His plight was brought to our attention a few months ago, and we have been working tirelessly to find his perfect match—his forever woman. Our town may be small, but our reach and desire to help is vast."

Fern strides onto the stage with several gorgeous, deep red, velvety roses tied with a Fern's Florals ribbon. She looks out into the crowd, catches my eye, and winks.

Why did we sit so close?

"Our bachelor will be revealed shortly. Poor guy is nervous as all get-out, which is not common for our good—oops! Almost gave it away early there! Before I accidentally reveal our handsome bachelor, Lauren, the architect of this event, will be introducing him."

My eyes widen, not realizing she was a part of today's festivities. She stands, walking up beside me, and grips my forearm. "Don't leave. Okay? Not until it's over."

Shit. It's Garrett. I suck in a breath as the room suddenly becomes a little dimmer, the buzz of excitement around me an unwanted presence.

"Thanks, Stella. Just a quick clarification—this bachelor idea was made in jest during a meeting, but I was not the one who gave it legs and ran with it. I'd hate to take all the credit when I had so little to do with it." She looks pointedly at the other women on stage, who merely smile with a hint of shameless amusement.

“Alright, so just before we drag—I mean, *bring* our bachelor out here, I’ll tell you a little about him and see if you can guess who he might be.”

Chloe takes my hand, knowing I need it.

Lauren takes the mic off the stand and moves to the side of the stage where the stairs are, away from where the candidates’ seating area is.

“Our bachelor kindly provided me with a list of his attributes.” She clears her throat, tempering a huge grin before bringing out a small scrap of paper or maybe a napkin. “He is just over six feet tall, decently good looking, health conscious, and financially stable.” She looks out into the crowd and flips the paper over. “As a bit of a surprise, he also provided an updated list of his ideal wife requirements that he’d like me to share with you.”

I squeeze tighter to Chloe’s hand as my gaze darts to Stella, who is clutching the mic stand tightly, and Fern, who has shifted slightly closer to Lauren, trying to see what the note says.

“Our mystery bachelor has been pining for a woman with the following qualities: an unapologetically flirtatious brunette with a quick wit and tenacious spirit. She should be kind and unequivocally loveable. She should be brave in chasing her dreams, wild in love, adventurous in life, and capable of putting up with a stodgy, older, closed-off, overly responsible man.” She looks up from the paper. “I may have added one or two adjectives to that last part.” I think the audience laughs, but I can’t tell through the sound of my blood pounding through my body. Hushed murmurs of, “Garrett, is it Garrett?” echo through the room.

Is she . . . ? Did he . . . ? Was that new list about me? Do I dare hope?

“Now, that may seem like a nearly impossible feat—even for The League—but I have a feeling one of the women here tonight is exactly who our bachelor is looking for. I’ll introduce the candidates to you and let you decide.” She nods to Julio, who is standing off the stage just in front of the

curtained area. “Linda is a thirty-four-year-old voice coach from Santa Rosa. She loves animals, art, and traveling.” Linda makes her way onto the stage. My jaw clenches as I realize she’s cute. “Katlyn is a thirty-year-old pastry chef from Vaughn. She says she’s recently divorced, extremely flexible, and looking for a Mr. Right to make her feel right.” Lauren turns to look at the busty brunette. Lauren moves the microphone away slightly but not enough to keep her comment from coming through just fine. “Shit, girl. Keep it in your pants. He’s not going to mount you right here on this stage just because you’re making it super clear that option is available.” The woman gasps and starts for Lauren. Stella scowls and sticks out the mic stand, blocking Katlyn from going after Lauren.

Something tells me that was not to protect Lauren—the woman can handle herself.

Lauren goes through the rest of the candidates with markedly little enthusiasm. Some of whom seem lovely, maybe even perfect. Does hoping he walks up to the stage and tells Stella to kiss his ass, he’s not doing *The Bachelor*, make me a bad person? Does it make me stupid? Am I going to continue to get in the way of what he really wants?

What do you want, Aria? How about you focus on that?

“Thank you, Lauren. That was . . . informative. And finally, while these ladies have gotten some basic information about who they are meeting today, maybe some have even guessed who their handsome bachelor is, they will be finding out with the rest of you today. In fact, why don’t we have him come on out and get this started?” Stella holds out a hand to the other side of Taps.

Garrett stumbles out of the back kitchen doors like he was pushed. He rights himself and then makes his way to the stage. As he gets closer, I notice he’s looking around the room and not at the women on the stage. His gaze finds me and stops. A shy smile spreads across his face, and his pace falters. Without removing his eyes from me, he makes his way up the stairs. I’d have landed on my face, yet this isn’t the only thing impressing me right now.

He's looking at me—only me.

The clapping and whistles calm down as he takes his place beside Stella.

“Welcome, Dr. Caldwell! We are so excited to help you find your perfect woman in this fun and naughty way. Keep in mind, we don't have the budget to send you on any sexy vacations or to pay for luxury suites for the well-known overnight date.” The audience chitters and oohs at this. I roll my eyes.

He leans forward and says, “Not necessary.”

“Good. We'll give you some time to talk to each candidate privately. Well, what I mean is that you and her will talk one-on-one on stage here for all of us to hear and experience with you.” She chuckles.

For the next forty minutes, I block out the inane chitchat that occurs during the ten-minute quick dates between Garrett and each of the four girls.

Who am I kidding? I am riveted. I hang on every word. I am devastated and confused. Garrett is asking ridiculous questions and barely paying attention. He is respectful and smooth, but his questions are not the first date or getting-to-know-you type.

“Alright, time is up. I'll have you come back up here, Garrett.” He nods at the last woman and makes his way back to Stella. His eyes find mine again and he looks worried. “We've added a twist to tonight's event. The audience will get a chance to choose their favorite candidate. Though, after those lackluster dates, I'm not sure that will be an easy decision. Perhaps your first real date will provide a bit more insight.” She turns and waves the girls over to stand at the front of the stage opposite where Stella and Garrett are. “As explained in your event packages, Garrett will be choosing only three candidates to return next week. He will be giving one lucky gal of his choice the first impression rose to represent his choice for his only one-on-one date next week. Garrett will go on a group date with two candidates first, followed by his first impression date—all of which will be

documented and livestreamed here.” Fern steps up and hands the flowers to Garrett. “There is a poll on the Landry Facebook Page asking you to pick who you think should be the first impression rose winner tonight. Go ahead and put in your choice.”

Garrett gets out his phone.

“Oh no, mister, you don’t get to vote on there. You’ll be telling us your choice soon enough.” Everyone giggles.

“You missed a name. I’m just adding it.” He looks down at me again, this time nodding at my phone, a rare playful smile on his face.

I had no intention of voting for someone to go on a special date with my man—my boss/baby daddy/ruiner of my heart.

I practically drop my phone in a rush to pick it up.

There in the last spot, I see *Aria Davenport*.

“You can’t add anyone, Garrett. All the contestants are already listed—” She looks at her phone and then over at me. Stella bites down on a smile, a twinkle shining in her eye. “Hmm. I see.” She grins. “Garrett, you still have roses to give out. Please call over the ladies who will be returning next week—one at a time. Call the woman receiving the first impression rose last. It adds to the suspense.”

I can’t look at Garrett as he chooses his potential lover and soul mate. Hard pass.

“That won’t be necessary.”

Confusion sweeps through the candidates first, then the audience. Stella’s mouth twitches slightly, but she doesn’t look confused or upset. Unlike most of the other women on stage.

“Aria Davenport.” I collapse against the back of my seat, cheeks heating, the dregs of jealousy and hurt I refused to admit were building like a wildfire inside me finally extinguishing. “I choose Aria. It’s always been her. I’m sorry I wasted your time. This was a slightly barbaric but well-organized event. Excuse me.”

Chloe gives my arm one last squeeze, and my eyes flick to her for a moment. She grins and mouths, “Wow,” as she leaves the table.

Garrett sweeps over like a sudden storm, and I’m completely caught in the whirlwind he creates.

I stare, just . . . stare. I have no words—no teases or quips. Not one dirty comment or enticing taunt.

He goes down on one knee, and I think he’s broken my brain while mending my heart. It hits me that he’s doing this publicly, in front of almost everyone we know.

“Aria, I’m not sure exactly how they do this on whatever stupid show those Leaguers watch, but this felt right.” He offers me all four roses, one of which has some kind of glitter sprayed on it. Garrett must hate that and it makes me smile. “Will you honor me by accepting all of these roses and all of me?”

I’ve been holding my breath and finally release it. Garrett’s deep green eyes bore into mine. He doesn’t bother to hide the desperation, the pleading in his eyes on full display.

“Kiss him!” a familiar voice shouts from the back. I look over and see Lauren elbow Sean. “Ow, what? Geez.”

I turn back to Garrett and notice that he hasn’t stopped staring at me.

He moves closer and lowers his voice. “I don’t want our first kiss as a couple to be in front of a bunch of people clearly starved for entertainment. But I do want to kiss you. First, I need you to tell me if you’ll accept me—us. If you’ll give us a chance the way I should have years ago.”

I lean down and put my mouth against Garrett’s ear. His scent floods my senses, and I hum to cover the moan desperate to escape. Why does he smell so damn good?

“Are you asking because you want me to save you from this situation or because you want *me*?”

“The latter. Though, you’d be saving me too. It’s a bit one-sided, I know. I’d be willing to make it up to you.” His voice

drops several octaves, causing a shudder to race down the length of my body. “Over and over and over.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Yeah. Is it working?”

“It just might be.”

“I want you, Aria, not these women, not anyone else. It really always has been you. At the same time, it could never be you. I’ve had that stuck in my mind for too long. Forgive me please. Say yes. Move in with me. Let me take you out, kiss you, hold you, and be with you. Finally. Fucking *finally*, Aria.”

“You squeezed in the moving in part all sneaky.”

“I did.” He swallows, still on his knees, but the hand not holding on to flowers is now spread over my thigh, its warmth heating me up all over. “Was all of this too much?”

Garrett could have said no to this event. Instead, he planned this as a way to declare his feelings. He did this for me. He participated in this uncomfortable, ridiculous town event—as the star of said event—in a dramatic way to show me he chose me.

And he changed his list.

“It wasn’t too much. I was actually incredibly jealous and devastated at first, thinking that you were maybe still looking for your perfect woman.”

“I think the new list is much better. Don’t you?”

Smiling at him, I nod.

“So? Will you accept my rose . . . er, roses?”

“Yes, but with conditions.”

“I’ll take it.” He jumps up and places the roses in my hand. His arm slides under my knees while the other goes around my back. A startled yelp leaves me as he scoops me up and carries me through the room. “Sorry, everyone. This bachelor is taken. All future events are canceled. Unless you can convince Sean

or Sawyer to participate. I'm taking my bachelorette home now."

Murmurs and an assortment of happy and disappointed shouting follow us.

"I'm happy for you, man, but really don't appreciate being thrown under the town bus," Sean comments as we pass him.

I look up at Garrett, who completely ignores Sean. "I can walk, you know."

"This is a required part of the event."

"Really?"

"No, but it was part of my wooing you plan, and so far you haven't complained so I'm going with it." And he won't hear me complain. This is romantic as hell, and I hope he carries me all the way to his car.

Stella's voice sounds behind us. "Aw! Look at that. One town bachelor has already found love in an unexpected turn of events tonight. Not to worry, my lovely Landrians—we have bachelor Number Two on deck and even a few more wonderful women who might just be the perfect match for another handsome eligible town bachelor."

I chuckle as Garrett shakes his head. He looks down at me, and as if he just realized I said yes, he beams at me. He slows, nearly stopping.

"Don't put me down yet," I blurt.

"Never."

I giggle like a damn girl seeing how serious he is. "I meant, I'd like for the bachelor to carry his prized candidate all the way to the vehicle."

"Done."

And he does.



e arrive at his house, and my mind starts running, working its way into a bit of a frenzy. I agreed to something, and I don't even know what it means.

“Stop letting your mind get carried away. Let's just get inside and talk, yeah?”

I shoot him a pretend glare. How dare he read my expression so clearly and try to talk me off the ledge!

“Alright. But just remember I said I had conditions.”

He grips the tip of my chin between his thumb and fingers, soothing me with his soft touch. “I remember and can't wait to hear them.”

After giving Petunia some love, I settle on the couch.

Might as well dive right in. “I will move in with you.”

Relief has his shoulders relaxing. “Great. That's—I'm really glad. Having you here and seeing you every—”

“Hold up. Before you say anything that's either going to enrage me or turn me to mush, I need to get the rest out.”

His cheek dimples slightly, and he holds up his hands. Petunia climbs into his lap, and he absently pets her while keeping his focus on me.

Watching him loving on his cat makes everything inside me melt. Dammit.

“My housing situation and our co-parenting schedule will be made simpler by cohabitating.” Great, now I'm starting to sound like Garrett. “I think we should see how that goes before we get more feelings involved and complicate things with dates and sex.” He perks at the last part. “So I'm accepting your proposal to date once you've passed the one-month probationary period.”

“Probationary period?” he asks, but his eyes light in recognition of the last probationary period talk we had.

“Yes. Living together will be a good relationship test. If you still want me and I still want you after living together for a few months—”

“One month,” he interjects. “I was thinking one week would be plenty of time for us to get comfortable with each other.”

“I’ll take that into consideration, and we can discuss that as we approach the end of the four weeks.” Talking like Garrett is fun. It’s all business and curt words and making me feel powerful. Though, my enjoyment could also be that it’s another way to tease him.

He smirks. “Alright.”

“There will also be rules.”

“Yes. Good. Dishes are put directly into the dishwasher, and the washing machine door should always be left—”

“Not chore rules, you big goof.” I whack him with a pillow, and an audible *oof* leaves him.

“Sorry. Rules?”

“Yes. We have our own bedrooms and do not enter those private spaces. We have open communication about any cohabitating grievances. We make baby and future planning decisions together. You are not to judge me for the quantity or frequency of my consumption of Super Nibs or other licorice treats. And lastly, we both need to be fully dressed at all times to avoid any of those cutesy accidental nudity moments that happen in romantic comedies. That will not help our current situation.”

“That all sounds fine. Oddly specific but fine.”

“Great. Any requests or rules on your end?”

“No. When do you move in?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll have to get packed and grab my stuff out of storage, so maybe the week after next?”

“I’ll help you pack and move it all over this weekend.”

Well, okay then.

“I’m also taking you to whatever that event was that Sean invited you to.”

“That sounds an awful lot like a date.”

“It doesn’t have to be a date. Sean said it wasn’t, so I think we can do the same.”

He clearly has no idea what he’s just volunteered for, and it takes everything in me not to rub my hands together like a gleeful villain.

“I think I can handle that.”

CHAPTER 23



ARIA

Garrett is the subtle, sneaky type. Considering his usual upfront, blunt ways, I found this to be a surprisingly sexy revelation. Which probably says a lot about my emotional state right now.

He's on his A game, and I can't say I mind one bit. He waits to see what I have planned and then pounces. For the past couple of weeks, he's planned a series of non-date *dates*—that are totally dates. We've gone out for lunches and dinners, he joined my yoga class, and we've enjoyed several movie nights together.

This is his way of adhering to my one-month requirement. To Garrett, I'm sure he considered this a challenge he has every intention of vanquishing.

He's fairly predictable when it comes to excuses he uses for us spending nearly all of our free time together. Some reasons are under the guise of either the baby or discussing ClickPix Photography, which he's been helping me with. The times I surprise him by staying home or telling him I want to do something, especially when it's last minute, his reasons are less thought out and painfully obvious. I like those ones best.

Today's non-date date is dinner out to discuss baby names. We haven't been able to agree on any that have stuck yet. After a while, I start suggesting more awful-sounding names, including making some up until he becomes so flustered I just about pee my pants laughing.

He growls, finally clueing in on what I've been doing. He pulls my chair so close to him I'm caged between his long, lean thighs and rock-hard biceps. He's holding on to the back of my chair, and I swear for a few heart-pounding moments, he's going to kiss the smirk right off my face. He wants to. I can see it—his eyes flicker to my mouth, to my eyes, back to my mouth, then the rest of my face.

Instead, he leans in close, pressing his forehead against mine, and half hummed, half growled at me.

He licks his lips, and my tongue flicks out, wanting to join his. "Are you having fun, Minx?"

"So much fun."

"Good." He backs up slightly, and my body follows, a sad sigh leaving my lips without permission.

"So we have less than two weeks until we talk about us dating for real."

"Mm-hmm. Oh! What about Tiffani?" I ask, changing the subject back to baby names. If he asks me point-blank about us being together, I'm going to cave, and I want to stay strong and give my decision the full month. Even if I know in my heart what I want—what I've always wanted—I need to see this through and not jump in like I always do.

By the look on his face, he doesn't approve of my name choice. He explains that Tiffani is out of the question because he doesn't want people assuming our little girl is flaky. *Pfft*. Judgy.

"It's cute, and we'd spell it with an *i* at the end," I try.

He scoffs. "That's worse. Our little girl will have a strong, beautiful name. Like her mom." Dammit, he can be so sweet. "I've always thought your name was beautiful. It's why I rarely used it and called you Minx instead."

"Not because I was a minx?"

"Oh no, you were. You were all kinds of sassy, sultry trouble. You're still the perfect mix of sweet and seductive."

"Which one should I be at the end of this date?"

“Technically, this isn’t a date.” Shit! Right! Gah. *Way to give yourself away, Aria!* “This is me wooing you. I think I owe you a lifetime of it.”

With that, we made our way back home. He walks me to my bedroom door, and when I ask for a hug good night, he lingers. His fingers caress my back, his breath tickling my neck, and his chest presses hard against mine.

I’m going to have to figure out a way to get him out of the house sometime soon because I need to attend to my lady needs so I’m not itching to throw myself at Garrett during another long, orgasm-less night.



Our next non-date date is baby shopping, and it was the sweetest surprise. Not only do I get to shop for cute baby stuff but we also get to see all the babies at the store and imagine what ours will look like, sound like, be like.

I’m having fun and I feel . . . special. Cherished. Earlier, we walked by a super-hot mom—even I was checking her out—and Garrett didn’t even notice. Yet, every time I let the tiniest sniffle out, he was on me.

I’ve been a bit of a mess throughout the non-date, and neither of us knows when my next outburst will reveal itself. It’s happened at least four times already, and Garrett is strung tight, ready to jump in and fix whatever caused me to begin weeping again. I may normally have a rock-solid confidence and wild nature, but deep down, I’m soft. This date he came up with didn’t stand a chance.

He’s hidden onesies that made me tear up because they reminded me of my old baby pictures. He’s cleared aisles so I can strut around testing out strollers and the over-the-top sweetness combined with picturing him as a dad—*oof*. That was a bad one.

Our last crying near miss ended in Garrett buying every type of pacifier because I said I couldn’t choose, and he was intimidated by the mere threat of waterworks.

“You want to go pick out a rocking chair? Preferably a glider because the baby’s room is carpeted.”

“Absolutely. But only if you test each one with me.”

“There are twelve chairs.”

“Well, you did say you brought us here so we’d have more selection than the stores near Landry. Look at all this selection!” I throw a stuffed animal at his face, and he snatches it out of the air with ease.

Why did that get me so hot?

Down, girl.

“You’re lucky you’re so fucking cute.”

After thirty minutes of working through Garrett’s complex scoring system to determine the glider chair winner, we make our purchases and arrange for the crib, chair, and dresser to be delivered to *our* house. Garrett corrects me every time I refer to it as his. The grin he shoots me when I say ‘our house’ quickly eased any discomfort I had.

We are nearly out of the store when I spot a table of onesies we must have missed. Picking up an adorable one with sloths on it, I hold it up to Garrett. He approaches warily.

“Sloths?” he asks.

“Baby sloths on a baby onesie. How cute is this?” I hold it up for him to inspect the little sloths closer. He shakes his head at me, but a hint of a grin pulls at his mouth.

“That one was my daughter’s favorite too,” an elderly lady tells us. “Are you two shopping for your own baby or someone you know?”

“For our baby,” I answer, curious where this is going.

“Oh, my! Sorry, you just look so young.” I knew the braids were a mistake today. She eyes Garrett with some curiosity, some suspicion. “You’re not married?” I shrug and shake my head. “Hmm. I guess people aren’t building families anymore. That’s too traditional for young folks now. So, how did you

two meet and decide to raise a baby together in your . . . circumstances?”

My mom would have just made some excuse and walked away at this point. This is one of those times when the two of us differ greatly.

“Well, it’s actually a super-sweet story, isn’t it, Gar-Bear?” Ooh, that just came out at the moment, but I think I’m going to keep it. A glance at Garrett tells me I found a fun button to press. That or he’s worried about what I’m about to tell this judgy lady. “My handsome man here was actually my babysitter when I was younger. He was so sweet, asking if he could stay in touch with me when he left for college, but I still had to get through the rest of middle school and then high school. I mean, I still hadn’t even gotten my boobs yet, but there he was, seeing my potential in a training bra.” I hear Garrett mutter a colorful combination of curse words. “Years later, he was still making sure to check in on me when he came back home from school, and we would spend some, uh, very nice time together, didn’t we, babe?”

Garrett is swiping his hand over his face repetitively. Fine, I’ll finish this little tale solo. I look back at Nosy Nelly and see her eyes open wide, hand clutching her imaginary pearls. “Oh, gosh. That sounded bad, didn’t it? Don’t worry, ma’am, he waited until I was legal to do the baby-making stuff.” I pat my barely visible baby belly. “We got it on the very first try.” I hold my hand up for him to high five, but he’s not even looking at either of us. I grab the hand that he shoved into his pocket a few moments ago in resignation and help myself to that high five.

Nosy Nelly seems to have regretted asking, and that’s all I could have hoped for.

“Dear, that is . . .” Her mouth opens and shuts a few times.

“Absolutely none of your business. Remember that before prying next time.”

Landrians who care about me asking nosy questions? Sure.

Strangers who ask questions hoping to verify their judgemental assumptions? Nope. Take that shit somewhere else.

“Well, we have to get going. You have a nosy day.” I wave and pull Garrett along with me as we leave the store.

The man beside me is completely silent until we get into his car.

“You still want to open a photography business, right?”

Huh? “Um, yes. Why?”

“I was just thinking maybe you could write stories instead. Your imagination is both impressive and horrifying. I don’t know if I’ll ever forget that sordid tale of inappropriate love.”

“I mean, it wasn’t really *that* far from the truth.”

“Aria! It really is. I need you to acknowledge that and agree never to tell people we fell in love when we were younger. I come off as a massive creep.”

“Why? Because you really did love me back then? Dude, I was only fourteen when I first met you. Sicko.”

“Sweet hell. I’m in some kind of sweet”—he looks me over slowly—“sexy hell.”

“Well, if you’re in hell, it’s probably because you perved on my fourteen-year-old ass.”

“I didn’t perv on you or anyone.” He glares at me playfully. “When you were a teen, you were a goddamn nuisance. I could tell the very moment you decided you had some kind of feelings for me. Avoiding you was a basic requirement when I was home. I had no tolerance for your little flirtations and constant prodding. It wasn’t until—” He stops midsentence.

“Until when?”

His deep green eyes meet mine, unashamed and full of emotion. “Until you came back from San Jose for my birthday party one year that I . . . I actually saw you. Beyond the show you put on for everyone else. You seemed your usual self-

confident and infectiously compulsive self. But something was off with you, like you were maybe lost and uncertain. It was intriguing. I wanted to step right into your storm of contradictions and chaos, but you were barely twenty and still in school while I was nearly thirty and in the beginning stages of opening my practice. You were deeply entwined in my family, but still, I noticed. I shouldn't have, but I did."

"You noticed all of that? You barely looked at me during that party. You spent way more time looking at my boyfriend. For a minute there I thought maybe I had developed yet another crush on a gay man."

"*Another* crush on a gay man?"

"In high school, my boyfriend turned out to be gay, and I acted as his beard until he was ready to tell people." I hold up a hand. "But that's a bit off topic here."

"Well, I wasn't gay. Your boyfriend was just fucking awful, and glaring at him kept me from physically removing him from my house—from my own damn birthday party that I didn't even want."

"He wasn't that bad. Tenny actually treated me pretty well."

"Tenny, which is a bullshit name, called you 'sugar baby' and ordered you around, then praised you when you did as told like you were a goddamn puppy. The fact that he was one of the ones who treated you well is disturbing." His hand squeezes mine, and I look down to see I must have reached out to hold his hand at some point.

"He was my first real relationship in college. He was a douche, yes. But he was fine, and he loved spending time with me. Turns out he also loved spending time with other people too, but until that point, he was good."

"He cheated on you?"

I shrug. "He didn't realize we were in an exclusive relationship. Apparently, he has a lot of love to give. I mean, I do too and he mentioned that. But I also mentioned wanting a committed relationship. I wanted something real. I understood

why he was confused though. I'm affectionate with everyone, connect with people quickly, and back then, I'd *dated* quite a bit."

"You mean you fucked a lot of guys?"

"Basically."

"That's . . . whatever. It's college. But if you're in a relationship with someone, it's because you've chosen them to build something real and incredible with. Not because you're bored, horny, or lonely. That guy knew you, what you wanted, knew you were in a relationship. He had something fucking perfect that no one else even compares to, and he took that for granted. How he could even look at—" He shakes his head, and I'm transfixed by the utter confusion on his face. "He was an asshole."

The surprised, knowing look that's been frozen on my face since he started talking has exploded into a smile so big my cheeks burn.

I lean over, my hand skirting along his arm and up to his neck. My lips press a lingering kiss to the spot where his dimple hides.

He liked me. Even back then. He just wouldn't let himself have me. And that might've actually been the right call at the time. Maybe I keep that little thought to myself for a bit though.

CHAPTER 24



GARRETT

I forgot the lunch I packed for work today and had to turn around and head home. My mind is elsewhere as I consider why Aria didn't want to come in with me this morning. She said she was going to ride solo since she had a few things to do. I didn't ask many questions, but her responses were vague and evasive.

I unlock the door, curious why Aria's car is still in the driveway if she had errands to run.

Grabbing my lunch from the fridge, I decide to check on Aria.

I hear something coming from down the hallway. Aria cries out and I quicken my pace.

When I get to her door, I pause before knocking. Her door is open just a crack—just enough for me to see inside. I freeze as she cries out again.

That is not a cry of distress or pain like I first thought. No. My little minx is on her bed, legs spread, a black device gripped in her hand as she pleasures herself.

It's so fucking hot I can barely breathe. It takes me several moments of watching her use the large vibrator and listening to the needy pants leaving her lips before I can speak.

“You need a hand with that, Minx?” I offer.

She screeches and scoots up the bed. “Garrett! What the actual fuck?”

“I heard sounds coming from your room and came to make sure you were okay. Apparently, you’re more than okay.”

She quickly covers up with a blanket. “You could have called out when you got home. You’re supposed to be at work.” She looks down at the bed, realizing she abandoned the still vibrating sex toy a few feet away. A blush covers her cheeks as she snatches it up and tucks it under the sheets.

“I forgot my lunch. And now I’m really glad I did.” I kick the door open wider. “So? Want some help?”

Her jaw drops and she looks flustered. “I had almost finished taking care of it myself when you scared the crap out of me.”

“Let me make it up to you.”

“The four weeks aren’t up yet, and I deserve to be taken out on a date first, Doc.”

“This can be whatever you want it to be.”

“Like helping keep all the hormonal horniness at bay?” I tilt my head at her, glancing down at the expanse of leg and hip she wasn’t able to cover with the blanket. God, I hope she throws the blanket aside and lets me play with her.

I nod.

“What did you have in mind?”

I don’t even need to think about it. “I want to taste you. You can either ride my face or toss the blanket aside and open your legs, but I want my mouth on you.”

Her breathing turns shallow and her chest heaves.

The blanket is tossed aside, revealing all her soft curves. I want those legs wrapped around me again, but that’ll have to wait for another day.

I prowl forward, heading straight for the bed. When I’m standing at the end, I reach over and grab one toned calf and pull her toward me. She squeals, then hums when my hands move up her shins and part her thighs.

Staring down at her pussy, I move my thumbs to the crease at the apex of her thighs. She whimpers at me and I smirk. Her eyes lock with mine, and I know if I offered, she would give me the green light to fuck her. That's not what I want though. I want to give her some pleasure and ease her ache. I want us to be firmly in a relationship before we have sex again.

After a few slow strokes, her movements become desperate wriggles. I grab the outside of her hips and pull her all the way to the edge of the bed. Getting on my knees, I set her legs on my shoulders. Her gaze doesn't leave mine, and I can't read her expression.

I place a few lingering kisses on her mound until she growls at me. That's when I dive in, my tongue parting her, slipping through her slick heat in rhythmic swipes. I listen for her sounds. Her being vocal and unrestrained is a huge turn-on.

My swipes have gotten lazy as I feel her and savor her sweet, tangy flavor. My cock is pounding, so hard and desperate, but I ignore that and focus on the woman in front of me, eager to see her come.

“Faster. Focus on my clit, Gar. I need—”

I abandon my slow exploration and suck on her clit. Her back bows. I press two fingers inside her and hook them up, rubbing inside her as my tongue swirls against her swollen flesh.

“Yes. Oh, God.”

She goes off, her body convulsing and clenching all around me. I continue to give her clit some gentle attention, drawing out the last dregs of her orgasm. My dick is angry, craving her attention, and her taste on my tongue combined with her silky thighs and incredible ass nearly have me reaching down to give myself the quick few strokes I'd need to relieve the pounding ache.

Her body relaxes, and her arms come up to cross over her face. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” I look my fill and lick my lips. Fuck, she’s so beautiful. The slight swell of her lower abdomen fills me with a proud, possessive fervor.

“So now we . . . ?”

I tear my gaze from her delectable body. “Go to work.” Standing up, I casually wipe her release from my face and hold out a hand to help her off the bed since I can see her legs are still shaky.

She takes it and heads to the bathroom. “I’ll just need five minutes to freshen up.” I nod. She looks down at my groin, sees I’m still hard as stone, and bites her lip.

“Aria . . .” I warn.

“Right! Five minutes.” She doesn’t make it two steps before turning back toward me. “So this was just you helping me scratch my pregnancy hormone itch?”

“Or we can end the probationary period, enter into a real relationship, and do this any time we like. I like that option best.”

“We’ll talk next week. For now, this was . . . It was amazing. Thank you.”

“Anytime.” She stares at my goofy, lopsided smile and chuckles.

“Don’t forget your lunch,” she calls out.

I’m only going to want to eat one thing for the rest of the day, and that’s her. But I need to do this right—the way she wants me to.

CHAPTER 25



GARRETT

She's an adorable, sexy, human tornado. One I've had to work to keep my hands off today. She hasn't mentioned the scratching her itch incident, but the long looks she sometimes gives me lets me know she's thinking about it. And as that four-week timeline creeps up, I have a really good feeling about where we're headed.

In the past few weeks, I've had my eyes opened to what it's like living with a woman. Something I haven't done since I lived at home. Aria doesn't have an overwhelming amount of belongings, but what she has are items that she enjoys keeping out and ready at any given moment.

Makeup stays on the counter—I don't even bother putting it away anymore. In fact, it was highly suggested that I stop doing that. There are at least eight things on the entryway table at all times. The shower is filled with roughly the same amount of products available in the entire personal care aisle at Martin's Market. My living room has turned into some kind of nesting area with twelve blankets, throw pillows, lotions, something called reading socks, and an essential oil diffuser. My cat has been spoiled to the point where she doesn't even acknowledge me as a member of this household anymore. It's all Aria, all the time. And I don't blame her.

Then there are the pictures. They're in frames, on stands, propped up on the mantel. I've caught myself staring at them too many times to count. She's a photographer, so I expected a number of photos and various forms of art. What I didn't expect was how I'd feel about those images.

She's talented, so talented—able to capture just the right moment. Not an expression, but the emotion behind the smile. The composition and lighting create the exact style and theme she intends. Examining each photo with care, I see a life I never got to witness. Apart from one photo. My favorite photo. It's one of my family at our annual Christmas gathering. Everyone has a somewhat tipsy smile on their face—everyone except Aria. She stands beside me, plastered to my arm. A laugh pulls at her cheeks, and she has her head turned toward me. What no one else knows is that she whispered something dirty to me right before the photo was taken. She'd taken this picture using some kind of remote and waited until I reacted before pressing the button. My pained, hooded expression exemplifies my feelings around her for most of my late twenties.

This house is Aria's now, and I'm more than happy to give up my empty, lackluster lifestyle. Every time I see something of hers or something that would typically annoy me, I expect that irritation to settle in and burrow deep, eventually spilling over. Those cups she puts in the dishwasher wrong. The times she gets distracted and leaves something half-finished. The pantry is full of food from grocery aisles I purposely avoid. The extra sass from grouchy Morning Aria. Those all mean she's in my life. She's leaving her mark, proving she lives here and is comfortable.

Aria's voice draws me away from the photos I was looking at again. "Garrett, did you eat my leftover mac and cheese?"

Like hell. The congealed mess she left on the stove after falling asleep *while* eating last night was tossed straight into the trash. Now, I have to decide if I convince her she ate it or confess that I tossed the artery-clogging mush into the trash.

"Didn't you finish it?" There. Not a lie but not an answer either. I think I might be getting better at this.

She hums, looking around the kitchen as she thinks. "Maybe. I was super tired last night. I'll make some more. You want some? I'm adding bacon to this batch." She waggles her eyebrows at me, laughing and turning to the stove, not waiting for an answer. She already knows what I'll say.

“Hey, Aria? It’s eight o’clock.”

“It is,” and I can hear the smile in her voice.

“Eight o’clock *in the morning*. We have to leave for work in forty-five minutes. I made oatmeal with apple and cinnamon if you want something nutritious before we head out.”

“Nope. All good. The mac and cheese will only take fifteen minutes tops.” She’s digging in the fridge and comes out with olives, holding them up proudly. “Oh! What if I added this? Yum.” I gag a little and likely do a terrible job hiding it. Thankfully she’s too busy prepping her food and doesn’t notice. “Pregnancy is pretty cool. It makes me crave all kinds of weird things, giving me a solid reason to experiment.”

I thought it was fascinating too. Until she dipped a perfectly smoked baby back rib into our jar of peanut butter the other night.

“Tonight, do you want me to make you that Thai noodle bowl you liked from last week?”

“Oooh, yes! With extra peanut sauce.” Of course.

I hear some sniffles and look up. “Aria?” She looks over, and her eyes are filled with fat, shiny tears. Ah, crap. This gorgeous woman and her tears destroy every wall I’ve built. I see those tears and I want to succumb. I want to touch, feel, taste, and fix.

“You are such a good cook, and I’m over here making mac and cheese from a box and adding precooked microwaveable bacon strips and olives. I’m awful in the kitchen and a mediocre roommate. We both know I’ve been doing some stuff on purpose, but I also know I put the dishes in the dishwasher wrong. I try to tell myself they still get clean, so it shouldn’t matter. But it matters.” Her sobs stretch the last word out, and it’s nearly indecipherable. “And when I ruined your dining room rug, you were so understanding. But really, of all the possible places, why do people put a stainable piece

of fabric directly under where they eat?” She chokes on her tears nearly the whole way through her breakdown.

Going up to her, I bring her toward me, the same way I have several times this week already. I cup the side of her neck with one hand while my other arm presses against her lower back, molding her to me. Aria is a hug lush. It’s also the only thing—that I’m allowed to do—that calms her when she feels overwhelmed or emotional. There was some trial and error with this.

First, I tried to reason with her. *Mistake.*

Next, I tried passing her some tissues and telling her I’d give her some time to herself. *Bigger mistake.*

Later, I noticed that she liked to wrap her arms around herself during these waves of unfettered feelings.

As a doctor, I acknowledge that a hug can help reduce blood pressure, lower stress hormone levels, and release oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin—the feel-good hormones. This latest attempt at soothing the pregnancy beast has proven extremely effective.

I’m an idiot for not thinking of it sooner. Aria is an affection-loving person, and while I’ve been trying to shower her in attention and consideration, I’ve been keeping it tame until she gives me the go-ahead again. Which I hope happens really fucking soon because I’m on a slippery slope, and I’m not sure how much longer I’ll last without tasting, touching, or feeling her again.

She buries her face into my chest and takes a few deep, long breaths.

A very slippery slope.

I release her and back up half a step. She follows, clinging to my shirt. Goddamn, I’d like to wear her—undress her, lift her, and keep her on me all fucking day.

Clearing my throat and my mind, I distract—another effective tactic. “How about we explore the trail behind my house after work? It ends at Grey’s Vineyard and is about an hour’s walk from here, but there are lots of places to stop and

scope out. I can bring my GPS, and we can pinpoint the exact coordinates of prime spots.”

One side of her mouth tips up at me, and her eyes hold the promise of a thorough round of teasing.

“It’s an accurate way of recording locations, and I use it for my runs as well.”

“I wasn’t going to mock the GPS. That might actually be handy, but you’ll have to show me how to use it.” I nod. “I was just thinking about how accommodating and doting you are. I used to have to do all kinds of ridiculous shit to get your attention. Getting it every day is . . .” Her eyes start to tear up again, and my arms immediately pull her back into me. “Well, it’s just so unexpected. I didn’t think you were the whipped type.” She makes a terrible attempt at the *wuh-chhhh* whip sound. “Saved the weepiness with a joke. It wasn’t my best.”

A deep, raspy chuckle leaves me and has her tentatively smiling up at me.

“So? Spot scouting walk after work?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

“Hey, Aria?” I ask. “I want to tell you something, but there have already been some tears this morning.” I hate when she cries. It triggers something in me that has me on alert to destroy anything and everything that causes her pain or sorrow.

She looks up at me in alarm.

“No, no, nothing bad. It’s just, you forgot to put water in the pot, and we now only have thirty minutes before we have to leave.”

Her forehead drops against my chest, and I can’t tell if she’s laughing or crying. Shit. Chances are it’s those tears again. Those damn tears that I knew would likely become a steady presence in our lives given her condition. I knew I’d feel uncomfortable and helpless, but I didn’t know I’d feel gutted with each trembling breath and watery sob.

“I’ll order the baked mac and cheese from Taps and have it delivered as soon as they open. Okay?”

She sniffs and looks up at me. “Really?”

“Of course.”

“*Wuh-chhhh!*”

This time, her whip sound is followed by hand gestures. A burst of laughter knocks me back on my heels, head tipped back as I enjoy this moment with my little minx.

“I really didn’t want to make subpar macaroni. You are too easy, Doc.”

“You don’t even know how easy, Minx.”

She winks at me. “I wouldn’t say nearly a decade is easy.”

“You’re tailoring our history to suit your purposes. Your gangly, needy, energetic teenage self does not even compare to your current full-figured, fully-adult body and somewhat more mature nature.”

“Except the gangly part, I’m still all of those things.”

I shrug, my face not revealing a thing.

“You going to get dressed, or are you waiting for me to help you? Because if you give me the green light, you’ll be wearing no clothes, and we’ll be late for work again.”

Her brows hit her hairline, and I have to admit how good it feels to be the one doling out the flirtations and sexy quips.

“You’re never late for anything, Dr. Caldwell.”

“It would be worth it.”

She slides away from me, and just before disappearing around the corner to the bedrooms, her arms cross, and she grabs the hem of her sleep shirt. I catch a glimpse of it being whipped off and chucked behind her. “Damn straight.”

A low groan rattles in my chest as I beg my body to stay where it is. I have another week before Aria and I revisit our dating conversation, so I need to behave.

If she says no and wants to keep our relationship strictly a co-parenting one, I'm fucked. In the back of my mind, there's the reminder that it doesn't matter. She'll still be here, and I'll have the chance to convince her that I'm the man for her and that she's the only woman for me.

CHAPTER 26



ARIA

I've taken more pictures of Garrett than of the spots I'm supposed to be scoping out. I got one of him tying his shoe at just the right moment, when he looked up and scowled at me for taking another seemingly mundane picture of him.

When we emerge from the section of woods just north of Landry, it opens up into a field with the rolling hills acting as a backdrop. This is where I'll be taking engagement photos. I can bring out some props and furniture, using both the thickly treed area and the rolling hills.

Dragging my sexy photography assistant out into the field, I place him where I want him and back up. After switching lenses and making some adjustments, I take a few shots. It's adorable that he's uncomfortable.

"Can you get that, Gar?" I ask sweetly.

He looks around, then back at me. "What? Did you drop something?"

"No. Just wondering if you could remove the stick from your ass? It won't look good in the images."

He rolls his eyes and crosses his arms.

Oh. Broody. Me like.

I fire away while giggling. He hears me and starts coming for me. I take a few more shots before skipping away farther down the path.

I haven't had this much fun on a location scouting trip in years.

Garrett hands me a water bottle from the backpack he brought with us. I drink it down gratefully. My thighs have been tight and crampy, and my stomach has been off this morning.

"It's another ten minutes to the vineyard. You doing okay?"

"Yup. All good. I'm young and spry! Just because . . ." I look around to see if anyone is on the path, then whisper, "I'm pregnant doesn't mean I can't go on a little walk. Some women still compete in marathons when they're pregnant."

"That takes training and marathon-ready prepregnancy fitness."

I gasp. "Are you saying I don't look fit enough? Have you checked out these thighs? This ass?" I spin to flaunt the booty I'm proud of. "I do Pilates and yoga on most days. I also wear heels, which is practically a workout all on its own."

I peek behind me to see him staring at my ass. "Oh, I believe you." A hand comes down over his eyes like he's trying to wipe away the image of my backside. I'm going to take that as a compliment. He can't handle these curves.

He has before . . . and you loved it.

I see the sign for the vineyard and pick up my pace. I hope we have time to stop for a snack. I haven't eaten since I gorged on what had to be a double order of baked mac and cheese from Taps that Garrett ordered for me and refused to try.

"We should get a sna—Ow, shit. I think I have a cramp."

"Let's take a break." His hand finds my arm and guides us to the side of the path. "Can you take a deep breath?" He lays his warm palm gently against my stomach as I breathe. That doesn't seem to help, and the pain isn't in my ribs or upper abdomen. It's lower . . . much lower.

Oh, no.

“I think I’m having cramps. Not from walking. Like period cramps. Garrett . . .” I can’t keep the tremble from my voice.

“You’re okay. Cramping in the first two trimesters is fairly common. There are a lot of changes and growth happening in your body right now. Let’s just take a little break and then make our way to the vineyard. It shouldn’t last more than a few minutes. But I can get someone to come pick us up if you’re not feeling up to walking back.”

I nod, smiling, feeling better. The father of my child being a doctor and my best friend being a nurse practitioner is coming in rather handy.

We make it to Grey’s Winery and grab a table in their tasting area to order some snacks.

“I’m going to the washroom. Apparently, this peeing thing starts earlier than I expected. Then we can order a bunch of food. I’m starving. It’s almost like you planned it that way when you suggested a walk and winery visit this evening.” I raise my eyebrows in question. “This isn’t technically a date, got it, mister?”

He raises his hands. “I can wait, Minx. No rush. How about I order an assortment of things I think you’ll like, and we can see how well I did?”

“That sounds like a fun game. If you want to win, make sure you flip over the menu and peruse the dessert section.”

He laughs and flips the menu over.

I’m mid-pee when I look down and see something that makes my stomach plummet. I wipe up with tears in my eyes, needing to get back to Garrett.

I get back to the table just as the server is taking his order.

“Garrett. We have to go.”

His eyes lock on me, his expression shuttering as he reads my panic.

“What’s wrong?”

I look at the server, who looks confused but takes his leave, recognizing my need for privacy.

“I’m spotting.”

He gets up, grabs his phone off the table, and walks me to the exit. His demeanor is calm and sympathetic. It’s nearly the opposite of the riotous feelings practically beating their way out of my body right now.

“Sean says he can come pick us up and take us to Vaughn or Santa Rosa. I’m going to make a quick call and see who’s on call in Vaughn since it’s closer.” He gets on the phone and talks quietly for a few moments, but I can’t hear what he’s saying. My thoughts are too loud.

After he hangs up, he comes and stands next to me, arm brushing mine as we wait for Sean.

“Sean was the first one to answer my group message asking for someone to come get us. If he starts talking too much or asking too many questions, just nod at me, and I’ll take care of it.” He checks his phone again.

“Should I be sitting? Lying down? What will help?”

“It could still be nothing, Ari. But if it’s something—if something has happened—your position won’t affect anything. There’s nothing we can do until we can get you checked out. Even then, if it’s a worst-case scenario, there’s often nothing that can be done once it’s underway. However, spotting is very common, and we can investigate the cause. We aren’t able to do an ultrasound at the clinic, which is why we’re heading to Vaughn’s medical center. Chloe is meeting us there.”

A shuddered half sob, half sigh escapes me. Garrett takes me in his arms, his scent calming me and his strength seeping into my unsteady bones.

I have no idea how long I get lost in Garrett’s touch, but Sean is pulling up seemingly moments later.

“What are you doing? Come on and get her in. Does she need to be carried? Hold on, sweetheart, I’ll get you up and into the truck.” Sean swings his door open, but Garrett barks,

“Stop. I have her. We need you to be the levelheaded person here since you’re driving.”

Garrett scoops me up, and my arms wrap around his neck, snuggling in and taking pleasure in the small things I’m able to. He deposits me in the back of the truck and then slides in beside me, reaching to buckle me in before I’ve moved to do it.

“I had ten minutes of panic driving on the way here, not knowing what I’d come across. I left the newbie in the shop and peeled onto the highway.” Sean grabs his chest all dramatically.

Garrett slips an arm around me, sending me a pointed look when I glance up at him, silently asking if I want him to shut his adorable cousin up. I shake my head and give him a small smile.

“I’m fine, Sean. It could be nothing. It’s *probably* nothing. Right, Doc?”

He huffs a sigh of relief as Garrett explains.

It’s just under twenty miles to Vaughn, but in this beast of a truck, I’m pretty sure Sean plans to run down anything that gets in our way. In the false calm, I take in my surroundings and hear the buzzing of my phone in my bag. Reaching down, I dig it out and see Chloe has sent me several messages. And Emma and Lauren.

I’m loved and I have support. Real support from people who are there through thick and thin, good decision or bad. It’s a comfort I haven’t had in so long. Why did I keep looking for this feeling—this comforting, fulfilling piece of my life I was missing—in so many places that weren’t *here*?

I send them an update in our group text and tell them I’ll call when I get some news. Then I message my mom too in case she hears I was taken to the hospital, though I’m not sure when she’ll check her phone since she and Jack are pretty hot and heavy right now. When I went over there for brunch last weekend, I found them in a state of disheveled bliss. I didn’t touch any of the surfaces.

After we arrive at the medical center and Garrett talks to the intake staff, I'm moved to an exam room.

"You'll need to order a full blood panel. We've already done the urinalysis even though I haven't noticed any symptoms, but she could be asymptomatic. You should book a pelvic ultrasound—"

"Yes, Dr. Caldwell. We've got this. Your friend is in good hands." The older man gives Garrett a knowing look, and the hand that's holding mine grips a little tighter.

"I don't need placation, Dr. Crawford. What I need is for you to run all tests and procedures by me." He's got that seething glare he used to use on me years ago. I haven't actually seen the full extent of Garrett's dark, wrathful gaze in a long time. It's simmered over the years, but here in this exam room, he's not holding anything back.

"I will run them by her nurse," the doctor says, a hitch in his tone. "We have Chloe Caldwell listed in her file. Until she gets here, you are a visitor, not staff. I'll share with you what I can, when I can, but Chloe will be able to fill you in better once she arrives."

"I'm here. I'm here! Sorry. I had to drop Kinsley off with Aunt Lucy." She comes and gives me a hug. "I'll talk with Dr. Crawford, and then we'll get some answers, okay? Garrett, you stay here with her and no more browbeating the staff."

"I can't make any promises. Actually, let's add a full pelvic exam just in case there's a tear. Though that's not common unless she's been sexually active." He's in full crisis mode, expressionless but mind still spinning, not realizing it's time to get off the ride and let Chloe and Dr. Condescension take a turn.

Take-charge Garrett shifts his gaze back to me. "Have you been sexually active? You don't have to tell me. In fact, I'd prefer if you didn't because I'd have a lot of feelings about it, and that wouldn't help us right now. You'll need to tell Chloe though."

“What? Of course I’m not sexually active. Except for that one thing you helped me with last week, the last time I had sex”—I point at my tiny tummy bulge—“this happened. You were there, so don’t pretend you don’t remember. It happened in a room very similar to this one.”

“Gross,” Chloe murmurs.

“I remember. I remember very well. I just didn’t want to incorrectly assume you’ve been celibate since then. I mean, maybe you haven’t been with a man, but you’ve—”

“What? Been with a woman?” A laugh leaves me at the serious look on his face as he considers this.

“No. Wait . . . have you?” he asks.

Chloe is mumbling things through the hands she has covering her face.

“No.” Idiot.

“Well, a tear can also easily be caused by other intrusive objects.” What? My face screws up as I twist slightly to face him. “Sex toys. A toy can do a fair amount of damage if the vagina is not—” I nearly choke on my tongue, and I slap a hand over his mouth.

“I’m going to go now that Chloe is here. Order whatever tests you deem appropriate.” Dr. Condescension practically races from the room.

“I don’t need a pelvic exam, Chlo.”

“Good to know.”

“It might still be a good idea if—”

“No, Garrett. I haven’t had sex in months, and the only toy I’ve used since moving in with you was my vibrator, and since that particular one is for clit stimulation only—which you very well know, my little Peeping Tom—my delicate vaginal walls have been safe as can be.”

“I feel wholly unprepared for the personal details that have arisen during this medical emergency,” Chloe says as she taps away on the tablet the doctor had handed her. “You’ll have

some blood drawn, pee in a cup, and then you'll be taken to get an ultrasound. Spotting is quite common, but we want to make sure the baby is still doing well."

Chloe goes over what they'll be looking for and some possible explanations, most of which ease my mind.

I haven't even been able to feel the baby move or see him or her, and our first viewing is going to be in a panic, wondering if the baby is okay.

When we get to the ultrasound room, Garrett is quiet the entire time, trying to catch glimpses of the screen while one hand strokes a slow path up and down my forearm. The goose bumps breaking out along my arm don't escape his notice. He looks down at my arm, never stopping the gentle swipes of his fingers, then up at me, and a tender, uneven smile lifts one side of his face.

"Do you two want a picture of the baby?"

"Yes!" we both answer.

He places a hand on my lower stomach, brow crinkled as he stares at my bump.

"Is he—or she—okay? Is it a hematoma?" Garrett asks.

She smiles sympathetically. "The radiologist will be in touch with my findings. The good news is that baby is moving around, and their heartbeat is strong."

We both nod and Garrett grabs my hand. His face is filled with worry, and his eyes turn glassy. Crap. One of us needs to be strong, and right now, Garrett looks ready to break.

When the tech leaves the room, he gets his phone out and starts texting someone with a frown on his face.

"What are you up to?"

"I have a radiologist friend who works here a few days a week. I'm going to see if he can look at the scans remotely so we can get our results faster." His fingers fly across the screen before he tucks it away.

Biting down on a grin, I say, “Okay, babe. You do what you need to do.”

His phone buzzes, and I watch as he pulls it back out. With an angry huff, Growly Garrett shoves his phone back into his pocket.

Looks like we are waiting for a while longer.

He doesn’t look up, but he does keep touching me. In small ways at first, but when his eyes drift to me, his face softens, and he hops into the bed with me.

“Now, what are you doing?” I tilt my head at him, untempered delight mixing with my teasing tone.

“Being exactly what you need, Ari.”

I melt against him, the hollow nervousness in my tummy replaced with swarms of butterflies. We cuddle together for over an hour, all the while knowing that this is not the same lingering infatuation I’ve felt for years. It feels so much bigger than that. Not because of the baby, and not because of my hormones.

I might be an emotional wreck, but I also know that I’ve fallen completely in love with Garrett Caldwell.

CHAPTER 27



ARIA

Garrett insisted that I take a few days off work even though we found out I have a very small subchorionic hematoma that will likely resolve in a week or so, and I'll be just fine.

"You still up for going to that town event tonight? You looked like you were dragging this afternoon, and I don't want you to overdo it," he asks.

"Ohh, no. No, no, no. We are definitely still going. Also, I expect you to fully participate at the event since I will be unable to considering you knocked me up." I've been looking forward to this for months, even more so now that Garrett is my date. Yes, *date*. I plan on telling him soon that I want us to move forward, create a life together, and have all the sex. I want him so badly, cuddling on the couch while we watch movies has me squirming, my nipples hard and panties in need of a change.

"I don't know what fully participate means, but sure."

"Good. Go get ready. Don't overdress. It's very casual. Just a shirt and jeans." I grin, thinking about how he'll look at the end of the night. "I'll go change and meet you at the door in twenty."



Garrett's gaze sweeps over my deep purple wrap dress. He watches as it flutters delicately around my calves as

I walk toward him. I seem a tad overdressed compared to his very casual look, but I'm glad he followed my outfit suggestion.

With his hand on the small of my back, he leads me to his car, but I stop several paces before we reach it. "Forget something?" he asks.

"No, I just figured we could walk. It's super close, and I haven't gotten to stretch my legs much lately other than our occasional walks to work."

His gaze narrows suspiciously. "I'll grab you a sweater and then we'll go."

I won't need a sweater, but I don't tell him that because I won't be able to keep the laughter out of my voice.

He jogs back out, the sweater hooked over one arm while he holds out his other for me. Cheesy, yes. But try telling that to my swooning woman parts.

After striding past Jess and Emma's, I sharply guide us up their neighbor's walkway. The neighbor on the far side of Jess and Emma's house is hosting tonight.

Garrett stalls, his steps not quite stopping altogether, but there's a noticeable dragging of his feet.

"Aria."

"Yes?"

"Why are we stopping at Stella's?"

"This is where the event is."

"Ah, fuck," he mutters, scraping a hand down his face.

Oh, he's already irritated. Wait until he gets inside.

"You're book clubbing me."

I bite my lip in an attempt to prevent my wide, teasing smile from growing.

The lovely town of Landry has a book club, held monthly at Stella's house. It's an absolute shit show of games, socializing, and general debauchery. There is usually a book

chosen, but fewer than half the participants actually read it. It starts with some mingling and leads to a scandalous lightning-round-style game loosely related to the chosen book. No one had a straight answer for what happens after that. Tonight, we finally find out!

“Technically, you volunteered. I was going to go with Sean, remember?”

“Yeah, I do. Sean isn’t taking you out. You want to go to a ridiculous town event or shopping or yoga or bowling or figure skating—whatever you decide to try—I’m taking you.” I raise my eyebrows at him haughtily until he corrects himself. “Let me take you. Please.”

I hum at him with a poor attempt to hide my smirk. “Let’s see how you do tonight before we plan more outings.”

“A test? I can do that. I’m great at tests.” I roll my eyes.

“Well then, let’s get in there and experience Book Club! I’ve been wanting to attend for *years*.” I bounce a little on my toes, hands rubbing together in excitement. That gets a smile out of him as he knocks. “Oh, and since I can’t drink, you’ll be drinking for both of us. Remember, I expect full participation and effort, Doc. Make my spectator status worthwhile and show me what you’ve got.”

The corners of his eyes tighten in apprehension.

Before he can reply, Stella opens the door with a great whoosh and an elated smile. “My, oh my! You did the impossible, my girl!” she says to me, forgoing a normal greeting. “You got Garrett Caldwell to attend book club.” Her sly gaze switches over to him. “Looking good, Doc.”

He moves closer to me, clearly not wanting to give Stella an opening to get into his personal space.

“I’ll protect you, don’t worry,” I whisper out of the side of my mouth. Though, I won’t be able to protect him from the fact that he hasn’t read the book. I doubt he would have read a book about an upstanding community member and Catholic priest forsaking his vows for an emotionally broken stripper. Garrett would hate that. The man wouldn’t even allow

himself to accidentally touch me until after I'd finished college. He fell out of a chair once when I sat too close at Millie's birthday dinner one year—and even then, he's made sure to keep a comfortable distance.

“Come in, come in. Leave your pants by the door.” Garrett's hand jerks on my waist as he pulls me against him. Stella bursts into laughter. “Oh, dear. Your reaction was even better than I expected. Sorry, sweets, I was only teasing.” Garrett relaxes a fraction. “The nudity doesn't happen until the lightning round game is well underway. And that only really affects those who haven't read the book. You're the studious sort, so I'm sure you've read it and will be just fine.” She moves closer and pats him on the arm.

“You never mind her, Dr. Caldwell.” Greg appears, wrapping an arm around his wife. “Stella is just a bit sore that you upended her bachelor event sooner than expected. She was hoping you'd give a rose to Aria, and then she'd be a candidate. Your love story would play out beautifully for us all to see. She's a sucker for unlikely pairings. And you two have been circling each other for years. Until I started reading these book club romance novels, I wouldn't have even noticed. But my eyes are open now, and it's clear as day, isn't it, sweet pea?” He turns to his wife, and she gives him a less than chaste smooch.

“Oh, hush. Don't go revealing all the inner workings of my mind, snugglepoo.”

A muffled sound of disgust comes from the man beside me. I look over and see he has a fist pressed against his mouth. A sharp laugh leaves me before I cut it off.

“Sorry for disrupting your plans for Landry's edition of *The Bachelor*, Stella. I had no interest in dating any woman other than Aria.”

Stella's *aww* can be heard by the entire house. Looking past the entryway, I see several heads turn to look at us.

“Let's go get you a drink! Glad to be here, Stella. Can't wait to get to the game. I loved the book!” I read it two weeks ago and ended up having to rub one out. Ever since the nausea

eased up, my body entered horndog status, and reading taboo romance was like adding gasoline-soaked kindling to the already out of control fire blazing in my body.

Garrett sticks by my side as we wander through the house. His soft, constant touches are a surprisingly welcome distraction from the chaos around us.

When we are all called outside to start the lightning round game, Garrett stiffens. I choose a side since this game has us split into two teams. My wary protector settles in behind me, wrapping one arm around to the front of my hip.

I hear a shout coming from a distance and look up. Over the fence, Emma sits on her own deck, and she's waving at us. I forgot she sometimes likes to take in this spectacle from the comfort of her yard. She disappears into her house, and I focus on Greg as he explains the rules.

Emma comes back out, this time with Jess. She's pointing at us and Jess looks confused at first.

"If you don't understand the rules, we are going to lose this game, Ari. Which means I'll have to get naked or drunk . . . or both."

"I would actually prefer that, handsome." I wink at him, and he fights a smile as he listens to Stella introduce the team captains. "Look who is also spectating tonight." I tip my head toward his brother and sister-in-law.

Jess is laughing so hard he's shaking. Emma has gotten a couple of chairs out, and they both get settled to continue watching.

"Great."

"It won't be so bad. I'm sure it's just like a book trivia kind of game—some laughs, some shots, and fun."

"Okay, book club, let's start with Maria's team. Oh, wait. Who has the flogger?" Stella asks, looking around. I don't help. I look back at Garrett.

"No. Hard no," he says.

Laughing, I lean against his chest and grab his arms to wrap them around me. “Just for thirty minutes. I need to see this.”

He grumbles but tucks me tighter against him, soothed by my closeness.

Thirty minutes comes and goes, and Garrett has crossed straight into tipsy territory. I’ve *never* seen him so loose and carefree. It wasn’t long before people noticed I wasn’t drinking, which apparently strictly isn’t allowed at book club. They made an exception after Garrett shouted at them to lay off. That brought more attention to us, and people started speculating why I wasn’t drinking and why Garrett hovered around me acting weird. After a few more shots, the stoic man beside me breaks. He announces to everyone that we are pregnant and he’s going to be a daddy. With zero hesitation, he answers some of their questions, deferring the rest to me. He kisses me sweetly on the head, occasionally dipping down to drop a kiss on my shoulder while I’m talking to Lucy, Maria, Fern, and a few other town ladies.

For the past twenty minutes in the game, he’s been getting questions wrong just so he has to take a concession card, which gives him a somewhat demeaning or sexy task to perform. And I’m the lucky recipient of all his partner-related tasks.

I finally ask him why he won’t let me help him with some of the answers.

“Because I love seeing you laugh, and I really want to pass this test. That means doing everything to make the most of this fucked-up game.”

People around us tut at him, and some start to argue about how judgmental attitudes are supposed to be left at the door.

“Oh, come on. Barrie was sent to the hot tub confessional and returned without his underwear. Lidia has been sneaking her own task cards into the card pile—most of which contain some form of toe sucking.” His voice booms across the patio. “This is the most fucked-up, perverted party I’ve ever been to. And I spent a weekend getting dragged to several Coachella

parties by Jess back when I was in college. Wait. Are people doing drugs here? That would explain a lot.”

My eyes widen. Garrett doesn't typically try to cause conflict unless he feels strongly about something. He usually just ignores the offensive situation until it either stops or he snaps. I learned that early. Then again, I liked it when he snapped. It always resulted in his undivided attention, and the last time I saw his perfect composure break, it resulted in orgasms.

“Garrett, maybe it's time we go?”

“You want to leave? Did I pass?” His head drops to the crook of my neck. He runs his lips along the length of my throat. My eyes close as warmth spreads through my body, and a tingle of need burns to life again. He's barely left my side tonight, and with every touch, every smile, he's been priming me with the promise of more.

“You did. With . . .” His tongue finds the edge of my ear, and I just about lose feeling in my legs. “Um, flying colors.”

“Good. I'm taking you home—our home.” I don't know why that sends a zap of pleasure down to my core.

Stella sends us a slow, knowing wave as we reach the side gate to walk home. With our place only two doors down, I get him safely in the house before he can wreak havoc elsewhere.

He collapses on the couch, then jerks up and pulls me down with him. I'm comfortably cradled against his chest, my head using his brawny arm for a pillow.

“You know I've always been one touch away from tossing out my good-guy rules and being bad. I wanted to be so bad with you for so long.”

Drunk Garrett is surprisingly forthcoming. Interesting.

“Perv.”

“Not when you were a kid.” He sighs into my hair. “Don't be gross.”

“*Me* don't be gross? How long have you been tempted to be bad, Doc?”

“I may have noticed you at my birthday party years ago, but it wasn’t until you came home from college your junior year and brought that moron home with you that I was tempted. He had all your attention. Little shit tried to grope you under the table. And that red dress you wore had me messed up for months. I couldn’t pretend after that.”

“But you did.”

“I had to. You weren’t even twenty-one yet, and I was a grown-ass man with a practice your dad had threatened to destroy if I looked anywhere but your face.”

“Yeah, I recently learned about that. Sorry.” Though, I’m not sure if I am. It wouldn’t have been right for us to have been together then. It would have been a struggle in so many ways—our families, our stages in life, our wants and needs.

His hand skims up my arm, across my collarbone, up my neck, and cups the side of my face. I look up at him when he tips my face toward him.

“The summer after that, you started coming back home more regularly, and every single time you’d seek me out like you knew I was avoiding anywhere you might be.”

“You weren’t very subtle. It’s not like all I did was hit on you or try to make you feel uncomfortable. We had some good talks on the rare occasions you’d humor me.”

“That made it worse.”

I laugh. “What?”

“You’re interesting, charismatic, and fun. I could watch you all day. Just sit at home and watch you be you. You’re meant to be cherished, Ari. Meant to be loved.”

My eyebrows raise at that, and I grin at him suggestively.

“Not like that. Though . . . also that.” His lopsided, happy smile flashes for a moment before he gets serious again. “I meant you’re easy to love, easy to crave. You can make friends with anyone, know everyone, and are just so completely at ease in your own skin. Half the time I don’t know what to say to people unless it involves health care or football.”

“You do just fine.”

“With you, yes. You should see me on a date. It can be painful unless the other person is willing to carry most of the conversation.”

“I’m excellent at carrying a conversation. Maybe you should take me on a date.”

He practically smothers me, trying to get closer. His hard body and burning heat sneak past my “keep it in your pants” defenses. I can feel him hardening against my thigh, and I arch toward him automatically.

When his hand finds the small of my back, keeping me pressed against him, my leg starts to wind around him.

“You’d go out with me? For real, not just as a way to go to an event or to taunt me or to make me sorry I ever looked past you, ever forced myself to stay away from you?”

“Ask me and find out.”

His eyes dart between mine, uncertain. “Aria, would you go out to dinner with me? Or a hike? Or we could do that dancing in the town square activity. It sounds like torture, but you seemed so excited about it. Whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want, huh?” My feet creep higher.

He swallows and ducks his head slightly. He takes a moment before saying, “I draw the line at skydiving,” in a mock-serious tone. I’m really enjoying tipsy Garrett.

I frown a little, pouting until he looks at me.

“Fine. We can skydive, but I’ll have a lot of questions and require some intense research time.”

I giggle, and it’s embarrassing. I don’t often giggle like a doe-eyed ditz. I’m usually the one who makes the other person feel all gooey. I’m the direct one who approaches first and encourages them.

“That’s a sound I could get addicted to.”

“I could get addicted to you making me giggle.”

He's holding himself up on one propped-up arm while the other holds me tightly to his front. I shimmy just a little to see how it feels—but mostly how he reacts. When his breath stalls, I stretch upward, tipping my face to get closer to his, but I can only reach his neck.

My lips brush up and down, just like he did earlier.

“Please tell me I don't have to be good anymore.”

“I've been waiting for you to be bad with me, Garrett.”

“Thank fuck.”

His mouth moves in for a slow, scorching kiss. Full, firm lips brush against mine like he's just wanting to get a feel before owning them.

Our kiss turns aggressive, both of us nipping and sucking at each other. With one flick of his tongue, I open for him, tasting, testing. He shifts us so I'm partially on top of him, his hand lowering to the side of my ass. A groan leaves him as his fingers wrap around to encompass the bottom edge of my cheek.

“Your. Fucking. Ass,” he murmurs against my lips.

His pecs twitch under my touch, and I move my palms up and over his shoulders, one hand diving down the back of his shirt to feel his roped back and the other gliding up into his hair.

Our hands keep exploring, my mouth pulls at his aggressively, desperately. My hips start pushing for friction, and his answering groan has me smiling into our kisses.

The strong arms that have provided me with more hugs than I've ever experienced with anyone else cross against my back and lift me so I'm fully on top of him. I prop myself up on my hands and move my knees to settle on either side of his waist. His hands guide me into a slow grind. The delicious feel of his full length, even through our clothes, has me moments from combustion.

His jeans are a problem though. I give him a lingering kiss as I reach down to undo them. With that done, I remove the

annoying obstacle between me and his dick. I settle back as I take in the view before deciding to push his underwear down too. I was only going to hump him a little, but now that I see it, I need it.

My hand wraps lightly around him, starting at the base and moving to the velvety tip.

“Mmm, Ari. We have to go slow this time. I haven’t gotten to explore you yet. Damn, I need another taste. Take your panties off.” I squeeze the head and give a few quick, firm pumps. “Shit. Fuck. You are my undoing, Minx.” At the mention of the nickname he gave me, I lick my lips, thinking of all the naughty things I want to do to him.

“I like that you lost control for me.”

“One of these days, you’re going to let me be in control—complete control. And I’m going to make you beg and plead and scream my name. You won’t be able to distract me with that hot, sassy mouth. You’ll only be able to come—all over my face, on my cock, and with my fingers buried in your pussy.”

Fucking what?

Yes. So much yes.

My center throbs, clenching around nothing and needing everything he just promised.

“I’m going to need you to make all of that happen.”

He lifts up and captures my mouth in another needy kiss. One hand moves across from my hip to dip down into my panties, his thumb brushing against my clit so gently I almost wonder if it was intentional. Another few passes and I realize it’s very much intentional.

I’ve soaked my panties. I’m so ready for him—so hot and slick and needy. “Please?”

“Please, what?” he grumbles.

“More. I need more.”

He sits up all the way and leans me back against the couch cushions. “I need you to be bottom naked.”

An unexpected laugh bursts from my lips. Bottom naked? “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“I don’t need to be completely sober to eat your pussy. Get those panties off. Dress too.” I shimmy them both off, further instruction unnecessary.

The hot doctor whose mouth is about to be put to work scoops me up off the couch and slowly carries me to his bedroom, layering soft kisses across my breasts the whole way. He deposits me gently on the king-size bed. I move to the center of the mattress as he prowls toward me. His hands slip under me, molding to my ass and lifting me up to meet his face.

His thumb grazes up and down through my slit a few times, making me squirm. When his fingers start to circle my opening, I’m begging, nearly sobbing. “Stop teasing and either get those fingers in me or your mouth on me.”

“Bossy. This is how I used to feel being close to you. Always on edge and frustrated and forever wanting more.”

Finding out I affected him has my mouth curving in satisfaction. But when his hot tongue delves into my core, I suck in a breath, a surge of pleasure ripping through me. He circles and flicks his tongue against me, alternating between fast and slow, hard and soft. It’s torture and perfect all at once. He picks up his pace, listening to my murmurs and moans. A few more quick, deep strokes of his tongue have me right on the cusp. He sucks my clit into his mouth and plunges his fingers into me. Garrett groans as white-hot bliss detonates inside me in a searing wave.

It takes a minute or two for me to come to my senses enough to look down at him. The faint brushes I felt on my thighs were his wandering kisses.

A weight settles against me as he gets comfortable. He’s breathing a little heavy like that was just as good for him as it was for me. He shifts so his head is snuggled into my shoulder,

and his arm is looped around me. A breathy mumble leaves him.

Is he . . . ? Did he fall asleep?

I shift from under him a little, but he moves with me. “Garrett?”

“Mmm?”

“Are you falling asleep?”

“No. Just need a minute.” There’s a long pause. “Then I’m getting inside you. I just need to sober up a little first.”

I bite my lips together to hold in my laughter. “Garrett, move on to your back. I want to show you *my* best work.” My hand goes to his open pants, but he snags it, holding it to his lower abdomen.

“Not necessary, babe. I came while I was eating you out.”

My jaw drops. “What?”

“I couldn’t help it. You’re so sexy and you taste like sin. The moment my fingers felt you grip me, I remembered what you felt like. The mattress got a good pounding, but I’m not entirely sure you even noticed.”

“Um, no. No, I didn’t. You kept me thoroughly distracted.” He was humping the sheets thinking of what it feels like to fuck me while his mouth made me come harder than I ever have.

“Just give me two minutes, and then I’ll get us cleaned up.”

He settles back against me, his arm engulfing most of my chest. He hums like he’s enjoying that my breasts are plastered to his arm.

I wake up to a warm cloth between my legs. He barely finishes, and I’m already drifting back to sleep. I know I should go to my own room, but I’m too tired to bother.

CHAPTER 28



GARRETT

*M*y phone is buzzing, but I'm too tired and comfortable to move. My head is throbbing and doing anything other than lying here in this soft—wait.

Focusing on my hands as I try to crack an eyelid open, I discover I'm not alone. I have a bed companion and she feels like heaven. I press in closer, tucking her head under my chin and smoothing a hand down her bare back. The soft curve of her shoulder, leading down to the dip of her waist and hovering at the flare of her hip.

We almost had sex last night, but I was in no state to fuck her properly. The fact that I managed to carry her into this room and make her come is a goddamn miracle. Feeling her pulsing against my mouth, clenching around my fingers, and moaning my name had me coming in my pants like a teenager.

It's been months though. The last time I was with anyone or thought of anyone other than Aria was . . . Well, since before she moved back to Landry.

So I keep holding her and touching her because I can. She shifts a little, but it's closer to me instead of away, and that makes me smile. Even through my pounding head and sandpaper mouth. I probably smell like death.

Book club. She took me to book club last night, and I didn't hold back. Her delight at watching me play that atrocious game with those insane people made it easy to do all the things I'd normally run from.

By now, half the town probably knows or has seen photographic evidence of my attendance. This also means everyone will know Aria is pregnant, and I am “do anything for this woman” in love with her.

For all my talk of building a future with someone and finding the appropriate person to mesh my life with, I don't know if I ever truly considered that I'd connect with someone so deeply. That I'd come to crave her, need her, do stupid shit to make her laugh, bend over backward to make her happy.

Sure, between Chloe, Jess, and Taylor, I'm surrounded by people in love. Each of them has found it in different ways. Watching their relationships develop was a lesson I don't know if I paid close enough attention to. Now though? I understand.

I love her. This quirky, seductive siren stole my attention and my sanity. This woman is responsible for changing my life and making me dream of better things.

Now, I have to hope she feels the same about me too. She's attracted to me—thank fuck for that—but does she love me?

Infatuation and attraction are miles away from love. I know she has real feelings for me, but her concern that I'm obligated to her is valid. Not because it's the truth—it's far from the truth. But I understand why she'd think that.

The whole town knew that her dad had left them because he wanted something more. He only stayed with Candi Davenport because he knocked her up. He stuck around for their daughter, and while she always spoke well of him, let's call a spade a spade. He let his family down.

Ian Davenport didn't need to live in the same house or be in a complacent relationship with her mom to be a good dad. There are all kinds of families, and Aria is right in that some are better off co-parenting from a distance.

We are not that family. Because I can't imagine a world in which I don't love Aria. Living in a world where I have to go back to hiding how I feel? Fuck that. I'll spend every ounce of effort left in me to make sure she gets what she needs.

Physically and emotionally. That last one will take some practice, and mistakes will likely be made, but I'm sure my little Minx will have no issue telling me when I mess up.

“Good morning,” she mumbles into my chest.

“Morning, pretty lady.” Her sleepy eyes meet mine.

“We did some things last night. Do you remember?”

“I was drunk, not unconscious. And you never have to worry about me forgetting about touching your body or the sounds you make when you come. Even when I'm in a senior's home, battling dementia, I have no doubt I'd still remember that catch in the back of your throat when your body starts shaking.”

“Jesus. That one sentence went from dark to unexpectedly dirty.”

“That pretty much sums up the past few months of our time together. Dark when we weren't together and unexpectedly dirty when you finally broke me.”

Her sneaky, delicate hand starts tracing circles around my abs, dipping lower with each pass. “Hmm. I actually kind of like that. Not the breaking you part but the dark to dirty part. Maybe we can continue practicing the dirty parts—”

The doorbell rings just as Ari's hand grazes the part of me that's pointing straight at her, ready and eager.

“We'll ignore it.” My voice is husky as I move to kiss the side of her neck.

The doorbell sounds again, followed by obnoxious banging. The banging doesn't stop, which means it's one of two people—Jess or Taylor. And given the fact that Jess saw me at book club last night and likely wants to give me shit about it, I think he's a pretty good bet.

Ari's hand slips into my hair, gently tugging to pull my face away from her neck to look at me. “Go answer the door. It's probably your brother. I'll go shower and we'll continue this later.”

I growl in frustration.

“Mm, save that for later. I love when you growl at me. Or the smoldering ‘get away from me’ glare you used to give me? I’d get myself off to images of your annoyed expressions and the feeling of your simmering anger.”

“Fuck, Ari. That’s not going to help my boner go away so I can go answer the door.”

“Tough. Can I use your shower? I might have to play with myself a little, and yours is more spacious.” I whine pathetically at her. “Sorry, but my horniness levels have increased tenfold in the past few weeks. My sex drive was high before getting pregnant but now? I have to change my underwear at least twice a day, and I have dream-gasms two or three times a week.”

“Dream-gasms?”

“You definitely don’t have time for me to tell you about how I orgasm in my sleep. Go answer the door before your brother breaks something.”

She has to pry my fingers off her perfect, squeezable ass before spinning away and hopping out of bed. I’m much slower, watching her toned backside bounce away from me.

Dammit.

I throw on sweatpants and storm over to the front door.

“What the fuck are you doing banging on my door so fucking early?”

“*Oof*. Someone is grumpy. Did I interrupt sexy time? Looks like I did. Point that thing away from me.” Jess grimaces at me.

“You came over unannounced. You don’t get to give me shit about how I look, what I’m wearing, or the erection you made sure didn’t get tended to.”

He shrugs and walks past me into my living room, saying something about how he’d prefer not to discuss my jerking-off habits so early in the morning.

Then the bastard throws himself onto my couch, propping his feet up on my coffee table.

“You got book clubbed,” he taunts.

I shake my head, rubbing my temples. “If we are going to talk about this, I need coffee and an Advil.”

“Oh, hungover, huh? Yeah, they don’t go easy over there. And Stella and Greg had to reschedule this one, so it actually ended up being on a Friday night. That’s why there were so many more people there. Usually, it’s on a Thursday night, and not as many people attend since they have to work in the morning. Aria chose well.” He smirks at me and laces his hands behind his head, getting comfortable and looking smug.

“That book club is a danger to society.”

“Agreed. I’m not sure where they all go when they leave. Or how they don’t get picked up by Sheriff Alex or his deputies. It’s a town secret, I think. The unanswered question will forever remain: Where do all the heinously drunk book club members go?”

“They’re probably passed out in Stella’s basement and eventually risk going out in the light to get home. Mystery solved.”

“Don’t ruin it for me, asshole. I made it home from that party, if you can even call it that. I’m a book club survivor. We both are. Congrats, man.”

“Alright, you came, you gave me shit, and now we agree to never attend that depravity-laden circus masquerading as a book club ever again. You can kindly leave.”

“What? Nah. Let’s have breakfast. Emma went for a walk with Maddie, but I wanted to come see how you’re doing.” He rubs his stomach. “You’re probably going to need to feed me. Emma tried a new muffin recipe, and it had prunes in it. She finally got blueberry muffins to an edible state. Why would she try something new and oh-so awful?” He shudders and heads to the kitchen. “I hope you have some bacon and other non-health-nut food.” He opens the door and gasps. “What is this?” He holds up the processed cheese slices in mock horror.

“Aria likes those for her grilled cheese. She used to get nauseous in the evening, and I found making those for her

right before bed helped. She likes hers with one slice of real cheddar and one slice of that processed plastic crap. But I make it with butter. Margarine is disgusting, and she can't tell the difference anyway."

"I can, but I've just never said anything." Aria comes around the corner from the hallway, surprising us both. I thought she'd be in the shower a lot longer. "You had me at grilled cheese. I'm eating it. Hi, Jess."

Jess peeks around the door. "Hey, Ari. You are radiant in all your pregnancy glory but look like you could really use a grilled cheese." He winks at her, trying to get her to play along so I'll feed him.

"I can always use a grilled cheese." She looks over at me, her plump lip sticking out like it's beckoning me. "Can I get double the processed plastic crap, please?"

Making my way around my brother, I wrap my arms around her and suck that sassy lip into my mouth before giving it a soothing swipe of my tongue and releasing her. "Absolutely. Jess, you're on your own. Make toast or something."

"Hey, Doc?"

I get the blender out too, deciding to make her a smoothie. "Yeah, Minx?"

"Can you also make us bacon and those egg bite things with the sun-dried tomatoes? Those are *so* good. I had four of them before I even drank my coffee the other day. Have you tried them, Jess?"

Jess is staring at us with one eyebrow hitched to his hairline. "So, this is a thing now?" He points back and forth between the two of us. "Just like . . . officially? You're finally together? Hold on. I need to text Emma. She told me to text her a code word if you two boned." He gets his phone out and whispers, "Honeysuckle," as he types it out.

"We're together," I confirm. Aria hasn't said anything yet, so I glance back over my shoulder at her. She's sitting at the island and watching me. "Right, babe?"

“Super together. Though, I believe I’m owed a date to make it official.”

“Already on it.” I’ve had this date planned for weeks.

She gets off the stool and comes to stand beside me. “Now, teach me how to create these little heavenly egg bites.”

I do, and she decides it’s a lot of work and feels bad for how much effort goes into something she consumes in under thirty seconds. But I don’t mind at all, not if it puts that deliriously happy smile on her face.



After finally getting Jess out of the house, we had less than ten minutes before Aria had to leave to meet up with her mom and Jack, her mom’s new live-in boyfriend. At least we’ll have the rest of the afternoon together.

I hear the front door from the dining room, where I’m still prepping a few things for our night in. Not wanting her to see some of the things I have planned, I make a quick trip to the deck before heading to the front entry.

“You better be naked, Doc,” she shouts, the front door still open.

I grin and rein in the instinct to walk over there, push her pants down, and take her against the door.

“How’s your mom?”

She scrunches her nose at me, not appreciating the subject change. I have a whole evening planned, and I’d like us to get through some of it before we rip each other’s clothes off.

“She’s good. She and Jack are thinking of renovating the apartment. And I think they’re going to get engaged soon. Jack talked to me when my mom went to the washroom.”

I can’t figure out why Aria looks so hesitant. “That’s good, right?” Her tight smile gives her away. “Do you not like Jack? I’ve played golf with him a couple of times, and he seems like a good guy.”

“No, it’s not that. He seems great and treats Mom the way she’s always deserved. I just . . .”

“What?” I’m not capable of inferring anything from her blinks, tense silences, or sad faces quite yet.

“She always said she’d never get married. Probably because of the way Dad fucked with her for so many years. I think he made her feel like maybe she wasn’t the marrying kind. So I’m a little worried that his proposal might blow up their relationship, and she’s so happy right now. They both are.”

“Wouldn’t she just tell him how she’s feeling, and if the two of them want to be together, they’ll work out some kind of compromise?”

“That sounds very rational, and yes, my mom is usually very forthcoming. However, I get my emotional, “follow my heart not my head” trait from her. And I don’t know where her heart or head is at right now. I hope she’s over what my dad did and gives Jack a chance, but I also don’t want her to get hurt or feel pressured into such a big commitment after only a few months.”

“You could talk to her. I imagine she’s the talking sort like you?”

“Yeah. You’re right. I should just talk to her. I just hate bringing up Dad, and I have a feeling he’ll come up.” She reaches up on her toes and gives me the kind of kiss that goes way beyond appreciative and into *causing me to remain hard all through dinner* territory. “So, what kind of surprise do you have in the kitchen?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You usually come to the door the moment you hear me pull up, but today you took much longer. You’re up to something.”

“Don’t be a brat. I have a nice evening planned, and you’ll go along with it.” I smack her ass and revel in the feel of it against my palm. Shit. We need to make it to the date I planned.

She huffs. “Fine. But just so you know, I’m a snooper.”

“Go get your sweatpants on and meet me out on the back deck.”

“Oh. It’s a fancy evening you planned, then?” she sasses.

“Your pants haven’t been fitting well now that you’re starting to show a bit. I was being thoughtful, allowing you the option to be comfortable.”

She frowns at me. “So women don’t really like it when men tell them they’re too big for their pants. Now, I’m going to put on a dress!” My eyes widen slightly right before I school my expression. Does she think I’m going to argue against her putting on a dress? I may be clueless but I’m not stupid.

“Whatever you want. Meet me out there when you’re—”

My work phone rings from the living room. My *after-hours* work phone.

“Shit. One sec.”

Answering the call confirms that my well-planned, sexy evening has been derailed.

I walk back over to Aria, and she grimaces. “You have to go?”

“A patient is having post-op complications and wants to know if he should head to the hospital. I’ll need to go and do an assessment.”

“That’s okay. I’ll go get all done up for our . . . Wait, is this a date? *The* date?”

“You make it sound like I’ve only got one planned. I have a lot of plans, Aria.”

“Of course, you do. It’s good one of us is a planner. I’ll be the spontaneous one. Surprise trip to San Diego, learning to rollerblade—post-baby, of course—signing us up for a mud run, and quickie blow jobs under your desk at work.”

Well, that took me on a bit of a ride. “I approve of most of those kinds of surprises.”

“Thought you might. It was the mud one that got to you, wasn’t it? You don’t like dirt.”

“I’ll like getting dirty with you.” That should count for something.

Her hands find my chest, and mine drift to her ass. Just before I grab the bottoms of her cheeks and lift her against me, she whispers in my ear, “You have a patient to get to, Dr. Caldwell.”

Fuck.

I pull myself away from her, kiss her nose, and back away. “Appetizers are in the fridge. You can help yourself to the platter with grapes on it. The jelly on the side is not jam—it’s spicy, so only use a little on the crackers. And Aria?” My voice is stern and she bites her lip. The fact that she loves my no-nonsense tone shouldn’t be as hot as it is. “Do *not* go out onto the deck. You’ll wait until I get home. Can you do that?”

“Honestly, that’s going to be tough. You just told me something awesome is out there.” I sigh. “Fine. I’ll be a good girl while you’re gone and bad when you return. Work for you?”

“I’m holding you to that.” She laughs softly. “I’m having a really hard time wanting to do my job right now.”

“We’ve got time, babe. Go do what you need to. I’m not going anywhere. We’ve waited this long. A couple more hours won’t kill us.”

“Speak for yourself,” I grumble. “Do you know how frustrating it’s been to watch you grow into . . . *this*? A woman who makes me do nothing but want. Who knows how to push every one of my buttons. Who is everything I’m not and everything I need. You’re my reward for being good for as long as I did, and I want to collect.” I tip my head down and plant a kiss on her collarbone. “But I think it worked out exactly the way it was supposed to.” That includes the pregnancy. I don’t say it out loud, but I hope she knows that.

Her hands come up to cup my face. “Go do your doctor stuff and then get your hot ass back here.”

I place one more lingering kiss on her soft, willing lips before rushing out the door.



My patient was in rough shape and had to be taken to the emergency room in Santa Rosa. He will likely need a second surgery and some imaging done. He's stable but should have gone in days ago.

I messaged Aria when I was on my way back, but I've been gone for over three hours, and I'm a little worried about her emotional state that she might be disappointed or even pissed.

The house is quiet and dark except for a slight glow coming from the back where the string lights I set up can be seen. Shit. She'll have seen those for sure.

Aria is not in the living room or kitchen, so I hope she's in my room. We didn't get to talk much yet about what us being together means, and it hasn't come up before now because she was still feeling things out, and I didn't want to push anything.

I don't call out for her, worried she might be sleeping already. The door to my room at the end of the hall is open, and it's dark inside. Light filters out from Aria's room, her door partially closed.

Making sure not to make too much noise in case she's asleep, I move closer to her door. I hear her before I see her. A humming noise and whimpering pants reach my ears and have blood roaring through my body.

Is she . . . ?

The partially opened door grants me a very familiar view. Aria is on her bed, propped up on her pillows, dress pulled up to her waist, panties pooled at her ankles. Her slick pussy is on full display as she moves that giant black device against her slit.

Her knees widen and draw up with a moan. My cock threatens to burst from my pants while I watch the sexiest

woman I've ever known bring herself to orgasm. That goddamn vibrator is stealing more orgasms from me.

She notices me and grins. "I'm sorry. I tried to be good, but then I saw the lights out on the deck, and I knew you'd planned something romantic, and then I started thinking about all the romantic things, and that led to thinking about the post-date activities. And I'm so horny. All the fucking time. I figured I had time before you got home to take care of myself a little so I didn't hump you the moment you walked in the door."

I take the black orgasm summoner from her hand, set it aside, and tell her, "You're under the impression that I wouldn't have responded well to an entryway fuck against the door. You're wrong. We can always fuck first and do the sweet date after. I just want to be with you, Ari."

She's leaned back on her elbows, and her breasts are pushing against the confines of her top, calling to me. I'm too distracted by her soft skin, and the smell of her to ascertain her exact response, but it sounded positive.

"Open your legs again."

I slip two fingers between her swollen lips. She gasps and throws her head back. "Watch me," I demand, kneeling on the bed.

She does. Her head tips back down, focusing her hooded eyes on my hand. She licks her bottom lip, watching me play with her. Her desire covers my fingers, and I can't wait any longer.

"I need to be inside you."

"Yes, please."

"Condom?"

"You already knocked me up, stud. I think we're good."

Her hand moves down to my shirt, looking displeased it's still on and fully buttoned.

She frantically tries to undo the buttons as I slow my fingers and use my other hand to help her.

It's clearly taking too long because she grabs both sides of my shirt and pulls. Buttons fly and shirt is ruined, but I couldn't care less. Her eyes dart up to mine. "I've never done that before." She grins wickedly. "I liked it."

We may never leave this bed if I can help it.

"Oh, holy mother of abs."

Pushing my pants off, I shoot her a grin. Curious fingers sneak down to grasp my cock, smearing the precum already beaded on the tip.

I hum deeply in my throat, trying to maintain control. "Hands up."

She doesn't listen, choosing to continue her slow strokes while grinning up at me.

"I think someone is used to getting their way in bed. You're in for a lesson, sweetheart. In fact, I think I'd enjoy playing with you a little."

"Does playing involve cuffs? When you mentioned that, my legs just about gave out on me."

I groan. My dick is bobbing furiously, seeking her sweet heat. It's been too fucking long, and I need her almost more than I need to eat, or sleep, or breathe. "I'll be tying you up another time. Right now, I need inside you."

My hips press forward, notching against her soft opening. I surge forward and plunge into her tight channel exactly as I've been dreaming about for months. Her back arches and I lower myself to her, pressing into her at a different angle. My pelvis rubbing against her most sensitive spot has her nearly thrashing, she's so desperate for release.

Focusing on her keeps things from ending sooner than I'd like, so I lift a hand and lay it on her ribs, sliding it firmly up until I capture one of her ample tits in my hand. Knowing they might be sensitive or sore, I caress it gently. I push down the fabric of her dress and lace bra, releasing one dark pink nipple. She moans as I flutter my fingers over it, pulling slightly.

“Oh, fuck. Do that again.” I can feel her core tighten around me, and on my next thrust, I grind myself against her before pulling back out. Her inner walls are tightening like a vise. My thumb skates over her soft, full breast again before I grasp that hard nipple.

I dip down and pull one dusky peak into my mouth. My pace quickens, and I can feel her walls gripping me. I almost tip over the edge. My jaw is clenched as I try to breathe and hold off just a little longer. I slow down, but in doing so, I’m prolonging Aria’s release. Her heels dig into my glutes, demanding more.

I rotate my hips slightly, picking up the pace and praying I can get her there first. I’ve played with her long enough. Her desperate pleas are telling me she needs to come, and I know she’ll take matters into her own hands soon if I keep drawing out her release and mine.

“Yes. There. Don’t stop.” My balls are slapping against her ass as I pull nearly all the way out and push back in quick intervals. I only pull back an inch this time before leaning down and pressing back in. I grind my pelvis into her, pressing against her swollen nub.

She releases a keening cry and pulses so long and hard, my eyes roll back, and a deep groan echoes in the room. My balls tighten as a tingle races up my spine. I look down at the woman who has captured my head and heart longer ago than I’m comfortable admitting.

Her breath is coming in slow, deep waves, her hands loosely floating along my shoulders. When her eyes meet mine, the heat in them does me in. Pleasure shoots from my thighs all the way up to my chest as I grip her hips and release into her.

After my heart rate returns to reasonable levels, I drop to my hands, planting them on either side of her head. I’m still inside her and find myself in no hurry to change that.

Tilting my head, I brush my lips against hers. So frantic for her, I realize I haven’t kissed her yet. I nibble her lip, causing

her to open slightly for me. I invade her mouth and hum against the feel of her tongue stroking mine.

I break the kiss softly and peer down at her. “I owe you a romantic fuck now.”

She giggles. “Fucking isn’t romantic. I think you meant to say that you owe me some lovemaking.”

“I can’t fuck you without it being lovemaking, Ari. Get used to it.” I capture her mouth again, not wanting to do any more talking. Not when I know she’s not ready to admit what I’ve been ready to for a while. I love her. Aria is my dream woman. A woman who’s been in front of me this whole time, waiting for me to let my guard down, to wake up and see her.

I see everything—including our future—and it’s looking pretty fucking amazing.

CHAPTER 29



ARIA

I think Garrett might love me. Or care about me a lot. How the hell am I supposed to know though? The guy listens intently to me like it's his job, but he doesn't tell me what's on his mind or spew his every thought and feeling like I tend to. The only time he opens that sinfully gorgeous mouth of his is in the bedroom or when I initiate conversation.

Men.

I can respect that he doesn't enjoy gabbing just for the sake of it. But he moved me into his bedroom weeks ago, cuddles me all night—Garrett's a cuddler, who knew—and plans romantic dates for us regularly. He's the best boyfriend I've ever had. The best man I've ever known. And is the literal dick behind the best sex I've ever had.

Yet, he never tells me how he feels. So, unless he's pissed or turned on, I can't tell what he's feeling. He keeps it all locked up tight.

Part of my issue is that I've never had a guy love me—truly love me. Most just wanted something from me or used me as a placeholder until something better came along. I guess that's what dating is nowadays, but that doesn't make it any less shitty.

“Here's your chicken Caesar wrap with extra mustard.” My boyfriend's nose scrunches in distaste as he places my lunch in front of me on the desk. He leans down and kisses me long and hard. I'm still dazed, blinking incoherently at him

when he says, “Had to get a good one in before you ate that pitiful excuse for food. Enjoy, babe.”

“Sure will. I’ll come back there and tell you how it was.”

“You just want to try to kiss me with your Caesar dressing and mustard mouth.”

“Correct.”

Another kiss lands on my lips, this one quick, before he walks to the back.

“So that’s going well, then?”

I spin in my chair and squeal a little in delight. Chloe hasn’t asked about Garrett and me since I told her we were dating. I may have overshared about his oral skills, forgetting for a moment that said oral-giving god is her brother. She said that if she ever wanted to know about our relationship, she would ask.

“It’s . . . it’s really great, Chlo.” I look around, making sure everyone else cleared out for lunch. “I was scared and angry and a dozen other feelings when I found out I’d have to try to figure out raising a baby with a guy who might never return my feelings. I have a lot of years of feeling shitty and having my heart stomped on behind me. Now, I have Garrett, who years ago would never have given me the time of day. And we have so much sex now. Not the mediocre, ‘nothing’s on TV, I’m too lazy to go grab a snack, wanna fuck?’ kind of sex either. It’s hot but romantic, slow but frantic, and completely consuming. Have you had sex like that? Because let me tell you—”

“Ari! Come on.”

“You asked this time!”

“I asked if it’s going well, you oversharer! Not how hot the sex is.” She takes a few gulps of her water like she’s trying to wash away even the thought of her brother and me together. “I wanted to know how the day-to-day living together and falling in love has been.”

“Well, I don’t know if he loves me, but—”

“Are you kidding?” She stares at me a moment, discerning whether I’m being sincere, then grabs my hand and drags me down the hallway. We pass a couple of exam rooms and stop in front of Garrett’s office.

She knocks just as Garrett looks up. “Hi, you two need something? A longer break? Is Ari okay? Did that fucked-up wrap make you sick?” He starts to get up, but Chloe just puts up a hand to settle him.

“May we come in?”

He nods, a curious look on his face as his gaze flicks between the two of us.

Chloe tips her head, so I follow her into the small office. She walks around the desk and stands there.

Oh. She’s waiting for me. I rush over and stand beside her.

“Garrett, Ari’s feet are cold. I was wondering if you maybe had an extra thick pair of socks she could borrow to put on while she’s at the front desk?”

“Oh. Yeah, of course.” He looks at me, almost offended. “Why didn’t you say something when I was up there? Have you been moving every thirty minutes like we talked about?”

“My feet aren’t—” I get cut off by an elbow jamming my arm.

Garrett leans over and pulls open the bottom drawer of his desk. It’s filled with random stuff.

He shuffles things around for a while, digging for what I assume are socks. I look at Chloe, completely confused. She shoots her eyes to the drawer, then back to me. I frown again before she pointedly gestures for me to look in the drawer.

I get closer and start picking out the things I can see: snacks, lotion, vitamins, a heat pack, a cold pack, muscle rub, candy, ginger ale. Why does he have . . . ? Oh. Oh, my gosh.

I look closer. Those snacks aren’t healthy snacks. They are some of my favorite crunchy, salty treats. The vitamins are the prenatal kind. The hot and cold packs I recognize from last week when my feet were swelling a bit, and Garrett

disappeared for a minute only to come back with the cold pack. The ginger ale is for the times I still get a little nauseous.

It's an Aria drawer.

"Is that all for me? All that stuff?"

He holds up a pack of Red Vines and hair elastics. "It's certainly not for me." He does that half smirk that just barely tips up the side of his mouth. "I figured you might like to have some of these things here. When you're having a bad morning—because let's face it, the mornings are toughest for you—I have a drawer full of stuff to help."

"That's really good . . . planning . . . babe," I say between sniffles.

"Oh, God. You made her cry again," my best friend accuses.

"I didn't make her cry earlier. That was Mrs. Henderson when she told her about the dead bird on the sidewalk out front," Garrett reminds us.

"Don't forget the worst part—the nest of baby birds in the tree across the road calling for their mom!" The last part comes out as a sob, and I don't bother holding it back as the story hits me all over again.

"Ah, shit," Garrett mutters.

Chloe gets to me first, wrapping me up in a hug, and I hold on tight.

"Move," Garrett grumbles. He shoulders his sister out of the way as she protests. My face meets his warm chest, and I cry harder.

"Ari, did I make it worse?" he asks.

"You're so . . . damn . . . amazing," I say between sniffles.

"And that's making you cry more?"

"Y-yes," I say through a watery smile.

"Makes complete sense." With a thumb, he gently wipes a tear from my cheek and holds me until I stop hiccuping.

The storm of feelings is finally starting to ease. Garrett loves me, and it feels even more intense than I imagined. It feels like forever—like everything I want wrapped up in exactly the person I've always wanted.

“Told you,” Chloe singsongs on her way out of the office.

I look up at my man. His eyes are soft, amused, and concerned all at once. Maybe his feelings have been close to the surface all this time, and I just wasn't looking in the right place.

I reach up to kiss his handsome face, pushing him along until we get behind his desk.

“I don't have a drawer full of Garrett stuff—that would actually probably be very un-Garrett-like—but I do know at least one thing you like that I have with me right now.”

He looks down at me, noting my lack of pockets in my stretchy pants. His gaze travels up, his sexy green eyes turning molten as he takes in my heaving chest, picking up on my intentions.

I push him against his chair, and he falls ungracefully, shock registering on his face.

On my knees, I show Garrett one of the many ways I love him too.

CHAPTER 30



GARRETT

“*Y*ou’ll want to keep all financial statements, receipts, and expenses in this folder by category and year. To start, let’s make one for your company credit card. Make sure to use that credit card for *all* photography expenses so it’s easier to track.”

“So, track everything, and bookkeeping is boring. Got it,” she smarts.

I swat her right ass cheek. She’s sitting on my lap as I show her the software I helped her get for bookkeeping. It’s different than what I use at the clinic because it’s better for her type of business.

“Did I tell you the Delgado family were the first to book for my holiday mini photo shoot next month?”

“Technically, the Caldwells were the first to book.”

“Yes, but you guys are family so that doesn’t count.”

I bite my lip to keep from grinning like a fool. I look at her and know from the flush climbing up her chest that she can see the adoration I feel for her and the pleasure it gives me to hear her say it. “What?” she asks.

“I like when you call us family. I like that you’re my family,” I admit. I’ve noticed that Aria likes when I share my thoughts and feelings with her. It’s not something I’m used to doing, but having her near me makes me feel a lot of things, so it’s not as hard as I once thought it would be.

I move so fast, she doesn't even have time to react. My mouth captures hers. I slip my tongue past her lips and firmly grip her ass with both my hands, pulling her closer to where I need to feel her. She gasps and I move lower, placing kisses along her jaw, down her neck, and directly into her lush, expanding cleavage.

"I didn't think I could like these any more, but pregnancy gives them some kind of tit superpowers. I'm going to have to keep you pregnant. How many kids are you good with having? Because you could probably convince me of a ridiculously high number right now."

She tips her head back on a moan as I cup her.

"More kids?" she manages to ask, her voice hoarse.

I layer delicate, teasing kisses on her lips, soothing her possible freak-out with sweetness. "Mmm. More kids, for sure. Do you not want more kids?"

Another round of sweet pecks keeps her lips busy until she's ready to answer. "Um, yeah. Actually, I do. I'd love three or four." She cringes, likely expecting a negative response, probably because she's received negative responses in the past. I fucking hate that she might have talked about children with other men, but I have her here in my arms, carrying my baby and holding my potential happiness and future in her hands.

"I think we should try for four." I lay four soft kisses on her stunned face. "It's a nice, even number." A surprised laugh leaves her.

Deepening our kiss, I move her leg over so she's straddling me. She's lucky she's currently pregnant because I'd be nonstop trying to put another baby in her.



I'm barely through the front door when I hear Aria shouting. Dropping my gym bag, I hurry to the living room and see Aria frantically clicking at her laptop. She groans and then lowers her head to rest on the keys.

“Babe?” I ask, wary but curious. She’s only a couple of weeks away from her first photo shoot session and has been a bit stressed.

“I hate technology.”

“When it’s not helping us become efficient and extremely convenient, it can really be the worst,” I offer.

“It’s not convenient when it fucks up and allows two bookings per time slot for my mini series. I have three spots that have been double-booked and no idea how to fix the program so it stops being a problem-inducing asshole.”

Aria would call an online booking software an asshole. So fucking cute.

“How can I help?”

“Would you let me take pictures of you naked and put them on my website?” I keep my expression carefully blank. “Tasteful nudes, of course. We can cover most of your junk if you want.” *Most?* “Don’t you think that would be a nice draw for new photography clients?”

“No. But I can help you fix the settings on your booking program.” Probably. If not, I can call Jess over, but I want to be the hero today.

She sighs and scoots over on the couch. A day planner sits beside her, and a multitude of pens and sticky notes litter the coffee table.

“You need an office.”

She glares at me. “Don’t kick me while I’m down. One problem at a time. Then I’ll clean up my living room work explosion.”

“I’m not complaining. I’m pointing out that we need to create you an office space. How do you feel about converting one of the bedrooms downstairs into an office and studio?”

Her head whips around, eyes wide. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I be? You’re going to be busy and need a place to do all of this. Plus, you can’t do only outdoor

sessions. Some people are going to want headshots and studio photography.”

Her eyes sparkle, and a lopsided grin lifts the one side of her face. She’s happy. I always love when something I say makes her happy. “I love you,” she whispers, and my heart stops.

I grin and my heart starts racing. She’s always been open about having feelings for me—mostly of the physical kind—but this is her admitting it’s so much more.

My hands move up to her hair, pushing my fingers through it and curling them around the back of her head, pulling her into me. Softly, I move my lips against hers, giving her every ounce of emotion within me. She’s mine and I’m hers.

When I pull back her cheeks are pink, and her eyes are slightly glazed. I press one more kiss on her mouth, but I can’t stop smiling, so it ends up being a bit of a mess of teeth and lips.

Her inky black lashes flutter up at me. “What if it all goes to hell and my photography company is a flop? What if I can’t keep up after the baby? That room will taunt me, telling me I put my career dreams on hold.”

I rest my forehead against hers and slide my arm soothingly up and down her back. “That won’t happen.”

“Being a mom, medical office receptionist, and photographer is a heavy helping of responsibility for someone who used to avoid it like the plague.” She’s stressing about her workload and juggling all her obligations. This is a mental space I know well.

“Reduce your workload.” There. Simple.

“Easy for you to say. My day job is required for making money as I also try to grow my business. Photography feeds my soul while also eventually allowing me to merge my career with my passion.”

“I should have clarified. If things get too difficult, you pull back at Caldwell Medical. You’ll have your maternity leave benefits for a while after the baby is born, and you can take as

much time off as you want before you return—if you *want* to return. You could just focus on photography and being a mom. Looking at your business plan, you’ll recoup most of your costs after the first year and still make a modest income. With my income, we won’t have anything to worry about in terms of household finances. You don’t need to be working at the clinic, though I do enjoy you being there.”

“I’m a self-sufficient woman and will continue to be. So that means I *will* worry about it, Garrett. You making money means *you* have money. I want to contribute. But I also want to do this . . .” She waves a hand around her makeshift office. “Well, not the crappy online booking and bookkeeping stuff—the taking beautiful photos and capturing heartfelt moments.”

If things go as planned a few weeks from now, she won’t have to worry about whose money is whose and how to reach her dreams on her own for much longer.

“We’re a team, Aria. You deserve the chance to chase your dreams like I did mine.”

“Finished chasing your dreams already?” She smirks at me, mouthing, “Old man.”

“I wasn’t sure I’d ever get to chase all my dreams. Becoming a doctor and running my own practice took a long time. I thought maybe I missed those prime years when people usually found their person, had kids, settled down, and went on family holidays at the beach. I’m nearly thirty-seven, and I wasn’t sure if I’d get to have all my dreams. I decided this year that I’d focus on my personal life, my love life, and if I hadn’t reached that goal by the time I turned forty, I’d let it go and return to what I was already good at—work.”

“You still have a few years left, then.” Is she fucking with me? Little Minx.

“Nah. I squeezed in those last few goals by knocking up my dream woman. I’ve always been a bit of an overachiever.” I shrug cockily.

She pushes me with one arm and rolls her eyes. She turns back to the laptop screen and sighs dramatically.

Maybe what she needs is a fun distraction.

Her sleep shorts are riding up her thighs, exposing smooth, creamy skin. My fingers dance along the outer curve of her leg from knee to hip, dipping under her shorts.

Every fucking part of her is either sweet and soft, or tight and hot, and it drives me out of my mind. There's no unknowing what Aria tastes like, feels like. Imagining a life without her is torture. How would I go back to that mundane, empty existence?

You don't, and you don't have to. Ever. She's yours forever.

I move my hand to stroke the inner curve of her thigh. When I get to her shorts, I curve my fingers up to brush against the front of her thin cotton shorts.

“Garrett, I'm kind of stressed out over here and contemplating my entire future.”

“Don't. Focus on my fingers instead. Just for a few minutes. Once the stress dissipates, you'll have a clearer head.” My fingers slip beneath the shorts and tease her as I move in slow circles. She doesn't bat my hand away but keeps clicking on the computer.

I'm going to need to take it up a notch.

CHAPTER 31



ARIA

I'm so focused on trying to fix all these stupid online booking kinks and attempting to figure out if I need to open up another mini photo shoot day so I don't have to cancel on the people who were overbooked that I've blocked out my surroundings.

With technology working against me, I might have to create two new sessions just to keep a few spots open for those who may still want to book next month. All of my weekends in December are either filled with photo sessions or our usual holiday events. The clinic doesn't close until Christmas Eve, so I'll still be there during the day too.

Add to that our baby will be here in a few short months, and we still haven't painted or put together the furniture for the nursery.

I'm tired just thinking about it all, but I'm also very excited. I just have to figure out how to manage my time better and handle being a boss babe and superstar mom. Maybe Garrett's right, and I'll need to pull back from some things once the baby comes. That doesn't necessarily mean giving up on my goals, does it?

Will my dreams of having this life with him impede my professional and creative dreams? If I go on maternity leave and put my photography business on hold for a while, and then Garrett and I end up splitting up, would I be able to afford to live on my own while trying to pick my business back up and caring for a baby? Can I do it all?

Those sound like future Aria problems, and I hardly ever concern myself with them, but my life is not quite so simple anymore.

Maybe I could just book photoshoots on fewer weekends and work part-time at the clinic. I'd figure out a life without him. Right? In this scenario, would it be impossible to keep myself emotionally together, be a single mom, a business owner, and be forced to be around the man I love, the man who broke my heart? Yes. This man has the power to crush me. To build up my expectation, joy, dreams. He has me reaching for things I've only ever wondered about. Which means he could then break me into a million pieces.

I shut off that train of thought and focus on the current problem.

Garrett's fingers are exploring my skin, and it takes everything inside me not to immediately unzip his pants. Sometimes when he touches me, I still think, *Is this really happening? Are Garrett Caldwell's hands on my ass and his breath panting against my lips as I grind against him?*

I've turned myself on just thinking about the last time we had sex and the moment of disbelieving elation I experienced as he made me come against the living room wall. The wall that's just ten feet from us.

My eyes flick to that spot, and heat radiates from my core.

Garrett's hand moves to the inside of my thigh, and his head is bent into my neck, breathing harshly as if he, too, is struggling with being this close to each other and behaving.

"Garrett, I'm kind of stressed over here and contemplating my entire future."

"Don't. Focus on my fingers instead. Just for a few minutes. Once the stress dissipates, you'll have a clearer head." His fingers have moved up into my shorts and are moving in delicious circles around my clit, never once actually touching it. Bastard.

"The doctor is prescribing stress-reducing sex?"

"Yes."

“How about the stress-reducing remedies occur after I fix this schedule?” I ask half-heartedly.

“Nope.” His scruffy face burns a path from my collarbone to my ear as he places soft, open-mouthed kisses along the sensitive curve of my neck. “You need to let go. When was the last time you just said ‘fuck it’ and did something unexpected? You’re smothering yourself by trying to do all the things you think you need to, exactly the way you think you should. That kind of thing works for me because I enjoy order, planning, and systems. But this is *your* business, *your* time, *your* body. You need a little freedom and some fun and chaos.”

He makes excellent points, and I should probably let him convince me a little longer. Except one of my hands is already in his hair, and the other is clutched to his bicep. I’m no longer facing the laptop. I’m all twisted up in him.

“Maybe just a quick stress reliever and then right back to it.”

“You need more than that. And so do I, baby. But today, I’m in charge.”

“Oh? How are you going to pull that off?” Hot excitement rips through my body.

He shifts to put himself across my body and turns his head, placing his lips against my ear. “I’m going to tie you up.”

Oh, fuck. It’s happening. We’ve talked about this but only in short snippets. Just enough to tease. I’d heard rumors years ago but had to block them out because I refused to acknowledge how thoroughly he was fucking other women while I was away at school.

A hiss leaves my mouth that was supposed to be a “Yes!” but comes out in an incomprehensible, desire-drunk sound.

I lean back and whip my top off my body, leaving me in only my shorts, having forgone a bra earlier. He’s watching me, heat and need flickering in his eyes like he’s not sure if he should look, taste, or touch first.

“Already forgot that I’m in charge, Minx? I decide when your clothes come off. You aren’t making any more decisions

for the next thirty minutes.”

My hands immediately find his chest, feeling the heat and strength in it. I bunch up his shirt to sneak a peek at that glorious vee that leads to the incredibly hard dick straining against his dark gray sweatpants.

His quiet growl tells me he’s displeased and turned on all at once. Before I can even smirk up at him, he has me scooped into his arms and is carrying me to our bedroom.

“Enjoy it while you can. Your hands won’t be quite so free to explore when we get to the bedroom.”

I do. He’s hard and trim and has that perfect triangle-shaped upper body that has me finding myself staring at him in a daze on a regular occurrence. I have overfilled my coffee cup at least three times since I moved here.

I nip and kiss one side of his neck while my hands cup his jaw on the other side. Knowing I’m running out of time, I suck his earlobe into my mouth and then grasp his face with both hands and kiss the hell out of him. His steps falter slightly before he takes over the kiss. How he does that while carrying me, I have no idea. Fuck, he’s so hot.

He places me in the center of the bed, and I’m practically squirming with need. He moves away, leaning toward the nightstand, and I feel cold and desperate. Friction, pressure, strokes—that’s what I need right now.

Garrett places some black rope beside my head and looks down at me with intent. His hand grazes my hard nipple as he feathers his hands up and down, feeling the weight of them. Then he firms his grip and dips his head to suck. One wide, strong thigh settles between my legs, and I move against it with a moan.

He hovers above me, his hands encircling my wrists and sliding them up the bed. “I’m going to make you come so many times, you won’t be able to walk, or think, or talk.”

My head tips back and I let him touch me, waiting for him to deliver on his promises.

A slick, cool material brushes against the wrists he has positioned above my head.

“Do we need a safe word?” I ask.

His response is to kiss me. His tongue invades my mouth, stealing my words and my breath. When he pulls back, his teeth capture my lower lip and tug lightly before releasing my swollen mouth.

“No safe word. Just tell me to stop or undo you. We aren’t doing anything complex. It’s just your wrists. I want to make sure you and the baby are safe, but I know how much you’ve wanted to try this. And how much I think you need this right now. How much you need me to take control of your pleasure.”

My shallow breaths increase as he presses the insides of my wrists together and starts wrapping several lengths of the rope around them. I twist my head to watch him work what looks like a complicated but tidy knot into place, securing me to the headboard.

I test it out after he shifts down. Solid but not uncomfortable. It’s oddly comforting to know I’m at his mercy, and he’s going to take care of me.

His tongue drags down to my breast, circling my puckered nipple. They are so sensitive that the barest touch has me writhing.

He works his way down my body, kissing, scraping, and touching every bit of skin. Pushing my knee up and to the side, he layers slow kisses on my slit before burying his tongue inside me.

My hands move to grip his hair as he fucks me with his mouth—but I can’t move, and I should be slightly freaked out. Instead, my breathing slows and my body relaxes. I welcome the orgasm building, the skills of this incomprehensibly good man guiding me to blissful freedom. It’s fast and desperate and not nearly enough.

I whimper at the man I can’t seem to get enough of. He looks up at me, heat sparking in his eyes.

Shifting, he hooks my leg over his arm, centering himself at my opening. His gaze comes back to mine right as he thrusts into me. I want to reach out to him, hold on to him as he takes me, but I can't.

I'm not in control, but I don't need to be. Garrett taking care of my every desire is hot. Almost as hot as watching him chase his own release.

"You're going to be a good girl and come again. Squeeze me hard, make me come inside you. Then I'll untie you. Understand?" he growls at me.

Tingles spread through my body as I tighten involuntarily to his command. "Oh, God," I cry out.

His pace slows as he brings my legs to his shoulders. "That's not an answer, Minx."

"Yes. Understood. Don't stop."

He grins that rare smirk at me. "You don't call the shots. Right now, I do. I give you pleasure. This time it'll be you who is out of control. Let go, Aria. Let go like I did."

And I do. I let go, and it feels so fucking good.

My body jerks against the restraints, and my core clenches so hard against his length, it's almost too intense. My body burns as it tightens and relaxes, over and over until all I can feel is the heat of Garrett's body moving in an erratic rhythm over mine. He locks eyes with me, his face wild with hunger and euphoria as he empties himself into me. Hunching over me, breathing hard, he eats up my body with his eyes from where we are still joined all the way up to my fastened wrists.

"Hmm. I quite like you at my mercy."

"Just remember that when I'm free of this rope, you're the one who will be at my mercy, Doc."

"Well aware, babe."

I bite my lip and smile up at him as he unties me.

"Next time, you're the one who gets tied up," I tell him.

“Not how this works, Ari.” He smacks my ass, and suddenly, I’m wondering if he has one more round left in him before he unties me.



“I need to talk to someone about this, Chlo,” I beg her.

“It’s going to need to be someone else. I’m not that good of a pretender that you can use other people’s names and act like I don’t know who you’re really talking about.”

“Come on. You’re not curious about it from a strictly scientific perspective? We don’t have to get into specifics about your brother and me. I mean, I wasn’t sure if I’d like being tied up, but holy shit. The power dynamic is heady. Garrett—I mean, some men—can be bossy, but this is completely different. I’d become used to being the sexual instigator in the past, but wow. Just wow. This man is *very* in charge in the bedroom.”

“Remember five minutes ago when I told you not to tell me about your sex life because it involves my brother? That still stands. Maybe one day I’ll be able to push through and think about it as just two gals chatting about our sex lives, but that day is not yet here, dear friend.”

“Sorry.” I pout. “Who else am I going to tell?”

“Anyone. Anyone else.”

“I already told Lauren and Emma. I didn’t think I should tell Sadie though. Stella came over the other day while I was unloading groceries and mentioned that Sadie and Keith may be having problems. I imagine she might be upset over whatever is going on and spewing my ‘and then he tied me up’ sex stories isn’t the kind of friend she needs right now. I texted her but haven’t heard back, and she’s not at school today. Want to pop by for a visit after work today?”

“Yes. I haven’t seen her in forever. With Kinsley being sick for most of this week, I haven’t really seen anyone but you. Hayden doesn’t have anything planned tonight, so I’ll just

let him know it's a ladies' night. We should make it dessert-themed, right?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely we should. This is why you're my best friend. Can we also dress grungy and lay in the town square grass while telling all our most embarrassing stories like we used to? I'm in for some nostalgia and cringe-worthy 'I prayed the ground would open and suck me up' stories. We know most of each other's but Lauren and Emma likely have many I desperately need to hear."

A loud knock on the door has Chloe and I both jumping.

Sawyer Fletcher stands at the glass door, peering in. When he sees us, he holds up his hand. He's pressing a blood-smeared gauze pad to his forearm.

We both scramble to get to the door.

"Ladies, looking lovely as usual." He winks as he greets us.

"Come on, tough guy. Let's get you to an exam room before you pass out while trying to flirt with the nearly married lady you used to go out with and her pregnant best friend."

"I heard about that. Congrats, Aria. You and Garrett will make beautiful kids who will be both sassy and serious." He follows Chloe to the exam room but turns his head back to keep talking to me. "That was a compliment, I swear. I heard what happened at The Bachelor event, and while I'm a bit pissed he couldn't hold out for a few weeks to take the heat off me, it's clear you two are really great together. Did he actually haul you over his shoulder, smack your ass, and lay claim to you in front of everyone?"

"What? No." But I wouldn't have hated it if he did. I wonder if Garrett would be into a little reenactment with a twist.

"Ah, I see. Fern was gushing over the details and how romantic it was when she brought Chester in for deworming a couple of months ago."

I give him a sharp look of disappointment.

“What? It’s hard to know what to believe anymore! When I heard you were pregnant with Garrett’s baby, I thought that was bullshit for sure. But then I saw you two at yoga a few months ago, and I wondered if something was going on. I mean, the town could have been making up that you were pregnant. They tend to say things they hope for instead of what actually happens. So when it turned out you actually were pregnant, it wasn’t that much of a leap to believe he carried you out of Taps telling everyone that you were off-limits to all the ‘single bastards who are nowhere near good enough for his woman.’”

Huh. I mean, that sounds kind of awesome actually. Mental note for the sex scene playing out in about four hours.

Also, did the town know we were pregnant before we announced it at book club? Because there was very little chatter about it post-announcement, and there should have been a much bigger reaction.

Shit. They totally knew.

“Enough about the town and whatever information they’ve been feeding you to try to coax you into participating in their next bachelor event. Tell us what happened here,” Chloe demands.

“They haven’t asked me, and I will absolutely not do it.” He looks around like a League member will pop up out of the trash or something. “You make sure to relay that. Tell Lauren, okay? See what she can do for me. I don’t need a girlfriend, especially one chosen for me by women who think I need ‘some good loving from a wild woman.’ Who even says that to someone? Do I look like a stallion needing to be broken in?”

Chloe and I both slant our heads in unison and look him up and down.

“When was the last time you had some incredible, nearly blacked-out kind of amazing sex?”

He jerks his head back in surprise, and his cheeks turn ruddy. Just before he’s about to answer, I feel the hot presence

of someone at my back.

“Do not answer that,” Garrett warns. “Aria, your medical assessment questions are a bit more explicit than we usually require.”

“You should change that,” I suggest.

“I’ll take it under advisement.” He steps closer to Sawyer. “Let’s see it.”

“I was out at Cooper Harrison’s farm, and one of his newer farm dogs got me. He’s a rescue and a bit skittish still. It’s not that bad, thankfully.”

“I’ll determine that for myself,” Garrett says, his non-sense tone and stance making my thighs clench. I must have made some kind of sound because Garrett’s eyes flick to mine, and a knowing smirk spreads across his face, transforming him from a serious doctor to a hot, coy sex magnet. Shit.

“Jesus. Stop eye fucking him while there’s a patient in the room.” Chloe whispers to me out of the side of her mouth. “We are in an antiseptic-scented exam room. This is not sexy. Keep it in your pants, you horndog.” Chloe waves her hands in the air, biting down on her grin as she pretends to disperse all-out sex thoughts and pheromones.

“The antiseptic smell did not stop us last time,” I whisper back.

She grabs my hand and pulls me along, leaving the guys without even a glance. They start talking about superficial something-or-other just as I clear the door.

“You owe me liquor. And you’re the designated driver tonight.”

“I’m the designated driver for at least the next five months. Probably way longer because I’ll have a newborn.”

“Good.” We stop when we get to her office, and she unlocks it to let us both in. She pulls out her phone, her mouth twisting in concentration as she reads. “Mamma Millie wants us all to have dinner together this weekend at your guys’

place. She wants to see how the nursery is coming because she has a few things to add to it that she's been working on. Probably a whole bunch of things. She's now a full-time member of the Knitted Knot Club."

"Maybe that's where Garrett learned his love of knots from." I bite my lips together as I wait innocently for her response.

"I'm ignoring that completely. Also, how dare you bring my mamma into your lusty knot play talk! Ugh. No." She fakes a shudder as I laugh heartily and hug her. "You're lucky you give good hugs, or I'd be questioning our friendship."

Pfft! "You love me. Even when I'm inappropriate and even when I make you question your tidy, proper life choices. Especially then. I believe I was the one who put the idea in your head that Hayden was just a wounded man, in love with a pretty young girl he didn't think he deserved to have. He didn't hate you. He was just in your life the only way he thought you'd let him be. And now, look at you two. Freaking perfect with the cutest little seven-year-old I've ever met in my life."

She grins. "I'll give you that one. But I think we could have saved ourselves a little trouble had you been here to keep me from acting like a lunatic when I moved back."

I give her a sly smile and a half-hearted shrug.

"I'm going to ask something under the guise of inquiring on behalf of Mamma Millie, but I really want to know too. You love Garrett, I can tell. I see it now. Looking back, I should have seen the way you were around him. But you're together now and happy, and I need to know . . . is he *it*?" She pauses, and her voice softens. "Has he always been *it* and I never knew?"

I blow a breath out of my pursed lips. Looking into the jewel-toned eyes my best friend shares with the man I love, I prepare to finally tell Chloe what I've been keeping hidden away for years. "Yes. I love him. I'm so in love with him. More than I imagined I would be. I've had a crush on your brother with varying degrees of infatuation since I could drive

and he came to help us with a flat tire that summer before junior year. I never outwardly acknowledged it. I smothered it down when it persisted outside of my teenage years.” I sigh, looking down at my hands. “Your friendship means more to me than almost anything else in my life. It’s half the reason I moved back here. I have always loved this town, but you’re my person, Chloe.” I look back up at her and find that her mouth is slightly open, but her expression is carefully blank. “You and I have each other’s backs, always. I couldn’t risk that. I might have been a shitty best friend for falling for your extremely respectable, responsible, hot-as-hell brother, but I wasn’t really expecting Garrett to look my way or want to be with me. Even though I wanted him, I knew it wasn’t possible then. But it was hard to tell that to my teenage, Garrett-obsessed brain.” I give her a coy smile. “I’m not sure you would have even believed me if I told you. He was so unlike any of the guys I was dating back then.”

“Ari.”

“I know. I should have said something. I wanted to at the Caldwell dinner when you figured out we’d been together, but everyone was there and you seemed so surprised. Though you weren’t upset about it, I wasn’t sure how you’d feel if you knew my playful teasing with Garrett over the years meant more than you knew.”

“Did you two ever . . . ? You know . . . before you moved back? Did you ever tell him? Did you keep tabs on him after we moved? Did you ever actually talk to him outside of coming over to our place? I . . .”

“Yeah. I figured you’d have a lot of questions.” I try to keep a smile on my face, but it wobbles.

“Oh, sweetie. Don’t cry. I’m not upset.” She steps close to me again, enveloping me in her sweetness. “I wouldn’t have been upset then either. Sure, I would have looked at you like maybe you’d sustained a head injury, but it would have been something we could have had fun with together. There’s no way he would have dated or even looked at you while we were teenagers, and making him squirm was always a lot of fun. I just wish I had been in on it more. I know what makes him

tick. You forget that I shared a bathroom with him for a few years before he left for medical school. I *know* things. You found a great man to give your whole heart to, Ari. I can finally say I approve of this one.”

“I really did find the best man. Do you think I chose guys who weren’t really available or into me for the right reasons because I’d already chosen my man? Oh God, what if he hadn’t wanted me?”

“You’re just now realizing this? I never knew why you chose those previous guys, but I was eagerly waiting for you to meet someone worthwhile.”

Well, that’s an embarrassing eye-opener.

“And all I had to do was seduce your brother and get him to put a baby in me.”

“That baby is my niece or nephew, so you can’t weird me out about it. I’m too damn excited. You and I are sisters. Mamma might be all torn up that you two aren’t getting married, and you might be against marriage, but I don’t care. Whatever you and Garrett end up doing is irrelevant because you are my best friend and a gorgeous pregnant lady who is making me an aunty again.”

I put a hand over the one she has placed over my now very obvious baby bump.

“Mamma Millie is upset with us? We never actually said we wouldn’t ever get married. I just made it clear there are other types of family dynamics and we’d find ours. I’m not against marriage, Chlo. I’m against getting married for the wrong reasons.” She looks at me with concern as my voice hitches slightly. “You know what my family was like, what my household felt like for most of my childhood. A few years ago, my mom admitted she was basically a shadow of who she once was. She was technically married but felt like a single mom—one who had a husband who popped in, stayed for a while here and there, but was absolutely not the man she needed or wanted. And my dad felt stifled and compelled to do the right thing, which turned out to be wrong for everyone. They were only together for me, and I felt it in every

interaction, every family dinner and holiday. It's why I spent so much time at your house."

"I know. And Mamma's not upset the way you might be thinking. She just doesn't like being left out of the loop and wants the best for both of you. You are not *like* a daughter to her. You *are* a daughter. She loves you and just wants to make sure you're happy. She'd also love for you to persuade Garrett to have a big wedding and tons of babies. So prepare yourself for her inquiries this weekend. She is definitely willing to talk anyone into anything if you say you want it. She's in your corner as much as Garrett's, so be careful where you aim her."

I stiffen, my body rejecting the onslaught of questions riddling my mind at what should have been comforting assurance. I give it all a firm shove aside, deciding to deal with it later. Because thinking about the Caldwell's expectations and the intention behind them might make me spiral. It might make me consider whether they'd be wanting us to get married if a baby weren't on the way. Or if Garrett would have wanted to be with me if I hadn't taunted and essentially low-key seduced him for years. Then I might start to wonder how shitty it will feel to have Millie ask me to convince my baby daddy—the man I love with everything in me—to marry me in a grand wedding he might not ever want.

So yeah, that shitstorm of emotions can wait.

Simply nodding, I ask, "Should we head to Taps early? Take over the music, order all the appetizers, and see who will participate in some games with us?"

"Should we invite the guys?"

"Nope. Girls' night. We'll bring them leftovers. Maybe they can all get together to help with the babies while we are out."

"Good idea. Maybe Hayden, Taylor, Jess, and Garrett can all head to Taylor's? They have an extra room where Jess can put Maddie down to sleep. Lucy can come over and watch Kinsley. Hayden loves hanging out with the babies. He's definitely ready for us to have another, and I have to say that I'm more than ready too."

“Really? Our babies will grow up together, maybe even be in the same grade!” I tear up a little before pulling myself together. “Kinsley is going to be ecstatic. She’s been asking for a sibling since she met you, hasn’t she? Shit, that girl is the best. If you have another like her, you’re in trouble. I’m going to give her all the things.”

“That reminds me. Don’t think I don’t know it was you who gave her the hair glitter.”

I grimace slightly. Caught me. “A few of the girls in her class already color their hair, and since Kinsley’s lovely, rational parents decided it’s too soon for their baby girl to color her hair, I thought this was a great compromise and a much better idea than permanently changing her gorgeous hair.”

“Tell that to my bathroom and her bedroom. There was glitter everywhere.”

I nod, my mouth contorting slightly as I try to smother a laugh. “Yes, mm-hmm, that is one small caveat in regards to glitter. But how pretty did she look and how happy was she?”

Her gaze narrows at me. Okay, so I probably should have checked in with her about the hair glitter. In my defense, I was being a good aunty. Then she turned those warm brown eyes on me, and we walked out with all the hair glitter.

“I’ll be the official driver of all our outings, *and* I’ll throw in three overnight Kinsley babysitting duties. She can come over, and we can do all the girly things, have a photo shoot, do all the fun crafts you generally dislike but pretend to be into, and glitter the shit out of Garrett’s dining room.”

She snorts with laughter. “She’ll love that. And I’d be very interested to see how Garrett reacts. When I was ten, I left a handmade card, some baked treats, and hole punch ‘confetti’ all over his bed as a surprise when he came home from school for spring break. The chocolate chip cookies were still warm and left brown streaks on his comforter. He told me that he’s allergic to all types of confetti and that I’d have to take it out of his room.”

Of course, he said that. He probably actually *feels* allergic to confetti. “I’ll keep that confetti tidbit in mind for a special occasion.” I wink at my friend and hook my arm around hers before leading us out of the clinic.

CHAPTER 32



GARRETT

Emma is hosting a “practice Christmas dinner,” and we are all required to go. Aria is excited since she loves all Christmas-related activities. It’s a lot of her favorite things: people hugging, dancing, singing, and surprising their loved ones.

“We don’t have to go. I’ll tell her—” I try telling her, knowing how busy and tired she’s been lately.

“Hell no! We are totally going. Don’t keep me from Christmas celebrations, or I’ll create my own. Oh! We should have a Christmas party!”

I pull her into my chest with a smile. “Christmas is only two weeks away. Between events and your photography, we don’t have any weekends free.”

“Did you sneak in any fake events so I wouldn’t throw a raging holiday party? Hmm?” I did that *once* to make sure she didn’t try to squeeze in other activities before a surprise date I had planned.

“You can throw a raging party for New Year’s Eve. How’s that?” She loves parties, and I couldn’t care less as long as no one acted like assholes.

“Acceptable. Oh, and I meant to ask how you’d prefer we hang the streamers and other decorations I got for the New Year’s Eve party? I now know tape is a big no-no, but what about sticky tack? The white kind, of course.”

“You already purchased decorations for a party we hadn’t discussed before now?” I tilt my head at her, eager to hear what she’s been planning in that delightful head of hers.

“Well, I figured it would be good to be prepared in case you approved. You suggesting the party was a stroke of luck. I had a whole thing planned to convince you, but this works too. And it’s much easier on my jaw.”

“Your jaw?” I ask, confused.

She mimes giving a blow job, and I choke on my own saliva as I suck in a surprised breath.

I love this crazy, beautiful woman. When she told me she loved me, something surged inside me. An exciting certainty grew. All the possibilities, all the feelings and elation had me pouncing on her. I wanted her close so she could feel what she did to me and share in it. Instead of saying it back, I reacted and kissed her, worshipping her. I showed her my love at a time when words didn’t seem sufficient enough. But I know Aria needs the words too. She deserves to hear exactly how ingrained she is in my heart and mind.

When I wake and she’s already up and working on her photos before we head to work together, I ache. Before I can shower or get on with my day, I need to see her and touch her. I need her to grab my ass when I walk into the kitchen, and comment about my bedhead being indecently sexy, and solicit me with sexual acts if only I’d bring coffee to her in bed.

Now, I just have to hope like hell she doesn’t wake up one day and realize I’m too boring, old, brusque, and emotionally ill-equipped to put up with forever. Because that’s what I want—forever. I’ve even gotten some help with making this goal happen. I just have to keep it a secret a little while longer. Aria enjoys spontaneity, and providing her with planned surprises is about as spontaneous as I can offer most of the time.

“What were you thinking about just then?” she asks. “You’ve been acting weird for weeks, and you keep looking at me like that. Tell me what’s going on in that smarty-pants mind of yours.”

“My little Minx.” I pull her toward me and capture her dirty mouth in a deep kiss that has her gasping into my mouth. “We have fifteen minutes before we need to leave, and all I can think about is being inside you.” I spin her around and reach around to cup her breast in my hand. Her back arches against me as she inhales sharply. I ease her over to face the dresser. “Lift your dress and pull your underwear down.” Her breathing quickens as her hands find the hem of her dress. She starts pushing her lace panties down, but I stop her when they get to her mid thighs. “Leave them there.” I nudge her legs wider apart.

“Hands,” I command. She flattens them on the dresser, knowing exactly where this is going.

Gathering her hair and holding it off to the side, I bend to kiss the nape of her neck. I pull back on the hair in my fist, and she bows. My other hand soothes a path down from her swollen breast to the neatly trimmed triangle of hair above her mound.

“Yes,” she mumbles, one of her hands coming off the dresser and moving into my hair, holding me close. My hand tightens around the dark silky waves of hair in my grasp, and I remove my other hand from her heated skin.

She slaps her hand back down on the dresser, emitting a little growl. With a satisfied smirk, I move my hand back to the apex of her thighs and firmly cup her. She’s wet and smooth, and the gyration of her hips spurs me on.

My fingers delve into her with slow, firm strokes. Her head tips down as she moans. I give her hair another little tug until she drops her head back against my shoulder. I let go of her lilac-scented hair, reaching down to undo my dress pants. She presses her curvy bottom against me, encouraging me to hurry.

I push the material down my thighs and flip my shirt up, needing to feel as much of Aria on me as possible. She tightens around me with a moan as I thrust my fingers into her. I clench my jaw to keep from bending her over and slamming into her delicious heat and coming right then.

Aria is reaching her peak and moaning loudly, moving with my hand, and I know she needs more. Reflexively, I give myself a few quick pumps before grabbing her hips. I pull her ass out against me and press a hand against her upper back, encouraging her to bend forward.

She wiggles her ass at me, looking back. “If you don’t get inside me soon, I’m turning around and taking what I ne—”

I enter her with one swift flex of my hips and groan. So much for not just bending her over and slamming into her. She’s hot and so wet, I pause for a moment to make sure she adjusts.

She swivels her hips into me, taking what I momentarily stopped giving—and I let her because it’s fucking incredible. She’s working herself over me and keeping those hands on the dresser. Fire ignites in my veins as I lean back and watch her, pushing into her every time her ass grinds down on me.

That familiar tingle has me reaching for her clit. I want to feel her tighten around me as I come. I draw tight circles around her bud as we move together.

“Faster,” she demands. Unsure if she means my thrusts or my fingers, I pick up the pace for both and am so close I push my chest against her and keep her in place with one hand gripping the top of her hip as I pump erratically into her. She’s crying out my name, and I can’t hold back anymore. I let go, slowing slightly and spilling into her. My senses wane for a moment before I pinch her clit and send her over the edge with me.

Her knees buckle slightly, but I wrap an arm just under her breasts and keep her with me.

CHAPTER 33



ARIA

Garrett is hiding something. He's being careful with his words, giving me weird looks, and even took a few calls outside. I asked questions, but he said he couldn't tell me. It was probably work-related, but he didn't actually say that.

So that's eating at me a bit. Everything else is perfect. Well, that and the fact that Garrett hasn't told me he loves me yet. I've been saying it whenever I feel it because I don't hold back, and if I feel or think something, it tends to come out.

If he didn't love me, would he still go through the motions because he felt he had to?

He probably would. But would he still do all those sweet things for me—stare at me and smack my bum with heat in his eyes when I tease him?

Yet, despite Garrett not being the type to share his feelings openly and with descriptive flair, I'm still disappointed. Maybe that's not fair to him. It's probably something I should talk to him about. He's likely not even aware he hasn't said it and that I want to share those words with each other regularly.

Because I want to be told I'm loved. I deserve to be loved out loud.

However, having that conversation anytime soon seems unlikely. Our weekends have been taken up with photo shoots and Christmas activities, and his evenings during the week lately have been just as busy.

The last time Garrett and I spent an entire afternoon together was nearly a week ago when we put up the Christmas decorations. Thankfully, I had a whole bunch of mine in storage we were able to use, because Garrett apparently isn't the decorating type. Shocking, I know.

He's been so busy lately that I'm starting to get a little sensitive about that too. I shouldn't complain because he's getting the baby's room ready. It still has all the old furniture, but he built the crib and put together the bookshelf.

I asked him if everything was all right, and a slow smile spread across his face. "Yes. You missing me, Minx? I'm not giving you enough attention, am I? Let's fix that, shall we?" He scooped me up, and we spent the entire afternoon naked.

My baby belly has grown considerably in the past few weeks. It's adorable, and Garrett loves up on it all the time. That gets me going again, and we end up naked more often than not, which isn't conducive to deep conversations.

Today, we're unpacking some of the things we bought for the baby.

"What is this and why does it plug in?"

"That's a wipes warmer, and it plugs in because that's what heats the wipes."

"Warm wipes?" I laugh with a nod. "Seems frivolous."

"Oh, it is. But when we went shopping, you said 'get whatever you want,' so I did. Plus, seeing the look on your face while I piled more and more stuff into our overflowing cart was loads of fun."

He smacks my butt and goes to the dresser to put the wipes warmer with the rest of the diaper-changing items.

"What about this?" he asks.

He holds up a tall, white, enclosed pail.

"Diaper Genie. It holds all the stinky diapers."

"Why can't we just use a regular garbage pail? And how do we get our trash bags in here?"

“There are special bags for it. They’re on top of the dresser. The blue thing.” I point as I take tags off onesies.

He walks over and picks up the special bags. Turning, he holds it up for me to inspect, but I already know exactly what it looks like. “What the hell is this? How does this even—you know what? Never mind. I’ll figure it out.” He walks to the diaper pail with determination. I bite my lips together to keep from laughing at him.

“This bag doesn’t have a bottom. I have to tie it off. What the hell kind of engineering is this?” He’s muttering to himself, and I have to turn away so he doesn’t see my face.

“Hey, um, remember how we agreed that you are sometimes unaware of emotional needs?”

He stops what he’s doing and turns to me, worry etched across his face.

“I just thought, we’ve been so busy, and baby is going to be here in a few short months, my photography business is picking up. Maybe while we have some downtime, we can talk about our feelings a bit.”

“What’s wrong? You okay? Did something happen? You never have to ask to talk about your feelings. You can just blurt them out like you usually do, and I’ll listen.”

He’s gone from adorably frustrated to concerned in seconds.

“Oh, yeah. I have no problem sharing my thoughts and feelings. Even in the middle of the night, as you’ll recall.”

“Mm-hmm. That fainting goat dream at three in the morning was something. Especially the part where we discussed why it had Sean’s face.”

I forgot about that one. Anytime I have a crazy dream, I sleepily tell Garrett, and he talks me through them until I fall asleep, usually on his chest with his arms wrapped around me.

“Yes. You are a great dream analyzer. Scarily accurate, actually. But what I meant was a conversation where I did more listening, and you did the majority of the talking. I’m not

as good at dream interpretations, but I love talking about feelings.”

“Feelings about what?” He returns his attention to the Diaper Genie and pulls some of the blue transparent bag out of the top.

“Your feelings. About anything. Maybe the baby, or work, or maybe about us and how this is going?”

His gaze flickers to me with a hint of something I can’t quite name.

“I feel good about all of it, Ari. It feels right. Don’t you think?”

“I do.”

“I’m glad.” He walks over to me, and I breathe a sigh of relief, waiting for what he’s about to say. “I’m going to make us some lunch. What do you feel like?”

I feel like a big serving of you laying your heart out for me, dammit!

“Anything is good.” I shrug. He kisses my temple and moves around me to go make us some food. I call him back. “You know you can tell me things, right? I think I have you mostly figured out, but I love when you open yourself up to me in ways you don’t with anyone else.”

“I . . . I know. I will. I’m working on it, babe. Okay?”

I nod numbly.

Is he working on telling me or figuring out how he feels?

Shit. How did opening up communication make me feel less certain?

CHAPTER 34



ARIA

The boys are at something called a beer and diapers party while I'm at the community hall for my baby shower. For the first bit I just welcomed people and watched Lauren browbeating people into participating, Emma taking charge of running most of the activities super seriously, and Chloe taking pictures awkwardly with my camera, insisting I'd want the memories but couldn't take the photos myself.

"Maria wins," Emma announces.

"What?" Lauren roars, ripping off her blindfold. "I could still hear Maria shuffling around with diaper tabs when I got my last one on. Emma, come on."

"Lauren, your baby doll's diaper isn't even on properly."

"Oh, please. It's totally fine."

"I'll need you to prove it. Otherwise, people will think I'm showing you favoritism because you're my best friend. Lauren, please stand the doll up."

Lauren playfully scowls at her. She lifts the doll, and the diaper immediately falls off. "Judas," she mutters through a smirk as Millie, Chloe, Sadie, and a few League members laugh at her competitive antics.

Chloe settles into the chair to my right as we watch Maria pick her winning prize.

"How is baby shower number one going?" she asks.

“Surprisingly well. Maybe because the guys are wreaking havoc at your place instead of here.” This is the first of three over the next few months. I’m always up for a celebration and getting to talk to people. Garrett is more of a homebody, but two of the three baby showers are for women only, so he gets off with a guys’ afternoon, and I get to party it up with my favorite ladies. It’s a win-win for both of us. Then add in baby games, great food, and making new friends, and I can confidently say I’m not put out in the least.

“Emma made us put a cap on the number of guests for hers. For efficiency, she only wanted one shower. She said she had already bought most of the items she would need and was fully prepared, so there was no need for more.” I laugh, looking over at the newest member of the Caldwell family. She’s reorganizing the prize table. I’ve found her and Garrett to be quite a bit alike in some ways, and it’s highly entertaining when they team up against Jess.

“Want me to go steal you a chocolate éclair we put in the fridge for later? Between Stella and Emma, we’ve got a tight schedule ahead, and if the snacks that show up on your desk every afternoon at two o’clock and demolished within minutes are any indication, you’ll be hangry soon.”

“You noticed my afternoon snack schedule?” I look at her curiously. “Have you been creeping on me?”

“Unless it’s chocolate, I probably wouldn’t have noticed on my own. What I noticed was Garrett noticing. He has a phone timer go off every day where no matter what he’s doing, he slips away and brings you something to eat.”

“I *do* become a bit irrational when I get hungry. Or I get super emotional. Sometimes, I don’t even know why I’m crying. Your brother is a smart man.”

“He’s different around you.” She wraps her arms around me. “He normally distances himself from emotional or social situations. With you, he’s attentive, protective, devoted, and fully willing to step out of his comfort zone. He’s trying to be everything you deserve, and as much as I give my brother shit for his gruff, aloof personality, I have to admit that he has the

capacity to be incredibly sweet, and I never thought I'd see that."

I clear my throat and blink a few times to keep the tears from gathering.

"No crying." She chuckles. "Was that a yes to the eclair?"

I give her a squeeze and nod. I probably don't need the extra sugar. I'm already jacked up on everyone's energy.

I wander over to the wide double doors of the hall, looking for my mom. I saw her hanging out with Kinsley earlier, and I can only imagine what those two are getting up to. I bet they already found the eclairs.

Before I turn the corner to where the porch leads to the back patio, I hear some voices.

"Before the baby comes. He was insistent about the date. Marg wasn't sure if she could put it all together in time because they already have an event booked at McKinley Farms the same weekend he wants the venue."

"He will figure it out. That boy could probably use some spontaneity anyway." The voice belongs to Stella, but it doesn't sound as jovial as usual. "Garrett knows what he wants, but life doesn't always happen in the way we expect. Sometimes it goes to shit. Sometimes it turns out even better than we could have imagined. Garrett believes that if he plans it all out, it'll go exactly as he prefers."

"Well, Millie has been busy helping set up some of the details, and she couldn't be happier. Two of her kids getting married in the same year? I'm sure she's bursting at the seams with this news, but Garrett insisted everyone keep it quiet. Like he doesn't think we can keep a secret."

My hand is covering my mouth to keep from speaking or breathing while I eavesdrop. Two weddings? Is Garrett . . . ? Are we . . . ? What the hell is he up?

"What secret? Did you say something about two weddings? Is Garrett trying to squeeze in a quickie wedding before the baby comes? Won't that steal Chloe's thunder? Does she know yet?" I peek around the corner and see

Hannah, the wandering town employee. Girl can't hold down a job, and with the amount of gossip she tends to spew, it's not surprising. However, at this moment, she's asking some questions I wouldn't mind hearing the answers to.

"Move along, Hannah, my girl, we are having a private conversation, and since you've proven incapable of keeping a secret, you are not invited to participate. Don't give me that look, off you go," Stella directs her, and in my mind, I can see her hands shooing her away.

I figured Hannah would head out to the tables where everyone else is. Instead, she barrels around the corner and right into me.

"Oh, hi, Aria. Um, congrats on the baby. And for nabbing the most eligible bachelor in town. He's a good man. You're lucky. Like, really lucky. When Christie Ferguson got knocked up, she had to move back in with her parents and raise her baby by herself. The father just disappeared. Or she didn't know who he was. I can't remember now. Anyway, I'm glad Garrett is doing the right thing for you. He always does the right thing, and you're lucky to have a man like that."

Wow. Thanks for that fucking backhanded reassurance, Han.

"It's not luck when you surround yourself with people who care about you, Hannah. Thanks for coming to my baby shower. I'm sure I'll see you around." Then because I can't help myself, I add, "Oh, and we'll be posting a temporary job opening to cover my maternity leave at the clinic. I ran into Sheila Langley, and she was telling me about how you intended on applying. I'll be weeding through the candidates, and I can't wait to find out if you are the *lucky* new employee getting to work alongside our *good* doctor and his team." My beaming smile has her eyebrows raising, but her expression is still confused. "But I wouldn't hold my breath." That should clear it up.

Her mouth gapes open, and she has one fist propped up haughtily on her hip. I send her a jaunty wave while striding back into the hall.

Now, instead of enjoying my baby shower and watching my friends and family play games where they have to eat various flavors of mushy baby food, I'll be wondering why my boyfriend is planning a wedding I know nothing about. A wedding that apparently needs to take place before our baby is born.

Food moves around the hall, Lauren's bright laughter echoes through the space, and Emma is making a list of all the gifts my lovely friends gave us but I haven't been able to focus on any of it.

Chloe has been checking on me continuously, knowing something's wrong. Even my mom is hovering, shooting me furtive glances, and I know she's going to be asking me questions as soon as this shower is over.

Chloe beats her to it though. "What happened, Ari? Talk to me," she begs. "One minute you were mingling, trash-talking during the diaper tower contest, and having a great time, and the next, your mind had completely left the building."

I look around. Many guests have stuck around to chat even though all the events for the party ended nearly an hour ago.

I pull her into the kitchen area for some privacy before asking, "Is Garrett planning something I should be aware of?" If Chloe knew and didn't tell me, I'll be furious. She knows how I feel about being misled or lied to. She also knows that I won't let someone choose my future for me—not anymore. That should have been a discussion if this mattered that much to Garrett, and he really wanted to get married before the baby came. Not a ploy behind my back. I told him from the start that I wouldn't marry him just because we're having a baby, so I certainly won't be racing to the altar to squeeze in a quickie wedding before I pop.

"Like what? He usually has something up his sleeve to surprise you. Did he do something?" She looks so genuinely concerned. I have to believe she doesn't know.

"So you know nothing about plans for a wedding?" Her eyes widen, and her eyes dart to my hand.

“I don’t. Are you upset because you want that and he hasn’t made steps toward that yet or because he has and you’re against it?”

“You know that if Garrett pushed for us to get married right away, I wouldn’t do it. I couldn’t. I want love, not obligation or assumed expectation. I want a loud, gorgeous, epic wedding with all my friends and family. The planning and buildup to the day should be enjoyed. I know people find it stressful, but I want to revel in it. A marriage is one of the biggest life decisions we make, and the wedding is where everyone celebrates your new journey—your path down a happy, full life. It shouldn’t be rushed or include a looming deadline.”

“I completely agree. And I want all of that for you too. As long as I’m the maid of honor, of course. Otherwise, expect a little drama at your gorgeous wedding.” She rubs her hands up and down my arms, trying to calm me. “Aria, what is this about. Did Garrett propose?”

“I think Garrett has gone off the deep end and made some decisions without consulting me. He’s been acting oddly for weeks, and I think I found out why. I’m not sure he understands what I want or what I need.” I growl in frustration. “Sometimes, I think he knows exactly who I am and what I want. Other times, I wonder . . .” My voice catches. “If he has this perfect little plan for us and I’m just along for the ride.”

Her frown deepens, and her rubbing turns a bit frantic. “Garrett can get caught up in achieving his goals, especially when he wants something as badly as he seems to want you.”

“I know. I know he’s like that, and usually, it’s impressive. Today I’m confused about his intentions. It seems part of what is driving his relationship goals is our baby. And when it comes to our relationship, it needs to be about much more than the baby. In some ways, it needs to *not* be about our baby at all. I’m not sure he fully understands that,” I admit on a half sob. “Why he’s with me, if he loves me for me or because we’ve created an unexpected family—those questions have been taking up residence in the back of my mind for months.

Questions I've quieted because I know he cares about me and he's kept me very well distracted." A choked laugh leaves me as I see her disgusted face. "I guess I'm feeling sensitive. I've gotten played by the shitty intentions of men before. But this is the first time I feel like I might be getting played by a man's good intentions."

She tips her head to the side, thinking about what I'm saying. "Garrett does love you for *you*, Aria."

I raise my watery eyes to hers and whisper, "He's never said it."

Her eyes squeeze closed like it was nearly as hard for her to hear as it was for me to say. She hugs me like she's trying to infuse me with her light. "Some things don't need to be said to be true."

I hold on to her and that thought for as long as I can. When she finally releases me, I feel marginally better. Until I realize I have to go home and talk to Garrett about this.

CHAPTER 35



GARRETT

CHLOE: Fix it.

ME: Get Hayden to fix whatever you broke.

CHLOE: No. I didn't break anything. You did. Fix things with Aria. She's really upset—fix it.

*A*ria's upset about something? And it's my fault? What the hell did I do?

ME: What is she upset about?

CHLOE: Shit. You don't even know? That should go well when she gets home in a few minutes. Good luck, brother.

Ah, fuck.

I pace the house, awaiting my doom and racking my brain to try to come up with what went wrong. Everything has been great. She appreciates the way I am—my gruff certainty and practicality, my appreciation of simplicity, even my reserved nature. She likes toying with all of it and coaxing me out of my routines, out of my shell. She never ceases to surprise me, and in return, I take pleasure in creating those moments for her as well. And even though she knows that I've thoroughly planned our outings, the surprise element satisfies her impulsive needs.

Aria makes my life better, and every day, I make sure she sees that. Even on days when she tells me stories about how she ran into some Landry resident and they talked her into hosting a free nutritional health night at the clinic or ended up

driving someone to San Francisco because they hadn't tried the hot chocolate at Ghirardelli Chocolate Marketplace and she felt a hankering for a two-scoop chocolate sundae.

The front door opens, and my feet are moving before my brain catches up, meaning I'm not prepared to see a teary-eyed woman with arms full of fluffy gift bags.

"Aria? What's the matter? Did something happen at the shower?" I step closer and scoop all the bags out of her arms.

"What's your plan for us, Garrett?"

My mind goes blank, not prepared for that particular question at this moment.

"You always have a plan. I usually appreciate it because I'm a horrible planner, and honestly, I just don't like the limitations. I don't want to pencil in fun. I want to go find it, enjoy it, relish the possibilities."

"I know. I'm fine with doing all the planning." Constraining her would feel akin to wounding her, and I'd never hurt her. I live for her smiles and unabashed escapades.

"So what is your plan for us? I assume you have one."

Telling her my plan would ruin the surprise. My hesitation does nothing to ease her discontent.

"I do. I have all the plans for us, Ari, but I'm going to ask you to be patient." She huffs. "Though, I realize now that my telling you to be patient will likely stimulate the opposite response in you, but I was hoping to surprise you with one of my plans very soon."

She softens slightly as I put my hands on her lower back and draw her into me. "I heard about one of your plans today."

Shit. This fucking town.

Wait, why is she upset then?

"Which plans?"

"The ones at McKinley Farm. The ones you made knowing how I feel about our situation and the idea of an obligatory traditional family setup."

Obligatory? Well, that fucking hurts.

“Are you saying you don’t want to get married? You don’t want to commit to our family or me?”

“I’m saying it has to be more. Rushing the timing and having honorable intentions . . . It may seem like the proper way to do things to some people”—her eyes connect accusatorily with mine—“but it doesn’t feel right to me. Marriage is so much more than a legal, lifelong commitment. It’s a promise of unconditional love and a lifetime of discovering your joy and melding lives with your favorite person.”

She’s describing exactly what I want to give her—give *us*.

“That sounds like exactly what I want too, Ari. I don’t understand the problem.”

“I think that’s just it, Garrett. You don’t understand, and if I explain it, you’d only try to give me what I want.”

Fuck, I’m so confused.

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“I don’t want you just to do whatever you think you should. Our relationship should be about how we feel, not what we should do. And . . . well . . .”

Does she think I would want any of this if I didn’t feel it? I know exactly how I feel and how she does. Deep down, it’s always been there.

“Well, what? I want you to tell me everything you’re thinking because I’m very confused about what’s happening right now.”

“I’m not exactly sure how you feel. You’ve been a bit distant and quiet lately.”

This is what keeping secrets and organizing surprises does. I fucked it up.

“I’m not the best at communicating. I’ll work on that.” And I will. I’ve just been trying to be romantic and plan a grand way to show her how I feel, and in the interim, I

dropped the ball trying to keep everything under wraps. “I’ve been quiet because I was trying not to spoil the surprise.”

“I think that surprise might be pushing things a little quickly. Especially given the reasons behind them. Let’s just . . . let’s just back up a step and take things slow until the baby comes. We need to see how our lives are going to change and how we feel about that. I want to be free to make decisions as they come and not be influenced by what our families or friends or other people expect. I want to take that out of the equation.”

She doesn’t want to marry me. Hell, she might not want to get married at all.

She’s scared.

“You don’t want to marry me, and you want us to take a step back until the baby arrives?” I reiterate, hoping like hell I am getting it wrong.

“I don’t want a quickie wedding pushed on to me for the wrong reasons.”

“Aria.” The myriad of ways she has mistaken this situation has me saying her name in exasperation. “I have only *right* reasons when it comes to wanting to be with you. I want only you. Forever.” Even when she’s brought a confusing emotional upheaval to what should have been an incredibly romantic surprise. I almost smile at that thought but see the raw misery on Aria’s face, and a bolt of pain hits my chest.

“I think . . . I think I need things to slow down. Just to make sure they’re right. To make sure we want the same things and that this is more than just about me carrying your baby.”

“What?” What the fuck is she talking about? Of course, this is more than just about the baby. I don’t want to slow down. I want to speed ahead and make sure this woman is by my side, brightening my day and making me feel all the things I’ve never known before now. “I don’t want to step back. I want to step forward. All the way forward until there’s no space between us, nowhere left to step.”

Her eyes search mine, and it sparks hope in me. Until I see the tears collecting on the edges of her lashes. Fuck. What did I say now?

I pull her in for a hug, and she releases an unsteady breath. I hold on to her until she pulls back a few inches.

“I need some time with this. And I think you need some time to think about why you’re doing this with me. Why the timing for this wedding surprise had to be before the baby was born.”

I frown at her. “Wedding surprise?”

She’s deep in thought and looking more forlorn than before. “I’m going to stay in the other room tonight. I just need to do some thinking, and I’m having a lot of feelings and just want some space.”

My hold on her tightens as my body disagrees with this decision. She disentangles herself from me and makes her way to the baby’s room.

I continue standing here like an idiot with no clue what to do.

She says she loves me, and I spend every spare moment I have making sure she feels my love. What I have planned for her future has nothing to do with securing a traditional family or trying to be a good man. I just want to be *her man*.

Aria finding out that I arranged an elaborate, romantic proposal should have led to hot and frantic sex on the living room floor—or at the very least some sweet excitement. Instead, her reaction was asking for space. No matter which way I look at it, that doesn’t bode well for me.

CHAPTER 36



GARRETT

Spending the entire night figuring out where and how badly I fucked up probably wasn't my best idea, but my mind hadn't exactly given me any other choice.

What I came up with after ten hours of reflection: I should have told her I love her—months ago. The moment I felt it, I should have shared it. It's just not something I think to say as much as she does. Then my fucking stupid plan to tell her in the most romantic way possible, even if that meant waiting a bit to actually say the words?

I fucked up. Aria deserves the big romantic plans. But she also needs those daily affirmations and affections. I got distracted with big picture forever moments.

Hearing the sniffles coming from the other room last night made me feel enraged and helpless all at once. Aria is an emotion-driven woman, and pregnancy has only emphasized this. The fact that she was upset and crying alone in her room because of something I did sat heavy with me. I couldn't go in and hold her, so I stationed myself on the hallway floor opposite her door and hoped she'd come out at some point and we'd get another chance to talk.

I roll my neck a few times, not used to sleeping upright all night like I did during my internship. Aria ended up coming out sometime this morning, but I must have passed out by then and didn't hear her. A note on the kitchen island let me know that she was spending the day at her mom's.

Aria likes to talk things out with friends and family. Maybe I should call in my problem solver too.

ME: I might be in need of some woman advice.

Dots appear and disappear a half dozen times.

TAYLOR: I've been waiting for this day. Meet at Taps in an hour.

I knew he'd be way too excited.



“*Y*ou should talk to her and tell her exactly how you feel. Let her know whatever it was you were thinking when you decided to hide your feelings and plan something extravagant instead of just telling the woman you love that you *actually* love her,” Jess says, followed by a mumbled, “Idiot.”

I punch his shoulder. “At least my woman didn’t come to you bawling over blueberry muffins and bursting into tears every time you saw her.”

His mouth twitches into a flicker of a grimace as he recalls how I met Emma. “Fine. Point made. But man, learn from my mistakes. When you care about someone and your life would be fucking miserable without them, you tell them.”

“Unless she doesn’t love you back, then you shove that shit down and tell yourself that being friends is better than never being a part of their life.” Sean takes a healthy swig of beer, claps the table twice, and heads to the bar.

“Sean is dealing with some shit,” Jess explains as he watches our cousin order another drink. “I think what he meant was that Aria loves you, so there was never any reason to hold back.”

“I didn’t realize I was. I planned a romantic proposal, and she hated even the idea of that. How do we get past that? She wants space and time, and she was crying and confused.” I shove a hand into my hair, ready to rip it out. “On a regular

day, the little Minx is a tumultuous mix of emotions and flirtations. Add in pregnancy hormones and insecurities about how she thinks I feel, and here we are. I fucked this up.”

“Wait . . . does she know you were planning a big proposal?” Jess asks.

“Yeah. She was upset about what I had planned for her at McKinley Farms—which was the proposal.”

I think. Did she actually mention the proposal?

No. She said wedding surprise.

“From what Chloe told me, this had something to do with a wedding and your inability to express your emotions.”

“I show her every day. Every. Single. Day. And it’s easy. She makes it easy to love her.”

“You should probably tell her that, you moron. Don’t you think that’s shit that women like to hear? Let me help you out here and confirm that. Yes, they love it. If you need an interpreter present, let me know. I can’t guarantee I won’t add in my own thoughts, but I’m sure I’d still be able to say what you want her to know better than you have been,” Taylor offers.

“She knows I love her.”

Sean sinks back down into his seat. “She thinks a part of that might be because she’s having your baby. Women don’t like thinking a guy is only into them because he’s stuck with her and trying to make the best of the situation.”

“Fuck you. That’s not what’s happening here,” I roar at my cousin.

“Sean, lay off. He’s not equipped to deal with relationship dilemmas and your wiseass speeches,” Taylor tells him with a reproachful glare promising painful consequences.

“Tell us why you didn’t open up to her before now?” Jess asks, pivoting the subject.

“I wanted to do something big for her. When I realized I hadn’t said it back when she did, I wanted to make it right. I

already knew at that point that I wanted to marry her, spend all of my time with her. I'd do anything for her."

"Oof. He's a goner. You better hope she listens when you try to explain all of this."

"She wants space to think about what everything will be like after the baby is born. I don't know why she thinks the baby being born will change how I feel about her. If anything, it's only going to make me love her more."

"I would maybe avoid telling her how the baby makes you love her more," Taylor suggests.

"Why?" I ask, confused. "Should I love her less?"

"From what you said, she's worried you might never have loved or cared about her if she hadn't gotten pregnant."

Because I pushed her away for too long.

"I knew I wanted to be with her. By the time I decided I had needed her, damn the consequences, she was already pissed at me. I likely would have eventually convinced her to give us a chance, but our timeline moved up a bit when she ended up pregnant."

"Sounds like she doesn't see it that way. Sounds like she sees it as you two finally giving in to your interest in each other, you decided it couldn't go anywhere, and then suddenly she's pregnant, and you're with her," my brother says.

"That's not what happened. At all. You don't know everything that happened."

"Maybe not. But does she?"

I'd make sure she does.

"Boys."

We all look over to see Aaron—one of the few men in The League—as he greets us.

We all greet him pleasantly but only give a quick nod before turning back to each other. I'm not letting a single one of these meddlesome jerks leave until we have a plan in place to fix my relationship.

“In the interest of saving myself some time today, I’m going to come clean and just admit that I’ve been sent over here to gather intel and offer some advice.”

“About what exactly?” Taylor asks.

“About the Doc and his woman.” He points at me but is still looking at Taylor.

“Probably should have expected they’d send someone sooner. While Lauren was in the shower, I yelled through the door that I was leaving so she couldn’t ask me any questions. Brady’s afternoon nap time on the weekends always means naked time. So she’d have a lot of questions about why I was meeting with Garrett instead.”

Aaron scoffs, shaking his head. He ignores Taylor and focuses on me. He flutters his hands, silently asking me to move over.

The old man steals my beer and gets comfortable before he starts talking.

“We think Aria is under the impression that you planned an entire wedding—not a proposal—that you would be springing on her to ensure you two were hitched before Baby Caldwell arrives. She believes Millie helped you and is encouraging this shotgun wedding. A conversation was also overheard where someone may have implied that Aria’s lucky to have found a man willing to do the ‘right thing’ by her. I’m sure you understand why that would have struck a nerve—what with her parents’ marriage being the way it was.” He pauses, chuffing out a breath. “Basically the poor girl thinks you were checking off your life and relationship to-do list goals, and marrying her was the first item on your list.”

What? Who the hell—why would she believe—“What the hell happened at that shower, Aaron?”

He raises his hands. “I wasn’t personally at the event. Stella said it was for women only. My task today was merely to assess the level of destruction this caused and slip some hints into the conversation, letting you know what happened. Of course, Stella recommended I be coy about it and say I was

‘popping in for some male bonding time,’ but I have to make this quick and dirty. College football semifinals are tonight, and we’re having people over. So I eavesdropped for a bit, gave you the necessary information, and even shared a beer with you young men to make it appear as if we were all having a grand time.” He lets out a weary sigh. “My work here is done. Any questions before I head home?”

He’s got one butt cheek already off the seat, so I know I have to make this quick. “How did she come to find out all of this grossly misleading information?”

“She overheard a couple of ladies talking about you trying to book McKinley Farms. They got carried away and started speculating . . . as they do. Not sure exactly what was said. I only know what was likely interpreted by your lovely lady.”

“And they’re willing to help make this right, I’m assuming.”

“I believe that’s why I’m here.”

“I’m also still going to need McKinley Farms gazebo and party space sometime later this year. I’m sure they can handle rescheduling since I’ll no longer be needing the space next weekend to propose to my girlfriend”—hopefully still my girlfriend—“since she is currently requiring space.”

“I’ll pass that along, and I’m sure Fern or Stella will be able to handle that for you. Fern deals with Marg there regularly for event flowers through her shop.”

I nod, then he returns the gesture. He pivots and hightails it out of Taps.

My cousin looks at me with a heavy expression. “She thought you were springing a surprise wedding on her. And that you wanted to squeeze it in before the baby arrives so you had a neat and tidy little family life all set up. I mean, it kind of sounds like you. Which makes this whole thing a lot worse than you thought, man.”

It is, and it isn’t. Her not wanting to be pressured into a wedding she didn’t get consulted about and thinks is about my

obligations to her as my kid's mother feels a *tiny* bit better than her not wanting to marry me at all.

“At least it makes more sense now. I can fix this. I'll just tell her exactly what was happening and how I feel. Done.”

Taylor barks out a laugh. Then Jess joins in. Sean doesn't laugh. He just raises his eyebrows at me.

“What?”

“Yeah, sure. Women are easy. Go into the conversation with that mindset,” Jess says, a large dose of sarcasm lacing his tone.

Taylor laughs. “Alright, everyone, meet back here tomorrow at seven for part two of Garrett asking for relationship advice. Aaron was right. There's a game on in an hour. Come on by my place in a half hour. Bring snacks and no talk of women. Football only.”

I frown, about to tell him I won't be coming by because I want to head home and see if I can catch Aria. Or should I give her more time to think?

Everything she's thinking is wrong. Don't give her more time to be upset about false information.

“Not you.” He points at me. “You go deal with your relationship.”

I pull at my hair again before getting up from the table and slipping out of Taps even faster than Aaron did just minutes ago.

After walking into the house and realizing Aria isn't home, I text her.

ME: Hey.

Get your shit together, Garrett. Say something meaningful. It's what she needs.

ME: I missed you today. Can't wait to see you. I know you want your space, but maybe we could sit on opposite sides of the couch while we watch *The Bachelor* together?

Aria convinced me to watch it with her after the town event. It's the worst, most dramatic, contrived crap I've ever wasted time on. Watching it with Aria though . . . makes it bearable.

ARIA: I'm staying over at my mom's tonight. We have plans in the morning.

ARIA: I miss you too, Gar. I just need to figure some things out. I told myself I'd never let myself get into a situation like this, and here I am wondering if I toss that aside just to be with you. I'd be breaking promises I made myself, and it's got me messed up inside.

ME: I would never ask you to do that, Ari. I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I'd love the chance to explain a few things. I really think we need to clarify some misinformation.

ARIA: Before we rehash anything, I'd like for us to consider what our future will be like and the reasons for wanting to be together. We need to be honest with each other and determine what kind of relationship will work moving forward.

ME: Done. I'm ready when you are.

ARIA: You're sweet. Sweeter than I ever imagined. Can I have a couple more days? When I'm around you, it's hard to think objectively.

ME: When you're not here, it's hard for me to think at all. My brain refuses to think about anything other than you. I've never once had issues focusing. Until you.

ARIA: Dammit, Garrett. Sharing your thoughts with me and making me ache to be with you will only further muddle my feelings.

ME: Come and muddle them here with me.

ARIA: Soon.

ME: You'll be home tomorrow night?

ARIA: I hope so. Good night, Doc.

ME: Good night, Minx.

CHAPTER 37



ARIA

*B*eing away from Garrett has been difficult.

Fine. It's been excruciating. It's only been a couple of days, and all I've done is cry, pout, and question everything. None of it makes sense anymore. He admitted that he had these plans and wasn't going to consult me. Wanting to get married before the baby comes . . . Maybe it doesn't mean he's doing it only for the baby, but it still means he's adjusting the timeline to fit into his perfect plan. That's one of the things I feel pretty shitty about.

I won't be in a relationship with someone who's in it only for the baby. He cares about me, but is he with me because he loves me and wants everything with me—a lifetime of kisses over morning coffee, attending town events, whispered dirty promises, and cuddles on the couch. Or because he's making the best of our situation?

If he's not in this for the right reasons, I don't think I can be with him. And his text messages checking in and telling me he misses me are killing me. I know I can't stay in that house with him and stay strong in my convictions. Which means I may have to find an apartment after all. My mom thought I'd lost my damn mind as I told her this and sobbed into her shoulder for nearly two hours.

I haven't told her everything yet, just that I'm not sure if Garrett feels the same way about me and is making some decisions about our future without me. She hasn't pressed but is maintaining her positivity by assuring me this will pass and telling me she was an emotional, scatterbrained wreck when

she was pregnant with me. But she leaned the other way. She leaned on Dad, and he made her promises he couldn't keep.

When I asked to stay with her for a little while, she immediately started setting up her bed—insisting the foldout couch would be “uncomfortable for the baby.” Then she took off her usual, slightly rose-tinted glasses and laid some truth on me.

“Honey. You have never been scared of love—you have always sought it out. I often wondered if you might be hesitant after witnessing the relationship your father and I had, but I think it drove you to find your passions in life even harder. You threw yourself into one relationship after another and learned from each one. But the first time you feel something real, something you want desperately, is the time you pull back? That's when you get scared? No, sweetie. This is the time you get brave because you finally found a love that means something. This kind of love means everything. Your heart chose the right man for you a long time ago. You starting a family with him at the same time is just really good fucking luck, baby.”

After that talk, I took matters into my own hands and decided to lay out all the possibilities and see how I felt. I needed assurance as I considered what my actions would mean to my heart and my future.

Option one was heading back home but maintaining some distance while we figured out what we each wanted. Then when the baby came, we'd help each other get through that time and figure out the rest later. That option made my tummy hurt just thinking about how hard it would be. Could I live in the same house as the man I love and not gravitate toward him, not stray from my ideals?

Option two involved breaking things completely off, finding a new place to live, and working out a way to co-parent. I could barely think about this one. He's what I want, and building a life separate from him feels wrong.

Option three was to say screw it and head back home. Build our life together and hope our relationship is nothing

like my parents'. But giving someone my whole heart when they don't offer theirs would result in losing a big part of who I am. I wouldn't be happy knowing I'm cared about but maybe not fully loved the way I'd always hoped.

So that's how I found myself standing in front of a townhouse that I nearly vomited in while touring. And now, I know for sure that I can't do this. I don't want a life away from Garrett.

Summarizing my feelings for option two: it's fucking terrible.

I'm wiping tears away as I stare at the house that's helped me realize a life apart from Garrett isn't what I want. And I always go after what I want.

Garrett has never been the touchy-feely, talkative type but he loves me, and I'm going to get him to admit it. I'll also have to inform him that attempting a quickie wedding to have the idyllic life schedule is bullshit. I will not be squeezing into a wedding dress until at least six months after our baby is born, and I expect a proposal, not a preplanned wedding.

I hear a car door slam as I'm considering all the other things that were wrong with Garrett's stupid surprise wedding idea. He probably thought he was being efficient and taking care of the pesky planning he knows I don't enjoy. Idiot.

I should go talk to him.

"Aria." I spin around at the sound of his deep voice. "What are you doing here?" He's looking around warily, and his tone has turned gruff.

I remember where I am and immediately feel guilty. This looks bad. "I was just about to come find you so we can talk."

"You're looking for other places to live? I thought you were just taking some time to get all your thoughts together."

"I was going through all my options. I can't just think about a list of options and make a rational choice about this. This was something I needed to feel."

“And one option was moving out and living somewhere else? Where would that have left us?”

I hesitate, knowing this isn't truly an option. “Co-parenting. But—”

“You can't live here, Ari. This shouldn't have been an option.”

“Why? Why couldn't I live here if I felt like we'd be better off taking our relationship off the table?” Tell me something big, Garrett. Tell me how you feel.

“This isn't our home. You belong in our home. With me.” He growls a little and puts both hands in his hair. He pulls them away, breathing heavily, looking positively crazed. “For a woman who doesn't like to plan, you've taken to looking for an exit plan pretty damn seriously, Aria.” I've never seen him this upset, and it brings tears to my eyes. I don't know how I have any tears left.

He turns to me again, still fired up. “You could have at least given me the chance to explain because once I found out what the hell was going on, I could have explained all of this. You got this whole situation mixed up listening to gossip. You know this town. You can't believe everything you hear.” Shit. This is why my mom hates gossip. They can get it wrong just as often as they get it right.

“Well, you admitted that you organized a wedding and wanted to get hitched before this baby arrives. That was a blow to the foundation of what I'd hoped our relationship was built on. If it's only built on obligation, that hurts more than I can explain, Garrett. So I needed to consider which option I was left with and if any of them hurt less. Spoiler: most of them suck but not as much as—”

“Is this one of those ‘dump me before I dump you’ situations? You're worried I'm in it for the wrong reasons and that one day I'll leave, and that's what you told yourself you'd do anything to avoid? Because of your dad? If there was anything I could say or do to get that thought right out of your head, tell me, and I'll do it. I'd do anything for you, Aria. Including never getting married if that's what it takes. Hell, I

don't even know if that's what upset you or not, but I'll fix it. Just don't keep pushing me away. You want to put up your guard because you're scared, I get it. But I need you in my bed at night. I need your disgusting food in my kitchen, your products all over my counter, and your kind of chaos in every nook and cranny of my life. My need for you has nothing to do with you being pregnant with my child. It has never—for even a minute—influenced the immensity of what I feel for you.”

He swipes a rough hand across his mouth and jaw. My heart is beating too loudly to hear the rasp of his scruff he's let grow out more than usual. I reach for him, grabbing his other hand and holding it, tears streaming down my face. My throat refuses to work as I try to swallow down the lump of emotions.

“Maybe I didn't say the words or write you a love letter or shout about it through the town square, but I *showed* you. That's how I do these things. You've known me for years, Ari, *years*. I never talk about my damn feelings. I *do* things for the people I love. I take care of them. Not because I feel obligated, but because I want to. It makes me feel good to take care of the people I love and to see them happy. Watching your face light up when I surprise you and hearing your happy sigh when I place a heating pad on your shoulders while you edit photos—that's how I show it. I thought you understood that.”

“I felt it, Garrett. I do feel it. I just needed to be sure that it was about me, not about being the mother of your child.”

“I don't understand how someone who loves *love*, and craves affection as much as you do, doesn't recognize when the true love of her life is staring right at her and doesn't ever want to let her go.”

I squeeze my hands together as guilt gnaws at my insides. “Garrett . . . I'm sorry, I just—I've had men make sweet promises and declare their love before. Then when they leave or screw me over, I'm told ‘it's just something guys say’ or ‘they're just words.’”

He looks down at me and releases a harsh breath. “So I guess now I have to prove it to you? I have to be patient? I

have to sit back and watch you rent a damn townhouse that's not even in the town we love—the town you moved back for.”

How did he even know I was here?

The League has spies in Vaughn. Goddammit.

“Garrett . . . no. I'm not renting a townhouse.”

“If you feel you have to do this, then do it. But just so you know, I wasn't planning a quickie wedding. In case I haven't made it clear enough, I don't care what order we do things.” I swallow past the lump in my throat. “I had an elaborate proposal and party planned for you. Not before the baby was born or because I wanted to lock down our relationship status by an arbitrary date. I couldn't hold in anymore how I felt—what I neglected to say that night on the couch with you. I'm not as good with words, but I needed you to know how much I love you. How deeply you're ingrained in my heart and in my future. It's not possible for me to plan a future for us on my own, Aria, because you are my future. *You* determine my future. I have no problem scheduling the little things, taking control when we're in bed, but planning our life together is something I don't want to do by myself or with anyone other than you.”

And then he walks away. Fuck.

I think I might have been holding my breath while he was tearing my heart out and mending it at the same time because I feel dizzy.

“Garrett,” I say, but it comes out barely above a whisper.

My feet finally cooperate, and I move toward his vehicle.

I tap on the window.

He rolls it down. “I'm upset, Aria, and I need some time to get my head on straight before we talk anymore. Okay?” I nod at him, tears still swimming in my eyes.

“Are you on your way back to Landry?”

I nod again, unable to speak other than to say, “Garrett,” one more time.

“Are you okay to drive? I can wait. I don’t want you crying while driving on the highway.”

I clear my throat. “I can drive.”

“I’ll follow you back to your mom’s.” His mouth tightens, and he looks away from me as he rolls up the window.

I get in my car, my heart beating wildly, my stomach churning like it hates me as much as I do at this moment.

He wasn’t planning our life, and his actions were from a place of good intentions. He wanted to do a grand proposal. Garrett. *Garrett* arranging a big romantic proposal and party.

I’m an idiot. An oversensitive idiot with daddy issues and an unfortunate penchant for assuming the worst from men. And now the man I love is escorting me to my mom’s place when all I want to do is go home with him.

CHAPTER 38



ARIA

Garrett has been showing his love for me for months, and for one weak moment at the baby shower, I doubted him and spiraled. The stupid voice inside my head that was wondering if Garrett was just looking to appease his family, set roles, marry the girl he knocked up—that's the emotionally damaged girl I used to be. It the part of me that sought love in all the wrong places because it hurt less to get disappointed by people who matter less.

I know what it looks like for a man to only be in a relationship for the kiddo because he feels stuck but isn't happy. That's not what happened with Garrett and me. I was the one scared, thinking that's where we would end up. Garrett has known me for a long time, but he can't know what my deepest fears and desires are unless I tell him.

In Garrett's eyes, fixing this could be as easy as a heartfelt apology and a few sentences explaining my hang-ups. But that wouldn't feel like enough to me. I want to use more than words. I want to show him like he's been showing me—but with a fair amount more talking because that's just how I am.

So I've spent my entire workday counting down the minutes to closing so I can ask Garrett if we can talk.

Right at five o'clock, I turn off the phone lines and bound out of my chair to lock up. I'm practically sprinting as I head to Garrett's office.

His door is open but I knock anyway.

“Can I come in?”

He gestures to the chair in front of his desk.

I sit and shift uncomfortably. Looking across the desk, I see he has a button undone on his dress shirt, and his cuffs are rolled all the way up. I just saw him yesterday, but I've been missing him so hard it feels like it's been weeks.

“Could we talk today? Whenever you're done here? Maybe I can come over?”

“You're always welcome at the house, Ari. It's ours.”

“You still feel that way? After I freaked, assumed you only wanted me because of the baby, and ruined your”—my voice breaks—“romantic plans?”

“Always. I'm . . . I don't know what I am, Ari. Hurt? Frustrated? Confused? Probably all of those.”

“I'm sorry, Gar—”

A loud banging sound cuts me off. We both stand and move to the door. Garrett gets in front of me, his fingers lingering on me to keep me still.

“Stay here. Please.” I nod and reach for the fingers grazing my swollen stomach. I give them a squeeze and he stalks off.

I hear him cursing and then someone else's voice.

“Neither of you is answering your goddamn phones. What the fuck?!?”

Shit. Sean is usually so charismatic and sweet, so something must be very wrong. I race over to the front and see him looking practically feral.

“Why are you banging on the door like a maniac?”

“You'd know if you'd have picked up your phone,” he shouts.

“Sorry, Sean, we were just closing up, and I—” I was completely focused on dealing with my own shit.

“Doesn't matter, I'm here now. Can one of you hold the door open? I'm bringing someone in.”

Sean heads back to his truck, Garrett following. Before Sean approaches his big truck, he looks around, takes off his hoodie, then reaches for the door. He hands the sweater to whoever's inside, helping them with it before leaning farther into the passenger side and hauling them out. A woman by the looks of it. She's absolutely dwarfed in Sean's clothes.

A quick glance of her face under the hood shows a familiar face, and my breath catches in my throat.

Garrett shuts the door and follows Sean back in.

"Get her to Exam Room One," he directs.

As he passes me, he rubs my back, sensing my distress. Because I know who Sean just carried into the clinic.

He presses a kiss to my temple that nearly sends me into another crying jag.

God, I miss him, his hugs, his everything.

"Go help her, Doc. I'll meet you at home."



*J*race to our house, wanting to make sure everything I set up during my lunch break is still in place.

The place looks pretty damn great. I put lights up all over the living room, and dinner is in the oven—Mamma Millie helped me with that particular part of the surprise, thankfully. We also had a really good talk about her thoughts and expectations of Garrett and me. I got the patented Mamma Millie swat and a talking-to about listening Garrett's and my hearts only and leaving everyone else out of it. As long as we are happy and good parents to her grandchild, she will keep out of our personal business. Though it seemed to pain her to say that, I know she meant it. She also mentioned that she has never once approached Garrett about us getting married because that's up to us. She knew he was proposing because he told her and asked her to help set up, but that was it. Was she excited? Yes. Would she mama bear me if I led Garrett on

and then broke his heart? Also yes. But she'd do the same to Garrett if he did that to me, so I thought that was fair.

I open a bottle of Grey's Vineyard Pinot Noir—Garrett's favorite—to let it breathe while I wait for him. I'll get out an Italian soda for myself later and pour it in a wineglass so I can still be fancy.

By the time I hear the door, I'm pulling the lasagna out of the oven.

"Aria?"

I hurry over to where he's slowly taking in the new living room decorations.

"Is she okay?" I ask, worried about my friend.

"She'll be just fine, babe." He glances back at the living room. "What's all this?" he asks.

Woven throughout the living room, hanging on long pieces of twine, are dozens of pictures. Pictures of Garrett in our house, of him walking with me, of him with his family. But mostly, they are of him looking at me. Going back through these pictures, it would seem obvious that this man loves me. I was letting other things cloud my view.

"It's my apology. I wanted to show you that I see it, Garrett—the love you have for me, the way you've shown me." I gesture around. "I just wasn't as ready as I thought for all of this. It was so big, and you are so much more than I could have ever imagined—and not just in the dirty ways." A light laugh and devilish smirk appears on his face. "I may have crushed on you hard ten years ago, and you burrowed in deeper every time I saw you, whether I admitted it or not, but now? I'm obsessed. You'll never get rid of me, and I'm—what did you used to call me again? Tenacious?"

"A brat. I used to call you a brat."

"Or Minx." I grin up at him before giving him a flirty wink.

He prowls toward me, wrapping me up in his arms. My belly is starting to become a bit of an obstacle, but the way his

hand always caresses the side of my bump possessively never fails to turn me to mush.

His mouth descends upon mine in a slow, consuming kiss.

I pry my lips away from his, backing away a few inches. “Wait. I have more to explain.”

“We can get to that later.” He ducks his head again and nibbles on my lower lip. His hands start exploring my hips and sneaking around to grab my ass.

I chuckle. “Garrett. Please? I need you to know where my mind was and why.”

“I know, Ari. It’s okay.”

“It’s not.” I take a deep breath and he holds me closer, cradling my head. “The idea of a quickie wedding triggered a lot of doubts and reminders of my family life growing up. My parents have never gotten along. I mean, they do now that they live separate lives and have journeyed to make themselves happy. But growing up, not at all. It’s why I was always at your place. My mom knew that, and I think it opened her eyes a bit. They split up a couple of summers after Chloe and I became best friends. Things were hard for a while after that, but eventually, my mom was happier. I promised myself I would *never* marry for any reason other than the forever kind of love. Getting accidentally knocked up put a bit of a roadblock in front of one of the few plans I had for my life. So when things were going well and felt perfect, I started to doubt. I’ll admit I let hormones and the added stress from opening the business—a business I worried I might not be able to maintain while also getting the kids and family I want—tank my already shaky emotional state. But I never should have doubted *you*.”

“I might have given you a few reasons to doubt, Ari. I’m pretty hardheaded about some things. You’ve been one of those things for years. I don’t blame you for questioning my intentions. I’m not great at communicating them verbally.”

“You show me in so many other ways. Go look at the photos. I wrote on the backs of most of them. Well, except the

ones where I captured you looking ridiculous. Those just made me smile.”

Thinking he’d walk off and go look at the photos on his own, I step back. That lasts about two seconds before he tugs me along with him, an arm around my waist.

He reads them all. Commenting on some, but I’m most nervous about when he gets to the last one. It’s a picture of him at McKinley Farms when we went out there for the Caldwell family photo shoot. On the back, I wrote *I’m devastated that I ruined your surprise proposal. I hope one day I earn another one.*

His head turns toward me, his eyes searing into mine. “I’d love the chance to try it again. Wouldn’t be much of a surprise anymore, but I could probably still get the gazebo at McKinley’s this weekend.”

I choke out a sob I’ve been withholding all night. “I don’t think I’ve earned another proposal yet. Make me work for it, Doc.” I place a sweet, quick kiss on his lips. “Or at least make me prove to you I’m not an emotional wreck with relationship hangups.”

“I think you may always be a bit of an emotional wreck, Minx. But I love you for it. Shit, I’ve yet to say it. Again.” He gets down on his knees in front of me and kisses my hands. “I love you, Aria Davenport. Forgive me for being too emotionally stunted to say it as often as I feel it. I’m going to get better at talking about my feelings, but until then, please know that I’ll always show you. Will you let me?”

“That almost sounds like a proposal.”

“Aria, I’m going to propose to you every damn day until you say yes.”

I duck down, place my hands on both sides of his jaw, and meet his mouth again. This time it’s not gentle or sweet. “You’re making this too easy, Garrett. Aren’t you upset with me?”

“I understand why you reacted like you did.” He reaches down and hauls me up into his arms. A surprised sound leaves

my mouth as he tilts his head down to whisper in my ear.

“I’m not an easy man, Ari, but I’m easy for you.”

I snort and cover my mouth. “Yeah, you are.”

“Not that kind of easy. Jesus.” He laughs lightly, walking us backward down the hallway. “I’m trying to be romantic here, babe.”

I giggle and run my fingers through his hair, drawing closer to him. “I love it. And I love how flustered you get around me sometimes. It’s sweet and sexy and makes me want to jump you.”

He’s lowering me down onto the bed before I even realize we’ve entered the bedroom. Leaning forward, he lets his lips brush against mine briefly before backing away, and it’s got me so needy, I’m scrambling to get closer.

I crush him to me, my mouth pulling at his. He groans and reaches up to hold my jaw in his unyielding and desperate grip. My tongue delves in to taste him, and I nearly whimper at how much I’ve missed him in only a few days.

Garrett grabs my hips and maneuvers us so I’m straddling him. I shift my dress up high, allowing me more room to get closer and feel him exactly where I need him.

I’m on fire, my pulse thrumming in my ears. Blood is rushing faster and harder, making me throb everywhere. I grind against him, and his eyes start to roll into the back of his head. He tightens his grip, and our lips slide against each other distractedly. I suck his bottom lip into my mouth and pull a little, teasing him like I used to dream of doing. I rub my tongue against his for only a moment before he dominates the kiss.

My hands leave his hair as I sit up to explore. They move down his firm, chiseled chest and caress his abs all the way down to the button of his pants. I undo it quickly and pull his hard length out of his briefs. As he gives it a few slow strokes from base to tip, his fingertips twitch on the sides of my bare thighs where he’s holding me against him.

I shuffle down a few inches, trying to maneuver lower so I can get my mouth on him, but his hands circle my arms and pull me back up.

“I need to be inside you, babe. Right now. Ride me.” Garrett doesn’t always like giving up control, especially when we’re naked, but sometimes I think he wants to just watch me. He wants to feel. When I have the reins, he relinquishes control sometimes, and I relish the power to make him feel good.

I lift and dig under the skirt of my dress for my underwear, but Garrett brushes my hands away. His large hand moves against the edges of my panties, sliding them to the side. My hips move just enough that he notices and slips a finger into me, knowing what my body was asking for. As he works me into a frenzy, I reach down and wrap my hand around him. A bead of precum forms on the top of his dick. I rub it over the head and match my pace to the faster one he’s now lashing against my clit.

“Enough,” he grunts. “Get on me.” Moving forward, I place him at my entrance while Garrett holds my underwear to the side. I tease him by sliding his straining dick through my folds a few times until I hear his growl of impatience. Without warning, I drop down and take his entire length into me.

I moan while grinding gently against him, loving how he fills me, how he holds me with such fervor. I rock into him, building up the tension, fanning the flames. Knowing he’s close by his breathing and the tension in his body, I reach down to touch myself, needing to go off with him.

He reaches for my hand, wanting to replace my fingers with his. I grab his hands and slap them back onto my ass. My eyes lock with his, telling him without words that I am running this pleasure train tonight. “Watch,” I say.

And he does. Our rhythm becomes erratic, his breathing stalls, and his long moan rumbles through my body, triggering the rush of my own release. Sweet tingles of heat pulse through me, and my inner walls clutch him firmly over and over in an orgasm so strong my whole body seizes.

Garrett slowly shifts me off him and lays me gently on my side. He turns to face me, and the adoring grin on his face lights my body up a second time.

As his fingers trail down from my shoulder to the dip in my waist, he says, "Marry me, Aria."

"Ask me again tomorrow, Doc."

CHAPTER 39



GARRETT

THREE MONTHS LATER

Every day for months, I've woken up to the gorgeous woman beside me and said, "Marry me." Sometimes, she tells me to ask again tomorrow. Other times, she doesn't answer—just kisses me until we're breathless.

We have passed the expected due date, and Aria might be getting uncomfortable, but her excitement has never waned.

I help Aria out of our new SUV as we pull up at my parents' new house. They've been looking for a place for over a year and only recently found a nice little bungalow on the west side of Landry. They had a few things renovated before they moved in, including one room solely dedicated to the grandkids.

I'm carrying the housewarming gift, and Aria, her camera. Luckily, the crisp spring air has warmed up, so Aria shouldn't get cold. However, there will be a lot of people here today, and even though it might be nice out, my patience for small talk, questions, and intrusive interactions will likely run out well before some of the guests even arrive.

"How are you doing? Feet not too swollen today?" I ask my soon-to-be wife.

If I keep saying it, it'll come true one day, right?

"They are good, but my lower back has really been bugging me today. I might need a rub down tonight." The corner of my mouth twitches in amusement. "I said rubdown not dicking down. Keep it in your pants, Doc."

I cough out a laugh and help her up the few steps to my parents' front door.

The door swings open before I can even ring the bell. "Oh, good." Dad shuffles us in. "Your mom has been waiting for you two. She thought for sure you were having the baby and started getting things ready."

“What things?” I ask as I hand over their housewarming gift. “We have a bag packed, and the nursery is set up.”

“Freezer meals, extra blankets, homemade snacks for when you two are too tired to cook anything but need to eat, special nipple ointment they make at the pharmacy in Vaughn, a sign for your door that tells people the consequences of ringing your doorbell while baby is sleeping. The spring market had a lot of baby stuff this year.” Or maybe you just went looking for all the baby stuff.

“That sounds amazing. Thanks, Mamma.” I noticed about a month ago Aria stopped calling my mom Mamma Millie and now just calls her Mamma. I like it and so does my mom. “You got any snacks in there that aren’t Garrett approved?”

“Lots. Don’t you worry, I’ll keep you fed. A woman needs curves.”

“Millie, she’s pregnant,” Lauren says as she roams over from the kitchen. “She had curves in all the best places even when she wasn’t pregnant.”

I lean over and whisper, “It’s true. You are the epitome of female seductive success.”

“Oh, so now I seduced you?”

“Didn’t you? Minx, I never stood a chance. You chipped away at my will daily until I all but begged for your attention.”

“You begging me to be yours was always a fun daydream of mine.”

“Really?” She nods and bites her lip. “Noted.” I grin at her before digging into my jacket pocket.

I nod to my brother, who has been hovering in the corner. The whole place lights up with projected images of Aria. Ones I’ve been taking for months, all the while waking up requesting she marry me. But I hadn’t officially asked her yet. *This* is me asking.

She looks around in awe. “What is this? You took all of these?”

“Most. Some are from people in town, wanting to contribute to the proposal they messed up.”

“This is so romantic,” my sister says. “Oh, sorry, we were supposed to stay quiet until she says yes.” She mimes zipping her lips. Then unzips them and adds, “You look beautiful, bestie!”

Aria’s eyes are still wide as she takes everything in.

“I know I bring it up every day, but this is something special I wanted to do for you. It was supposed to happen weeks ago, but you caught that cold.”

Her mouth gapes. “That’s why you acted like a pouty, sad puppy all weekend when I was the one who was sick.”

My family laughs.

I try smiling at her, but my face feels numb. I’m nervous and she can tell. She steps closer to me and grabs my free hand.

I sink down to my knee and look up at the beautiful woman who has taught me how to feel.

“Aria Davenport. I love you more than I ever thought was possible. You are all the light and fun and warmth in my life. Making a family with you is an incredible gift. Knowing you makes me feel so damn fortunate, but getting to marry you would be the best thing I ever did.” Aria takes a deep breath and then looks pointedly down at her protruding belly. “Intentionally. The best thing I would ever intentionally do. Did that make it better?”

Lots of no’s fill the room. I glare at them. This is not the silent, loving support I asked for.

She laughs and shakes my hands a little, eager for me to continue.

“I haven’t heard any begging yet, mister.” She swishes her hips back and forth playfully.

“Me neither, and I was really looking forward to it—*oof!* Come on, Sadie, this is a big day. Let me have a little—” Sean’s voice is smothered and I’m thankful.

There better not be any more interruptions. I haven't even gotten the question out yet.

“Aria. I want to be your husband, partner, and supporter for the rest of our lives. I'm begging you to consider becoming my wife and making me the happiest stubborn jerk you've ever had a crush on.” My mother tsks in joking disapproval, and Aria beams at me. “Ari, will you marry me?”

Her hand flies to her stomach, and she exhales a sharp breath. “Oh. Oh wow. Sorry. That was . . . I don't know what that was. A kick, maybe? Baby wants to be included, obviously.” She rubs her back, and the wrinkle in her forehead hasn't smoothed out yet.

“Are you okay, babe?” I put a hand on her stomach and notice it's tight. Oh, shit. “Baby, have you had any other pains today?”

“Um, yeah. My back is sore but it comes and goes. And I'm getting those Braxton-Hicks contractions where it tightens for a bit and then eases up.”

“Oh, hell,” Chloe says from across the room.

“Aria, do you think you might be in labor?” I ask.

“Yes. I mean, I'm not sure. What I meant was, yes, Garrett, I'll marry you.”

“What?” My head snaps up, my hands still on her belly, palpating the position of our baby. “Did you say yes?”

She nods, and I'm back on my feet in under a second, chasing her mouth for a kiss. When I pull away, I bring her left hand up and slide the two-carat princess cut diamond ring onto her finger, waiting for the little gasp I know is coming. Hearing it, I kiss her again before wrapping my arms around her, careful of her belly. The whole room erupts into cheers, or maybe they were cheering before, but I couldn't hear it. Aria looks around the room with tears in her eyes and her happy laughter filling the space around us. She looks up at me, and her gaze softens. Then her smile changes, and she tips her head in the direction of something behind me.

I look back and see the dining room curtain is wide open. At least a dozen Landrians stand plastered to the glass, some wiping tears from their eyes and others waving in glee.

Jess had only two tasks: the projector and the curtains.

Aria laughs and waves back, her other hand still clutching me. Her grip tightens on me, and she lets out a low, “Ohhh . . .”

Shit.

“I think I’m in labor,” she says.

“Oh, God. Aria’s melon is about to shoot out of the cannon. Everyone get out of the way! Baby’s coming. Move people.” Sean is herding people into a different room and coming back every few seconds to check on Aria.

“Sean is full-on panicking,” Chloe says as we all stop to watch him.

“Sean. It’s fine. Chloe and Garrett are going to get her to the birthing center. How about we go get their hospital bags from their house and meet them there in a bit?” Sadie offers, sliding up to Sean and putting a hand on his arm. He stills immediately and looks down at the tiny blond woman.

“Okay. Did you need to grab anything from our place before we go?”

Our house? Are Sadie and Sean living together? Shit, I’ve been so wrapped up in planning this surprise, I missed some stuff. Though that happens a lot when Sean talks. He says a lot of things. All the time.

I usher Aria out of the house while the rest of the Caldwells make plans for our baby’s arrival. I smile to myself but Aria catches me.

“What’s that smile about?”

“I was just thinking about how my *fiancée* is having our baby today.”

She chuckles sweetly but then clings to my arm tightly. I look at my phone—contractions are five minutes apart. Time

to get my girl to the hospital.

EPILOGUE



GARRETT

FOUR MONTHS LATER

Laney Gabriella Caldwell was born roadside in our brand new SUV at 3:42pm, weighing seven pounds five ounces, less than five minutes from Vaughn.

Sean and Sadie saw us on their way to meet us at the hospital and pulled up behind us. They helped with the birth as best they could, which meant Sean was really upbeat until he accidentally caught a glimpse of the baby's head crowning and almost passed out. Sadie had to tend to him, which was a blessing in disguise because he was annoying the shit out of me when I was trying to focus on my family.

Once the baby was born and Aria was stable, we carefully made our way to the hospital, where doctors, nurses, and the rest of our family were waiting for us.

The newborn stages are starting to pass us by, and we have fallen into a manageable routine. When I wake up and get ready for work, I take over baby duty while Mommy gets a little more rest. Aria tends to do most of the nighttime wake-ups now since Laney only wakes twice a night and often just to breastfeed.

I'm enjoying my favorite time of the day—snuggled in bed with my woman and our little Laney. Even Petunia is with us, resting at the end of the bed close to Aria's feet. I still have moments when I wonder how the hell an antisocial, introverted, practical man like me went from being a single, career-focused doctor avoiding relationships that didn't serve long-term purposes, and definitely avoiding my little sister's best friend, to succumbing to the ever-tempting allure of said woman, getting her pregnant, and creating this incredible family I'm eternally grateful for. One night with Aria put me on a path I'd never want to turn back from. I'm focused on reprioritizing, needing more of the life that, at one point, I wasn't sure would fit into my goals.

This realization led me to search for another family physician to join my practice. I currently have two nurses,

including Chloe, two clinical assistants, and someone who works remotely to take care of billing and records. Adding another family physician will allow us to take on more patients and for me to pull back my hours and responsibilities. It's been a long process, but I finally found someone willing to relocate to our small, crazy town.

Aria and Laney are napping, but I'm too amped up just watching my girls. Taking out my phone, I check my emails and message my mom a few pictures of Laney from this week.

A group text message pops up on the screen, and I groan.

SEAN: I might need one of you to bail me out later today.

JESS: Bail you out of what? The amount of shit you stick your nose into leaves too many possibilities to even fathom.

I'm in the middle of texting him back, saying that I already have a child at home and don't need to take care of a man-child who gets himself into these situations. Though, it's unlikely he'd say anything that would convince me to remove my arms from around Aria's tempting curves.

He responds before I can send my message.

SEAN: Jail. I'll probably be in jail.

Fuck. I erase my previous message.

ME: Are you fucking kidding me?

TAYLOR: How about you just don't do whatever it is that's going to end with you in the back of a squad car?

JESS: Yeah. That. Emma's baking a cake this afternoon, and I like to hover in case of any potential kitchen emergencies. Could we at least put off getting arrested for a few more hours?

SEAN: Too late, it's a done deal. That piece of shit has it coming to him. I'm done with her living in fear of what he might do. You gonna tell me that's a

stupid cause? You'd all do the exact same fricken thing.

Who is he talking about? No one tells me shit.

JESS: Wow. Sorry dude, you're right. We would.

TAYLOR: Agreed. We're talking about Sadie, right? Do you need backup? Lauren will want to come too, so we'd just have to drop Brady off at Nonna Millie's or Mrs. Henderson's.

ME: Jesus, let's slow down a minute. Did you talk to Alex?

Sheriff Alex might actually be able to talk Sean out of doing something that winds him up in jail or with criminal charges. He's logical and empathetic. He's also willing to work around the law when necessary. That's how Landry functions sometimes.

SEAN: Alex can't do shit unless we catch him in the act, and this asshole is experienced at fooling people.

SEAN: Answer your phones later. I'm going to go show this fucker what it feels like to be beaten up by someone twice his size.

We joked years ago that we'd need to start a fund for all the shit Sean seems to get into. When he moved here, he seemed to settle into small-town life just fine, but his favorite part was the drama. He's completely enmeshed in Landry events and happenings. It's kept him out of trouble—until now.

ME: We'll all show up when you need us. If you could try to maim and not kill, that would help with the possibility of bailing you out.

Aria stirs in my arms, and when I look down I see she's wide awake. "What's going on? Your phone kept buzzing and you look worried."

"Sean is getting into some shit to help Sadie with a guy problem."

“Well, at least it’s for a good cause. She’s been under that asshole’s thumb for years. I’m glad she has Sean in her corner. He’s been in love with her basically from the moment they met.”

“He’s in love with Sadie? I thought they were just good friends?” He flirts with her, sure, but he flirts with everyone. It’s why I was pissed when he wanted to hang out with Aria. They are both flirtatious and friendly, and I’m not able to decipher the difference between attraction and fondness in social circumstances.

She snorts at me. “Have you seen them together? He practically drools when she’s around. She’s now living in his house, and even when he was dating someone, he’d still always go check on her, take all her yoga classes. Did you think he suddenly loved yoga?”

I think back, drawing a complete blank. “I noticed none of those things.”

A bright smile takes over her face.

“What?” I ask, but she just shakes her head with a teasing look in her eye. “Can I get some credit for noticing you? It might have taken years for me to allow myself to do so, but once I did, you were the only thing I could see most days. You’ve been the best damn distraction that’s ever happened to me.”

Her face softens and she bites her lip. “I love you, Doc.”

“Love you back, Minx.”

“Promise never to notice anyone else for the rest of our lives?”

“Easy promise to make, babe. Do you promise to keep on surprising me with all the things I love about you?”

She presses the hand not cradling our child to my jaw—at the spot she enjoys kissing and nibbling. “I’m not sure we have much of a choice with that. Especially now.”

My smile turns confused. “What do you mean?”

“I have another surprise for you.” She pauses, her eyes taunting me as she drags it out. “I’m pregnant. Again.”

After I close my gaping mouth, I shift my gaze down to her stomach. My hands find their way into her hair, cradling her head. I lift my gaze once more, searching her shimmering, seductive eyes.

“Surprise!” she whispers just before I kiss her.

THE END

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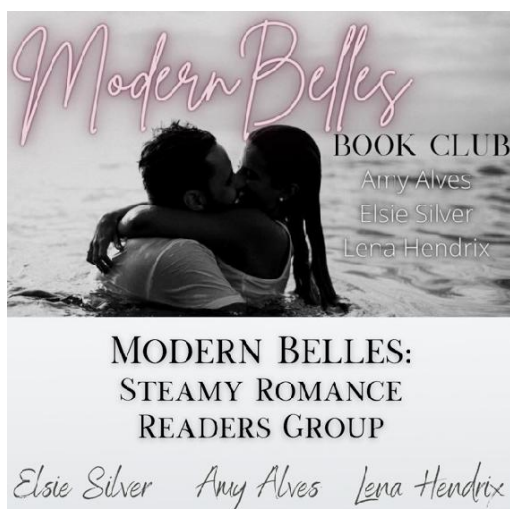
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I never thought I would write an age gap romance—let alone a surprise/unexpected pregnancy romance! Next thing you know, I'll be writing Reverse Harem... kidding. Do not expect that from me. That's not in my wheelhouse.

My hubby, the incredible alpha/beta reader, biggest supporter, and celebratory Moscow Mule-maker... you are my absolute favorite human being.

To all my surprise pregnancy trope lover friends, thank you for answering all of my questions about your expectations (Leanne and Stevie...you took the brunt of this, and I appreciate it more than you know).

My beta readers—Sara, Leanne, Jeanine—you are rock stars, and I feel so lucky to have a team who cares so deeply for the world of Landry. Thank you for being such a vital part in how these stories come to life.

My ARC and Street Teams— I am absolutely humbled by your support and dedication to my books and my author journey.

Katie, my incredible PA. Where have you been all my life? I would still be a stress case trying to do all the things (poorly) if I hadn't met you. Thank you for taking charge of my chaos and helping me grow.

Elsie and Lena (WTTW ladies)... by the time this publishes, one of you may have changed our group chat name, but until then, I smile every time I see a chat notification pop up. You two keep me going, make me laugh, and inspire me. Love you both.

To my readers: you make dreaming up these quirky characters and making them come to life worth every

late night and editing meltdown. Thank you for your support, reviews, messages, and love.

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Amy Alves lives in Alberta, Canada with her husband and two crazy cute kids. She is a romance-obsessed reader, a lover of wine and fuzzy socks, and a loather of laundry. For over a decade, she was a high school science teacher, but now substitute teaches in between writing novels and being a mom.

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