



A STANDALONE



WESTSIDE
ELITE

INTRO

CAMBRIA
HEBERT

WHOA

CAMBRIA HEBERT

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WELCOME TO WESTBROOK UNIVERSITY...

Where the only thing more elite than the Ivy League
academics
and exclusive enrollment for the monied is the swimmers.

Some colleges might revere football, baseball,
or even hockey, but not Westbrook.

At Westbrook, it's all about the water.

Or rather, who's in it.

More than one Elite swimmer has gone on to become a
decorated Olympian and nationwide sensation,
so it's all eyes on the hot men who spend more time in
Speedos than jeans.

Eventually, though, these guys have to get out of the pool.

And when they do...

Love, drama, and jealousy await.

Westbrook Elite is a college sports romance series of stand-
alone novels

with sexy swimmers, suspense, and page-turning plots.

The only promise the author makes is that each book will have
a happy ending...

But who knows what it will take to get there?

WHOA

A WESTBROOK ELITE NOVEL

Most people think I'm a moron. In actuality, I'm a man with a
plan.

It's one of those three-year plans that takes longer than three
years.

Still, I've been making it happen. Checking off those to-dos
and turning them into to-dones.

Everything is almost lined up.

And then my phone rings.

By the time I get to Jess, she's unconscious and bleeding.

My carefully crafted plan blows up in my face.

I tell the hospital we're engaged. We aren't, but apparently, in
that place, you need a permission slip to see your most
important, so I do what has to be done.

I toss together an epic apology salad for when she opens her
eyes, and when she does...

She asks me who I am.

I'm willing to overlook the insult since, you know, *head
injury*, but then Nurszilla spills the beans on our pending
nuptials.

And just like that, my friend turns into my fiancé, and I'm not even mad at it.

How could I be? Her curves fit in my arms perfectly. Kissing her is like *whoa* and makes me forget I'm living a lie.

I know I have to come clean, but someone dirtier than me is stalking my final girl, and until she remembers who, it's on me to keep her safe.

The closer we get, the guiltier I feel.

When all this is over, will she forgive me? Or will everything I've done cost me everything I've always wanted?

KRUGER

I WAS SO FOCUSED ON THE BRIGHT GLOW OF MY LAPTOP screen and the numbers filling it that the sound of my ringing phone didn't register.

“Kruger!” Prism hollered, a bit of bite to my name.

Attention caught, I snatched the ringing cell off the mattress beside me and accepted the call to silence the noise. “Sorry, P. Thought it was on silent.”

As he was reaching for his AirPods, I lifted the phone to my ear.

“Ben?” My whole body went rigid at the urgent, strained way in which she called my name.

Yeah, that's right. Did you think the only name I had was that of an iconic serial killer who looked like an overcooked yet somehow still raw tenderized steak who invades your dreams to gut you?

Well, it's not. And by the way, I dress way better than that guy.

And also, it's spelled different.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded as a swift sense of urgency punched my gut and made my heart hammer. The laptop resting on my thighs fell onto the mattress as I moved, everything I’d been doing completely forgotten.

“I think I’m in trouble.” She was whispering but also breathless.

My mind raced as I paced alongside my bed, mentally shuffling through the calendar to remember what damn day it was. Wednesday. *Piano night*. “Shouldn’t you be at practice?”

“They’re chasing me.” Her breath wheezed, and the unstable sound sent me running to the desk for my keys.

“Who? Where are you?” I questioned, stalking to the door and gesturing to Prism on the way. Already on alert, he was hot on my heels.

“There she is!” A voice that was *not* Jessica’s yelled in the background.

Her light whimper turned my blood to ice. The sound of pounding feet and her increased wheezing sent my body into full-on fight-or-flight mode.

“Jess,” I said, rushing out into the hall without looking back.

“I don’t think I can outrun them,” she whispered.

“Hide,” I gritted out, banging on Ryan and Jamie’s door on my way down the hall.

“I tried.”

The fear in her voice was so palpable I could taste it through the phone. Let me tell you I would rather eat shit before I ever tasted this again. My protective instincts were on

fire, my body nearly vibrating with the urge to fight. But I couldn't fight until I found her.

Inhaling deep, I tried to keep my voice as calm as I could, knowing my freak would only amp hers up more. "Jessica, baby." I cajoled, hitting the unlock button on my car. "Listen to me. I'm coming. I'm coming right now. But you have to tell me where you are."

"I-I'm not sure."

My jaw ached from the pressure of me grinding it. "Drop me a location pin, sweetheart. Okay? Can you do that?"

"Yeah,"

"Do it now," I said.

There was some fumbling, and my heart lurched. *Keep it cool, bro. Keep it together.*

"Jess?" I managed to sound rational as I wrenched open the door to my Audi so hard I felt it in my shoulder. The phone buzzed against my unsteady hand, and I yanked it down to see the notification flash onscreen before disappearing.

Jess shared her location with you...

Groaning in relief, I mashed the phone back to my ear. "I got it. Good girl. You did so good."

Thump. Clatter. "Oomph."

I sucked in a breath, the sounds conjuring up images of her being tackled.

"I didn't see anything!" Jess pleaded, her voice no longer right in my ear but a mere taunting echo in a place I wasn't at.

I let out a strangled sound and squeezed my eyes shut as though I could avoid the horrific mental image of her being

attacked. I wasn't there. *I wasn't fucking there.*

My eyes shot open at the sound of her voice.

“Please! *No—*”

The phone went dead.

“Jess!” I shouted, yanking the cell down to see remnants of the call. A call that lasted less than two minutes, but the panic it inspired would live in me forever.

Immediately, I dialed her back.

Hey, this is Jess! Why are you calling? Hang up and send me a text.

“Fuck!” I bellowed into the dark.

“What’s going on?” Prism asked. He was standing on the sidewalk with Jamie and Ryan right behind him.

“Someone is fucking with Jess,” I snarled. “Let’s go.”

“We’ll follow you,” Ryan called as I slammed the driver’s side door.

Prism opened the passenger side to get in. “Call everyone!” I yelled and then started up the Audi.

P wasn’t even buckled when I threw it into reverse, tires screeching as I peeled out of the lot. As I drove, I pulled up her location.

“She’s at the theater arts building,” I said, the engine revving as I pressed on the gas and tossed Prism the phone.

He caught it midair and glanced at the screen. “What’s she doing out there?” he asked.

“It’s rehearsal night,” I answered, impatient. “Someone was chasing her.” I took a turn so fast I felt the car lift on two

wheels.

Prism grabbed the oh-shit handle above the window and hung on. “We won’t be any help to her if we’re dead.”

Resolve settled in my gut like heavy lead. It was the only thing at this point keeping me sane. “We ain’t dying tonight, P,” I vowed, the car dropping back to all four tires. “If anyone is dying tonight, it’s whoever the fuck dared to mess with what’s mine.”

ELITE GROUP CHAT

Ryan: Elite 9-1-1

Jamie: Kruger is coming unglued. Something going on with Jess. All bros on deck.

Rush: Where?

Prism shared a location with the group.

Max: What the fuck is she doing out there?

Jamie: That fucking building.

Wes: We're on our way.

Prism: Hurry.

JESS

NO REST FOR THE WICKED.

Frankly, I find that saying ridiculous. The wicked probably take breaks whenever they feel like it. After all, they're wicked. They do what they want.

It should be *no rest for the weary*. Because people who don't get any rest are exactly that: weary.

And do you know why the weary get no rest? Because they work their asses off day in and day out with the hope they might not be so weary in the future. Kinda seemed counterproductive, but I tried to ignore that little tidbit of a thought in favor of telling myself that all my hustling now would pay off later.

It was hard not to be bitter, though. Especially at a place like Westbrook where money practically grew on trees. Except I didn't have a yard. Therefore, none of those aforementioned money trees belonged to me.

I was the scholarship kid in a world of elitists, the girl who had to work harder than everyone else around her. And while I

knew it probably wasn't like this everywhere in the world, the world *I* lived in made me feel like I was severely lacking.

Instead of accepting it, I doubled down. I hustled harder. I got a scholarship to one of the most prestigious schools in this country. I worked two jobs and gave piano lessons on the side. My schedule was jam-packed, and some nights, like tonight, after a full day of classes, a shift at the music store where I worked off campus, *and* a two-hour orchestra practice, I asked myself why I did all this.

The answer was never far away.

You might think this was all about money. After all, I just said I was the poor kid living among the bank account blessed. But my motivation was not about money. If money were the goal, I'd have quit a long time ago.

I did all of this for another reason. A reason honestly even more unattainable than riches but something that meant far more.

Sometimes that reason tasted bitter too.

Have you ever wanted something you knew you couldn't have but stubbornly refused to let go, so you accepted the parts you could have and tried to use those half pieces to fill up the gaping hole years of pining ripped open within you?

Most days, those half pieces did a decent job.

But some nights... Some nights when the sky seemed its darkest and I was depleted of optimism, those half pieces felt woefully small, and the parts of me left empty ached with the intensity of a harsh Siberian winter.

Those nights were growing more frequent, and I was afraid. I wondered how much longer I could live with half. I also wondered why, suddenly, half just wasn't enough.

I stayed late after orchestra rehearsal ended to give a piano lesson to a Westbrook University hopeful. After moving out of the large auditorium and into one of the practice rooms nearby, I spent an hour trying to conceal my grimace of horror. Seriously, I'd heard murderous screams in cheesy slasher flicks that were more pleasant than this. AKA the student wasn't particularly good. But the upside to giving piano lessons to upper-crust students with loaded parents was that I could charge a hundred dollars an hour and they wouldn't even bat an eye.

Yes, please.

Look, I said I wasn't money motivated, but hey, these hips didn't feed themselves.

Although, you know, maybe they did. Sometimes it sure seemed like it.

My stomach growled insatiably when I finally locked up the practice room and slung my bag over my shoulder. At least as a piano player, I didn't have to carry around an instrument everywhere I went. Look at me being all optimistic. Just a regular ray of sunshine.

My stomach rumbled again, reminding me the lunch I ate eight hours ago was long gone. My stash of snacks in my room was growing sparse because I hadn't had time to shop, so I decided to just swing by a drive-thru before heading back to the dorm.

The parking lot was nearly empty, and even though we were edging close to spring, the night air was crisp and made me regret not grabbing a jacket earlier in the day. Instead, I tugged the sleeves of my sweater over my hands, curling my fingers into my palms.

The echo of my footsteps on the pavement was slightly eerie as it was really the only sound I could hear out here in the dark. I parked farther from the entrance than I wanted because when I'd arrived, the lot had been full, and I chose the last remaining spot under one of the streetlights.

Seemed like a good idea at the time, but as I trudged through the lot, I debated my intelligence because what was the point of parking under a light if I had to traipse three miles through the dark to get to it?

Fine, it wasn't three miles. But my growling stomach would beg to differ.

"This is not final-girl energy," I muttered to myself, plunging my hand down into my bag for my car keys. "Walking through the dark alone with that looming gothic building in the background and trees everywhere is exactly the kind of thing those twits that get murdered first do."

Did I mention I love slasher films? Total guilty pleasure.

So was pouring a bag of M&M's into a bowl of hot, buttered popcorn and letting it melt all over each other.

So good.

Maybe I'd just eat that for dinner while watching some unhinged psycho walk slowly around with a knife, miraculously catching up and slaughtering everyone.

Comfort food + comfort show = best night ever.

No. Not best night. You would need something else for it to be the best night ever.

I ignored whoever said that. She was not a ray of sunshine.

Finally, I stepped into the glowing circle of light the lamp overhead cast, and I walked around to the driver's side of my

ancient Mazda. Pretty soon, a museum was going to offer me money for this relic. Until then, it would get me from A to B, and I wouldn't complain.

Still rummaging around in my bottomless tote, I let out a frustrated sound and ripped the bag off my shoulder so I could stare down into the open top. "Stupid keys," I uttered, shoving around everything inside, trying to find them.

The telltale jingle I hoped to hear remained mutinously silent, and I gave the bag a shake. "Where are you?"

Realization made me gasp. I'd knocked the bag over earlier in the practice room, and they must have fallen out. I probably hadn't heard the keys fall over the sound of my ears being murdered.

"I am so eating popcorn and melty M&M's for dinner," I vowed as I trudged back toward the massive theater arts building.

In the daytime, it looked like a castle, something you might see in a movie or even in a storybook. And I supposed that was still true right now, but the movie would likely be *Dracula*, and the book would be something by Stephen King.

The side door I exited through earlier locked behind me, so I went to the wide glass doors that led into the lobby of the massive auditorium. My shoes squeaked over the polished floor, then were muffled as I walked down one of the carpeted aisles to a side door near the stage. Once through, I started down the hall toward the practice room.

A faint sound faltered my steps, and I tilted my head to listen. When no other sound came, I brushed it off. *Probably one of the custodians cleaning.*

I started walking again, but more sound stopped me in my tracks. This was louder and definitely *not* someone cleaning.

I tiptoed down the hall, slinking along the wall like a skilled spy to follow the muffled noises. I ended up going past the practice room, my keys and growling stomach completely forgotten as curiosity ruled my attention.

The wooden door was large and heavy, and if not for the fact it was just slightly ajar, it probably would have subdued all the sounds inside the room.

I crept closer, hand clutching the strap of my bag as the muffled noises grew louder.

Girl, get your keys and get out of here. This is stuff ain't nobody need to see.

I ignored the intrusive thoughts and leaned in, pressing my eye to the slim crack.

"Agh!" I gasped so loud that it echoed down the long empty hallway. My sneakers made that ear-piercing shriek against the floor as I stumbled back.

Ohmigod!

I started away, the shout behind me making me run faster. Still shocked by what I saw, I tripped, falling onto my hands and knees.

"Come back here!" someone hollered.

Shit! I glanced over my shoulder, and the anger that met me was so intense it gave me the momentum I'd been lacking to lurch up and race back down the hall. Seeing the side door I'd used earlier, I shoved through, nearly falling outside onto the sidewalk.

My heart was hammering so hard I couldn't draw in a full breath, and when the door handle behind me shook, I stopped breathing altogether. Rushing around the corner, I pressed my back into the stone of the building so hard I felt my sweater snag.

"Where'd she go?" a voice asked as they pushed through the door.

"You go that way. I'll go this way," another voice answered.

Two voices that did not belong together.

Footsteps drew closer, and I gazed around, frantic for somewhere to hide. With little choice, I slipped behind two large plastic trashcans parked a few feet away.

Shrinking behind them, my sweater snagged even more as I tried to make myself as small as possible while my heart thumped in my chest. This seemed absolutely ridiculous. Why was I hiding? I didn't do anything wrong!

But they did. And you saw.

A shadow passed close by, and I pressed my palm over my mouth to muffle my labored breathing. I always thought the people who did this in movies were dramatic.

I was wrong. They were just trying to be quiet.

But in the movies, it rarely worked.

This isn't a movie. I reminded myself.

A dark curse cut through the quiet, freezing my shaking limbs. But then the person moved away, disappearing to where they'd come from.

I exhaled, entire body deflating against the rough stone. I stayed wedged between the two garbage cans a little longer, nose wrinkled against the stench as I listened to make sure they were gone.

When I was sure they were, I slipped out of my hiding place and back onto the sidewalk. My stomach was wobbly, head slightly dizzy. Clutching my bag in front of me, I started toward my car.

My keys!

“*Shit,*” I spat. They were still inside. I debated for long minutes. Over just walking back to my dorm. Over calling Ben for a ride.

He’s the last person you need to see right now.

In the end, I decided to pull up my big girl panties and get my keys. I couldn’t just leave them overnight. What if the custodians found them and moved them somewhere else? What if someone found them and stole my car?

A giggle slipped out.

That was absurd. No one would want to steal my nearly twenty-year-old car. The second they got in it and dust shot out of the heat vents, they’d choke and get right back out.

It was good fortune really. I didn’t have to worry about my car ever being stolen.

But I really didn’t want the hassle of trying to track down my keys. Was there even a lost and found in this building? I didn’t care to find out.

Nervously, I went back to the auditorium, entering through the lobby once more. My breaths were shallow, my footsteps

light as I went, this time not taking a shortcut through the auditorium, this time going the long way around.

I could hear myself swallow, feel the heartbeat in my temples as I moved as silently as I could down the hall to the practice room. The entire time I stared at the door I'd snooped through earlier, noting that it was now latched closed.

That's good. They probably left.

The rehearsal room door creaked loudly when I pulled it open. So loud that I shuddered involuntarily and then looked over my shoulder, expecting to see someone there glowering.

The hall remained blissfully empty and quiet.

I went into the room and over to the side where I thought my keys might be. The room was dark, the only light filtering in from the open door. I begged my eyes to adjust quickly, loath to turn on the light and draw any kind of attention to myself.

You are being ridiculous, my mind taunted.

But deep down, my gut whispered, *You are not.*

I bent, looking under the chair my bag had been sitting on before. The darkness was so inky and opaque that I had to bend farther, stretching my arm out so my hand was swallowed up by the shadows.

The brush of cold metal against my finger made me jolt, but then I realized it was what I came here for. My keys!

Slam!

The chair skittered away with the force of my jump, the back of it hitting the wall. I fell onto my butt, all the air punched out of me on impact. Forgetting the keys, I glanced in the direction of the door. I could only see it because of the

light coming through the small rectangular window in the center.

Someone had slammed it closed.

It took two tries to swallow, and then I let out a shuddering breath. “H-hello?”

“You saw something you shouldn’t have.” Why did voices always seem so much more ominous when they came through the dark?

I scrambled back, the side of my hand brushing the keys still on the floor. I curled my hand around them, praying they didn’t jingle and give away my position.

If I can’t see them, then they can’t see me. Right?

“I know you’re in here. Just come out.”

I had to hold back a snort and remained exactly where I was. *Sure, just let me get up and offer myself on a silver platter because you asked.*

The light flicked on, so bright I was momentarily blinded.

Squinting against it, I lurched up and rushed for the door, body slamming into the other person. We both grunted, and I grappled for the handle, wrenching the door open and rushing out into the hall.

Instead of running in the direction of the side door, I ran the opposite way and into the auditorium. Heart pounding, I scurried toward the back and then dove between a row of seats.

Once out of sight, I dug my phone out of my bag and quickly made sure it was on silent, then dialed up my emergency contact.

After two rings, I bit down on my lip so hard I tasted blood. *He isn't going to answer.*

The second the ringing cut off, I was so relieved I spoke before he even had a chance to say hello.

“Ben.”

He was alert instantly, which made me feel a little calm. “What’s wrong?”

The door to the auditorium opened. Someone walked in. “I think I’m in trouble.”

If he said something, I didn’t hear because I was practically lying on my belly now, trying to see under the seats to know which direction they were walking. But it was impossible to tell because of the way the seats were laid out.

“They’re chasing me,” I whispered.

“Who? Where are you?”

Yes! Tell him where you are.

“There she is!” the voice boomed from across the room.

My head shot up, and I whimpered, seeing them standing across the space, staring directly into the row where I was hiding.

I got up, my limbs feeling like cooked spaghetti as I lurched out of the row to hotfoot it to the door.

Ben called my name.

“I don’t think I can outrun them.” It was really disappointing to learn I wasn’t final-girl material. I was first-girl dead.

“Hide,” Ben ordered in my ear. I liked the sound of his voice. I should have told him that. I should have told him a lot

of things.

“I tried,” I said.

“Jessica, baby.” The term of endearment hit my ears and spread through my veins like one-hundred-proof alcohol, the warm rush of it impossible to deny. For long moments, all I did was react. Feel. Yearn. It was better than I imagined that those words on his tongue were directed at me.

“...But you have to tell me where you are.”

“I-I’m not sure,” I said, still overloaded from everything going on. Still trying to hear more than his cajoling *baby*.

A body burst out of the theater and into the hall behind me. I glanced around, the aggression and resolve of the person advancing enough to make their motives crystal clear.

I started to run again.

“Drop me a location pin, sweetheart. Okay? Can you do that?”

“Yeah,” I said, at the last second lurching through a door and into the stairwell.

Up or down? I debated.

“Do it now,” Ben said, his voice so urgent and worried that my brain finally seemed to clear.

I pulled the phone down, hitting the screen a few times and sending him my location.

The door behind me opened, and I rushed up the stairs.

I’d literally just become the girl who ran *up* the stairs to get away from a murderer. I was pathetic. I learned nothing from watching all those movies.

“I got it. Good girl. You did so good.” His praise overruled the insults I’d just been hurling at myself, and I was instantaneously distracted by the fact he’d said them.

More. I want to hear more.

A hand slammed down on my shoulder, wrenching me around. The phone fell out of my hand, hitting the top of my foot and clattering down two stairs before stopping to teeter precariously on the edge.

An angry yank to my ponytail wrenched my head so far back that I was forced to look up into the stairwell where the floors rose. I panted, teetering midflight as I tried to decide what I should do.

A pale blob floated into my line of sight, and I blinked against blurred vision as a face appeared, leaning over the railing above. Unease tangled around me like vines as they stared down, almost uninterested in my plight.

Another vicious yank to my hair made me stumble as I was partly dragged up the rest of the stairs. *Away from my phone.*

“I didn’t see anything!” I said, the frantic plea a complete lie.

Now I know why the girls in these killer movies act like such morons. Fear chases away all intelligence and leaves behind nothing but straight idiocy. I mean, damn, I had to send Ben a location pin instead of just telling him the building.

My scalp screamed with burning pain as we came to a stop at the top of the stairs, and I was basically shoved into the wall. A grunt forced its way out of me when I hit, but I had no time to recover before being wrenched back once more. My heaving breaths stuttered when lips brushed against the shell

of my ear, the voice lifting goose bumps along the back of my neck.

“You’re a terrible liar. But no matter. It doesn’t matter what you saw because dead girls don’t talk.”

I gasped, heart jumping into my throat. “Please! *No—*”

My body went airborne, feet grappling to find the ground.

And then I found it.

Crack!

But not with my feet.

My body was like a ragdoll, smacking into the unforgiving stairs as I trundled down, every inch of me pummeled by pain.

I wanted it to stop.

And then it did.

KRUGER

I EXPECTED TO GET A FRONT-ROW SEAT TO ELITE'S NEWEST shit show right there in the parking lot. So, frankly, it offended me that everything looked all tits and gravy because I knew damn well it wasn't.

The longer I went without eyes on that girl, the closer I got to losing what little cool I had left.

"You see her?" I asked, ripping through the parking lot like my ass was on fire.

It wasn't, but my heart sure as fuck was.

"There's her car," Prism said, pointing out the windshield.

I slammed on the brakes and threw it in park, vaulting out of the driver's seat to rush toward the bucket of bolts she drove.

"Jess!" I yelled. "Jessica Park!"

The only answer I got was the running engine of my Audi. At the driver's side, I simultaneously knocked on the window while pulling on the handle to open the door.

The car was locked, and the inside was empty.

Cursing, I rushed around to the front fender and looked everywhere, hoping to see her. What the fuck was she doing parked in the fucking boonies?

I was going to give her a lecture. A long one.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and yelled. “Jess!”

My ears strained, listening for any type of reply. Nothing was all I got.

“Goddammit!” I yelled.

P appeared at my side, shoving my phone under my nose. “It looks like she’s *in* the building,” he told me, pointing at how the location pin was directly on top of the building and toward one side.

Grabbing the phone, I looked again, spinning to stare at the giant building. “She rehearses in the auditorium,” I said, and we ran back to the car, the door slamming with force as I hit the gas before we were barely even inside.

Prism cursed beneath his breath, but I ignored it and sped forward.

Scraaaaape! The bottom of my car dragging over the sidewalk as I drove onto it was loud but hardly competed with my racing heart.

Both of us jolted forward with the force of my stop, and I scrambled out, clutching my phone, to race inside.

The lobby was empty, the lighting dim as I raced into the massive auditorium.

“Jess!” I yelled.

Noise to my right had me spinning, my chest squeezing hopefully, only to be disappointed when a man pushing a

cleaning cart looked up.

“You!” I demanded, not even giving him the chance to speak. “Have you seen a girl? Beautiful. Long brown hair?”

“Been empty since I got here.”

Ryan, Jamie, and P all rushed in behind me, and I spun. “Split up. Start looking.” I ordered, heading to the side door.

I knew where the practice rooms were, and I headed there first, bulldozing through the door with a bang. The hall was still and quiet, the energy undisturbed, but something about it raised the hair on the back of my neck and caused a sheen of sweat to bead across my forehead.

“Jess,” I called, walking down the hallway to fling open doors as I went.

Prism came into the hall behind me, and I pointed farther down. He jogged off.

The sound of a ticking clock was loud inside my head, almost as if it was warning me that her time was running out and if I didn’t find her soon, I’d be too late.

The fear was so severe that I couldn’t even tell myself I was being dramatic because if I ignored the way my gut was screaming, it might be the biggest regret of my entire life. The ache in my fingers made me look down, and I glanced at my phone.

Cursing, I pulled it up and tapped the screen to call her number.

It started to ring in my ear, and I listened, hoping it would give away her location.

This is Jess...

I hung up and dialed her again, still opening and closing doors. Still listening. Still feeling my heart lodged in my throat.

The third time I called her, Prism stopped walking a few feet down the hall. My eyes flew to him immediately as he tilted his head and turned to the stairwell door.

He pointed, and I started to run, calling out her name as he shoved open the heavy door so I could rush through first.

“Jess,” I hollered, my voice echoing down the stairwell into the dark. Just as I was about to head down, Prism stopped me.

“Kruger.”

The tone of his voice turned me cold. Trepidation made my feet heavy, but I moved anyway, willing to walk with cement blocks strapped to my feet if I had to.

He was at the bottom of the stairwell heading up, and by the set of his shoulders, I knew what he saw wasn't good.

Our bodies bumped when I rushed over, a guttural groan ripping right out of me when I saw the body sprawled on the landing above.

One pale arm was flung out, limp fingers dangling over the top step.

I took the stairs three at a time, using my hands to push off the steps as I ran.

I hit my knees beside her motionless body, hands hovering just above her prone form. Scared to touch her. Scared not to.

“Call 9-1-1!” I barked, not taking my eyes off her.

Her hair was falling across her face, concealing her features. My fingers trembled as I reached down to brush the brown strands away, and when I did, my fingertips came away stained red.

I stared almost unseeing at the bright red, dully noticing how warm the sticky liquid felt. Then all at once, the gravity of the situation befell me, and the horror I'd imbibed on drained away.

"Fuck!" I spat, swiping the bloodied fingers across my chest and ripping the hoodie off my body to press it against the wound on her head.

So much blood.

"Get the ambulance here, P! She's bleeding bad."

I pressed harder, trying to staunch the blood pouring from her, noting the small puddle on the floor beneath her head.

"Jess, I'm here," I told her. "You're going to be just fine. I've got you."

She didn't say anything, and her cheeks were paper white, lips pale. Her eyelids didn't so much as twitch when I spoke, and it caused panic unlike anything I'd ever known to whoosh through me like wildfire.

"Don't you die on me," I told her, pressing even harder against the wound. "I forbid it. You hear me? I'm not done with you." My voice cracked, and I swallowed. "I haven't even started with you yet."

The door to the stairwell burst in, and I looked up, hoping it was help.

"You found her?" Ryan asked as more Elite piled in behind him.

I turned away from them, sinking onto my ass and scooting as close to her as I could. But it wasn't enough. It wasn't damn near close enough.

Still holding the hoodie against her wound, I slid my other arm beneath her and tugged her into my lap.

Her body was so limp, and it scared me even though I could see her chest rising and falling with air. Needing more reassurance, I lowered my ear to her mouth.

The second I felt the soft puffer of her breath, I exhaled in relief and turned my head. Our faces were so close our noses nearly collided. "Just keep breathing, baby," I whispered. "That's my girl. Keep breathing. I'll take care of everything else."

"How is she?" someone asked, kneeling on her other side.

Threatened, I rumbled in displeasure, the warning low and menacing. My eyes flashed up as I clutched her protectively. Ryan held up his hands, palms out, a gesture meant to show surrender, but I continued to snarl.

"What happened?" he asked, making no move to try and touch either of us.

I shook my head, sweeping my eyes over her face. "She was like this when I found her."

"Help is on the way."

My head whipped up, eyes spearing Ryan's. "I'm going to kill whoever did this."

He frowned. "You think someone did this?"

"I know they did," I intoned. "She called me. Someone was chasing her."

Ryan's eyes went back to the girl in my arms, and I hunched around her a little closer.

"Her foot's broken."

My head snapped up, and I looked over my shoulder to see Rush standing a few steps down. Jamie was right beside him. Following Rush's gaze, I glanced down her body to her foot, which was twisted at an odd and clearly uncomfortable angle.

"Where the fuck are the cops?" I roared, the force of the yell echoing into the stairwell.

"Here!" Win yelled, holding open the door. I hadn't even realized he was here.

Seconds later, Lars appeared, leading a couple paramedics.

"Here!" I called, my voice unsteady. "Get up here!"

Elite moved off the stairs so the emergency workers could come up.

"Is she responsive?" one asked.

"No." My voice broke on the word, and I grabbed her face, the blood smearing my fingers and streaking her colorless cheeks. "Jess," I begged. "Baby, open your eyes."

"Sir, we need you to move back so we can help her."

"Please wake up," I murmured.

"Sir." A hand brushed my shoulder, and I went rigid.

"Back off." I snarled.

"We need to get her into a neck brace and stabilized."

"I can't," I said, knowing she needed medical attention. Knowing it was in her best interest to let these people do their job.

But I couldn't. It was physically impossible to peel myself away from her. I needed hands on her. I needed eyes on her.

I needed...

"Bro, come on." Jamie's voice was suddenly close, and his arms slid around me from behind.

"No," I argued, grabbing Jess even tighter.

"You're gonna hurt her," Jamie warned.

I let go instantly, bloody hands hovering over her face.

"C'mon, we'll stand right here."

"Wait," I whispered, bracing my hands on either side of her as I leaned in, brushing my lips across hers. They were cool and slack, not at all the way they were supposed to feel against mine.

"I'll be right here." I promised her. "I won't leave you."

Jamie hauled me up, basically supporting my weight as he moved us back so the men could get to work. I slumped into him, watching every move they made.

When they carried her off on a stretcher I started after them.

"Is that her phone?" Ryan asked, pointing to the facedown device in the corner at the bottom of the stairs.

I went and snatched it up, noting the shattered screen and how only half of it lit up. Her lock screen flickered—well, some of it—and a sob caught in my throat.

It was a photo of us.

She was smiling, her brown eyes lit with laughter and cheeks full of color. A far cry from the lifeless, pallid girl strapped to a stretcher as they carried her out the door.

Regret rocked me, quaking me so bad that I swayed on my feet.

Ryan and Jamie moved in on each side, Jamie slipping an arm around my waist. “We got you, bro.”

“But who has her?” I echoed, the ache in my chest threatening to split me in two.

“You.”

I glanced at Rush who was standing with Lars at the bottom of the stairs. He nodded encouragingly. Something about his assuredness reminded me of my own. I nodded back and straightened, jogging out of the stairwell and into the hall.

Prism was trailing along behind the paramedics, and I jogged forward, sliding the keys to my Audi into his hand. “I know you don’t like to drive, but will you bring my car to the hospital?”

“Of course.” He agreed without an ounce of hesitation. He was a good guy. My best friend.

“Thanks, P,” I said, a lump forming in my throat.

“She’s going to be okay,” he said, giving my shoulder a squeeze.

“Yeah.” I agreed, trying to sound more confident than I felt. “Jess wouldn’t leave us, P. She likes to boss us around too much.”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a sad attempt at a smile. We were both hella worried. Both trying to be strong. “You should go with her,” he whispered.

“You’ll be at the hospital?”

“I’ll be right behind you.”

I glanced behind us, catching Ryan's eye. "We're all coming."

"I'm coming with you!" I called, jogging ahead to the paramedics and holding open the door as they carried out my girl.

They loaded her into the back of the ambulance, and I climbed in right after. I sat as close as I could, reaching over to lace my fingers with hers.

The hoodie I'd been using to staunch the bleeding wound was long gone, replaced by some gauze and direct pressure from the medic. I frowned at where he touched her, leaning close.

"I'll do that," I said, reaching for her head.

"It's better that I do."

I thought about arguing. Shit, the insults were right there ready to fly free off my tongue. But one glance at the ashen girl between us had me holding back. "Fine." I agreed, gruff. "But if you do it wrong, I'll personally unbraid your DNA from the inside."

The man blinked.

"And then I'll use it to knit myself some socks." Damn right, I knew how to knit. P's gram taught me.

His lips parted, probably to tell me to get out of his ambulance, but I wasn't about to have it. Pressing my hand over his where it held the gauze, I said, "Pay attention."

He nodded, and the siren flicked on, wailing loudly into the night. I grimaced and glanced down at Jess, but she remained unchanged.

It was the longest I'd ever seen this girl without some sort of animation on her face.

I hated it.

Leaning down, I whispered against her ear, "We're in the ambulance, baby girl. They gotta be real loud so we can get there fast. Don't be scared. I'm here. Just keep breathing."

The fingers I was holding jerked slightly.

"Jess?" I questioned, flicking my gaze to the paramedic. "She just moved."

He nodded once. "She can probably hear you."

"Yeah?" I echoed, returning my full attention to her face. It was unchanged, her lashes still downcast, oxygen mask strapped over her nose and mouth, and blood smearing her skin.

Without thinking, I licked my thumb and started swiping away what I could reach. "You're too pretty for all this blood," I told her.

A throat cleared, and a cloth appeared under my nose. I glanced at the wipe the man was offering.

"Thanks," I muttered, taking it to gently clean up more of her face. "So much blood," I murmured.

"Head wounds bleed a lot."

"Does she need stitches?" I asked, not looking away from her.

"Yes."

I nodded. "That's okay. I'll hold your hand for that too." I promised. "I'll do anything for you."

Including making whoever did this pay.

But later. Right now, she was all that mattered.

JESS

PAIN TRIED TO BREAK INTO THE DARKNESS WHERE I DRIFTED.

It pricked and pinched, needling its way into unconsciousness to rouse me for brief flickers in time. It was confusing and fearsome to go from nothing at all to intense agony without any sort of warning.

I couldn't decide which one was worse, nothing at all or too much. Both were unrelenting.

But then, suddenly, something else was there. Something soft and gentle, vaguely familiar, but incongruous with the place I was imprisoned.

Despite its oddity, it was exactly what I wanted. The thing I clung to when the blackness let in just a pinprick of light.

Baby.

Baby girl.

Sweetheart.

That's my girl.

I'll do anything for you.

Fear and discomfort were overwhelmingly present. But reassurance had a voice. A voice that whispered the most beautiful words. Words that held the worst at bay, promising that if I just held on, the glimpses of consciousness would eventually give way to something better.

KRUGER

THE PEOPLE IN THIS HOSPITAL WERE ABOUT AS USEFUL AS A windshield wiper on a goat's ass.

In all seriousness, though? Elite needed some kind of séance. Something to clear out the wicked mojo we had going on because, bro, this shit was toxic.

On dry land, Elite was plagued with drama and misfortune, and I'd spent more than my fair share of time in this emergency room during the past few months. Apparently, being a frequent flyer at the ER did not give you a VIP pass. Neither did showing up in the back of an ambulance.

And frankly, it was pissing me off.

The second we'd gotten there, they whisked Jess off to someplace I couldn't see her and demanded I stay in the waiting room.

These people didn't deserve their degrees if they thought they could relegate me to a place filled with sniffing kids and whiners with stomach aches. Not to mention, this so-called waiting room was around the corner and not even in sight of

what was going on in this shady place. Frankly, I was considering a lawsuit. A big one. Assholes.

How could they expect me to just let them cart away my whole life on a gurney? Just *have a seat* and leave her in the hands of complete strangers? What if she woke up? She wouldn't know anyone. She would be afraid. Confused. *I told her I wouldn't leave her.*

The torturous thoughts were like rusty screws twisted into my heart, the vision of her lying in a puddle of blood a relentless image in the back of my mind. Tugging at my hair for the one-millionth time since I got here, I turned abruptly midpace, almost colliding with a nurse in white scrubs on her way past.

Her gasp of surprise was a mere blip on my radar.

“You have news about Jess?” I asked, desperation clinging to me like bad B.O.

“Who?” Her voice was brusque and almost absent as if she was too busy to find out if my life was fucking over or not.

“And people call me stupid,” I muttered, dragging in a deep breath and praying for patience.

The nurse bristled and eyed me suspiciously. “Excuse me?”

“I need some information on a patient.”

“Are you a blood relative?”

“No.”

“Spouse?”

My jaw grinded. “No.”

Her lips pursed. “You should be in the waiting room.”

“You should be doing your damn job,” I gritted out.

She gasped, clearly offended. Too damn bad. I was offended first!

From behind the nurses’ station, another nurse in burgundy scrubs stood. “Sir, I’ve asked you multiple times to please wait in the designated waitin—”

I glanced in her direction. “And I told you I’m not moving from this hallway until I get an update!”

At that moment, a couple led by another nurse in navy scrubs went past. The woman was pale and limping, the man supporting most of her weight.

Jabbing a finger at them, I said, “How come he can go back there, but I can’t?”

The man glanced over his shoulder at me. “I’m her husband.”

I flung my hands in the air. “Ooh, he’s got a permission slip.” What a fucking crock. As if a piece of paper makes me care any less or more about someone. This place sucked.

“Security!” Nurszilla behind the desk called down the hall where a man in a uniform dallied.

He started my way, and my tongue glided over my front teeth as I mentally calculated the best way to take him down. I could do it.

“Chill.” Jamie’s voice was low, appearing seemingly out of nowhere as he draped an arm around my shoulders. Then to the nurses, he added, “You’ll have to excuse our bro, ma’am. He talks first and thinks later.”

“That’s rich coming from you,” I muttered as he flashed his megawatt smile at the woman threatening to have me

tossed out on my ass. *Traitor.*

The nurse in burgundy nodded emphatically. “Yes, I understand this is a stressful situation, but we cannot have people loitering in the hall like this.”

“I wouldn’t have to loiter anywhere if you’d let me back where Jess is,” I barked.

“What seems to be the problem here?” the security guard asked.

“This man needs escorted out of the building,” the nurse in white answered.

I physically reacted, probably would have gone through the damn ceiling if Jamie didn’t anchor me on my feet. “The only place I’m going to is wherever the hell Jess is,” I told everyone and started down the hall. I’d just find her myself.

The security man stepped into my path at the same time a hand clamped around the back of my neck and yanked me back.

“Jamie, I am not in the mood—” I started, but a voice cut me off.

“It’s not Jamie.”

I cut some side-eye at Ryan who suddenly decided he was my personal leash. “Let go.”

He nodded. “Sure, bro. Right after you calm down.”

I reacted, throwing my arm up to knock away his hand and spin to face him. “You tell me to calm down?” I challenged. “Like you’d be any better if someone was trying to keep you from seeing Rory while she was unconscious and bleeding.”

Ryan grimaced and said nothing. Know why? ‘Cause I was right.

“Sir, let’s go,” the security guard ordered, grabbing me by the arm.

Suddenly, a wall of Elite was there in front of us. Jamie, Ryan, Wes, Lars, Max, Win, and Prism all stood, arms folded over their chests, feet planted into the ground, rooted like trees.

I smirked at the guard. “Meet my friends.”

He reached for the small radio pinned to his shoulder, likely to call for backup.

“Excuse me.” A familiar voice came from the other side of the Elite wall.

The guys parted, and a petite, carrot-colored head came through, carrying a stuffed drink carrier. Rory, Ryan’s girlfriend, stepped through, followed closely by Jamie’s girlfriend, Madison, and Landry, Rush’s girl.

“What is going on?” Madison asked, her dark head swiveling around at the clump of us in the middle of the hall.

“You are blocking the ER.” The nurse wearing white spoke. She should have been wearing black. Something to match her soul.

“Oh! Marlene, how nice to see you,” Landry said, acting as though she’d just come across her long-lost BFF.

The black-hearted nurse who was shit at her job glanced around at the blond, her eyes lighting with recognition. “I should have known,” she mused, shaking her head. “I thought this large group looked familiar. How are you doing, hon? How’s the tongue?”

See? I told you Elite was a shit circus. The girls here were on a first-name basis with the trauma nurses.

“It’s all healed up,” Landry told her. “Thanks to you and your team.”

The guard cleared his throat and tightened his grip on my arm. “Reunion’s over. Let’s go.”

“Just call for backup, bro. I’m not leaving,” I told him.

Rory appeared instantly, her short stature overpowered by the large drink holder in her hands. “I brought trauma lattes,” she said, passing one to me.

“I don’t want it.” All I wanted was info on my girl.

“Maybe you could hold on to it for Jess, then?” Rory suggested, completely nonplussed by my rejection. “How is she by the way?”

I accepted the hot drink, my throat constricting, and gazed off down the hall. “No one will tell me.”

Rory grabbed another coffee and held it out to the guard. “I’m sure you’ve had such a long night. And now you have to deal with these guys. Here, you deserve this.”

I made a rude sound. I’d just told her these jackals wouldn’t tell me shit, and she wanted to hand out coffee? “Ryan,” I called, gruff. “You better get your girl.”

Unthreatened, Rory offered again. “Go on. It’s caramel.” Reluctantly, the guard reached for it, and she smiled. “Madison has donuts.”

“You giving my donuts to someone else?” Jamie grumped.

Oh, *now* they wanted to do something about this? Assholes.

Madison flipped open the lid on the box and held it out to the man. “What’s your favorite?”

Landry appeared, her blond hair waving around her face. “I like the cake ones.” She pointed, smiling up at the man. “I bet you’re a chocolate-cream-filled guy.”

Behind her, Rush scoffed.

The guard glanced between all three girls standing there waiting for him to take a pastry. “I’m on duty.”

“It’s the least we can do for the trouble,” Madison said, batting her brown eyes. “We won’t tell.”

“Just one,” Rory goaded.

“Well, one won’t hurt.” He agreed and reached into the box.

“I knew it,” Landry mused. “Chocolate cream filled.”

He smiled at her.

Rush grabbed her from behind, pulling her back into his body. “Smile at my girl again, and it’ll be the last meal you ever eat,” he threatened.

The guard stiffened. “Everyone, out!”

Multiple voices started talking over each other, a kid around the corner started wailing, and my temples started to throb.

I didn’t give a shit about any of this. None of it. All I wanted was to know how Jess was. Why was that so fucking hard for anyone to comprehend?

A light touch on my arm had me reeling back, ready to put up a fight, but it was just P.

“I’m fucking worried,” I said, my voice getting lost in the chaos.

He nudged my arm again and then pointed to a man dressed in mint-green scrubs with a long white lab coat and stethoscope around his neck. In his hand was a tablet, on his head a scrub cap, and there was a mask strapped around his ears, but the facepiece tugged under his chin.

I thrust the latte in my hands at Prism, and my sneakers squeaked with the force of my push as I met him halfway down the hall. “Doc. Please tell me you have news on Jess.”

He glanced at his tablet. “Ms. Park? The young woman brought in with a head injury?”

My stomach dropped. “Yes. How is she?”

The doctor’s gaze shifted from me to Prism and then back. “Are you a blood relative?”

Jesus. This shit again?

I let out a frustrated growl and tugged on my hair. “Please. Just tell me if she’s okay.”

“I cannot divulge information about patients to—”

“I’m her fiancé,” I rushed out.

I felt Prism’s surprise and his side-eye, but I kept my focus on the man withholding the information about my girl.

The doctor’s brows rose. “You’re her fiancé?”

I nodded. “Yeah. We’re engaged.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” someone said from close by.

I glanced over at the nurse who’d been acting like the queen of the castle behind the desk earlier. “It shouldn’t

matter,” I retorted. “You saw me arrive with her in the ambulance.”

“You arrived here with her?” the doctor asked.

I nodded.

“Did you see what happened to her?”

I swallowed and shook my head, mentally reliving her sprawled out there in that dark stairwell alone. “No,” I rasped.

The doctor made a disappointed sound, and my heart dropped.

“But she called me,” I said, desperate to prove I had the right to information about her. The right to be there at her side. “She called me and said someone was chasing her. She sent me her location, and I went there.”

“We all did,” Prism said beside me, and I nodded.

“She was at the bottom of a flight of stairs. She was unconscious.”

“A fall down the stairs would be consistent with her injuries,” the doctor murmured, glancing at what I assumed was her chart.

Injuries. I stiffened and moved forward, but P caught the back of my shirt and tugged, reminding me to keep my cool. Fisting my hands, I shoved them into the pockets of my jeans to keep myself from grabbing the man by his coat.

“*Please,*” I practically begged. “Please just tell me if she’s okay. Is she awake? Is she in pain? Please...”

Something in my voice must have swayed him. Maybe he could sense my torture. Maybe he didn’t want to hear a grown

man beg. I didn't give a fuck. I'd drop to my knees right here if I thought it would get me what I wanted.

He cocked his head. "Fiancé, you said?"

"Yes." I agreed without pause.

The nurse nearby made a sound of disbelief, and I mentally scratched her off the wedding invite list. Hell, my Christmas card list too.

Fine, I didn't have either of those, but if I did, she wouldn't be on it.

"It's new," I explained to the doctor. He was the one I had to convince. "We haven't told many people. My parents said we're too young." I went on, chest tight. "But I don't care anymore... *I love her.*"

Maybe I should feel like shit for lying like this. But not all of it was a lie.

"It's true, Doc," Rush said from behind me. "We helped him plan the proposal."

"Yeah." Wes agreed instantly. "We spent a whole afternoon lighting candles and cutting out paper stars so he could surprise her."

"It was so romantic," Madison professed, stepping so close to me that her shoulder brushed against the back of my arm. "Jess was so happy."

A light tug on my shirt sleeve made me pause. I glanced around and noticed that all of them were standing there nodding. Totally backing up the lies I was spewing. Totally all in with me. Hell, even the security guard seemed invested. Must have been the chocolate cream.

"Are any of you a blood relative?" the doctor questioned.

I groaned, tugging my hands free of my pockets. “Bro. She doesn’t have any family here. She’s at Westbrook on scholarship. I’m all she has.”

Something pressed into my palm. Something small, hard, and cold. I jolted a bit, but it pressed in again, and my hand automatically closed around it.

Madison shuffled back the second I accepted whatever it was.

Prism made a rude sound. “She has me too.”

I cuffed him on the shoulder. “Of course, P. You too.”

“She has all of us,” Landry said, stepping forward. “We aren’t blood, but she’s our family.”

I was about to pull out her busted phone and show him that I was her emergency contact, but then I realized what Madison had forced into my hand.

A ring.

“I have her ring,” I blurted, holding it palm up and looking down at the gold band with a small bow in the center.

As if I’d hand this over to my girl.

“It’s just a placeholder. The ring I got her was too big. It’s getting sized. She was wearing this until hers was ready,” I explained. “I took it off her in the ambulance to clean off the blood.”

The doctor sighed. “Fine. Since she has no direct relatives and you’re engaged...”

I nodded so hard my brain rattled in my skull. “Where is she?” I said, starting down the hall. “Let’s go.”

“Hold on, Mr...”

“Kruger,” I said, spinning to shove my hand between us.
“Benjamin Kruger.”

“Mr. Kruger, I’m Dr. James,” he said, returning the handshake. As I was making sure I squeezed extra tight—you know, in case this guy thought he could get away with shit—the peanut gallery started a sideshow.

“So weird to hear his full name,” Win said from behind.

“I thought he only had one,” Max deadpanned.

“His parents really missed an opportunity to name him Freddy,” Jamie observed.

“I wonder what his middle name is,” Rory whispered.

“What is it with you and wanting to know everyone’s middle name?” Ryan wondered.

“We need to know what to yell when you all act like idiots,” Madison quipped.

“No one ever asked my middle name,” Lars pointed out.

“That’s because no one would dare yell at you,” Landry mused.

Win and Rush grunted in agreement.

“What is your middle name, Lars?” Rory asked.

I let out a rude sound. “You all need to go buy some plants to replace all the oxygen you’re wasting,” I snapped and turned back to Dr. James. “About Jess...”

“We have some forms that need filling out.”

“I’ll do it.” I was decisive.

“Does she have insurance?”

That would be a no. But the minute I said that, they'd downgrade her care, and that shit wasn't happening. "Just send all the bills to me," I said. "I've got them covered. I'll put all my information on the form."

"So she doesn't—"

"She doesn't need insurance because she has me," I said. "Understand?"

"I'll have the nurse get the documents for you—"

I cut him off again. "Can you just tell me how she is?" Reaching into my back pocket, I pulled out a money clip. "Here's my ID. Here's my credit card. It has a large credit limit and no balance. You can have whatever you want. Just tell me how she is."

The doctor cleared his throat. "Yes, I'm sorry. You must be worried."

I laughed. He had no idea.

He glanced at the chart again. "Ms. Park is currently in stable condition, but she is still unconscious."

I sucked in a breath. "Still? What's wrong with her?"

"She has a head injury. A fairly severe one. We were able to close the headwound with twelve sutures, but there is some swelling."

"She has brain swelling?" Max echoed from off to the side. The bleakness in his tone actually raised the hair on the back of my neck.

The doctor glanced at the group listening and frowned.

I snapped my fingers at him. "Don't worry about them. Talk to me."

“There is some swelling on her brain, but it’s all in relation to the head wound. I think it will go down quickly.”

“I want to see her.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible right now. She’s being prepped for surgery.”

I took those words like a fist to the gut, recoiling from the panic they caused. Pressing the back of my hand to my mouth, I sucked in a deep breath. “I thought you just said the swelling on her brain wasn’t severe.”

“The surgery is for her ankle. It’s broken. The bone is misplaced and needs to be realigned before it starts healing improperly and needs to be broken again to reset.”

“I knew that ankle looked gnarly,” Rush murmured.

“Is doing surgery like that okay with her head injury?” I worried, pacing a bit in front of the doctor.

“There is no current contraindication for the use of anesthesia for patients with a concussion.”

I stopped midstride. “Don’t give me all that doctor mumbo-jumbo. Is it *safe*?”

“Yes.”

“I want to see her first.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

I lunged, grabbing him by the coat and dragging him forward. I knew the second he really looked at me because a bolt of unease went through his stare as he took in mine. For most of my life, I hated my mismatched eyes. They made me different. Strange. I was mocked and ridiculed for them. *Fish eyes. Crazy eyes. Jekyll and Hyde.*

It wasn't always easy having the same last name as an iconic slasher film villain (no one cares the spelling is different, okay?) *and* a face that looked like I'd been given spare parts from someone else.

But I adapted and now often forgot about my heterochromia until I watched someone notice it for the first time. You'd think a doctor would recognize it for what it was: a genetic mutation. Not this guy.

He seemed more inclined to think I was pieced together like Frankenstein's monster. 'Course, maybe it wasn't my one green and one brown eye freaking him out but the fact I was currently holding him hostage and breathing in his face like a dragon.

Whatever it was, I would use it.

"My fiancée is lying in some cold room with stitches in her head that she had to get alone after I told her I'd hold her hand. You made a liar out of me, Doc. So now I have to go back there and apologize to her for not being there. And you're going to let me."

"I could have you removed," Dr. James said, his eyes cutting to security.

I tightened my grip on his coat and flicked a glare at the guard, dismissing him. "You could," I said quietly. "But you won't do that, will you, Doc? Because you know that if I'm not here focusing on my girl, then I'll be out there focusing on the person who won't let me see her."

"You can sit with her until she has to go down for surgery."

I let him go, smoothing the wrinkles in his coat. Smiling, I gestured for him to lead me to her. "Thanks, Doc. I really appreciate that."

“That was actually kind of scary,” Lars whispered loudly.

“I’ll protect you, angel,” Win whispered back.

“So, Doc, you the one doing the surgery?” I asked as we started off down the hall.

“No. We have an orthopedic surgeon on call. He’s on his way and will be reviewing the X-rays.”

I wasn’t there for the X-rays either.

The guilt was sickening, the only thing strong enough to overshadow the anger I felt at this entire situation. Hell, I probably wouldn’t even be on my way to her room now if I hadn’t lied and told them we were engaged.

Jess is going to be livid.

I shook off the worry. She’d just have to understand. I was doing what I had to do. She needed me right now.

“I want to meet the surgeon,” I said.

The doctor stopped in front of a wide door. “I can ask him to come speak with you.”

I nodded once. “This her?”

“Yes.”

I started forward.

“I’ll have the nurse bring you the documents.”

“Sure.” I agreed, my heart nearly pounding out of my chest. I wanted to see her so bad, but now that she was right there, I was fucking scared.

“Doc,” I called, gruff.

“Yes?” he said, turning back as he tried to get away from me.

“Besides the head and foot. What else is wrong with her?”

His posture relaxed a little, and he checked his notes again. “All her additional injuries are superficial. A few scrapes. A few sizable bruises. The most concerning is her head injury and, of course, getting the ankle reset.”

“So she’ll be okay?” I wanted reassurance. In all the other Elite field trips to this pain ward, I’d never felt so shaken. I hated seeing any of my friends hurt, but this... this was on a whole other level.

“I am optimistic for your fiancée to make a full recovery,” Dr. James replied. “I’ll let the surgeon know you’d like a minute.”

He turned and walked away, leaving me there with my hand on the door and this odd fluttery feeling just beneath my ribs. At first, I thought it was nausea. But it wasn’t. I’d been nauseous since we got here, and this feeling had just started.

Right after he called her your fiancée.

Look. Full disclosure. Jess was my friend. My best friend next to Prism. But that’s not all she was to me. I was all in with her. *All in*. You feel me?

She just didn’t know it yet.

And I didn’t know how much I would fucking love slapping the title fiancée on her. Rationally, I knew it was fake. But those butterflies in my middle? They seemed to be having their own engagement party. With champagne. The expensive kind.

Not yet. But someday. I promised myself.

I just had to convince her I was worthy. But before I could do that, I had to make sure she was healthy and safe.

Anxious to get eyes on her, I pushed open the door.

JESS

JOURNAL ENTRY: FOUR YEARS AGO...

I refuse to write Dear Diary at the beginning of this because it makes me feel cheesy and like I'm talking to someone who doesn't even exist. Maybe that's the point, though. To pour out all my guts on a piece of paper where no one can judge me. God knows everyone else does. This world is filled with judgmental assholes, and it makes me feel weak. But I'm not weak. I'm a strong, independent woman, and I will prove to everyone they underestimated me. That I'm worth more than they think.

So I'm writing this out for my future self. So she can come back here and read these words and see how far she's come. Also, so I don't forget.

To be honest, I don't feel so strong right now. I overheard them. People who were nice to my face. Who smiled and cooed over my talent and how it had won me a scholarship to their precious private school.

All this time, it was fake. And the worst thing about it is that I didn't know it until it was too late. Until they had the

power to hurt me. They fooled me with their phony smiles and congratulations. All the times I sat at the dinner table and ate their food, smiling over peas and carrots like I belonged. I thought I did.

Until I heard them.

I'd gone up to the bathroom. Not one of the ones on the first floor either. No, I went up to his personal bathroom. To his private space. It smelled so much like him in there, his presence everywhere even when he wasn't in the room. Every time I took a breath, it was like having a piece of him inside me. Is that weird? Who cares if it is? I'm talking to myself.

I took my time, even if I was excited to sit in the passenger seat, covertly watching the way he handled his fancy car. Honestly, it wouldn't even matter if it wasn't fancy. I'd stare no matter what he was driving. I'd get in any car with him.

I must have lingered too long. Maybe they assumed the keys in his hand were there because he'd just gotten home from dropping me off. I'd gotten good at walking quietly down the massive marble staircase. Or maybe the raised voices in the dining room covered up the light taps my footsteps made.

"Be realistic, son. Think about your future. We've worked hard to give you every advantage. Why would you want to go and saddle yourself with... dead weight?"

"She's a good person. The best person."

I couldn't even feel warm from that defense because the offense hurt so much there was no room for anything else.

"She is a nice girl. But nice isn't good enough. We have expectations. As should you. If you want to be friends, that's fine. But it can never be more. Stringing her along would be cruel, and girls like her are clingers. Maybe not now but soon.

She'll realize that you're her meal ticket to a better life. You need an equal, and she is beneath you."

Shock turned me to stone. Or maybe it was their harsh words. But I stood there like I'd just looked into Medusa's eyes, turning concrete and forever frozen in that moment in time.

What a shitty place to get stuck. Shitty. Shitty. Shitty.

And then a door at the top of the steps closed, jarring me out of the shock and throwing me into horror. I had to escape. Get away.

Unclenching my fist from around the wrought iron stair rail, I stomped down the remaining stairs, moving like the uncouth ogre they clearly thought I was.

I thought they liked me.

How could I be so wrong?

I hollered loudly, using the dumb nickname because he hated it.

A stunned silence permeated the entire massive house. It was broken almost instantly by scraping chair legs.

"Oh, Jessica, dear. We thought you left," his mother said. The same woman who'd just served me cheesecake with a smile.

Liar.

"We're going now," I said, wanting to stare at her head on but unable to lift my eyes. "Thank you for dinner. It was very nice of you to let me stay."

I was kind, remember? Kind and unworthy.

I wished I could run out of this place and never look back. Now the idea of sitting in the car alone with him was not something I looked forward to but something to dread.

He hadn't agreed with his parents' words. But he didn't disagree either.

"You're welcome anytime," his mom called as I fled out the massive front door.

I didn't turn back. Fake. Fake. Fake.

Behind my eyes burned but not with tears. They felt dry and gritty as though someone scraped over them with sandpaper.

That's when you know it's bad. When you're too upset to even cry.

Inside the car, the engine turned over, and he cast a glance in my direction. He had such a baby face. "You okay?"

"Never better." I lied, plastering on a smile as fake as his parents. Once again, the urge to get out of this car and run home filled me. So much so my feet moved against the expensive mats under my feet.

I stayed in the seat, though. I wasn't crazy. By the time I made it to my neighborhood on foot, it would be the middle of the night. Being outside in the middle of the night there was asking to become a headline on the morning news.

I really thought they were different.

They aren't.

"Hey," he said, laying his hand on my arm before I could climb out onto the shitty street in front of my dilapidated house.

I glanced at where he touched me, then up at him.

“You sure everything’s okay?” he asked.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I countered.

He pulled his hand back, and, oh, I found the tears I thought I didn’t have.

“You know you’re my best friend, right?”

Any other night, I would have loved to hear those words. Tonight, they were a slap in the face.

A silent agreeance to his parents’ opinions.

“I thought Matt was your best friend,” I teased. I learned pretend from the best. I just ate dinner with it.

“He’s my best guy friend. You’re my best girl friend.”

Girl friend. Not girlfriend. There was a difference. One I would never get to know.

I nodded. “I know.”

“I’ll always be here for you.”

But not in the way I want.

“Me too,” I said, getting out of the car. “Thanks for the ride.”

“See you tomorrow at school?”

“I’ll be there,” I replied, slamming the door and then jogging across the dead minuscule lawn and going into the house, which wasn’t even locked.

The second the lock was turned, I collapsed back against the flimsy door and listened to the smooth purr of his engine fade.

I can't sleep. So here I sit in this tiny room, writing down my secrets like future me might forget the worst night of my life.

What's even more pathetic? I hated his parents, but I could never hate him. Even when he called me his friend and silently agreed I wasn't worth more.

School was my chance out of this life. But him...?

He was the life I wanted.

So I'll silently mourn what I won't ever have and feel angry I'll never be enough. But I'll still go to school tomorrow and be his friend. And pretend I never heard what they said.

Why?

Because being his friend is better than nothing at all.

Dear future self, you can forgive him, but you should never forget.

I WAS A MOUSE, AND AWARENESS WAS A CAT BATTING ME around like a plaything, sinking its teeth into me one moment but then knocking me away the next.

It was disorienting and mildly upsetting. During it all, a voice in the back of my mind taunted me to wake up, but I didn't know which way was up, so I continued ping-ponging between consciousness and unawareness, settling in an odd in-between state.

Eventually, the ping-ponging slowed, and everything felt like a dream where I wasn't sure what was real. But that steady beeping sound? One hundred percent annoying.

I began to notice things like the cool air against my arms. The sterile smell. Pain. When I could, I searched around for something pleasant, but it was like trying to slough through trash.

But then there were voices.

“She’s still not awake?”

“No.”

“Have you slept at all?”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead.”

My eyes shot open, everything in me revolting so hard against death. Against the death of the person who owned that voice.

Who owned that voice?

The light was eye-wateringly harsh against the blackness where I’d been imprisoned. Everything was blurry. Nothing made sense. I wanted to look around but felt paralyzed by confusion, brightness, and fear.

The terror was strong, rising ominously slow to overtake everything else. Its monster size was further enhanced by the fact my eyes nor brain could seem to focus on anything at all. Though they were open, I felt entirely blind.

A loud squealing scrape filled the room, and then a shadowy figure filled the space above me, buffering some of the uncomfortable brightness.

“Jess?” that voice I liked so much called.

Was he talking to me?

“Go get the nurse,” he called over his shoulder and then was back, focus all on me.

“Jess, baby,” he whispered, warm hands cupping my chilled face.

I sighed, eyelashes fluttering closed under the comfort.

“No,” the voice above me commanded. “Open your eyes.”

I did what he ordered, wishing everything wasn't so unfocused.

“Please stay,” he whispered, a far different kind of command than the one he'd just given. Both impossible to deny.

I felt my heartbeat then. The slow, steady rhythm upticking enough to notice. The hands started to slide away, but I made a sound, and they came back.

“Wake up, baby girl.” He coaxed. “Let me see those brown eyes.”

I blinked, the action cracking pain through my skull, and I recoiled, wanting away from the sharp sensation.

“Does it hurt?” He worried. “Are you hurting?”

I nodded once, not knowing much in that moment but sure it was safe to tell him.

He made a pitying sound, empathy nearly dripping from his vocal cords. The mattress dipped as he eased closer, the same warmth holding my cheeks seeped into my side.

Something soft brushed my temple and then my brow. I went nearly cross-eyed trying to look at the face so close to mine. I was able to focus on light-brown scruff, a flash of red. Soft breath puffed across my cheek, and the scent of chlorine mixed with a deeper musk swirled under my nose.

Home.

“We can’t have that, can we? I’m gonna make sure it stops,” he murmured, creating a rush of something against the back of my neck. Something that was such a welcome respite to the pain battering my body.

Somewhere, a door opened, and the body so close pulled back.

“She’s in pain,” he demanded. “How many times do I gotta tell you people to do your jobs?”

“Bro, I think he’s as bad as Max and Win,” someone else said.

Another familiar voice.

Why couldn’t I identify anything? Why was I so confused?

“Fuck off, Owens.”

Someone gasped. “Sir! Is that the first thing you want your fiancée to hear after all she’s been through?”

Fiancée?

A rush of intense sadness rolled over me, so intense it dimmed the too-bright light in the room. He was engaged?

But he was supposed to be mine.

“I already said nice stuff to her,” came the gruff reply. “She’s the only one who deserves it. What can you do about her pain?”

“I need to see the patient.”

The body rotated back around, and my attention clung to him, vision finally focusing.

The short sandy-brown strands of hair stuck up every which way and flipped up around his ears and at the base of his neck. His full lower lip was slightly swollen and red as if

he'd been chewing on it for hours. His defined jaw and tapered chin were scruffy with more of the sandy hair. What drew me in the most were his eyes. One green. One brown. Both shadowed and tired but wholly focused on me. Despite his haggard appearance, he smiled. The kind of smile that reminded me I was glad my heart was beating.

“There she is. There’s my girl.”

Oh, I like his voice. Tears filled my eyes so fast the water spilled over almost instantly, slipping over my cheeks, cold against my already chilled skin. Even though it was an involuntary action and I didn’t really move, it hurt. Everything freaking hurt.

“Hey, hey now,” he crooned, part of his body coming back onto the bed. “You’re all right. I have the nurse here. She’ll check you out.”

He started to pull back, and panic overruled pain. I reached up, grasping for his wrist. There was a long tube stuck in the back of my hand, but I ignored it in favor of him. “Wait.”

He came back, eyes all over my face like he was taking inventory of every detail.

Who are you? My throat was so dry. “Water.”

Someone appeared over his shoulder, another face I felt I should know but didn’t. Dark hair. Brown eyes. AirPods in his ears. He was just as worried as his friend. “Here,” he said, passing a plastic cup close.

A straw brushed my lips, and I took a sip.

“Easy,” multicolored eyes cautioned.

Even though the sip was small, it seemed impossible to swallow at once, and a bead of the cool liquid slipped out of

the corner of my mouth, sliding over my chin like the tears still leaking from my eyes.

A wide, slightly rough thumb swiped the moisture away, gently doing the same to my cheeks. Then in a motion I found insanely captivating, he pushed his wet digit between his lips and sucked.

“Who are you?” I asked, unable to find any information in my pounding skull.

Everything about him stilled. Wariness filled the eyes I’d just been admiring. “Y-you don’t know?”

Tentatively, I asked, “Should I?”

The look on his face was answer enough.

KRUGER

I CAME UP WITH A LOT OF SCENARIOS ABOUT WHAT WOULD happen when this girl opened her eyes. I even tossed together a whole apology salad for telling the entire hospital we were engaged. I was gonna serve it up. With dressing.

What kind of dressing goes on an apology salad, you ask? Good question. It's compliments. Obviously.

Her asking me who I was?

Bro. That shit never even occurred to me. I mean, for reals, who would forget all this?

My fake bride, that's who.

Frankly, I was a little offended. But that lasted all of about one point two seconds because her face crumpled, and my heart dropped out of my chest.

"I should know, shouldn't I?" she asked, fresh tears spilling over her pale cheeks. "What's wrong with me? Why don't I know?"

My lips stuttered like some kind of engine out of fuel, and her eyes went to Prism standing right beside me. "I should

know you too, shouldn't I?"

"Us?" P echoed, gesturing between us. All I could think about was wiping away her tears. I could still taste their saltiness on my tongue. "We aren't important."

A sob burst out of her throat.

"You two are morons," Max snapped from the corner of the room. His boots echoed over the floor with his heavy footfalls. "Hey," he said softly from the other side of the bed, his ring-covered fingers wrapping around the rail lifted on that side. "You had an accident and hit your head. It's going to take a while to recover."

The room was silent for a heartbeat, and then Max realized we were all staring and rolled his eyes. "Well, someone had to tell her what was going on. You two were standing there with your heads in your asses."

"I don't know you either." She fretted, hands twisting in the shitty hospital blanket over her lower half as her wide brown stare took in his leather jacket and eyebrow piercing.

"Max," he told her, voice way nicer than he ever talked to me. "We're friends."

Bro always has been a little protective of Rory and Madison. Guess that extended to Jess now too.

I hated it.

"Go back to snarling over Wes. I got this," I snapped with less heat than I felt.

"Everyone, clear the room," the nurse declared.

I forgot she was even in here.

“I need to check her vitals, and it’s clear this is causing her anxiety, which is not good for recovery.”

“We’re delightful,” Jamie muttered beneath his breath.

Nurszilla heard. “Well, go be delightful in the waiting room.”

P and I stood off to the side while the rest of Elite filed out.

“Miss.” The nurse in blue scrubs stepped close. “Can you hear me?”

Jess nodded, cheeks still damp with tears.

“You’re in the hospital. You had a fall and hit your head.” The nurse repeated the same thing Max had literally already told her.

“I fell?” Jess’s voice seemed small and unsure.

My protective instincts, which I thought had been exhausted after last night, reared to life with brand new force. I stepped around the woman, reaching out to take her hand, but then I remembered. Jess didn’t know me. She wouldn’t want a stranger to touch her.

How could she not know me?

“You really don’t know me?” I whispered.

Her lower lip wobbled, and oh my fuck, that was it. That was the fucking end of me. A broken sound echoed deep in my throat, and I forgot I was keeping my distance. I leaned over the bed, over my girl, mopping up the wetness on her cheeks once more. “Shh, it’s okay, baby. I’m not mad. You can brain-dump whatever you want, okay? All that matters is that you’re breathing.”

She sniffled, grabbed my hand, and used it as a tissue for her dripping nose. Nasty, right?

“I like you,” she announced, her voice wobbling.

Well, I’ll be damned. Snot was suddenly romantic AF.

I smiled, chest expanding times two.

“I told you two to leave.”

I turned my face to glare at the nurse. “Can’t you see I’m trying to have a moment here?”

“Your moment can wait. Her health cannot.”

Yeah, okay. She was right.

I started to back away, but Jess clutched my wrist, pulling me back. “Wait. Where are you going?”

“I’ll wait outside and come back as soon as I can.”

“Y-you won’t leave?” she asked.

My stomach flipped at the underlying vulnerability in her voice, at the way she held on to me like I would be able to fix it. “Do you want me to?”

She thought a minute, her whole face crinkling up like it took so much effort to decide. It was so cute I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to yank her out of that bed and kiss the shit out of her right there.

Bet she’d remember me then.

Or maybe not considering I’d never kissed her before. But, fuck me, did I want to. *Almost lost your chance.*

“I want you to stay,” she finally said, sagging into the pillows as though those words exhausted her.

I leaned in, smoothing the hair off her forehead and side-eyeing the giant-ass bandage on her head. “Can I kiss you?” I whispered.

Her brown eyes lifted, wide and full of trust. When she nodded, I felt like the fucking man.

Sliding my palm around the back of her head, I pressed my lips to her temple, letting them linger. Her skin was cold.

“I’ll wait outside,” I said, pulling back to tug off the red hoodie Prism brought in from my car. “Hold on to this for me.”

After a split second of debate, she took the fabric and hugged it to her chest. I thought about refusing to leave.

“You’ll stay too?” she asked Prism, hugging the shirt like it was comforting.

Almost like her body remembered me even if her mind did not. What a fucking rush that was. To be ingrained in someone so deep it went beyond the mind.

“The way I’ve been worrying about you?” P scoffed and shook his head. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She nodded tentatively, and the nurse gave us an impatient look. We shuffled to the door, my feet dragging the whole way.

“Can you tell me your name?” the nurse questioned.

I held my breath, slowing my feet even more.

“Jessica.” She paused. “Park.”

The breath whooshed out of me, and I turned back, only to find her watching me expectantly. “Is that right?”

“Never heard anything righter,” I told her. “Good girl.”

Shy, she ducked her head but grimaced, lifting her fingers to her forehead. “That beeping sound.”

The nurse went to the monitor by the bed and hit a few buttons, and the sound silenced.

“My leg.” Jess worried, staring at the sling elevating her left ankle and foot, which was cast in white.

“You broke your ankle and had to have surgery to stabilize it,” the nurse explained.

“I won’t be able to walk.” She worried.

“You don’t need to walk. I got your legs right here.” I assured her. Her eyes flew to me, so I flexed, giving her a view of my bulging bicep. She’d probably forgotten about them too.

The nurse tsked and swiftly moved past us to open the door and point out in the hall like we were dogs being put out in the yard to pee.

I’m telling you, this place has some shitty bedside manner.

We moved into the hall, and I glanced back at Jess and winked.

The nurse shut the door in my face.

“*Bro*,” I intoned.

“*Bro*.” Prism commiserated.

I hesitated in the hall, not wanting to walk all the way to the waiting room. Her doctor appeared, and I straightened. “Doc.”

He glanced at me, and I almost heard his inner groan. Too damn bad. I wasn’t going anywhere. Someone had to make sure he did his job right.

“Mr. Kruger.” The man circumvented all the questions I was ready to fire. “Please let me see your fiancée and assess her condition. I will come speak with you *in the waiting room* when I’m finished.”

“You all just love your waiting room,” I grumped.

Prism stifled a laugh and cuffed me on the shoulder. “C’mon. Let them take care of Jess.”

I let him lead me away, but the entire time, I had to fight the impulse to pull a U-turn and run back.

JESS

HE DIDN'T TELL ME HIS NAME.

The thought plagued me. Where everything else seemed to flit through my brain as a mere passing idea, this one stuck like twelve-day-old gum on the bottom of a shoe in one-hundred-degree heat.

Here I was literally lying in a hospital bed with stitches in my head, a cast on my foot, an IV stabbed into the back of my hand, and I had no earthly clue how I got this way. But what was I worried about?

The fact that he didn't tell me his name before walking out of here. Should I have been horrified by this turn of events? I wasn't. I just wanted him to come back. *How am I supposed to call for him if I don't know who to ask for?*

"How are you feeling, Miss Park?" the kind-faced nurse asked as she stepped close to the side of the bed.

"Confused," I admitted.

She nodded as if the answer were expected. "You have a head injury and are just coming out of surgery, so it is completely normal and nothing to be alarmed by."

Easy for you to say. “How long have I been here?”

“You were brought in last night.”

“Were you here then too?” I asked.

“No. My shift started this morning.”

I nodded, trying to remember arriving here, but the memory was gone. If I wasn't lying here in this bed right now, I might even argue that anything happened at all. But the physical proof was undeniable, so I searched every corner of my brain for information I knew I should have but didn't. It was like opening a book and finding all the pages blank. How could I read the story if all the words were erased?

I floundered in that void of emptiness, alarmed I'd forgotten so much and anxious I wouldn't ever remember. “What happened to me?” I finally asked, frightened of that answer too.

“I'm not really sure.” The nurse was honest. “But that doesn't matter right now. What matters is your recovery.”

But it did matter. I *knew* it did. I just wasn't sure why.

“I need to check your vitals and ask you a few questions. I paged for the doctor, so he is on his way.”

I heard her talking but only half listened. Instead, my eyes lingered on the door he'd walked out of as I hugged the soft fabric of his hoodie closer to my chest. The scent of it relaxed me, the mix of chlorine and musk familiar even if I couldn't place it. I clung to that familiarity because it was comforting and inexplicably made me less afraid.

“He's not going anywhere.” The nurse's assertion shifted my attention from the door back to her. “He's been here all

night. Slept in a chair beside your bed.” She gestured to the uncomfortable-looking seat that was pushed against the wall.

“He did?”

“Yes. Apparently, he gave the staff in the ER quite a time when you were brought in. Almost got himself thrown out.”

I felt my mouth drop open.

She chuckled a little beneath her breath, then added, “Even gave the surgeon the third degree before they operated.”

“How do you know if you weren’t here?” I asked, suspicious. What if she was lying? I had no context to be able to tell.

“Nurses talk.”

Well, I didn’t need context to believe people liked to gossip. A surge of warmth and giddiness overcame me, rivaling the pain and frustration dominating my world. I had no recollection of yesterday, but hearing he’d been here made the unknown seem less scary.

Ducking my face into the hoodie, I breathed deeply, feeling like everything I wanted to know was right there on the tip of my tongue but just out of reach.

“Could you get him for me?” I asked, suddenly intensely homesick for a man whose name I didn’t even know. *I shouldn’t be homesick. I should be wary.*

I was wary. But not of him. That meant something. Right?

“After I get your vitals.”

“But—”

She made a tsking sound. “Your well-being comes first. I promise your fiancé will wait.”

I gasped. “Fiancé?”

She glanced at me and frowned. “We really need to get those vitals.”

“That was my fiancé?” I repeated, eyes flying back to the door.

She made a noncommittal sound and reached for me. I flinched away, holding up the hoodie like a shield. The hoodie my *fiancé* gave me.

I wrinkled my nose. *That isn't right. Is it?*

“Miss Park.” The nurse was patient. “I understand you are trying to process and make sense of things, but I really need to do my job.”

“Well, I really need to know who that was!” I exclaimed. “Why don't I know?”

A warm hand grasped mine. Her grip was firm and commanding. I gazed at her through watery eyes, the bright light shimmering against my unshed tears creating a glare that made my head ache worse.

“The doctor won't want me to tell you too much before he sees you. But let me reassure you.”

“Just tell me something. Anything.” The second the words were out, I regretted them. “Not anything. Something about him. Please.”

I felt blind, yet my eyes worked just fine. I could see, but without the context of everything in front of me, the view was just not the same. And even though there was plenty to be curious and concerned over, in that moment, I only wanted to know about him.

Still holding my hand, the nurse lifted it to gently rub her thumb over something around my left ring finger. Something I hadn't noticed.

“He held on to this ring the whole time you were in surgery. The first thing he did when he saw you after was slip it onto your finger. He pulled the chair so close to your bed the armrest touched the mattress, and when he finally stopped snarling at the staff, he fell asleep with his head on the mattress,” she said, releasing my hand to pat the bed.

I didn't look, though. My eyes stayed on the simple gold bow encircling my finger. How bizarre to feel like I was seeing it for the very first time when it was obviously something I owned. My fingers grazed lightly over the cool metal, admiring how simple it was, how sweet. *Like he tied a bow around me as if I'm some kind of gift.*

“We're really engaged,” I whispered to myself. *Shouldn't I be scared?*

The nurse pulled back. “He certainly made sure everyone knew it.”

Sorrow, not fear, swelled inside me, leaving my arm heavy. I dropped the ring-adorned hand into my lap, automatically burying my fingers into his sweatshirt. How could I not know this? Who forgets their own fiancé?

He must have been so hurt. The thought was unbearable. I had to see him. Maybe now that I knew, when I looked at him, all the memories would come rushing back. *Like when he proposed.*

A sob caught in my throat, making it feel tight as I swallowed back the regret of losing such a precious memory.

Ignoring the tug on my hand from the IV, I tossed the covers back, preparing to get out of bed.

“Miss Park.” The nurse was alarmed. “What are you doing?”

“I need to see him,” I said, determined.

“I’m afraid you can’t do that.”

“Watch me,” I sassed and tried to pull my leg out of the sling elevating it.

The second I did, pain shot up all the way into my knee. I dropped back against the pillow, panting from exertion. *I work out too much for that to be so hard.*

Ah! I work out!

The door opened, and my heart leaped into my throat, making me forget the realization about myself. I glanced over, expecting to see him, and was frustrated all over again when it was just the doctor.

I made a noise and started to get up again, the weight of the cast making my leg quiver and shake as I tried once more to lift it out of the sling.

“What is going on in here?” asked a man in a white coat and carrying a tablet as the door closed behind him.

“Doctor—” The nurse started, totally about to tattle on me.

So I bulldozed over her words with my own. “I’m getting up,” I told him, the sling jingling as I fought to get my foot out of it. *Why is this thing so heavy?* My temples started to throb as if I suddenly had more than one heartbeat.

“Miss Park, you just woke from surgery. You need to lie still,” the doctor chided.

“That’s what I told her, Doctor.” The nurse was plaintive like this was all my fault. When in fact, she was the one who had kicked him out of my room in the first place.

“How am I supposed to do that when I just asked my fiancé who he is?” I said, falling back onto my elbows. A cold sweat had broken out on my forehead, and it made me shiver.

The doctor came closer to the bed. “You’re experiencing memory loss?”

“I want to see him.” I pushed up again, the movement creating a draft. Looking down, I gasped. My legs were practically spread because of the way my broken ankle was elevated, and I’d thrown the blankets off in my attempt to get out of bed.

“Where are my clothes?” I asked, quickly crossing my uninjured leg over the busted one while tugging down the hideous, flimsy gown I was wearing.

“We removed them when you were brought in last night,” the doctor replied, calm. “I really need to examine you.”

“I want Ben,” I said, suddenly exhausted. “You can do all the tests you want. Just please get him.” I gasped. “I remembered his name!” I looked at the nurse. “Is that his name?”

Did it even count if I wasn’t sure? How could I trust myself?

“I’ll get your fiancé if you allow my nurse to record your vitals while I do,” the doctor offered.

Relieved, I sagged into the pillows. “Yes, thank you.”

The doctor excused himself, and the nurse got to work. I let her do her thing, too weak to even argue. My little burst of

rebellion had cost me. The pain I opened my eyes to was worse than before, and it was making me nauseous. And on top of the discomfort was the anxiety. FYI: anxiety did not belong on top of anything. It was so *not* whipped cream. But here it was. So much of it. Not knowing what I should know was making it impossible to focus on anything else.

All I really knew for sure was that I wanted Ben. I wasn't even sure why or *who* exactly Ben even was. But the *want* was strong enough to overrule rational thought.

I just hoped Ben and my fiancé were the same person because if they weren't.... things were about to get incredibly awkward.

KRUGER

I'D RATHER TAP DANCE IN A MINEFIELD WEARING CLOWN SHOES than sit in this waiting room.

Just call me Bozo because here I was, stepping into what I could now consider my least favorite place on Earth.

Elite was already here, filling a corner of the room of doom, and I was momentarily surprised when I saw who was sitting beside Landry. "Coach?"

He pushed out of the chair. "Kruger. You missed practice."

"I'll probably miss more."

I expected some insults followed by a lecture. Instead, he just pursed his lips and nodded. "How is she?"

All the bravado I'd been projecting in front of her seemed to drain away without any warning. "She didn't remember me."

Coach grunted. "I wish I could forget you too."

Behind us, Landry gasped. "Dad!"

"I'm kidding," he said, more over his shoulder than to me. But when he turned back, he laid his hand on my shoulder and

squeezed. “I might think you’re a pain in the ass, but I see the way that girl looks at you. She bumped her head. Give her a minute to sort it all out. She’ll remember you, son. My lifeguards are made of tough stuff.”

I bypassed all the nice shit he’d just said and hyper focused on one word. *My*.

I knocked his arm away. “She’s not *your* anything.”

“Better watch how you talk about Kruger’s future missus,” Rush mused from the other side of Landry.

“Bros! I’m in charge of the bachelor party!” Win announced.

Coach’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re engaged?”

“Sorry, Coach, no adults at the bachelor party,” Jamie told him.

“Well, that explains why you’d be allowed in,” Coach fired back.

“Want me to call the doctor, Jamie? Treat that burn,” Max heckled.

Jamie glanced at Wes. “You really could do better, bro.”

“Kruger.” Coach summoned me. “I’m waiting for an explanation.”

“Uh, yeah, we’re engaged.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “That seems awfully fast considering you weren’t even dating.”

“How do you know?” I argued.

“Because you all flap your lips like tween girls at a slumber party in the locker room on the daily. Gives me a

damn headache. I know more about any of you than I care to admit.”

Lars leaned around Rush to ask Landry, “Did you used to have slumber parties at Coach’s house when you were a kid?”

Landry giggled. “I did one time.”

“And I still have nightmares,” Coach muttered.

I sighed. “I kinda lied to the staff so they’d let me see her.”

“You did what?” he demanded, voice rising an octave.

“Shh!” I insisted, glancing around, afraid someone would hear. “I had to,” I said low. “You know how they are here. I couldn’t just let her lie there by herself.”

He continued to stare at me like I was somehow see-through. It made me squirm in my jeans.

“Fine. But you tell her what you did.”

I nodded. “I will.”

“Keep me updated on her condition. You can take a few days off from practice, but after that, I expect you back in the pool.”

I nodded, not verbally agreeing. The truth was I wouldn’t be back at practice until I was sure Jess was okay.

“Hey, Coach, can I borrow your whistle?” I asked, eyeing the silver thing around his neck. “These doctors need some discipline,” I told him, reaching for it.

He slapped my hand away. “Touch my whistle again and you’re gonna need a bed in this sick ward.”

“Thanks for coming by, Coach. I feel the love,” I mocked, turning away.

“Hey.” His voice was gruff, and I glanced over my shoulder. “I’m here for you. All of you. If you need anything, just ask.”

“I just asked for your whistle.”

“You know he ain’t gonna give that up to anyone,” Ryan mused. “It’s practically part of his anatomy.”

“Bro, remember that time Landry hid it? He ransacked the whole house.” Jamie reminded the group.

I couldn’t help but smile. We all sat on his giant couch, eating pizza while he was like an actual tornado whipping through the house, demanding to know about his precious hunk of metal.

“That was not funny,” Coach bitched.

“It was funny,” Wes refuted.

“You’re swimming extra laps in the morning.”

“How about a fresh trauma latte now that Jess is awake?” Rory suggested from her place in Ryan’s lap. “Might be nice to have something hot for her when we are allowed back in.”

“Yeah, that’d be good.” I agreed, gazing off in the direction of her room. *What is taking so damn long?*

A light touch on my arm had me jolting. “Kruger?”

I glanced down at Rory, the smallest of the bunch. Her wide gray eyes stared at me. “Can we pick up anything else for you?”

Jess’s memory. Folding my lips in, I shook my head. Rory nodded, and the three girls started moving toward the exit.

“Wait,” I said, finally finding my voice. “Here.” I dug into my back pocket to pull out some cash. “Get whatever you

guys want.”

“Oh, you don’t have to,” Madison said, staring dubiously at the offered money. “It’s tradition.”

“I can’t do anything for her right now,” I said, feeling naked. “At least let me pay for her coffee. For everyone’s.”

Madison nodded sagely and took the cash.

Landry laid her hand on my arm. “You’re doing more than you know. You’ve been here the entire night. Sat by her bedside...”

“It’s not enough,” I whispered.

Rory rushed forward and wrapped her arms around my waist. Her head didn’t even clear my shoulder. Surprised, I glanced around, expecting to see Ryan charging me. But his ass was still in that god-awful waiting room chair. Our eyes met, and he lifted his chin, half smiling.

Bro. I’d be pissed if Jess was giving out free hugs.

“We love you, Kruger, and we’ll be here for both of you.”

I patted her back and cleared my throat. “You shouldn’t be handing out love like that.”

Rory gasped and pulled back. “Are you saying you don’t love us?”

All three girls gave me *the eyes*. You know, the look that was all wide and dewy with hurt like someone kicked their puppy after telling them it was ugly. As if that wasn’t bad enough, they huddled together, mashing themselves in front of me with wobbling lower lips.

“I’m saying you got boyfriends,” I lamented, trying to hold strong.

“But we can still love you,” Madison said. “I thought we were family.”

Ryan, Jamie, and Rush appeared.

“What the hell did you say to them?” Rush demanded, his dark features appearing even darker.

“He said he didn’t love us.” Rory sniffled.

Three glowers turned in my direction.

“Oh, for shit’s sake,” I spat. “I didn’t say that. Of course I love you.”

The girls brightened.

I sighed. “This is why I skipped dating and went right to engaged.”

Ryan stifled a laugh.

“We’ll be back with coffee!” Rory said, stretching up on tiptoes to peck a kiss on Ryan’s cheek.

“We should get Kruger an extra-large trauma latte,” Madison said, and the other girls nodded.

I opened my mouth to argue, but Jamie cut me off. “Let them buy the damn trauma coffee.”

“Tastes pretty good actually,” Rush added.

“Yes, trauma is tasty,” I spat.

“Pissy.”

I ground my teeth together. “Someone tossed my girl down the stairs, and now she doesn’t remember me.”

“By the time we go back in there, she’ll remember everything.” Ryan tried to assure me.

At that moment, her doctor stepped around the corner, eyes searching.

“Doc,” I called, stepping through the wall of my friends. “How is she?”

I felt like my entire life dangled by a tattered thread as I waited for the answer.

The doc walked closer, mouth settling into a grim line. “I don’t have many answers,” he replied. “I haven’t been able to assess her yet, as she is very agitated and asking for you.”

I didn’t wait for him to say anything else. I took off in her direction, leaving everyone in my wake.

JESS

THE DOOR PUSHED OPEN, AND A BROAD-SHOULDERED BODY bulldozed through. The complete lack of hesitation he embodied reassured me in a way nothing else could.

I was unsure. He was absolute.

I felt broken. He radiated strength.

I had questions. He was the answer.

I had known very little since opening my eyes, but my instincts screamed for him. And if I couldn't trust my mind, I would trust my gut.

"Jess." His voice was rumbly, kind of like thunder rolling over a stormy sky, and I leaned away from the nurse in favor of him as relief glazed my tattered nerves.

Tears pricked the backs of my eyes, making me blink furiously, frustration swelling in my chest until it was uncomfortably tight. *Why can't I remember?*

Coming around to the side of the bed, he lowered the rail and dropped onto the edge of the mattress, holding out his arms. I leaned into him willingly, my hands fisting in the T-

shirt covering his chest as I buried my face against his shoulder, letting it muffle the sob I couldn't restrain.

"There's my girl," he said fondly, anchoring me against him while stroking the back of my head with his palm. "I hear you were missing me."

I nodded, face rubbing against his chest with the movement.

You can't miss a stranger.

But he's not. He's your fiancé.

He made a deep sound, hunching around me a little more, creating a cocoon with his body heat and a shield with his size. The scruff on his jaw caught in my hair as he lowered his face to speak softly against my ear.

"What's the matter, baby girl? Hmm? Tell me what's wrong so I can fix it."

Goose bumps lifted across my arms, and my fingers went from clenching his shirt to flattening against his chest. Balancing my palms against him, I pushed out of his hold enough to lift my face.

My stomach dipped when I realized how close we were, so close that our noses nearly brushed and the tickle of his warm breath brushed softly across my skin. Flexing my fingers against his pecs, I thought about moving back just a little bit more, but my body didn't obey the thought, and I stayed rooted right there in his personal space like it was mine.

Maybe it is.

I lifted my eyes, seeking answers but forgetting the questions and getting caught up in his captivating two-toned stare. I heard his thick swallow and watched his lips part with

a cautious inhale. Everything around us began to hum, electricity bringing the air alive, the currents making my stomach buzz. Without thought, the pads of my fingers rubbed lightly against his shirt, the repetitive action oddly soothing.

The palm cradling the back of my head slid down to gently untangle a few rogue brown strands of my hair that were caught in his scruff. When they were gone, I felt oddly sad until he cupped the side of my face.

“Everything’s okay.” He spoke quietly to no one else but me. *Like I’m the center of his world.* “I’m here. I got you.”

I hesitated, afraid to ask but so desperate to know. “Ben?”

Pride lit his eyes, and the corner of his lips tugged up into a lopsided smile that made my heart tumble. “I guess some things are just too good to forget.”

A rush of fondness overcame me, and suddenly, I wanted to tease. “Or too annoying.”

His mouth dropped open, but then he shook his head sadly. “You hit your head hard.”

I giggled, and he grinned. The giggle was short-lived, though, because, while I was happy I’d remembered his name... “I don’t remember anything else,” I confessed, sorrow clogging my throat. “It was really bothering me that you left without telling me your name. I worried you wouldn’t come back.” I lowered my eyes, feeling embarrassed and somehow ashamed.

He made a soft noise, petting my hair. His hand was big, so big it covered the entire side of my head, and even though his touch was gentle, it made me feel inherently safe.

Tucking his finger beneath my chin, he pushed my face up even as he leaned down so he could look right into my eyes.

“You take all the time you need, sweetheart. I’ve been following you around half my life, and I can guarantee that isn’t going to change, so you don’t have to worry about me not coming back. I’d have to leave first, and that ain’t happening.”

I felt my eyes round with the little bit of information. *We’ve known each other that long?* “Really?”

He nodded. “But I’m not sorry I forgot to tell you my name.”

Surprised, my lips fell open. “What?”

He half smiled. “If I had, I wouldn’t have gotten that sweet rush from having you remember me on your own.” He tapped the side of my head lightly. “If my name was still in there, then the rest of me is too.”

My lips curled in on themselves. *Is he flirting with me?* “It just came out when I kept asking for you and they said no.”

He drew back a little. “They told you *no*?” His body rotated in the direction of the nurse, and all the warmth he’d radiated at me turned cold. “You told my girl she couldn’t see me.”

The nurse bristled a little but stood her ground. “We need to assess your fiancée, Mr. Kruger. I’m sure you understand her well-being is top priority.”

His body tensed. “You told her we’re engaged?” His voice was flat, borderline angry.

My hands slid away from where they still touched him, unease coiling inside me.

“I mentioned it briefly,” the nurse replied.

“Is that not right?” I asked, feeling my forehead bunch as confusion muddied my thoughts. “Are you not the one who

gave me this ring?” I worried, stabbing a finger at the sweet little bow. “*Oh God*, is it someone else?” I freaked, snatching my hand back to cradle it against my chest. Panic pooled into my limbs like adrenaline, making me jittery and unable to focus clearly.

Ben made a noise and closed the distance between us that I had tried to gain. “Like hell I’d ever let any other man have you,” he grumbled. “Of course it’s me.”

Calmed, I sagged into him. “It’s you?”

“Mm.” He agreed. “Who else would it be?”

My nose wrinkled, and I hesitated.

Ben gave me a squinty look. “You got someone in mind, do you?”

“I—I’m confused.”

His face softened. “I know, sweetness. You’ve been through a lot. It’s okay.”

“You aren’t mad?” I asked, wringing my hands at the thought.

“Mad at you?” He scoffed. “Not possible.” As if to prove it, he leaned in to drop a kiss on the tip of my nose.

I relaxed. “So that other one who was here?” I gestured to my ears. “With the AirPods...”

Ben’s eyebrows arched halfway up his forehead. “You thought Prism was your fiancé?”

“He seemed familiar,” I murmured to myself. *But I was hoping it was you.*

Ben stood from the bed.

Alarm filled me. “Where are you going?” *You went and did it now! First, you forget you’re engaged. Then you act disappointed it’s not someone else.*

He didn’t answer as he went to the door, glancing at the doctor I hadn’t even realized was in the room.

“Please don’t leave,” I called, totally annoyed with myself for the clingy behavior. *This is not me.* But the idea of him leaving was nearly unbearable.

Ben stopped and turned. “I’m not going anywhere, baby.” He assured me, then pulled open the door. “P.” He spoke into the hallway. “You’re being paged, bro.”

He came back inside, the guy I’d just asked about, appearing behind him. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Quiet demeanor. An inkling of familiarity came over me, but it was a mere fleeting sensation, and then it was gone. Like my brain wanted to remember but it just couldn’t. *Maybe once this horrible headache goes away.*

“Jess, hey,” he said, coming over to the bed, watching with calm but assessing eyes. “You okay? What do you need?”

It wasn’t lost on me that since I’d woken up, both of these guys had offered to get me whatever I needed. It made me feel even more guilty for forgetting them.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

His brows drew down, and suddenly, he was tugging the AirPods out of his ears, shoving them into the pocket of his sweats. “Sorry? What’re you sorry for?” he asked, his voice concerned.

Ben patted his shoulder. “This is Prism.” He introduced. “Brother. Not fiancé.”

Prism made a choked sound. “Fiancé?”

“She remembered my name, so I’ll forgive this,” Ben told him.

“You’re her brother?” the doctor interjected, looking at his tablet. “I thought she had no blood relatives here.”

“Brother from another mother,” Ben quipped.

“Brother by choice,” Prism said, offering me a small smile.

“Then why can’t I remember you?” I worried. “Your name doesn’t even sound familiar.” I glanced at the doctor, suddenly regretting I hadn’t let him examine me.

Prism cleared his throat. “Ah, you actually don’t call me that.”

I forgot the doctor to gape. “I don’t call you by your name?”

He smiled. “Prism is my last name. You use my first name.”

“Oh,” I said.

“You’re the only one allowed to use it,” Ben added.

My eyes flew back to Prism whose cheeks were turning pink. *Is he embarrassed?* It was kinda cute. “What’s your first name?” I asked.

“Matthew,” he said, then, “Matt.”

Ben nudged him. “Keep talking, P.”

“Matty,” he admitted, blush intensifying. “You call me Matty.”

“Matty,” I repeated, trying the name out. It still wasn’t familiar, but when I looked at him, I felt like the name fit.

“Bro, he’s got more than one name too,” someone whispered.

I glanced at the doorway, surprised to see a group of people crowding it.

“Don’t even think about it,” Matt warned. It gave me a moment of pause because of how easy it was to refer to him as Matty in my head, not Prism.

“Oh, everyone is still here,” the doctor observed as the room filled with a sea of unfamiliar faces. He didn’t seem very thrilled.

“It’s visiting hours,” a guy with a mop of brown curls refuted. Beside him was a dark-haired man in a leather jacket.

“So it is.” He agreed. “Regardless, we will need the room so we can examine the patient.”

A girl with long dark hair tucked under the massive wingspan of a guy with dark-blond hair and blue eyes spoke up. “Jess, how are you? Do you need anything?”

Another offer of help. Another massive wave of guilt had me choking on a sob. Everyone froze, an awkward, alarmed vibe filling the room.

Ben was there, sliding onto the edge of the mattress. “Come here.” His voice was so soothing it was almost a purr.

I went instantly, curling into his chest, rubbing my nose against his shoulder while tucking my arms between us.

“I really wouldn’t recommend too much too soon,” the doctor cautioned. “She needs time to acclimate herself.”

In a burst of energy—okay, mostly anger—I bolted up from the comfort of Ben’s chest, ignoring the wetness clinging to my lashes and the sharp stab of pain in my head. “I don’t

need to acclimate. I need to remember!” To the doctor, I said, “Why can’t I remember?”

The doctor cleared his throat. “My professional opinion is that you are experiencing retrograde amnesia.”

The word was like a punch right to my chest. *Amnesia*. “I have amnesia?” I echoed, trying to process the fact that I seemed to have brain-dumped my entire life.

“Retrograde amnesia is fairly common among those with traumatic brain injuries. Its symptoms include loss of memories of a period of time before the injury. Also, forgetting names, faces, and even dates before the onset of amnesia. What is the last memory you can recall?” he asked.

I stared blankly into my lap, trying to remember. You’d think it’d be easy, right? I mean, I was basically sifting through nothing. But it wasn’t easy, and self-doubt was killer. What if I remembered wrong?

“There are no wrong answers,” the doctor said like a creepy mind reader.

Feeling everyone’s stares, I finally replied, “The only memories I have are from when I was young.” *And honestly, the memories aren’t that great*. Internally, I grimaced. *Is this why I can’t remember?* Because my life was a shitshow and my brain was trying to protect me?

The doctor nodded. “Being able to remember long-term memories, such as childhood, is also an indicator of retrograde amnesia.”

“But what about everything else?” I worried, eyes going around the room to all the people crowded inside. “Are you my friends?”

“Every last one of us.” A guy with dark hair and blue eyes spoke up. I tried to remember his name but failed.

“Ryan Walsh,” he said, pointing to himself. He gestured to a little redhead beside him. “Rory Coin. But I call her Carrot.”

I smiled. “Carrot?”

Rory nodded. “We’re dating,” she informed, then, “He thinks my hair is orange.”

“It’s auburn,” I refuted.

Rory beamed. “That’s what I said!” Stepping away from Ryan, she held up a paper cup in her hand. “We got you a trauma latte.”

“A trauma latte?”

Rory bobbed her head. “It’s caramel.”

I glanced at the bedside table where there were three other identical-looking cups.

“It was a long night,” a girl with a chin-length bob said. I recognized her as much as everyone else in the room. Not at all.

I felt my eyes round. “You’ve all been here all night?”

“Just me and P,” Ben answered. “They went back to the dorms for sleep and swim practice.”

“I live in a dorm,” I said, remembering. “And I’m a lifeguard.” I gasped. “I play piano too!”

Ben scoffed. “Girl, you don’t play piano. You *own* it. Best damn ivory-tickler I’ve ever heard.”

Ivory-tickler? I giggled.

He glanced at me, a half smile curving his lips. “You liked that one, did ya?”

I really liked the way he looked at me, like his eyes were hugging me. An eye embrace. Is that a thing? It must be because I felt cuddled even though he wasn’t even touching me.

“Your self-awareness is good,” the doctor said, making notes on his iPad. “Anterograde amnesia is what occurs when a patient has problems forming new memories.”

“I remember everything that’s happened since I woke up,” I said quickly, anxiety making my stomach churn. “I don’t have that.”

The doctor nodded. “I would agree. You seem to be holding on to new information just fine. As for the confusion, that’s normal. The longer you’re awake, the more you will be able to acclimate yourself.” He paused, glancing at Ben then back at me. “You don’t remember anything about your injury or what happened to you last night?”

A flutter of panic burst in me, spreading through my limbs with startling speed. My fingers automatically reached for Ben’s as if my body knew where to go when it needed reassurance.

His body seemed to know when to give it because he gently tugged me into his side. I sank into his warmth with a silent exhale. Everything was confusing right now, but the safe way he made me feel was utterly clear.

“I don’t remember,” I whispered. “What happened to me?”

Ben started to say something, but the doctor cut him off almost immediately. “I’m going to order a second CT scan because of the memory loss you’re experiencing. I don’t think

it's anything to worry about, as the first scan was fine, but I'd like to do this as a precautionary measure."

I nodded. "Will I remember?"

"Most likely."

Frankly, I didn't find that reassuring. "When?" I asked, wanting to fill in the gaps in my memory, sensing what I'd lost was somehow very important.

"It could be in a few minutes or a few weeks. There really is no timeline on brain injuries like this."

"But I will remember," I pressed.

"I can't guarantee anything." He hedged, and I kinda wanted to poke him in the eye.

No wonder Ben was so surly with these people. They were horrible.

"I'll put in the order right now, and once that's done, I'll come back with the results and finish my exam. By then, the surgeon will probably be here and can talk to you about your ankle."

I glanced at the white cast around my lower leg and foot. "How will I work?" I stressed. Then I gasped. "I work at a music store!"

"Look at that. The old brain is warming up," a guy with dark hair and eyes mused. He was standing beside the blonde.

"Not enough," I muttered, wishing I knew all these people who'd showed up for me.

"Rush," the guy said, pointing to himself. "That's my girlfriend. She's a little siren, but you can call her Landry."

Landry waved.

Another big guy with chestnut hair and hazel eyes spoke up. "I'm Win. This is my better half, Lars." His better half was gorgeous with white-blond hair and pale-blue eyes. And his skin was incredible.

Max and Wes introduced themselves, but they didn't have to tell me they were dating. I could tell instantly. Madison and Jamie introduced themselves next. They told me we all went to Westbrook together and all the guys except Win and Max were Elite swimmers.

"And we're all friends," I repeated, gazing around at everyone. I had a lot of friends. And I forgot them all. It was overwhelming.

Everyone nodded.

"Except you," I said, looking at Ben.

He jolted. "What?"

"We're more than friends." I glanced down at the bow around my finger. "We're engaged."

Something rippled in the air, and when he didn't immediately relax and agree, the confusion still lingering inside me started to grow.

But then he let out a gruff sound, swiping his thumb across the back of the hand he was still holding. "Of course, baby."

"Why else would he let you call him Benji?" Matt mused.

Ben groaned. "How could you do it to me, P?"

He laughed under his breath. "Payback's a bitch."

I latched on to that little bit of information like it was gold and everything else I'd just learned was mere coal. "I call you Benji?"

“It’s terrible, isn’t it?” he mused, smiling like it wasn’t terrible at all.

My heart swelled a little, and all that rising confusion shriveled.

“*Benji?*” Max heckled from across the room. “That’s worse than Maxi.”

“I’m so calling you Benji from now on.” Win cackled.

Ben gave me a wink before sighing insufferably and turning toward our friends. “Bro, I will cover your floor with mini Legos while you’re sleeping and then enjoy the sound of your screams when you get out of bed in the morning.”

I giggled.

He glanced back at me. “Not you, though. You can call me whatever you want, and I’ll always answer.”

The doctor stepped forward. “I think it’s best if we limit visitors for a while. Too much stimulation could have negative effects. We can reassess after your CT scan and a more thorough exam.”

“You’ll stay, right?” I whispered to Ben.

“Does a monkey have a tail?” he refuted. Then his eyes widened so much I could see the white around the different orbs of color. “They do. In case you forgot.”

I laughed. “I didn’t forget.”

“So you can remember what a monkey has on his ass but not all this?” he muttered, gesturing to himself.

“She dumped useless info, bro.” Wes chimed in.

“Guess a monkey’s ass is more important than you,” Jamie quipped.

“You two should use glue instead of ChapStick,” Ben retorted.

“Out,” the nurse and doctor said at the same time.

“Before we go, would you like this latte?” Rory asked, coming over beside the bed. “It’s still warm.”

The idea of drinking the coffee turned my already queasy stomach, but the promise of something warm to hold was too appealing to deny. “Thank you,” I said, reaching for it. The second my hand closed around it, I sighed appreciatively as goose bumps raced up my arms, the heat seeping into my cold hands.

The sensation was so soothing that I wilted back toward the pillow. I must have misjudged the distance or perhaps was still disoriented because I ended up flopping backward like a dead fish, making my arms and legs fling out in search of balance. Coffee splashed out of the little hole in the lid, splattering my hand and wrist, and I gasped.

The spilled coffee burned my skin, but honestly, that was the least of my worries.

“Where the hell are your pants?” Ben exclaimed, practically diving between us to block the show I’d unwittingly provided.

Memory-challenged, uncoordinated, *and* I’d just flashed the entire room. Just call me blessed.

“I don’t know!” I wailed, completely embarrassed.

“All right now.” Ben’s voice was soothing as he tugged the hoodie he’d given me over my lap, spreading it out like a blanket. “Gotta keep those long stems under lock and key.”

“Did you burn yourself?” Matt asked, appearing right beside me. He was so much quieter compared to Ben. He took the coffee I’d barely gotten to enjoy to set it aside. After a brief glance around, he grabbed the hem of his shirt and used it to pat all the spilled brew off my hand.

I stared at him as he worked, affection rushing over me just the way the goose bumps had before. I still didn’t remember him, but he didn’t feel like a stranger.

“Does it hurt?” he questioned, voice quiet.

I shook my head. “No. It’s good. Thanks, Matty.”

His lips curled a little with the nickname, and he dropped the end of his shirt to lean over and kiss the top of my head. “I’m glad you’re okay. Be careful.”

“Let me see,” Ben said, reaching between us to take my hand, inspecting it like he had X-ray vision and was studying even my bones.

“I’m fine.” I assured him.

“Well, I’m not.” He was gruff. “You just flashed the entire damn room.”

“We weren’t looking,” Win declared. “We aren’t like you.”

“Don’t you be telling my girl I’m a perv!” Ben snapped.

“I need to get that scan ordered,” the doctor announced.

“Can I have the coffee back?” I asked Ben, trying to hold back a shiver.

“No. You’ll just burn yourself again. I won’t have it.”

“I’m cold,” I confessed quietly.

All the tension drained from him, replaced by a soft sound, and he tucked the hoodie a little closer around me, letting his

fingers brush over the back of my hand. “I got you.”

Straightening, he gently returned the cup, making sure I held it with two hands. Once it was firmly in my grip, he turned to the group filing out of the room.

“Anyone have any extra sweats in their car?” It was a surprise when several hands shot up.

“You all have extra clothes?” I mused.

“Swimmers always have extra clothes. And Speedos,” Lars told me. He had an accent, and I wondered where it was from.

“My duffle is in the Audi,” Matt said before I could ask. “I’ll get it.”

“Good looking out, bro.” Ben agreed.

Everyone else called out their goodbyes, promising to come by later to visit.

When they were gone, the doctor looked at Ben. “Mr. Kruger. A word with you in the hall.”

“What? Why?” I squeaked, freaking out that there was something terribly wrong and no one was telling me.

“I just need him to sign a form at the desk for the scan,” the doctor replied calmly.

Ben leaned over to kiss the top of my head. “I’ll be right back, sweetheart.”

I watched him follow the doctor out into the hall, my eyes staying on him until I couldn’t see him anymore through the little window.

I should have felt better, right? Apparently, I had a whole group of really great friends, and the news was encouraging. My memory would come back.

So then why did I feel just as worried as before?

KRUGER

AMNESIA. TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY. THE LOOK ON HER FACE when she asked me if we were more than friends.

I lied. I fucking looked into her trusting, innocent eyes and lied.

I was a bad bro. The fucking worst. Years of planning and effort to be worthy of her just stared into my face and heckled me. Frankly, it was scarier than all those bad horror movies my girl loved that I was so quickly able to undo years of determination.

Whoa. I epically fucked up.

“Doc?” I said the second we were out in the hall.

My mind was spinning. But even as I pummeled myself with an impressive mental beatdown, I focused on her. The urge to protect, shield, and fix everything was so vivid my hands shook with the inaction of just standing here in this sterile hall.

“I wanted to implore the importance of keeping everything as stress-free as possible right now. Your fiancée has been through a trauma, and her mind is still trying to process things.

She may be confused at times. She may get some things wrong.”

I nodded, listening intently.

“It’s imperative that her environment is as low-stress and calm as possible. Don’t tell her she’s wrong. Just redirect her. Keep to her regular routine. Too much variety and stimulation can be upsetting. She needs security and familiarity right now. Any information that you give her, new or old, should be simple and easily repeated.”

I swallowed, my stomach feeling hollow and wrung out. “I know what you said in there.” I gestured to the room. “But how bad is this? How worried should I be?”

His face pinched. Dude looked like a dried-up raisin. “Everything I said is the truth. I do not sugarcoat things for my patients. It’s unethical.”

I stifled an eyeroll. “I’m not implying you are,” I countered, gripping the tenuous string I had on my patience. “I just want to make sure I do everything I can to make sure she gets what she needs.”

He was silent a moment. Then he sighed. “While I can’t say that the staff here won’t be glad when you and your group are discharged, I can say it is very clear to me that you love her.”

All of my insides, bro. Everything from the chest down. All of it just dropped to my feet with his words.

He can see that I love her.

You do.

I’m used to hiding it.

Not anymore.

“Mr. Kruger?”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah. I do. Love her,” I said, my ears whooshing because that was only the second time I’d ever told anyone out loud that I was *in love* with Jess. And the first time was to him too. “That’s why I need to know.”

“Everything I said stands. I do believe she will recover her memory. I see no reason why her injuries won’t heal without any lasting effects. Now, if you will excuse me, I’ll put in this order so I can verify there is nothing serious going on.”

I waved him off. “Of course. Please, do what you need to do.”

He’d barely made it two steps before halting and calling out, “Oh, Mr. Kruger.”

“Just Kruger,” I told him. “I’m not my dad.”

Doc inclined his head. “The police have been here. Twice. They want to speak with your fiancée.”

“What the hell for? She didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Of course not. But someone did. Isn’t that what you and your friends implied when you called for help?”

I held in my curse, but inside my head, it was a whole parade. “I didn’t imply it. I know it,” I said. “But Jess is in no condition to be talking to the cops. She’s already confused and scared enough.”

“I agree, which is why we sent them away.”

I relaxed a little. “Thanks.”

“You don’t have any information about what happened?” he asked.

I shook my head. “All I know is someone was chasing her. She was scared, and when I got to her, she was at the bottom of the stairs, unconscious.” I’d already told him this, but hey, I’d repeat myself for Jess.

“And you think someone pushed her?”

“Well, I don’t think she jumped,” I snapped. Squeezing the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger, I let out an exhale. “I mean, yes. That’s what I think.”

“Then I must caution you.”

My head whipped up. “About what?”

“Some of her memory loss could be her mind’s way of protecting her. Considering the way she became agitated when I asked if she remembered what happened, I would be willing to assume it was traumatic, and I don’t just mean physically.”

My teeth gnashed together, and my hands balled into fists. I didn’t trust myself to say anything, so I just nodded.

Whoever did this to her is going to pay.

“If she starts to show any signs of PTSD, such as nightmares or panic attacks, please let me know immediately. Above all, just keep her calm. Don’t overwhelm her with too much information too soon.”

I laid my hand over my heart. “You have my word, Doc. I won’t do anything that will jeopardize my girl’s health and well-being. She’s priority number one.”

The doctor nodded and finally walked away.

I turned back to the room as the nurse was coming out. “Pain medication has been administered. Her vitals are stable,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said, anxious to get back to Jess.

“She’s a lucky girl,” the nurse commented, making me glance over my shoulder.

“Excuse me?”

“As a nurse, I’m definitely annoyed by your loud, overbearing behavior.” I felt my upper lip curl. *Time to get Jess a new nurse.* “But as a woman? Having someone like you at my bedside is exactly what I would want.”

Oh. Well. Maybe she could stick around. “What can I say, ma’am?” I mused. “I’m a real catch. But this fish has already been caught.”

Get it? Fish. Because I’m a swimmer.

Good looking *and* funny.

She laughed and went off as I stepped closer to Jess’s door, peering through the window to see Jess leaning her head on Prism’s shoulder and smiling.

My heart clenched. God, I loved her. For so damn long.

I always planned to make her mine. And now she was.

But it was a lie.

A lie I was now trapped in because telling her the truth was a risk to her health that I wasn’t willing to take.

JESS

BUTTERFLIES ERUPTED IN MY STOMACH THE SECOND BEN stepped back into the room, their fluttering wings increasing in speed at the sight of the single-minded determination on his face. His stride was graceful but commanding, so much so that Matt stood from the mattress and moved to the side as he drew closer.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, prickling with worry that the doctor did in fact tell him some heinous news.

“No,” he deadpanned without pause and slid his arms under me.

I gasped, reaching to steady myself as he hauled me off the bed. “What are you doing?” I demanded.

“Taking you to the bathroom so you can put on some damn pants.”

My lips parted in surprise. “Seriously? That’s what this is about? I thought he told you I was dying!”

“You aren’t dying. I forbid it.” His voice was gruff. Over his shoulder, he called, “P, give me a hand with her foot.”

Matt walked around to the other side of the bed and gently tugged away the corner of the sling, which was stuck to my cast. When it was gone, my foot dropped like dead weight, and Matt moved fast, catching it before it could hit the bed. Even so, it hurt, and I hissed as pain shot up my leg.

“Easy,” Ben cautioned, tightening his arms around me before sliding the handles of the duffle bag over his wrist and palming the IV pole to bring it with us.

“I’m too heavy for this,” I argued as he carried me and all my accessories across the room.

He scoffed like my words were too ridiculous for any sort of reply. But then a heartbeat later, he gave a quiet one anyway. “Feels pretty right to me.”

My gaze whipped to his face, but he avoided my stare. It didn’t matter, though. I didn’t need to see the look in his eyes because his words were enough to set the butterflies beneath my ribs wild once more.

“I got the door,” Matt offered, pulling it open so we could go straight into the adjoining bathroom.

“You’re my hero, P,” he quipped, the light flickering on automatically when he stepped into the small space.

I peeked over Ben’s shoulder to Matt, and he winked. I giggled lightly, and Ben glanced at me, his face darkening. His feet squeaked on the polished floor with the abrupt stop, and then he walked a few paces backward to pull the door closed with an audible click.

“Stop smiling at everyone,” he grumbled.

“What?”

He ignored the question, eyes roaming the options where he could put me down. I saw him eyeing up the toilet, which had no lid, and I shook my head adamantly.

“Do not even think about sitting me on that germ-infested hole in the floor,” I warned.

“You mean this germ-infested hole?” he mused, going toward it like he was indeed going to sit me on the seat.

I shrieked, locking both my arms around his neck to cling. The action caused a bolt of pain to shoot from my temple into my neck, and I stiffened with a low whimper.

He cursed quietly and gingerly set me on the counter. His warm palms cupped my face, holding it so he could sweep the whole of his gaze over me, studying every inch like I was homework and he had an exam.

“Where’s it hurt?” he cajoled. The secret quality the tone embodied made me sway closer.

Our gazes collided and held. Chemistry built so thick around us that I could feel its electricity sizzling against my skin. I tumbled into his stare, losing myself for long, quiet moments, reveling in his undivided attention. If I doubted this was my fiancé before, that doubt perished beneath the undeniable pull I felt between us. *I wouldn’t feel this way about anyone but the man I was going to marry.*

“Jess, baby.” His persuasive voice was softer than velvet. “Tell me where it hurts.”

I swallowed thickly, my tongue darting out to dampen my dry lips. “It doesn’t anymore.”

A low, guttural groan filled the room, and he leaned in, pressing our foreheads together so tight that the tips of our noses bumped. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“I’m sorry.” I heard myself apologize, but deep down, I wasn’t really sorry. Deep down, I was relishing this attention and the comfort he was practically smothering me with.

I like it so much.

The pads of his fingers slipped into my hair, tenderly cupping my head. “Don’t apologize. This isn’t your fault. You did so good, baby girl. I’m so proud of you.”

My lips rolled in, pressing into a tight seal. His praise was doing things to my insides. Things I desperately wanted to keep from escaping.

“I didn’t do anything.”

He made a noise, contesting my words. “You did everything. You called me, let me know where you were. You came through surgery *and* a head injury. You woke up.” He settled even closer, clutching me as if he were afraid I’d disappear.

For a moment, my heart stopped because I thought he was going to kiss me. I felt his want shimmering right there. Want so intense it inspired my own. I teetered on the edge of anticipation, hoping for our second first kiss. A kiss that I could tuck into my mind where all the others had been.

But then his chest expanded, and his shaky exhale whispered across my lips instead. “Thank you for waking up.”

I let out a ragged breath, practically deflating right there, but I wasn’t disappointed. How could I be when he was so grateful I was here?

“Even if I forgot you when I opened my eyes?” I whispered.

“Mm,” he hummed. “I’m in there somewhere.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you called my name.”

He was right. In my confused, frightened state, I’d asked for him without even really knowing why, just feeling I needed him. And in that desperate need, my heart called for him.

“I was hoping that name belonged to you,” I confessed.

“If it hadn’t, I’d have changed it.”

I giggled.

His smile was fast, lighting me up like a bolt of lightning. The corners of his eyes crinkled with amusement, and I was once again ensnared by his mismatched gaze. Suddenly, it didn’t seem like that big of a deal that I couldn’t remember anything because it was like all the answers were right there in his eyes.

“Do you think a person can trust their instincts even when everything else is unclear?” I asked.

He was quiet a moment, thinking about what I’d asked as he reached up to gently tuck the hair behind my ear. “I think the mind can play tricks and the heart can be blind, but instinct never lies.”

I tilted my head into the touch, hoping he would drag it out and not pull away. When his fingers slid down the length of my hair, his knuckles grazed the side of my neck, and my eyelids grew heavy.

“What is your instinct saying right now, sweetheart?”

I didn’t have to think about it. I didn’t open my eyes either.
“Your name.”

He groaned, cupping my head and leaning in to touch our noses once more. My heart fluttered erratically, and my breathing turned shallow. Anticipation created a soft hum below my skin, and my lips parted.

His nose affectionately rubbed against mine, warm breath expelling between our lips like he was fighting for patience.

I breathed in that breath and expelled it back to him, giving it a soft voice. “Ben.”

A pained sound vibrated his throat, and his chin lifted, disconnecting our Eskimo kiss but fusing our lips. His were warm and supple, pressing into mine with bold claim. I gasped at the contact, my stomach dropping like a rollercoaster from a high peak.

All at once, he stiffened and pulled away, skittering across the small room until his back came up against the wall. Wide, wild eyes flew to mine, the tops of his cheekbones crimson. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why not?”

He jabbed his thumb and forefinger into the sockets of his eyes. “It wasn’t supposed to be that way.”

My stitches tugged when my brows knitted, confusion mixing with pain. “What?”

“I shouldn’t be kissing you when you don’t even know who I am.”

“It’s okay,” I responded, almost surprised to realize it was. *I want you to kiss me.*

His eyes whipped back to mine, incredulousness filling his expression. “It’s not. You deserve better.”

He was visibly upset with himself, and that upset me. “If it makes you feel any better, that really wasn’t a kiss.”

He looked affronted. “Yes, it was.”

“Not really.”

His face turned stormy, and I found it oddly amusing. “My lips touched your lips,” he pointed out. “Touching lips is the definition of kissing.”

“I barely felt it.”

“You telling me I’m a bad kisser?” he demanded, no longer upset but thoroughly offended.

I suppressed a giggle. “I’m saying I don’t think it counts as a kiss if it lasts less than two seconds.”

His face cleared. “It didn’t count?”

I shook my head.

“That’s good,” he said, nodding to himself.

“Why?”

His head jerked up.

“You’re going to give yourself whiplash,” I told him.

He scowled. “You’re the one with the head injury, not me. Which is why I shouldn’t be in here kissing you.” His eyes widened, and he stabbed a finger at my legs. “While you aren’t wearing any pants!”

I gasped, pressing a hand to my chest. “The horror!”

“Don’t you sass me, final girl. First kisses should be better than this.”

“First kisses?”

He froze.

“Aren’t we engaged?” I said, starting to panic that I was confused again.

“Of course we are. But since you can’t remember any of our other kisses, it’s kinda like a first kiss all over again.”

“Oh,” I said, relief coursing through me. “You’re right.”

“I’m always right.”

I laughed.

Offended once more, he planted his hands on his hips to glower. “What’s so funny about that?”

“Instinct tells me something else.”

“Instinct,” he spat like it was suddenly a dirty word.

Amused, I said, “You seemed to like my instinct when it was whispering your name.”

“You need to put on some clothes. You can’t be walking around like that,” he declared, changing the subject.

He was cute. Ridiculous but cute. I liked the contrast of his baby face with the scruff shadowing his jaw. Kinda like a little war going on right there between boy and man. I hoped neither ever won. I was wholly endeared by both.

Grabbing the duffel off the floor, he went to sit it on the toilet, and I made a disturbed sound. He chuckled under his breath and set it on the counter beside me. The zipper seemed loud in the quiet space.

“These will work,” he said to the room, pulling out an ivy-green pair of sweatpants and a matching hoodie. Next came a T-shirt and a pair of white socks.

Realizing how cold I felt, I reached eagerly for the warm clothes.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked.

“Putting on pants?” I replied, phrasing it as a question. An *obvious* question.

“Those are Prism’s pants.”

I glanced between him and the green fabric. “So?”

“So you ain’t putting on some other man’s pants! I forbid it.”

“You forbid it,” I echoed.

He nodded once, succinct. “His dick was in there!” he proclaimed, pointing accusingly at the fabric.

Laughter bubbled up in my chest, making it feel tight. “Well, it’s not there now,” I pointed out.

Clearly, I was the reasonable one in this relationship.

He crossed his arms over his chest, face stony.

“Weren’t you just grumbling that I wasn’t wearing pants at all?” I inquired.

He took the clothes from me, dropping them on top of the duffle, and then stepped back, swiping the red sweats he was wearing down to his feet.

I gasped, averting my gaze. “Ben!”

“The only pants you’re wearing are mine.”

“But what will you wear?”

“Prism’s,” he said as though it were obvious.

“So you can wear his pants, but I can’t?”

“Exactly.” He nodded once.

“I don’t understand.”

“You hit your head.”

“Pretty sure that has nothing to do with this.”

His shoes clattered on the floor when he kicked them off and then bent to pull off the pants the rest of the way. I tracked his movements out of the corner of my eye but otherwise tried not to look. I don't know why, but his nakedness made me shy.

A light touch on the top of my leg made me jolt.

“Easy,” he said, voice soothing. “C'mon, I'll help you. Get these on while they're still warm.”

A shiver rushed down my spine, making my body quake.

“Whoa,” he murmured, slipping an arm around my waist. His scent surrounded me, and it felt like being embraced by familiarity. “You doing okay?” he asked, lifting his head to study me.

“You called me final girl,” I blurted.

His forehead creased. “What?”

“You said, *Don't sass me, final girl.*”

“I didn't say that.”

“I heard you.”

“You heard wrong.”

A sob caught in my throat, and I pressed the back of my hand to my lips to keep it from escaping.

“Jess,” Ben called, but I refused to look at him. I couldn't. He tried to tug my hand away from my mouth, but I locked my muscles, and he didn't force it down.

My throat worked valiantly as I struggled to keep down that pathetic cry.

“Baby,” he implored, and I lost the battle.

My hand fell into my lap, and my breath shuddered. “What’s wrong with me?” I worried, wringing my hands in my lap. “I can’t remember, I’m confused, and now I’m hearing things? How am I supposed to trust myself, Ben? How?”

A low curse fell from his lips, and both his hands covered mine, stopping their movement. His skin was so warm compared to mine, and the sensation of instant relief buffered everything else. “There’s nothing wrong with you, baby. It’s me. I lied.”

My lip stopped trembling, and I cut my eyes to him. “What?”

His face turned sheepish. “You didn’t hear wrong. I said it. I called you final girl.”

“Why?”

He shrugged, looking a little embarrassed. “‘Cause that’s what you are to me.”

“Isn’t a final girl a trope in horror movies?” I wondered. Gasping, I grabbed Ben’s wrist. “I love horror movies!”

He chuckled. “See? That beautiful brain of yours is doing just fine.”

“So I do?” I asked, wanting reassurance.

“The more terrible, the better,” he confirmed.

“Is that why you call me that, then?”

He nodded, saying, “Something like that.”

“But—”

“Pants,” he intoned, holding up the red sweats.

“This cast is heavy,” I said, lifting my thigh off the counter, watching the muscles quiver with the effort.

“I’ll help you,” he replied, kneeling at my feet to gather the pants and slide the hem over the foot without the cast.

The room was silent as I stared down at his bowed head, noting the mussed-up style of his sandy-blond hair. “Your feet are like ice,” he noted when his fingers brushed against one.

I watched him fall back onto his ass and lift his feet to yank the socks right off them.

“Ben!”

“Hush,” he scolded, bunching up one white crew sock to slide it over my chilled toes, pulling it up beneath the elastic hem of the pants.

I sighed, his body heat making me tingle.

“Good, huh?” he asked, and I bobbed my head.

“I don’t think it’s going to fit,” I said when he started bunching up the other leg to pull it over the cast.

He made a rude noise and then yanked the fabric. The sounds of ripping seams filled the room. “Your pants...” I worried.

“Will fit now.” He finished, tugging them gently over my cast. True to his word, the elastic band did fit, having been stretched to do so.

He tugged the fabric, standing as he went, his body so close to mine that my heart fluttered. “I’m gonna lift you down a minute, okay?” he asked. “Just hold on to me. Don’t put any weight on your leg.”

Unable to speak, I merely nodded.

His muscled arm wound around my waist, clutching me with confidence as he easily lifted me off the counter, guiding me toward the floor. My leg muscles quivered and groaned as he straightened, and I grasped at him tighter, afraid they would buckle beneath me.

“Good girl,” he praised, his voice like a caress as his hands hovered over the swell of my hips.

When I tipped my chin back, our stares bounced between us as the air in the room turned thick once more. My heart pounded heavily, thumping to its own rhythm, and my body relied on his to keep me upright as I clutched at his shoulders, admiring the strength in his body.

“Okay?” he murmured.

I nodded, my forehead lightly bumping his chin.

His stubble was soft.

“Hold on to me.” He reminded me, then slid down my body, robbing my breath and making my hands go from clutching his shoulders to his hair instead.

“Ben.” I was breathless, tightening my grip on his hair to try and pull him back up. “What are you doing?”

The soft material of the sweats glided up my legs, sliding beneath the hideous hospital gown. His knuckles brushed over the outside of my hips and then again at the place where my waist dipped in on the sides.

His fingers lingered there, lightly playing against the skin where the waistband of his pants met my body. Beneath the thin hospital gown, my nipples puckered until they ached, and I swayed closer to his chest.

“I was helping you put on these pants.” His voice was throaty and raw. “But if you keep pulling my hair like that, baby girl, I’m gonna yank them right back down and give you a real reason to hold on.”

My stomach dropped.

I wouldn’t be eating anything else for the rest of forever. Why? I no longer had a stomach to digest anything. All I had now was an ache... and the urge to keep pulling his hair.

I let out a shaky breath, slackening the grip I was using. His eyes had darkened and watched me with hawklike precision. My legs started to shake as he trailed his fingers up both my arms to encircle my wrists and gently pull them down.

He abandoned one hand to his shoulder, but the other he lifted to his lips. I watched with rapt attention as he stared at me while pressing a kiss against my palm.

Oh my God. He’s so hot. Giddiness coursed through my veins. How the hell is he mine?

“Shirt next,” he said, reaching behind him to grab a fistful of the T-shirt covering his chest.

Slack-jawed, I watched him yank it over his head in one movement. The second it was dislodged, my hand fell onto his bare shoulder.

Stunned, I stood there, and he grabbed my other hand and pulled it back to him for balance. “Hold on,” he instructed.

Quickly, I curled my fingers into my palm, trying to keep the kiss he put there. My eyes dropped to his chest, gliding over his rounded shoulders, defined pec muscles, down to his narrow waist and cut abs. His stomach muscles contracted as I looked, and I gasped.

“All you’re wearing is your boxers!” I announced, slapping a hand over my eyes. The sudden movement disrupted my balance, and I swayed on my foot.

“Careful,” he cautioned, both arms wrapped around my body to tow me. I gasped again, coming into full body contact with all that skin. “These boxers cover more than my Speedos,” he mused.

“I’m assuming that shirt,” I said, pointing at the perfectly nice one on the counter, “is also Matty’s?”

“I’m not having some other man’s clothes touch your skin. Bad enough you thought he was your fiancé,” he grumped.

I said nothing. I literally could not. Biting my lip, I glanced back at his chest... every golden inch of it.

“Back on the counter,” he said before lifting me and placing me onto my butt. Before pulling back, he untied the bow at the back of my neck.

Sucking in a breath, I crossed my arms over my chest to keep the gown from falling.

Gently, he tugged the shirt over my head, careful to avoid my stitches. When that was done, I tugged one side of the gown down and slid my arm into the armhole.

“What about the IV?” I worried, glancing at the line in the back of my hand.

Leaving one hand on my hip, he took the bag off the pole and carefully pushed it through the armhole, making sure the line wasn’t tangled before turning back to rehang it. While his back was turned, I let the gown fall and pushed my arm through, letting the shirt fall to my waist.

After repeating the same thing with the red hoodie I'd used as a blanket, I was completely dressed, the softness and warmth of the sweats making me much more comfortable.

I watched quietly as he quickly pulled on the clothes Matt gave him and then ran his hands through his messy hair.

Reaching over, he caught the string lying against my chest to tug it. "You look good in my clothes."

"What happened to me?"

He froze for a moment, the muscle in his jaw jerking once. When he looked at me, though, there was nothing but patience and warmth in his eyes. "I'm not sure, baby girl."

"But you said I called you."

He nodded. "You did. And I came. But you were already hurt when I found you."

"I can't remember."

"You will when you're ready."

He seemed so sure, and I didn't argue. Yet I still heard the doubtful voice whisper in the back of my mind. *What if I don't?*

KRUGER

ELITE GROUP CHAT

Kruger: Team meeting.

Prism: *boy raising hand emoji*

Jamie: Bro, we just saw you a couple hours ago.

Madison: Is Jess okay?

Kruger: She's sleeping. I have things to say she can't hear.
Private things.

Max: So you're typing them in a group chat? Moron.

Ryan: We're all family here.

Kruger: Wait.

Prism: *Red stop sign emoji*

Kruger: Did any of you add Jess to this group chat?

Rush: Little siren, he means you.

Landry: Why me?

Jamie: Because you added Madison and Rory without telling anyone.

Rory: Jamie, are you still salty about that?

Win: They popped up in here like those creepy jack-in-the-boxes.

Prism: *clown emoji*

Madison: He's just mad he can't complain about us and get away with it now.

Jamie: I never complain about you, Maddie baby.
blowing kiss emoji

Kruger: I'm trying to have a meeting. Pay attention.

Wes: I looked at the chat info. Jess isn't on here.

Kruger: You're a quality bro.

Max: You could have done that yourself.

Kruger: *middle finger emoji*

Ryan: So what's up?

Kruger: Where's Lars?

Lars: I'm here.

Kruger: I can't tell Jess about the fake engagement.

Max: You mean that you lied to her?

Kruger: Yeah. I lied. And it makes me feel like shit. It never even crossed my mind she would wake up with amnesia. I thought she'd wake up and we'd laugh about it. But now she's looking at me with those big eyes like everything I say is the law, and I feel like my insides are being chewed up by a meat grinder.

Lars: You can't just tell her the truth?

Kruger: Doc said to keep it low-stress. Not to argue with her or tell her she's wrong. He says she needs stability. How am I gonna rip what little bit of that she has out from under her by telling her I lied? She'd be confused all over again.

Rory: You can't tell her right now. She needs you.

Madison: She's right. It's better to let her recover. She'll understand when she remembers.

Kruger: What if she doesn't?

Jamie: You can get your grovel on.

Ryan: Is it even that big of a lie?

Prism: *eye emoji*

Win: Size matters for more than just dicks.

Landry: *barfing emoji*

Ryan: We all know you're in love with her.

Kruger: You don't know shit.

Ryan: You say you can't get a date, but you never even try. I see girls come up to you at parties and at meets and you barely even glance at them. At first, I thought you had a thing for Prism.

Prism: *shocked face emoji*

Max: *crying laughing emoji*

Lars: *Pride flag emoji*

Jamie: *eggplant emoji*

Rush: *peach emoji* x2

Wes: *bride emoji*

Kruger: This conversation is as useful as a waterproof teabag.

Win: *popcorn emoji*

Kruger: Just forget it.

Ryan: Everyone shut up.

...

...

Ryan: But then we met Jess, and it was obvious why you never look at anyone else, because she's all you see. So yeah, maybe you lied about being in a relationship, but the feelings aren't a lie.

Jamie: This is why my bro's the fixer.

Rush: He's not fixing shit. He's pointing out the obvious.

Kruger: It ain't that obvious.

Everyone: Yes, it is.

Prism: He thinks she's too good for him.

Kruger: P! Go back to posting emojis.

Wes: Tell us more, P.

Prism: They're codependent on each other but pretend they aren't. Also, Kruger isn't my type.

Kruger: Wipe your mouth, P. There's still some bullshit clinging to your lips.

Rush: Kruger, I should apologize for being pissed about you sniffing around Landry when she first got to town.

Landry: Jay, that wasn't an apology.

Rush: I said I should, not that I was going to.

Rory: I think you and Jess make a great couple.

Madison: Me too! So why haven't you made it official?

Kruger: The point is, as far as all of you are concerned, we're engaged. We've been engaged a couple months. We've been dating longer. Okay? And don't be pulling all this bullshit around her. The doc said no stress.

Ryan: You have Elite's word.

Lars: I have a question.

Win: The chat is yours, angel.

Lars: What's your type, Prism?

Prism: *monkey with hands covering his mouth emoji*

Kruger: This chat is going to self-destruct in thirty seconds.

Jamie: Okay, James Bond.

Kruger deleted chat thread

No messages to show

NERVOUS ENERGY WAS MAKING ME SWEAT AND MY CELL SLIP through my unsteady, damp fingers. *We all know you're in love with her.*

It wasn't that damn obvious. Just because I wasn't a manwhore, I must be head over heels for someone? Or gay? With Prism? Look, P was my best bro. I'd do anything for him. Hell, I was walking around in pants he usually keeps his dick in. But I didn't swing that way.

I couldn't.

The only direction I could ever swing was toward her. Abandoning the cell in my lap, I glanced at the bed where Jess slept. The room was dark, the only light from the hall filtering in through the window in the door. The chair I occupied was close enough to the bed that I could make out her features even in the lack of light. Her lashes fanned across cheeks that were still too pale for my liking. The length of her brown hair was tangled around her shoulders and was a stark contrast to the white bandage circling her head.

Her forearm draped over her middle, hand completely lost inside the sleeve of my hoodie. God, she looked fucking precious swallowed up in my clothes. Just seeing her all bundled in my red fabric sent a fierce streak of possessiveness through me that was shocking in intensity.

I was off-balance. Usually an even-keel type of bro, nothing much rattled me. I didn't see much point in stressing about everything because it seemed like a waste of time. If something did ruffle my good mood, then I made a plan. A man with a plan was in control. I'd figure out how to get from A to B, and then I'd execute it. I was patient too. Good things take time, right?

Swimming takes practice. Day after day, I have to show up at the pool.

A degree in economics takes years. One class at a time builds a foundation of knowledge.

And then there were the stocks. Risky, yes, but a calculated risk, one I measured daily.

All of these things are micro plans that add up to a bigger picture. A bigger goal. But this shit right here? A trip to the ER, a little white lie, and a side of amnesia... This shit was *not* part of my plan.

No wonder I couldn't sleep. I thought checking in with Elite, making sure they knew to keep my lies on the down-low, would make me feel a little more in control.

Should have known talking to that peanut gallery would only make this shit show smellier.

"We know you love her," I muttered to myself. "Ryan always acting like he's the Dalai Lama of fish. Just announcing shit like it's no big deal." My lips curled. "Asshole."

Maybe it wasn't a big deal. You know, if I hadn't spent the last four years of my life trying to prove my love was worthy. *And now she doesn't even remember who the hell I am.*

A small sound from the bed brought my head up, and I noted the tightness to Jess's previously relaxed features. The creases in her forehead, wrinkled nose, and stiff lip had me up out of the chair to lean over the bed.

"You're okay, baby girl," I whispered, brushing the backs of my fingers across her cheek. "You're safe."

Another small sound escaped her lips, and she turned her face in my direction. Heart swelling, I moved closer to brush a kiss across her temple and tug the blankets a little closer around her. She settled, but I stayed close a few minutes more, just in case.

Her features relaxed and her breathing evened, so I eased back and went into the bathroom to take a piss. As I was washing my hands, her cry cut through the sound of the running faucet, water splashing my shirt when I jolted.

"No!" she yelled, terror coating her vocal cords. "No, please!"

The sink groaned under the force with which I shut off the tap and took off, digits dripping as I rushed toward her. "Jess!"

I scanned the room, thinking maybe someone had entered and startled her. But the space was just as I'd left it two minutes ago, dim and undisturbed.

"I didn't see," she wailed, thrashing around so hard the sling supporting her cast swayed and the pole holding the IV skittered into the side of the bed with a crash.

"No," she yelled again. "No!"

I rushed forward, shoving the chair out of my way to catch the IV pole, which was wobbling with her renewed thrashing. "Jess," I called, reaching for her. Beneath my palms, her shoulders trembled, and she fought against my touch.

Adrenaline pumped through my limbs, my body primed to fight, but I couldn't fight a threat that was within her... at least not with physical force.

Her body bucked again, waist bowing up as she smacked her fists into my arms. I let her hit me, holding her arms just enough so I couldn't be dislodged but conscious of the grip so she wouldn't get hurt.

"Jessica," I called, voice firm.

Her body stilled, and her eyes flew wide.

The look on her face made my stomach twist, and I worried that she wouldn't recognize me again. We stared at each other for long moments, measuring each other as I looked for any flare of recognition in her gaze.

"What happened?" she asked warily. I felt her withdraw into herself, and, bro, I think I'd rather pluck my eyeballs out with a pair of rusty tweezers than have her recoil from me again.

"You had a bad dream," I said, keeping my voice low and reassuring as I slowly withdrew my hands from her upper arms. "Just a dream."

I straightened away from her but couldn't force my body to step back from the bed. It physically hurt to put space between us. To hear her scream in terror and not be able to comfort her the way every atom in my body cried to do.

"Just a dream?" she echoed, eyes still latched to my face.

I nodded, stuffing my hands into my pockets because, if I didn't contain them, I'd reach for her again. "Yeah, baby, just a dream."

Her eyes filled, the tears shimmering in the dim light. Her lower lip wobbled, and I bit my own.

“Why are you over there?” she whimpered, one of those glistening tears breaking free to trail down her cheek.

A strangled sound burst out before any actual words. “I wasn’t sure...” I began, then faltered, unable to say the rest out loud. *If you would know me. If you’re scared of me. If you would want me.*

“Ben,” she whimpered again, holding up her arms. “I’m scared.”

I moved instantly, slipping my arms around her back, pulling her into my chest. She snuffled, turning her face so it was against my neck, and her hand curled around my head. Her breathing was uneven and she clutched at my shirt, and I couldn’t help but wonder if she was trying to get closer.

Gently, I stroked the back of her head, making soothing noises low in my throat. “There you go,” I murmured. “You’re safe. It was just a dream. Everything’s okay now.”

“You got me,” she whispered.

My stomach flipped. “Yeah, baby girl, I got you.”

She rubbed her nose against my throat, humming as if my words soothed her.

I was pummeled. Frankly, it was a fucking miracle I was still standing on my feet. Despite my still, calm demeanor, my insides were on the spin cycle. P told everyone we were codependent on each other, but that wasn’t true. Well, okay. Maybe it was a little true. I needed her in my life. I needed her presence. But I held myself back from crossing the line. From needing everything.

With her in my arms, my control was slipping. The lines getting blurred.

I started to ease back, and she let out a sound of distress. “Ben.”

“Tell me what you need.”

“Lie with me.”

Well, fuck.

I pulled back the rest of the way. “Are you sure?”

“You don’t want to?”

The vulnerability soaking her voice was like a shackle around my heart. I’d do anything for this girl. Including stepping over my own boundaries and stomping on lines that shouldn’t be crossed. But would she ask me for this if she remembered? If she knew the truth?

“Ben?”

I made a rude sound. “Girl, I’d superglue myself to you if I could. I’m just worried about your injuries.” It wasn’t a total lie. I *was* worried about her injuries.

“I want you.”

Everyone, wave goodbye to all my morals.

I kicked off my sneakers and walked around the bed to the side with her uninjured leg. I felt her eyes the entire time I moved, and her scrutiny buried me under anticipation and the roaring between my ears.

She peeled back the blankets, and I slid beneath them, fitting alongside her.

“Wait,” she said, palm lying on my shoulder when I started to lean back.

I froze, heart lodged in my throat. Did she suddenly remember?

“Will you take your shirt off?”

It took a minute for those words to sink in. How the fuck was I supposed to listen *and* feel at the same time? My God, this girl was going to be the death of me. Good thing we were in the hospital.

“Is that weird?” she asked. The timid quality in her voice had me looking in her direction. Her cheeks were pink. *She’s shy.*

Suddenly, I felt like the fucking man. “I wouldn’t say wanting to get a peek at all this is weird,” I teased, swiping the hoodie over my head and tossing it toward our feet.

She tugged the sleeve of my T-shirt. “This too?”

Yep, definitely gonna die.

I tugged it off. There were worse ways to go.

Her hand curled around my bicep and pushed me against the bed. I went, holding out my arm, and she fit herself beneath it. Her smooth cheek met my chest, and she let out a soft sigh.

“Watch your head,” I cautioned, voice raspy as my head swam.

I’d hugged Jess lots of times. I’d even held her a time or two. Affection always existed between us... but this was different.

This was everything.

Her little huff of frustration brought me out of my feels, and I tilted my chin down, arm hovering around her back.

“What’s the matter?”

“This stupid sling. I can’t lie the way I want.”

I glanced down to where her leg was supported, noting that it was adjusted so she could lie on her back, not her side. The rest of her was now twisted toward me, but her leg was keeping her from cuddling up completely.

“That cannot be comfortable,” I mused.

Flattening her palm on my chest, she pushed up. My stomach muscles clenched, and I bit the inside of my lip at the way the ends of her hair brushed over my pecs. The light touch teased me mercilessly, alighting my senses and fraying the little restraint I had left.

My nipples puckered, tightening to the point of pain, and I willed my dick to stay on lockdown, but he wasn’t a very obedient fellow and I could feel him rallying.

Desire ran hot in my veins as her body brushed against mine, the softness of her hair whispering over me again. Without thinking, I reached over, curling the ends around my fingers and rubbing the silkiness between my skin.

Feeling the gentle tug, she glanced around, and our eyes collided.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Your hair is tickling me,” I whispered back.

Thick tension weighed down the room, trying to suffocate the very oxygen we breathed.

“I need to brush it.” She was breathless.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered.

The hand propped on my chest slid from beneath her, and she tumbled into my body. Releasing her hair, I caught her, wrapping her in both my arms.

“Careful,” I cautioned, rubbing my hand up her spine.

She swayed closer, arm looping over my waist as her breasts pressed along my side. Every nerve inside my body lit up, vibrating with something so intense it could only be want.

How good I’d been at keeping her at arm’s length, but the distance between us right now was far less. It was so fucking heady I wanted to pull her even closer, abolish everything left between us, and never go back again.

Her lips parted, eyes growing heavy. I wanted to consume this girl, swallow her heart and soul. I wanted it so bad my fingers delved into the hair above her ear to grip her scalp and pull her closer. Her breathing stuttered, and my heart beat so hard, tomorrow, my chest would bear bruises. The back of my head lifted from the pillow. The pads of her fingers tightened against my side, and our lips brushed in a barely there whisper, flipping my stomach inside out. I lifted again, this time to take instead of tease, and my fingers brushed the edge of the bandage covering her headwound.

I dropped back into the pillow, breathing as if I’d just swam ten laps, and stared up at the dark ceiling as I battled back the urge to claim.

“Ben?”

I squeezed my eyes shut at the insecurity in her voice. *What the ever-loving fuck is wrong with me?* She was already confused enough.

Forcing back my own mental anguish, I pushed up onto one elbow to smile. “You need to rest, sweetheart.”

“I want to take it out,” she said, reaching toward her leg.

I frowned, flicking a glance at the sling. “You should leave it elevated.”

“It’s been elevated all day. Just for a little while. Please?”

“If it hurts, you’ll tell me?”

She nodded eagerly.

I laughed beneath my breath.

I unhooked the sling and gently laid her leg against the bed, tugging so the blankets covered all of her.

She sighed appreciatively and patted the space beside her. I lay back down, holding my arm out, and she wiggled herself close until her entire body was pressed along my side.

“You’re so warm,” she murmured.

The leg with the cast lifted, draping over mine.

I stilled for a moment, marveling at how wrapped around me she was. How good the weight of her body felt on mine.

She lifted her chin, peering up from her place on my chest. “Is this okay?”

“As long as you’re comfortable,” I answered. Inside, my heart was doing cartwheels.

“But what about you?”

“Baby, you could scoop out my guts with a scalpel and eat them while I watched, and I would like it because it’s you.”

“That’s disgusting, Ben.”

“Still the truth.”

She settled against me again, and my fingers found their way into her hair, combing gently through the length.

A little while later when I thought she was asleep, her voice stirred the quiet room. “I won’t have any more nightmares tonight because you make me feel safe.”

My eyes opened, and I stared into the dark. Two days ago, that sweet confession would have made me high on life.

But now? It made me feel like the world’s biggest bastard.

JESS

FOLLOW YOUR NORMAL ROUTINE, THEY SAID. DO FAMILIAR things, they said.

Excuse me, but *who* is they? I suppose, in this case, it would be the doctors, nurses, and even the fun-time therapist they had drop by my hospital room.

They clearly never had retrograde amnesia because, if they did, they would slap themselves in the face for being stupid.

Okay, that was mean. I'm grumpy. You would be too if nothing was familiar, you didn't even know what your "normal" routine was, *and* you had a broken ankle that made it hard to walk.

They also wanted me to keep calm. Totally easy considering everything I said above. *Not*. In the past forty-eight hours, I had learned that not all anxiety is created equal. That just when you think you've reached the peak, a fresh batch of trepidation would present itself.

It was a lot, you know? A head injury, a body full of bumps and bruises, and a cast on my leg. What was worse than the physical pain, though, was looking at it all and not having

a clue as to how any of it happened. *What was I doing? Did I fall? Get into a car accident? Did I have a car?*

I gasped.

Ben's feet dropped from the side of the bed as he sat up, pushing the lid of his laptop down at the same time. "Jess?"

"Was anyone else hurt?" I asked, a fresh wave of consternation overtaking me.

See? It was endless.

"What?" he questioned, sliding the partly closed MacBook onto the end of the bed so he could give me his full attention.

Tears welled behind my eyes, creating pressure in my head. "Whatever made me like this," I said. "Was anyone else hurt too?"

Ben made a soft sound, wrapping one hand around mine while his other slid beneath my hair to cup the back of my neck. Something inside me quieted almost immediately. It caught me off guard every time he touched me. How my body overruled my empty brain and reacted to his touch like it was the best thing since sliced bread.

Oh God, I didn't remember how bread tasted.

The realization made me whimper.

Still anchored at my neck, Ben shifted from the chair to the edge of the bed. The hand he wasn't holding automatically gripped his forearm. I didn't know anything since opening my eyes, but one thing was very clear.

Ben made me feel safe. To be honest, if it weren't for him, all that turbulent stress presenting itself in new and oh-so-fun ways every ten seconds would probably have sent my assigned therapist into a tizzy.

He hadn't left my side at all. I'd been here for two days, and he was a constant in a universe of unknowns.

"Look at my girl." His voice was slightly gruff. "So sweet she's worrying about people she doesn't even know." His thumb stroked across the pulse hammering in the side of my neck. The repetitive action was soothing.

"Tell me."

"No one else was hurt. It was just you."

"So it wasn't a car accident?"

His thumb stalled. "Is that what you're worrying about in there?" he asked, moving his hand from my neck to tap the side of my head.

I hummed in agreement, then wrinkled my nose. "I can't remember what bread tastes like."

He laughed.

I scowled. "That's not funny, Ben."

Cupping the back of my head, he leaned in, kissing my forehead. I sighed, and his lips stilled against my skin.

"What?" I worried, feeling the change in him. Whatever it was made my stomach clench. "Ben?" I worried, my grip sliding from his forearm to his wrist. "What's the matter?"

Oh God, I did kill someone. I killed them.

He jerked back, mismatched eyes wide. "You didn't kill anyone."

"Then why are you suddenly acting weird?" I said, not even worried that I spoke my thoughts aloud. Hell, clearly, I'd forgotten how to work my mouth too.

The look in his eyes shifted as he sat farther back. “I was thinking about how easily that became a habit.”

I blinked. “What?”

The side of his mouth tipped up. “Kissing your forehead,” he said quietly. “It’s second nature.”

My stomach flipped. “Did you not do it... before?”

His eyes whipped up. “Uh, yeah. Of course.”

I nodded, lowering my gaze. “I like it.” Then I whispered, “You make me feel safe.”

He groaned, pulling me into his body and enclosing me in his embrace. “You are safe with me, sweetheart,” he said above my head. “I swear everything I do is for you.”

“So about the accident...” I reminded.

“It wasn’t a car accident,” he said, still holding me. “That dinosaur you drive is gonna outlive us all.”

A vision of an old silver Mazda flashed into my head. Gasping, I ripped back from his hold, eyes wide.

“Whoa,” he cautioned, reaching for me.

My hands slapped onto his arms. “I remember!”

I expected him to light up, to be as thrilled as me. But a mask of wariness dropped over his boyish features. “You remember?”

My nod was so enthusiastic the stitches in my head tugged and a twinge of pain tried to ruin the excitement.

“I drive a Mazda, right? It’s old and silver.”

“Well, the color is questionable. You’d have to actually wash it for me to see the true color,” Ben mused.

I smacked him in the chest. “That was so mean!”

“I’m not the one who never washes my car.”

Scowling, I crossed my arms over my chest. “Shouldn’t you wash it for me?”

His eyebrow lifted. “Say what?”

“Isn’t it your job to wash my car for me?”

He leaned back like he had to make room for my incredulousness. It was kinda cute, and I had to suppress a smile. “Woman, how the hell is it *my* job to wash *your* car?”

“It’s on the list of fiancé duties.”

His mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. “There’s a list of fiancé duties?”

I nodded.

“You telling me you don’t even know what bread tastes like, but you have a whole list in your head of shit I’m supposed to do?”

“Priorities,” I sang.

“Give a woman a ring, and suddenly, she thinks she’s the boss,” he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Ben?”

He glanced up, sensing the shift in my mood and tone.

“What, baby girl?”

“So no one else was hurt?”

“No, baby. It was just you.”

“How?”

I'd asked him this before. He always said he didn't know, but he had to know something. I saw the police outside the door earlier today. I also saw the way Elite planted themselves in the way until they left.

A shuttered look came over his face, the same one he always got when I asked questions he didn't want to answer.

"You don't know what it's like," I whispered.

His brows drew down, the action scrunching up his nose. "What?"

"To sit here and stare at these four walls and wonder about all the things I don't know. To look at that cast, to feel sore and stiff, and not know how I got like this. I saw the police outside, Ben. You wouldn't let them in."

He snorted. "The cops in this town are as useful as a screen door on a submarine."

I giggled.

His lips twitched. "It's true."

"You have a lot of bad jokes."

His mouth dropped. Pointing to himself, he asked, "You think my jokes are bad?"

I nodded.

His hands shot out, fingers burying themselves in my sides. I fell back into the pillows with a squeal, squirming away from his tickling. He was relentless, though, his body following mine.

I laughed, unable to twist away as much as I wanted because my body was sore.

"Ben, stop!" I demanded between laughter.

“Tell me you love my jokes.”

“No!”

His hand slid up, delving into the back of my neck to tickle there too. My entire body spasmed, bowing up toward him with a loud squeal.

“Ben!” I wheezed, wiggling around. My neck was so sensitive, something I hadn’t realized but he obviously did.

“Ow!” I wailed, a last effort to get him to concede.

He stopped instantly, both hands landing on either side of me, his body caging me in as he leaned in. “Jess?” Concerned eyes swept my features. “Shit, did I hurt you? Was that too much?” When I didn’t say anything, he started away. “I’ll get the nurse.”

“Wait,” I called, grabbing the hem of his hoodie. He was still wearing the green one Matt brought.

“Don’t go,” I said, tugging him again. “You didn’t hurt me.”

He rotated back, scrutinizing me. I smiled. His lips pursed, and all my attention dropped to his mouth. Desire and curiosity flared inside me. And something that felt a lot like a craving. I’d forgotten what he tasted like too. *I bet he tastes better than bread.*

“You playing me?” he asked, squinting.

“Hmm?” I acknowledged his words but still focused on his lips.

His hands made a soft slap against the bed when he came back over me, leaning in close enough that his scent filled my senses, renewing that gut feeling of home and safety.

“Because that right there is an actual bad joke. Making me think you need a doctor,” he scolded, going on about whatever else. Something about a Band-Aid and giving him high blood pressure.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said, interrupting his lecture.

He stopped midsentence, and though the room was suddenly quiet, it was somehow louder than before.

The chemistry in the room welled, pushing our bodies closer together, and I became acutely aware of the way his chest rose and fell with every breath he took.

He did that eye-embrace thing again, looking at me so wholly it was like a hug, like being wrapped up in him without actual touch. I swallowed, throat tight as my fingers spider-crawled the little distance between us to finger the hem of the hoodie.

He swayed a little, his chest leaning closer, elbows bending on either side. His jaw was still scruffy. My fingers itched to rub over all that golden stubble.

“There is literally nowhere else I could be,” he murmured, voice gravelly and warm.

Fingers still itching, they took advantage of the position of his body and the way it made his hoodie drape between us to slip beneath it. They tangled mere seconds in the T-shirt but pushed beneath it too.

I heard his intake of breath. Felt his body go still.

I gazed at him shyly from beneath my lashes even as my hand grew bold. His Adam’s apple bobbed, and my stomach felt heavy as he watched me, the smolder in his eyes unmistakable. For all the tension between us, he didn’t pull

away. It was almost as if he turned to granite, holding himself in place so I could avail myself of his warm skin.

And oh, it was warm. The first brush of the pads of my fingers made my teeth sink into my lip. I paused, four fingers lying against his side, flicking unsure eyes up to his. He said nothing, but I was absolutely consumed. His reaction was overwhelming, making me want even more.

Emboldened, I pushed a little closer, my entire hand curling around his side. His skin rippled, muscles contracting against my palm. He was smooth and radiated warmth that was somehow more comforting than any other heat I'd felt. Taking a chance, I rubbed a little deeper, my insides fluttering rapidly.

Curling my hand, I dragged my knuckles over his waist, moving to his abs and the defined ridges there. His breathing was heavier now, the smolder in his eyes burning me alive. I became flushed from the inside out, and my skin grew warm.

This was what I'd wanted when I slept in his arms. Even though I slept so well, I'd been restless too. I hadn't understood why until this moment. He'd been shirtless then, but I wasn't. And though my cheek pillowed on his chest, I'd wanted more contact. I wanted to feel his skin alive and reacting to my touch, to have my skin on his.

My finger caught in his belly button, and I paused before boldly circling it so I could delve back in.

He sucked in a breath, his body jerking. His hand found mine beneath his clothes and tugged it free. "You're testing my patience, baby girl."

A fissure of uncertainty created a crack in the heavy tension shrouding us.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, a little forlorn he was rebuffing me.

He hummed, delving his arms under me to lift me off the mattress and pull me into his chest. My arms circled his waist, and I buried my cheek into his chest. He hugged tight, resting his chin on the top of my head.

“Don’t be sorry, sweetness. You’ve just been through a lot.”

Is that why he never kissed me?

“Please tell me, Ben. Wondering is torture.”

“You called me the other night—”

“Where was I?” I interrupted immediately.

“At the theater building. You had orchestra practice.”

“I play the piano,” I echoed, thankful I at least remembered basic details about myself.

“Oh, baby, you don’t play. You *are* the piano. I’ve never seen anything like it. You are so fucking talented. A musical genius.”

“I doubt I’m that good.”

He made a rude noise. “That’s how we met, you know?”

I pulled back enough to look up at him. “Really?”

He smiled. “You got a scholarship to the school I went to,” he said, pride shining in his eyes. “I didn’t even know they gave kids scholarships in middle school. But they did for you. You were so talented even then that it blew everyone away.”

“We met in middle school?”

“Mm-hmm,” he hummed. “Went to the same high school too. And now Westbrook.”

“I got a scholarship to all of them?”

“I told you you’re the best ivory-tickler to ever exist.”

I ducked my face closer into him and smiled.

“Anyway,” he said as if his over-the-top assessment of my piano skills was not over the top at all but merely a fact. “You were at rehearsal. And you probably gave a lesson or two after.”

“I give lessons...”

“Mm, to those less gifted than you.” He agreed. “Which is everyone.”

“Do you know how to play piano?”

He laughed. “These webbed things?” he mused, pulling his arms back to hold up his hands. “They’re good at cutting through water but terrible at the keys.”

“Can you hug me more?” I asked, averting my gaze.

He made a sound, sort of like a groan, and pulled me back in. I sighed against him, rubbing my cheek against his shoulder.

“What did I say when I called you?” I asked. I was nervous to ask even if I wanted to know.

“You said you were in trouble. Someone was chasing you.” His arms held tighter, his posture growing stiff. “I told you to hide.”

“I didn’t listen?”

“I think you tried.”

“Then what?” I whispered, feeling like I was being told a story instead of something I’d actually lived.

“You cried out. The phone cut off,” he said, voice gruff. “We couldn’t get there fast enough.”

“We?”

“Me and Prism,” he replied. “And the rest of Elite too. We all came.”

That surprised me, and I drew back in his hold. “You all came?”

“That’s what it means to be Elite. When one of us is in trouble, we all are.”

I nodded, feeling slightly overwhelmed. “So you found me?”

“Come back over here,” he said, tugging me close once more. Once I was settled, he went on. “You were in the stairwell. You, ah, hit your head. There was a lot of blood.”

“I was unconscious?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what?” I asked.

“We called for help. And I rode in the ambulance with you.”

“You did?”

“Mm.” He confirmed.

“I fell down the stairs?” When he said nothing, I pulled back again to meet his eyes. “I fell?”

“I wasn’t there, but yeah, it seems like it.”

Something was off... something... I remembered the police outside the room and gasped.

“Girl, you have got to stop doing that.”

“The police!” I exclaimed, ignoring his statement.

“What?”

“Is that why they were here?” I said, gripping his arm. “I didn’t fall, did I?”

“The police were following up because that’s their job. We called for an ambulance.”

“Did they want to talk to me?”

He made a face.

“You said I told you someone was chasing me,” I recalled.

“All right now,” he said, trying to pull me back in.

I evaded the action, keeping my posture straight. Even after hearing this information, my mind was still empty. The pieces just weren’t fitting, not creating a full picture.

“Jess, you need to calm down.”

My eyes flew to his. “Someone pushed me, didn’t they?” I covered my mouth with my hand, the words too horrible to speak.

His face darkened, lips flattening into a line. “We don’t know that.”

“But that’s what you think.”

“What I think is you need to rest. Stress isn’t good for you.”

“Know what else isn’t good for me? Being kept in the dark!”

He stood from the bed, a frustrated noise filling his throat. “No one is trying to keep you in the dark. But you need time to heal. To process.”

“The nightmare,” I said, hand flying to my mouth again. Leaving it there, I spoke through my fingers. “Is that what I dreamed about?”

His eyes narrowed. “You don’t remember?”

Defeat overcame me, and my hand fell into my lap. “I just remember being afraid.”

His face was stony. I knew he was upset, but he worked to give nothing away.

“Do I have enemies?”

He laughed.

I scowled. “How dare you laugh!”

“Someone not liking you is impossible.”

“Hell-ooo?” I called, pointing to my head and my foot. “Obviously not.”

His face turned stormy. “*If* someone did that to you, you don’t need to worry about it.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll take care of it.”

A light shiver worked its way down my spine, the cold spreading into my belly.

The conversation was interrupted when my doctor entered the room with my latest imaging and test results. Ben seemed relieved... but I wasn’t.

Good news, I was getting sprung from this place. Getting back to that familiar routine the doctor loved to preach about.

Bad news, I was going out into a world where nothing was familiar and with the very real possibility someone wanted to hurt me. Someone I wouldn't know, so if they tried again, how would I see them coming?

KRUGER

KNOW WHAT I DIDN'T HAVE ON MY BINGO CARD FOR THE year? My fake fiancée asking me from her hospital bed if she had enemies.

What was this, a comic book?

Because in what reality would anyone hate this girl? She was fucking perfect. Smart, funny, hard-working, and oozing talent from her fingers. Not to mention she was hella beautiful. I mean sure, she drove a crusty old Mazda and loved horrible slasher films for comfort, but that shit just added to her charm.

I laughed when she asked because it was fucking ridiculous. Deep down, I was horrified and spicier than that ghost pepper hot sauce.

I tried that once. Don't do it. Unless you really like your bathroom. Jamie would probably eat it. I should get him some.

Anyway, I was pissed. Someone pushed my girl down the steps. No. They didn't just push her. They fucking tossed her like a rag doll. Her injuries were too severe for anything less. The sight of her sprawled at the bottom of those steps, body

twisted and a halo of blood around her head, would be tattooed on my brain for the rest of forever.

FYI, blood does *not* make a good halo.

It was suggested perhaps she just stumbled and fell. That suggestion was from the idiot cops. And people think I'm the moron. Jess didn't just trip. I knew it better than my own name. The terror coming through the phone that night was real. Its pungent remnants still rattled around under my skin, stinking everything up. She was being chased. Attacked.

I didn't see anything. It was what she yelled right before the phone cut out.

I didn't tell her. How could I? She was in a precarious state, and I needed to be careful with her. Giving too much information at once could have a negative impact. Doc said so. Telling her she probably saw something that pissed someone off would create more stress and a sense of urgency to remember.

I told the cops, though. Yeah, yeah, they don't like Elite, and I question their usefulness, but this was Jess's safety. I'd do anything for her.

Including lie.

You lying for her or for you?

I pushed away that rude AF thought. I had enough to deal with right now.

"You sure you're up for this?" I asked, turning toward the girl riding shotgun and making no move to exit the Audi even though it was already parked.

Prism appeared like an intrusive thought, sticking his beanie-covered head between the front seats. "I'm starving."

“He’s starving,” Jess echoed and smiled. But then her eyes strayed out the windshield toward the pizza joint where Elite was meeting up to celebrate her busting out of the hospital.

It took forever to get out of that place, as much as the staff loved to tell me they couldn’t wait to get me the hell out of there, they sure took their sweet time bringing her discharge papers.

I didn’t complain. Out loud anyway. Inside my head was a whole parade of impatience and insults. I kept it to myself, though. The last thing I wanted to do was make Jess feel like it was some kind of inconvenience to take care of her.

It wasn’t. I was just stir-crazy staring at the same four walls and replaying all the lies I’d told in the past three days. But now I realized my location didn’t matter. I was still filled with guilt, and now it was worse because Jess was going to be out here walking around in an environment I couldn’t control.

And don’t be getting your panties in a wad over that, okay? I didn’t mean I was trying to control her. This girl was now walking around with a blank mind, and the person who did it was out there walking around too. At least when she was in the hospital, it was easier to keep an eye on her and everyone who came around.

Easier to lie to her too.

I really didn’t appreciate the running commentary going off like random fireworks in my head. So if that could shut the hell up, that’d be great.

“I need some pepperoni,” P announced.

“Bros should be seen and not heard,” I told him, pushing his face into the back seat, then reached for Jess.

“Hey,” I called gently, slipping my hand over hers, which was lying in her lap. “If this is too much, we can get it to go and take it back to the dorm.”

Her eyes stayed on the brick building across the street. The windows were lit up, the awning over the door ruffling in the wind. The sky was twilight heading toward dark, and though it was nearing spring, the trees were still bare and the night air was still cold. The second the sun dropped, the temps did too.

“We’ve been here before?” Jess asked, eyes still taking in everything around us.

“Mm,” I hummed in agreement. “This pizza place is a hot spot for the campus and Elite. They have the best pie in town.”

“We eat at Shirley’s a lot too,” Prism piped up from the back, and Jess glanced over her shoulder at him.

“Shirley’s,” she repeated as though she were seeing if it was familiar.

P nodded. “Yeah, it’s the campus diner. Their waffles are bomb.”

“Bomb,” she echoed.

“We eat breakfast there after practice in the mornings. Sometimes we eat there for dinner.”

“We do?”

“Lately, we’ve been hitting up Pizza House a lot more, though, because they’re nut-free.”

Jess’s eyes flew away from P to me, her fingers rotating beneath mine so she could clutch my hand. “Oh, do you have an allergy?”

My stomach dropped. God, the way she got to me. Looking all wide-eyed and innocent over there. Unsure about everything... But then when she voiced her first fear, it was for me.

“You worried I have an allergy?” I asked.

“Of course.” She was vehement. “I need to know. What if I gave you something that could make you sick?”

“You’re so pretty,” I said, reaching up with my free hand to rub the ends of her long hair between my fingers.

From the darkened, tiny back seat, Prism snorted. “Whipped.”

He was just jealous she wasn’t worried about his eating habits.

Jess’s brown eyes blinked, surprise filling her features. Her nose scrunched up seconds later. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It means shouldn’t you be more worried if *you* have an allergy and not me?”

Realization dawned, making her lips form a little O. But with a little shake of her head, the expression cleared. “You wouldn’t let me eat something that would hurt me.”

Did you feel that?

Because, bro. That was a fucking earthquake.

“You trust me that much?” I whispered.

“Of course I do,” she replied like it was simple. “We’re getting married.”

A choked sound strangled my throat. I sat there nearly asphyxiating on my guilt. Prism’s hand shot over the seat to

grip the back of my neck and squeeze.

The pressure reminded me to drag in a breath. As my lungs expanded, I glanced at my best bro, and his eyes were knowing. I dragged in another lungful and shifted my attention to the girl beside me.

Thankfully, Jess didn't seem to notice the fact that I was in danger of literally suffocating on my own damn shame. Her attention strayed back to the pizza house. "But... do I have allergies?"

"No, baby," I replied, voice a little strained. "It's Lars. He's allergic to nuts."

"He's the very blond one, right? With the light eyes."

"Yeah."

"He's very handsome," she said, almost to herself.

I shot up in my seat. "What the hell are you looking at him for?"

Prism heckled, falling back into his seat.

Jess glanced at me. "That's what eyes do, Ben. They look at people."

"Girl, don't you sass me." *That's what eyes do.* That was some nerve. Look, head injury or no, I wasn't having it.

"What's his accent anyway?"

I choked again.

Prism popped up from the back seat again. Fucking jack-in-the-box bozo. "He's Swedish. Moved here from Sweden at the beginning of the semester."

She nodded and turned back to me. "So you don't have any allergies, right?"

I wasn't charmed by that. I was not. "No. I have a lead stomach. I can digest everything. Even you calling some other dude hot."

She threw her arms up. "I did not call him hot. I said he was handsome."

Prism cackled from the back.

"Bro, put your AirPods in."

"Are you kidding? This conversation far outweighs any discomfort I have keeping them out."

Jess frowned. "What?"

I felt P tense slightly and knew it wasn't a good time for all that. "It means he's a nosy eavesdropper," I replied. "Now about the pizza. I can get it to go."

"Isn't everyone waiting for us?" she asked.

I pointed out the three Jeep Rubicons parked nearby. "Ryan's is the black one. Jamie's is red, and Wes drives the bright-yellow one," I told her.

"And the blue Corvettes belong to Rush and Lars."

"They all have matching cars?"

"It's a bro thing," I said.

Jess looked at Prism. "So you have an Audi?"

Prism made a sound, and I laughed. "P doesn't drive, baby. He's a passenger princess."

"Bullshit," Prism spat. "I have my license."

I dipped my head. "True, true."

"I just don't like to drive."

"Why?" Jess asked.

Prism sucked in a breath and blew it out. He was tensing up. This was a lot of convo and probably overloading his patience. But look at him trying for Jess.

This was why he was my best bro and her self-appointed brother.

After a second, he banked his frustration and shifted to Jess to answer, but I popped open the driver's side door.

"C'mon. I'm starving," I announced. Before popping the seat up to make room for P to unfold from the back, I leaned back inside. "Stay there, sweetheart. I'll come around."

After pushing the seat forward, I started around the back of the car.

"Kruger." Prism's voice had me turning at the fender.

The look in his eyes said everything, and I doubled back and held out my fist.

He smashed his against mine. "Thanks."

"It's what we do," I said and moved off. I didn't need to say anything else and neither did he. Having each other's backs was what we did, and it wouldn't change.

In the open door of the passenger seat, I bent down. "You sure you wanna go in?"

"This is something we usually do?" she asked. "Like normal routine?"

I heard the nerves in her voice and squatted right there in the open door. Reaching for her hand, I curled my fingers around hers. "I can't imagine how scary it must be right now. To look at literally everything with new eyes. To see places and faces you feel like you should know but don't. So don't push yourself, okay? I know the doc said to do stuff you

normally would, but there's no pressure. We can do that stuff on your clock. When you're ready. If being out for pizza is too soon, then I'll take you home."

"I don't remember that place either."

I made a rough sound. "You know what I remember?"

"What?"

"That you're a badass who goes after what she wants. You're strong, Jess. The strongest girl I've ever met."

Her teeth sank into her lower lip. "Do we live together?"

My heart stuttered. That was not what I was expecting. "Uh, no. I live in Peregrine Hall. That's where Elite stays. I room with P. You have a dorm room in Spade Hall. Same dorm as Rory."

She brightened a little. "Oh, Rory's my roommate?"

Damn. It sucked to tell her no. "No, baby. Your roommate's name is Lainey."

"So if you take me home, you won't be there?"

My chest squeezed. Was she implying what I thought she was implying?

I was so done for this woman. Goddamn. How was I ever going to go back to just friendship?

When she finds out you're a lying liar, she won't even be that anymore.

I considered punching myself in the face. It might be worth it to get that asshole in me to shut up.

"I can stay for a while, but technically, there's a curfew and I'll have to bounce." *Fuck. I hadn't thought of that.* How was I supposed to just leave her there tonight and walk away?

“I want to go inside.”

My eyes whipped to her face.

She nodded. “Pizza sounds good.” She paused. “Pretty sure I like it.”

I smiled. “Piles of cheese and grease. What’s not to like?”

She giggled, and the tension squeezing my sternum released. “I need my crutches,” she said, pointing to the back.

Did I mention I hated those fucking chopsticks?

Making a face, I spun, putting my back to her. “How about I give you a ride instead?” I called, thumbing to my back for her to climb on.

“I’ll hurt your back.”

“Please, woman. I swim backstroke. This is child’s play.”

She hesitated, and I glanced over my shoulder.

“You’re gonna hurt my feelings,” I warned.

Her lower lip stuck out in a pout, making my heart turn inside out, and then she reached for me, arms wrapping around my shoulders, body pressing right up against mine.

After hooking my hands beneath her knees, I stood. “Watch your head, baby.”

When I was fully standing, I gave her a little lift, and she tightened her arms around me.

“Shut the door for me, sweetheart,” I said, quiet, and she pushed it shut.

The second her arm came back around me, my insides growled in possessive glee.

Prism was leaning against the back of the car, AirPods jammed in his ears, eyes closed.

I kicked his shoe, and his eyes shot open. “Let’s go.”

We walked across the parking lot and the street in front of Pizza House, and P held open the door for me to step through.

The scent of sauce, cheese, and baking bread hit me, and my stomach growled ferociously.

Jess’s giggle hit my ear, the back of my neck breaking out in tingles. “How hungry are you?”

“So hungry that shitty hospital food is starting to sound good.”

“Bro!” Jamie held up his hand from a large table toward the back.

I piggy-backed Jess through the tables, and Rush stood up to pull out a chair at our table as everyone called out greetings. Once she was settled, I sat down in the empty spot beside her, and P sat beside me.

Our table was actually several pulled together, and four large pizzas already lined the center. There was also a bowl of salad, which had to be the girls’ doing because why would I eat lettuce when there was cheese and pepperoni in front of me?

“We got you guys some water,” Rory said from the other side of Jess. “But if you want something else, you can tell the waitress when she comes back.”

“We got more pizza coming,” Jamie said, shoving a slice into his mouth.

“Help yourself to what’s already here,” Madison added.

“Thank you,” Jess said, reaching for her water to take a sip.

The sudden urge to lay my palm over her thigh was so strong I actually started to reach for her. Realizing what the hell I was doing, I stopped and pulled back. I felt her glance at me out of the corner of her eye but didn't say anything.

Prism was already reaching for the pizza, he and Wes talking about the new update to the game we all played.

“How are you feeling, Jess?” Lars asked.

Jess glanced down the table at him, and the slice in my hand suddenly didn't seem that appetizing.

“Better than I was,” Jess answered, smiling.

“I'm gonna get you some sunglasses,” I told her. Then I glanced at Lars. “I'm getting you a ski mask.”

Lars turned confused. “What?”

Prism stopped midsentence to tell the table, “Kruger's jealous as hell because Jess called Lars handsome.”

Lars's face turned red, and Win laughed.

I glared at Prism. “You've tainted this pizza with your betrayal.”

Jamie leaned over the table to snatch it right out of my hand and took a giant bite. “Tastes fine to me.”

“It was just a compliment,” Jess said, her voice slightly embarrassed.

I forgot about my irritation with P and the burning jealousy and draped an arm over the back of her chair. “We know, sweetheart.”

Win's lips smacked. "You'd have to be blind not to notice he's the best-looking one in the room," he mused. "Just remember he's taken."

I growled. "So is she."

Madison sighed. "Can we table all the macho crap and just eat?"

Landry released the straw between her lips and made a sound. "Yes, please."

Wes and Prism went back to gamer talk. Ryan and Jamie talked about swimming, and the girls started going on about hair.

I grabbed a slice of pizza and slid it onto the empty plate in front of Jess. She seemed a little overwhelmed just sitting there taking in all the activity around us.

"Here, baby. You should eat something." She'd barely eaten while she was in the hospital.

She glanced between me and the pizza. "I think you're the best-looking one in the room."

Our eyes flew up, connecting. She seemed surprised she'd spoken out loud, and I was surprised she said it at all. My stomach was flopping around like a fish out of water. Like no way any pizza would even be able to get down there with all the aerobics it was doing.

I liked it.

I liked it a whole hell of a lot.

I could have called attention to what she said. Let the whole damn table know that I was someone's pick.

I didn't need to. Just hearing those quiet, surprised words fall off her lips was enough for me. It was fucking everything. I wasn't even hungry anymore. She'd just filled me up.

Her cheeks looked warm, lashes fluttering shyly. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to pull her into my lap and kiss the shit out of her right there. I wanted it so bad I leaned in, cupping the back of her head and holding it so I could lay my forehead against hers.

Rubbing her hair, I breathed in deep. Taking in her presence, drinking in the bashfulness but also the way she didn't try and take back what she said.

She owned her words.

She owned me.

"Any beauty you see in me is a reflection of you," I murmured, pulling back just enough to kiss the tip of her nose.

I started to move away, but she caught my wrist, stopping my retreat. Unexpectedly, she leaned forward and laid her lips on mine.

It was a brief kiss, a mere brush of her soft lips. It paralyzed my heart and mind. I could do nothing but sit there, flabbergasted by her ability to rob me of literally everything but at the same time fill me to near bursting with fucking joy.

She sat back, a small smile playing on the mouth she'd just used as a weapon of mass destruction, and then picked up her fork like she had no idea I was obliterated.

Still paralyzed, I watched her cut off a small bite of the pizza and lift it. Her laughter was like ripples in the stillest of waters as the cheese stretched between the fork and plate.

The bite disappeared into her mouth, and she chewed delicately before glancing at my still-transfixed form. “It’s good,” she said, the tip of her pink tongue darting out to lick her lip. “Thanks for the pizza, Ben.”

Prism grabbed my shoulder and squeezed, which restarted my body and mind. I jolted with it but then smiled.

“Eat up,” I told her, rotating to look at P.

I’m in so much shit, bro, I told him with my eyes.

Oh, yeah, he answered with his.

“You need calories.” He spoke out loud, sliding not one but two slices of pizza onto my plate. They were steamy hot and extra melty, clearly just delivered to the table while I’d been having an internal meltdown because Jess fucking kissed me. Right there at the table. In front of everyone.

I’d sell my soul to the devil for her to do it again.

Beneath the table, someone kicked me. Hard.

“Ow!” I wailed, completely snapping out of it. I stared across the table at Max who sat there smirking, a half-empty beer in front of him.

“Asshole,” I told him.

“You’re welcome.”

I grabbed up the pizza and shoved half into my face. A groan instantly vibrated my throat as the flavors exploded over my tongue. *Fuuuccckkk*, this was good.

I devoured it in record time and barely swallowed before reaching for the next one.

“Ben?” Jess’s voice was accompanied by a light tug on the sleeve of my shirt.

“What is it, baby girl?” I asked, turning to see her staring.

I felt myself start to slip, her gaze like quicksand. I’d let her fucking swallow me.

Max kicked me again.

He was an asshole, but in that moment, I was grateful because this was ridiculous. *Get yourself together, Kruger!*

“What is that?” Jess wanted to know, pointing.

I followed her finger to the pizza I was about to inhale.

“This?” I mused. “Pineapple and ham.”

“There are two types of people in the world.” Jamie butted into the conversation. “Those who think pineapple goes on pizza and those who do not.”

Jess smiled. “And which one of those people are you?”

“Please, Jamie hasn’t met a food he won’t eat,” Madison mused.

Jamie smiled with all his teeth. There was cheese in them. “She’s not wrong.”

Jess laughed. “What about you?” she asked Ryan.

“Bro, sure, I like it.”

She glanced at Max. “Fuck no. Fruit doesn’t go on pizza.”

Win made a sound of agreement and held his fist out to Max. “Bro.” They pounded it out.

“You don’t like it,” I told her, wanting those eyes back on me.

She seemed surprised. “I don’t?”

“Nope. You’re a pepperoni monster like P.”

“It runs in the family,” Prism quipped.

“Are you sure I don’t like it?” she asked, glancing at the food again.

“Don’t believe me?” I mused and lifted the pie between us. “All right, final girl. Open up.”

A little challenge sparked in her eyes, and her lips parted. Stomach bouncing, I fed her a bite, watching as she bit down. She chewed once, and her nose wrinkled.

Everyone at the table laughed.

“Told you,” I sang.

Stubbornness glinted and she smirked. “Oh. You like?” I teased. “Keep chewing.”

She did, and the skin around her eyes crinkled, face screwed up in disgust.

Laughing, I held my hand out, palm up. “Spit it out.”

“I can’t!” She gasped around the food she hated.

“So you’re gonna swallow it?”

She blanched.

I held my hand up again, and she spit it out.

“Oh, it’s gross,” she said, sticking her tongue out.

I tossed her half-chewed bite into my mouth.

All the girls at the table squealed.

“Ben! Ew!” Jess exclaimed.

“That was some good eats.” I defended.

“She did you a solid, bro. Already chewed it for you,” Win mused.

“Exactly.” I agreed.

“That is disgusting,” Jess declared.

“Well, next time, listen to me when I say you don’t like something. Then I won’t have to eat your half-chewed food.”

“You liked it,” Rush heckled.

“Damn right, I did.” Leaning in toward Jess, I whispered, “You made it taste extra sweet.”

“It was slobber,” she deadpanned.

I laughed. “Eat your pineapple-less pizza before it gets cold.”

We all went back to eating with everyone talking over each other and fighting over who got to eat what, and I relaxed for what felt like the first time in days.

It was a nice ten minutes.

JESS

IT WAS KINDA SURREAL. AN ODD WAY TO FEEL ABOUT REALITY, I know. But maybe not, considering my knowledge of reality was a bit, ah, limited at the moment.

It made me wonder, though. Why did sitting here with my friends, having pizza and listening to them all laugh, feel surreal? It was my normal reality, right?

So did it just feel surreal because my mind was all messed up, or was it something else? How was I supposed to know?

I felt like the freaking twilight zone. Or maybe I was the Bermuda Triangle. Lost.

I liked being here, though. Glancing around the table filled with people joking and arguing over food. It felt nice to be part of them, like even if my mind was pretty empty, I wasn't alone. Maybe the few memories I did have were what made me feel like this.

Maybe being here with all of them felt surreal because the only thing I had to compare it to was a childhood that was the opposite. Born and raised on the wrong side of town. Not really realizing it was "wrong" until I learned not everyone

lived the way we did. Until I saw neighborhoods that weren't barren, dirty, and dangerous. Places you could go outside in the dark and not have to worry about getting jumped or worse.

Houses with yards and trees where you couldn't hear the neighbors screaming through the shared walls. Roofs that didn't leak when it rained and fridges with food that wasn't past the expiration date.

My earliest memories were of parents who screamed and fought. Who did drugs in the bathroom when they thought no one was watching. My father left when I was five and took my brother with him. My mom was pissed he wasn't taking me too. She didn't want me. But Dad didn't either.

In the end, he left. I stayed. Mom stopped caring if I saw her high, and I did my best to stay out of the way of her boyfriends who would come and go.

Like I said, maybe I wouldn't have realized that stuff wasn't normal if I hadn't seen different. If not for the piano. One day after school, I heard a teacher playing, and I stood outside the door, listening to the music, connecting with it in a way I never had anything before.

I went there every day for a week, lingering outside the music room, just listening to the teacher play. One day, he caught me. I thought he'd for sure shove me in a closet for detention. But he asked me if I ever played.

I told him no but then sat down at the keys and played the song I'd been hearing him play for a week without even blinking.

They labeled me a prodigy. Some kind of musical genius. Those words never felt like they fit, but the music always did.

That teacher became a champion of sorts, teaching me how to play and read basic music. Letting me play after school every day when he usually did. One day, he had a friend in the room and asked if I'd play for her. Said it was my ticket out. I didn't know what that meant, but I played like I normally did. And everything changed.

I got a scholarship to a private school. One with fresh paint, uniforms, and kids who showed up in shiny cars.

The day before I transferred, I heard my mom in the office yelling at him. I never heard him yell, but she sure did. After she was done, she stormed out of the office, cigarette smoke trailing behind her, acting like I wasn't there at all. It didn't bother me. She always acted like that.

"Listen to me, Jessica," my teacher said when he walked out of the office and knelt in front of me. "It's going to be hard. You're going to have to do it on your own. But don't give up. You're too good for this place."

I didn't know what he meant.

But I learned when I had to walk two blocks to the bus stop and then ride it to another bus stop where I could get on one that would take me to my fancy school. When I learned how to wash my uniform at the laundromat a couple blocks from home weekly because we didn't have facilities at home. I got a job my freshman year of high school and worked after school every day and on the weekends, using my breaks to study, and then I would pray I'd make it home before dark so I didn't get robbed.

I learned to hide my money at a place that wasn't home because if I didn't, my mother or her boyfriends would steal it.

It was hard. It would have been easier to just go back to my normal school. To fall in with the crowd that lived on my block and not have to work and study every minute of every day. I did almost give up. But I didn't because of Ben.

My fork dropped onto my plate, metal clattering against porcelain. I swallowed the lump in my throat as memories pressed into the backs of my eyes, making everything around me hazy.

“Jess?”

I glanced up, trying to shake off the hold the old memories suddenly held over my mind. “I remember middle school.”

His green and brown irises flared with recognition.

He leaned closer, his presence so comforting that I leaned in too. “You remember?”

“You said we met in middle school.”

He nodded. “We did.”

A rush of happiness came over me. Alongside it was relief. I hadn't wanted to admit it before, but I was terribly afraid my memory wasn't going to come back at all. That perhaps I'd been abandoned as a young adult with only the memories of a young child. But as I noted the differences of how I was raised versus where I sat now, the thoughts—the memories—came as if they'd been there all along.

“What else do you remember?”

Something in his voice, the tone or perhaps even an emotion, underscored that simple question with deeper meaning and brought my head up. What could only be described as apprehension passed behind his eyes, almost akin to wariness.

Is he afraid of what I might remember?

No. It was impossible. What could Ben possibly be worried about? He was perfect. The one thing in this entire situation that my heart never seemed to doubt. But the look he was wearing...

“Ben? What’s wrong? Why do you look so worried?”

Crash!

The unexpected and abrupt noise boomed over the entire restaurant, overtaking the atmosphere and filling it with a loud sort of explosion, which was followed by the ear-piercing sound of distorting metal.

My body registered fear before the sound even waned, and on instinct, I dove at Ben, the cast on the lower half of my left leg acting like a cement block trying to hold me in place.

I pitched forward, a strangled sound making my throat feel raw as I grappled for him. Of course, he was more graceful than me, reaching into my chaotic tumble to keep me from falling right onto the floor.

The second his arms closed around me, I clung to him, scrambling to get even closer. Grunting, he hauled me into his lap, my heavy leg having no choice but to follow. A high-pitched alarm cut through the room, and my heart tripled in speed.

Cringing into him, I locked my arms around his neck even as I buried my face into his chest, plastering close and squeezing my eyes shut.

Remnants of the nightmare I’d had last night flashed behind my eyelids like some bad replay. I whimpered, shifting in his lap again, straddling him so I could press all of me against all of him.

“You’re okay.” His voice was soothing compared to the wailing alarm and the dream that flickered so quickly I couldn’t make out what was happening but felt all too well the sick fear it inspired. “I got you, baby girl. You’re okay.”

I felt myself trembling, heard other voices around us, but I couldn’t hear past the roaring of the blood in my veins and the pounding of my heart.

Ben stood, taking me with him, arms locked beneath my ass, and adjusting me so my legs were wound around his waist.

One hand lifted to splay across my back, and I felt his scruffy chin against my hair. “You’re safe, baby. I swear it. If anyone so much as comes near you, I’ll kill them.”

That really shouldn’t have made me feel safe.

It did.

Still trembling, I burrowed into him, pushing my face into the base of his neck and breathing in the scent my body associated with home.

As it filled my senses, the warmth from his skin soaked into my cold face, and the hard knot of his bobbing Adam’s apple was physical proof he was strong.

Cold air rushed around us, tugging at my hair and sneaking beneath it to tap against my neck. The darkness seemed to intensify, and I arched into Ben even more.

He stroked my hair, fingers getting tangled in the uncombed strands. “There was just some sort of accident in the kitchen,” he murmured, rubbing against the base of my skull. “The smoke alarm they have back there went off. Everything’s okay, though.”

A shudder moved through me as his words filtered in. The sharp claws of panic retracted enough for me to think.

Against his neck, I said, “It was a kitchen accident?”

“Yeah. Someone’s probably gonna get fired.”

Was that amusement in his voice? “This is not funny, Benjamin!”

“Ooh, bringing out the full name.”

“I can’t remember your middle name,” I mourned.

“It’s Hayes.”

That brought my head up. And even though it was dark, I still blinked against the light. “Your middle name is Hayes?”

His nod was decisive. “Go ahead and yell at me if it will make you feel better.”

“You were laughing at me.”

His eyes narrowed. “Like hell I was. I was laughing at the poor schmuck who’s about to get fired.”

I realized then that we were outside on the sidewalk. The brick building of Pizza House was at Ben’s back as he stood facing the street.

“You carried me outside,” I observed, glancing down at our bodies and how I was wrapped around him.

“It was loud, and you didn’t feel safe in there.”

I grimaced. “I panicked.”

“That’s okay.” His voice was sure. Like it really didn’t matter I’d just jumped in his lap in the middle of a dinner.

His two-toned stare was steady on mine, his demeanor calm and arms solid. There was no wavering in his attention,

and he acted as if he had all the time in the world to stand there and hold me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, embarrassed, and dipped my chin toward my chest.

“Why are you sorry?”

“Because I acted like a freak and jumped on you.”

“I liked it.”

It wasn’t a joke. He didn’t smile mischievously. He didn’t wag his eyebrows lasciviously. Instead, he looked me directly in the eyes with nothing but honesty and said he liked it.

The hand still tangled in my hair scratched against my scalp, shooting tingles of awareness down my spine. “I hate that you got scared. I hate you feel unsafe.” He went on, his voice completely intoxicating. “But I gotta tell you, baby girl. I fucking love that you dove at me for protection.”

The door behind us opened. “Is everything okay?” Matt asked.

I craned my head to look at him. He seemed harried and slightly agitated. “Are you okay?”

He nodded once and looked at Ben.

“She’s okay, bro. The alarm off?”

He nodded. “The dishwasher in the kitchen exploded or something.”

I gasped. “What?”

“Someone’s definitely getting fired,” I sang.

Matt’s lips twitched. “You can come back in. Pizza is on the house for the scare.”

The idea of going back inside didn't appeal. But then I realized if I went home, it would be without Ben. Judging by the way I was still clinging to him like an octopus... I liked that idea even less.

"Aren't your arms tired?" I wondered, leaning my chin on his shoulder to gaze down the sidewalk behind him.

"Not when they got you in them."

My lips lifted. He was so cheesy. I really liked cheese.

"I don't really want to go back inside," Matt said, voice quiet. Whatever tone he used, I resonated with it.

"I don't either," I echoed.

"Time to go," Ben announced.

I tightened my arms around his neck. "I don't want to go home either."

Ben paused. I practically felt him exchanging a look with Matt. "Why not?"

"Because I don't remember my roommate. And..."

"And?" Ben pressed.

"And you won't be there," I whispered.

A low sound vibrated his throat. It made my insides tremble.

"You're coming home with us."

I pulled back. "What?"

"I'm telling everyone we're out," Matt said.

"Wait," Ben called, walking over to him. "I'll tell them," he said, pulling me away from him to deposit me in Matt's arms bridal style. "You stay with her."

“Ben!” I gasped. “I can stand.”

“I won’t have it,” he declared and went back inside.

“Put me down,” I told Matt.

“No.”

I don’t know why, but his firm refusal surprised me. I squinted, ready to fire off some retort, but he cut that off too.

“Sassing your brother is a crime.”

“We met in middle school too, right?”

He glanced at me, dark eyes assessing. “You remembered?”

“While I was eating pizza.”

“What else did you remember?”

“Ben asked me the same thing,” I pointed out. “Why?”

“We’re nosy.”

“I should be the nosy one!” I muttered. “I’m the one who doesn’t know anything.”

He laughed beneath his breath, and I realized it was nice to see him smile.

“Is everything okay?”

The smile on his lips disappeared, and his eyes cut to me, then away. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“You seem agitated.”

“It was loud inside.”

Something niggled at the back of my mind, and I tried to focus on whatever it was.

Ben appeared, carrying a pizza box and his car keys. “Let’s roll.”

“Shouldn’t I tell everyone goodbye?” Then I gasped. “I didn’t pay!”

“Pizza was on the house.” Matt reminded me.

“But everyone—”

“You can text them later,” Ben said.

I gasped again. “Where’s my phone?”

“You’re gonna give yourself asthma with all that gasping,” Ben scolded. Then to Matt, he said, “Trade me.”

The next thing I knew I was back in Ben’s arms and Matt was carrying the pizza.

On the way across the street, Ben told me, “Your phone is busted. I’ll take you to get a new one tomorrow.”

“I can’t afford a new phone,” I said, and then I realized...

“Woman, if you gasp again, I’m gonna stick my tongue in your mouth so you can’t breathe at all.”

Oh. Well, if that didn’t conjure up all sorts of desire. I fell quiet, marveling at the fact I could be so enticed by the idea of him kissing me breathless. I barely knew him, right? I guess it didn’t matter at all that my brain didn’t remember because my body sure seemed to.

Clearly, we had chemistry. Clearly, physical attraction was not a problem for us. I couldn’t help but think about sex. And kissing. What had that been like between us? The way my body seemed to crave him made me think we couldn’t keep our hands off each other.

“I can’t just come home with you,” I said.

He paused beside his car. “Why not?”

Because I want you to touch me. But I said, “Isn’t that against dorm rules?”

He scoffed. “We’re Elite. Rules don’t apply to us.”

I wrinkled my nose. “You sound like a snob.”

Ben said nothing but bent to place me in the passenger seat of his car. Frankly, I had no idea how he manhandled me the way he did. I wasn’t a small person. I was five foot seven and had a pear-shaped frame, which meant my hips and thighs were the widest part of my body. I had booty for days, okay? I’m not saying any of that was a bad thing, just that he was hauling it around like it was easy.

Grabbing the seatbelt, Ben leaned around me, hand brushing my hip as he clicked it into place. My stomach fluttered wildly at the innocent touch, and I held my breath, waiting for him to pull back and shut the door.

He didn’t shut the door. Instead, he sank low into a squat and gently grasping my chin to pull it around.

“You just got out of the hospital. You just had a panic attack.”

I opened my mouth to argue about that, but he made a sound, cutting me off, and dug his fingers deeper into my chin.

“You’re worried about sleeping beside someone you don’t even know. I’m not being a snob. I’m being a good fiancé. You’re coming home with us. You can sleep in my bed, and I’ll sleep on the floor. I’ll take you to get a phone in the morning, and then we’ll go meet your roommate. If you still aren’t comfortable after meeting her, we’ll figure it out.”

“You’re a good fiancé, bro,” Matt said from the darkened back seat.

Ben’s teeth flashed with a fast smile. “Maybe we should just get married, P. At least you appreciate me.”

I rolled my eyes.

Ben got up to close the door. Before he could, I grabbed his hand. “Wait.”

He leaned back in the opening, eyes questioning.

“I appreciate you,” I whispered.

Everything about him went soft, and it made my stomach flutter all over again. Cupping the back of my head, he leaned in and kissed my forehead. He did that a lot. I really liked it.

“Good girl.” He spoke so quietly the words hummed across my skin.

When he shut the door to walk around to the driver’s side, the interior of the car was silent, but then Matt spoke. “It’s good to see him happy.”

It made me wonder why that sort of sounded like he wasn’t happy before.

KRUGER

I COULDN'T BREATHE WHEN SHE WALKED OUT OF THE bathroom in nothing but one of my shirts or stop the swelling of my heart when she snuggled in my bed, whispering that it smelled like me. I was powerless to the panic when she cried out in the throes of a nightmare and impotent to deny how fucking right it resonated when I wrapped myself around her and she calmed.

I'd been waiting a lifetime for those little things that felt so big.

How ironic that a lie unmasked the truth.

I loved her so much I wondered how I'd ever kept it hidden and understood I would never be able to again.

JESS

I WAS STARTING TO WONDER IF I WAS A PERVERT.

I mean, sure, I had the whole retrograde amnesia thing and all, but I thought I had a pretty good handle on myself. The other stuff around me was questionable, but my self-awareness was on point.

Apparently not. I'd been having these thoughts, disruptive little whispers that were frankly making it hard to focus.

Yeah, yeah, focus wasn't my forte since I might or might not have been pushed down the stairs. You'd think I'd be worrying about that, right? Or the fact that I had to use a printed-out schedule and be escorted to and from classes by my friends who were taking shifts so I didn't get lost or overwhelmed.

Nope. All I could think about was kissing. More specifically, the lack of it.

Proof that I am indeed a pervert? Possibly.

How was a girl not supposed to think about it, though? Especially when the scent of the man she wanted to kiss clung to her all day because she'd slept in his bed. In his shirt. When

she woke up screaming and he crawled between the covers and held her, whispering everything would be all right. When she wore his ring but never his lips.

Okay, that might be a bit of an exaggeration. He did kiss me. On the forehead, the temple, the tip of my nose. I even got a couple brief brushes of his lips on mine. Know what that did?

Turned me into a pervert. Got my hormones all riled up.

I wanted more. I wanted mouth on mouth. I wanted to taste his breath, hear him groan, know what the texture of his tongue was like and how it felt stroking against mine.

Also, why were his shirts so much more comfortable than mine? Why did the sweater and jacket I was dressed in—my own clothes—make me slightly agitated and uncomfortable?

It was like I'd forgotten my own sense of fashion and only remembered what it was like to wear his worn, oversized hoodies that were permanently scented of chlorine and man.

Oh. Right. I *did* forget what it was like to wear my own clothes.

The professor dismissed the class, and I congratulated myself on making it through my first day of classes since mind-dumping literally everything. As I packed up, I wondered who would be waiting for me outside.

After waking up to some inhumanely early alarms, Ben took me to get coffee and then my dorm to reintroduce me to my roommate. He must have called and told her what was up because she didn't act surprised that we showed up at the crack of dawn or that I didn't know her. As anxious as I'd been to come here yesterday, I worried it would be weird. Thankfully, it wasn't, and I was relieved the place felt vaguely

familiar and comfortable. It made me think that perhaps the doctor was right. Being in my familiar surroundings and going through my normal routine would be good for me.

Lainey was sweet and patient, explaining everything we usually did and showing me my side of the room. We didn't have a private bathroom like Ben and Matt. We shared ours with the entire floor. Apparently, Elite were spoiled rotten at Westbrook. Ben made himself comfortable while I poked around, stretching out on the bed like he'd done it a thousand times before. He probably did. Lainey was awfully charmed by him, her eyes always straying in his direction while she laughed at his idiotic comments. Kinda made me jealous.

After changing into my own clothes, using my own products in my usual bathroom, and combing out the ends of my tangled hair (I didn't get too close to my scalp because it was still sore and stitched up) Ben walked me to my first class. When it was over, Matt was waiting outside to walk me to the next one. After that, I had lunch with Rory, Madison, and Landry. Toward the end, Rush arrived, and he and Landry walked me to my third and final class of the day.

I thought it was sweet the way they all showed up throughout the day, and I enjoyed the little bit of time with them all because it gave me a chance to get to know them all over again.

“Jess? Hey.”

I glanced up from my bag at the sound of a new voice.

A tall guy with dark hair, dark eyes, and a lip ring approached. He was dressed in slim-fit grey-and-black plaid chinos. With it, he wore a long-sleeved black T-shirt with a neon-green Metallica logo on the front. The shirt was loose

except for the little bit of hem tucked behind the buckle of the black belt low on his waist.

His white low-top sneakers velcroed instead of tied and had silver studs all over the toes. His hair was dark and messy, falling over his ears and forehead.

I stared, saying nothing as I took in all the details of his appearance as I could, right down to his blue eyes and the two lip rings at the corner of his mouth.

He stopped in front of me, leaving plenty of space between us, which put me at ease. I felt dumb because strangers made me wary. Which, sure, I guess wasn't really dumb because, you know, stranger danger. But... Technically, he wasn't a stranger, right? I mean, he was in my class. I'd obviously seen him before. Probably talked to him considering he approached me and knew my name.

People continued filing out of the room around us while I sat there fiddling with the zipper on my bag, not sure what to say.

He half smiled, reaching to curl a hand around the strap of the messenger bag slung across his body. My attention snagged on the belted leather cuff around his wrist and the braided cord bracelets stacked alongside it. There was a silver ring around his thumb and another around his pinky.

"I thought you might want a copy of my notes," he said, gesturing to some papers he clutched in his other hand.

In fact, he had a nice voice. Calm.

"Your notes," I echoed.

He nodded. "Yeah, you missed a couple classes." His eyes fell to the cast on my foot. "Heard you had an accident."

“Where’d you hear that?” I wondered.

“It’s kinda all over,” he said, sheepish.

“Right,” I murmured. I mean, I guess some girl busting her butt down the stairs and landing in the hospital would be something to talk about.

“Anyway, you took notes for me that time I was sick, so I figured I’d return the favor.”

He extended the papers between us. I reached out and took them, sliding them into my bag without more than a cursory glance. “Thank you.”

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“I’m having some trouble with my memory,” I explained. “I hit my head when I fell.”

His eyes widened. “You don’t know me.” Surprise laced his tone.

“I guess my memory wipe hasn’t gotten around,” I mused.

“Uh, no. I just thought you broke your leg,” he said, gesturing toward it.

I zipped up my bag, pushed out of my seat, and reached for my crutches. He moved to help me, then snagged my bag off the table, swinging it over his shoulder.

“Oh, you don’t need to do that,” I said.

“I don’t mind,” he replied, gesturing for me to go ahead of him.

I hesitated. “What’s your name?”

“I’ve never met anyone with amnesia before.”

“I can’t remember if I have.”

He laughed. "Arsen," he said, gesturing to himself. "You offered me your notes a few weeks ago when I was out sick."

"Jess," I said, then grimaced. "But I guess you already knew that."

"The piano player," he said, nodding.

Pausing midstride, I glanced around. "You know I play piano?"

"I know your major too," he mused.

Wariness skittered down my spine, a feeling I didn't much care for. I realized then that the classroom was empty except for us. Even the professor had already left. Arsen seemed innocent enough, but what did I know?

Suddenly, I felt woefully unprepared for daily life, for being around so many people I didn't know. If I had been pushed down those stairs, that meant someone had done it. Someone I couldn't remember. It could have been anyone. They could have approached me, pretending to be a friend, and I wouldn't know any better. How could I trust anyone? How could I trust myself?

The urge to flee was astounding, hitting me all at once with the force of a bus. My limbs trembled with adrenaline, mind screaming for me to get out.

Gripping the crutches, I turned away from Arsen, back to the door. My palms were sweating, and it weakened my grip on the crutches, but I hurried forward, planting the wooden sticks into the floor, and swung my hurt leg forward. My fingers slipped, and I stumbled a bit, which caused my weight to fall on the cast and me to cry out against the sudden pain.

Arsen rushed forward, wrapping an arm around my waist and lifting to try and relieve the pressure on my foot.

“No!” I said, heart slamming into my ribs. I scrambled up, but my balance was off, and one of the crutches clattered onto the floor. Arsen’s grip tightened on me instead of releasing, and my throat started to close in.

“What the fuck is going on in here?” a new voice roared.

The body against mine stiffened, and my head whipped up as Ben stalked forward, all traces of his baby face hidden beneath a granite jaw and flashing eyes.

“Bro, you’d better get your hands off my girl before I yank them off your body and beat you with them,” he intoned.

Despite the clear ire in his tone, his arms were gentle when they slipped around me, pushed Arsen’s arm away, and pulled me in. The other crutch I’d been clinging to clattered onto the floor as well, but I didn’t fall because the security of his body was there and better than any crutch could ever be.

“Ben,” I said, relief making me sag.

He bent, sweeping me up bridal style. My arms looped around his neck, and my cheek lay against his shoulder. The fear pummeling me just seconds ago abated sort of like a rising tide being pulled back out to sea.

A sense of *calm-safe-trust* enveloped me like a blanket. But it wasn’t a blanket. It was Ben.

“I’m glad it was you,” I whispered.

“Hmm?” he part grunted, part hummed. I felt his chin angle down toward me, but his attention remained locked on Arsen.

“I wondered who would be waiting outside for me,” I explained. “I’m glad it’s you.”

Shifting, he pulled me a little tighter into his chest. “I wondered what was taking so long for you to come out,” he said, still glaring. “Can’t say I expected to see you getting manhandled. What the fuck, Arsen?”

Surprise made me look up. “You know him?”

“She was having trouble with her crutches and slipped. I was trying to help her.”

Ben made a face, then glanced at me, softening his gaze. “That true, baby girl?”

I felt insanely stupid. Clearing my throat, I glanced at Arsen. “I’m sorry. You were so nice and gave me notes, carried my bag.” It was still slung over his shoulder. “And I freaked out.” Grimacing, I glanced back at Ben. “I got nervous and almost fell.”

“It’s all right,” he murmured, reaching up to stroke the side of my hair gently. Turning back to Arsen, his gaze hardened. “What the hell did you do to make her nervous?”

“Ben!” I scolded. “I just told you he was being nice.”

Arsen made a sound. “I shouldn’t have said that stuff. I’m sure it’s weird to have someone know so much about you when you had to ask for my name,” he said, sheepish. “Sorry. I didn’t really think about that.”

“What stuff?” Ben demanded.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” I assured him. “I’m just jumpy lately. I really shouldn’t have gotten so upset.”

“What stuff?” Ben asked again.

“I just know your major because it’s mine too.” Arsen went on. “And everyone knows you play piano. You’re the best pianist at Westbrook.”

“Well, that’s true.” Ben agreed.

“We have the same major?” I asked, curious.

“Bachelor of arts in music.” He confirmed. “I have a concentration in music science, though.” He waved his hand around the classroom. “Hence the sound recording technology class.”

“I don’t have that,” I said, automatically knowing.

“Your specialty is piano,” Ben answered immediately.

“Then why am I in this class?” I wondered.

Arsen shrugged.

Ben made a sound. “Because you have a big brain and you take shit like this for fun.”

“So, ah...” Arsen began, dividing his stare between us. “Are you two together now?”

Beneath me, Ben went taut.

Confusion swirled through my mind. “You mean you knew all that other stuff but didn’t know we’re engaged?”

Shock passed over Arsen’s features. “Engaged?” he echoed. “I didn’t even know—”

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” Ben cut him off.

Arsen blinked, then tugged at his lip rings. “Uh, yeah. Actually, I do.” He swung the bag off his shoulder and carried it over. I reached for it, but Ben made a rude noise and shifted so he could take it.

“Thanks.” He was gruff.

Arsen bent to gather my crutches and lean them against the closest table. “If you need any help with the notes or need a

refresher on the stuff we already learned, just let me know.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely. “And I’m sorry I was weird before. It’s been a long week.”

His head bobbed. “No worries.”

Arsen turned his gaze back to Ben. “Later, Kruger.”

Ben gestured with his chin but said nothing else. When Arsen was gone, he looked at me. “What happened, sweetheart?”

“It’s just unsettling to be around so many people and not know any of them and not know if they know me.”

Turning, he sat me on the closest table, fitting his body between my knees and bending to rest his palms on the tabletop on either side of my hips. “You know what you need?”

For you to kiss me.

Guess I wasn’t done thinking about that.

“A scary movie, some popcorn, and some M&M’s?” I answered.

The corner of his mouth lifted. “No.”

I tried again. “To learn to walk better with those crutches?”

“Fucking crutches,” he muttered. Then, “No.”

For you to kiss me.

I wasn’t saying that out loud. *I was not.* And since I couldn’t trust my voice, I merely shrugged.

He leaned a little closer, his arms so close I could feel the warmth radiating from his body.

Kiss. Me.

I glanced up. Our eyes collided. The oxygen in the room was depleted, and I sat there glued to his enigmatic stare without speaking. Without breathing. Without the beat of my heart. I survived solely on the connection between us, left on pause while I waited for him to hit play.

He moved. I swallowed. He leaned farther, taking over the little bit of personal space I had left, and I surrendered it without fight.

My lashes fluttered. The gentle tickle of his breath across my lips and under my nose was foreplay, the fluttering of the butterfly wings in my belly so sharp I expected them to slice me open.

“A break.”

It took long moments for it to sink in that he'd spoken. That he used that mouth for something other than devouring mine.

And even as I registered the words, I had to replay them once, twice, and then finally a third time to understand.

“W-what?” I whispered, still tingling for that kiss.

He pulled back, the movement so abrupt I went with him, the tether between us too strong to deny.

“Easy,” he murmured, catching my shoulders to keep me from pitching off the table. Clicking his tongue, he turned, crouching before me. “Come on then, final girl.” His gruff tone and the use of the nickname I'd only partially understood were the only indications he felt something too. “Up you go.”

I went, and he hauled me onto his back, then grabbed my bag and my crutches.

“Where are we going?” I asked when he stepped outside into the cool afternoon air.

“Somewhere you’re gonna love.”

“But we’re already there.”

He kept walking, but his head tilted toward me. “What?”

“I’m already somewhere I love because I’m with you.”

His feet made a scuffing sound against the sidewalk, and our bodies bounced forward with the force of his stop.

Everything in his hands banged onto the ground, and a few muffled curses floated around us as people had to abruptly change direction to avoid colliding with us where we stood.

The hands under my knees flexed, kneading against my body impatiently. “What did you just say?”

His tone was an abrasive scrape against his throat, the words harmless but inciting danger. Another hard squeeze at the backs of my knees, almost like a warning. If it had been anyone else, I probably would have panicked. Hell, it had happened earlier for far less.

But this was Ben. The only name my heart whispered. I wasn’t scared of him. It was literally not in my DNA. Excitement skittered along my nerves, crackling my senses with some unnamed emotion I did not recognize but reveled in just the same.

“Jessica,” he rasped, the first time I’d ever heard him say my full name.

And he said it like *that*. Another warning. No. A demand. Maybe a dare.

God, he’s delicious.

“I’m already somewhere I love because I’m with you,” I repeated.

His inhale was sharp, and his back inflated with it, pushing his body even closer against mine. I dropped my chin on his shoulder, my cheek nearly brushing his ear.

“You don’t know what you’re saying.” The words were hoarse. It was almost like he was trying to remind himself.

“I know the only minutes I’m not completely afraid are when you’re in my sight. I know that wearing my own clothes has felt so uncomfortably foreign today because, until this morning, I only remember wearing yours. I probably would have ripped them off by now if your scent didn’t linger in my hair from your bed. So yes, Ben, I know exactly what I’m saying. It doesn’t matter where we go because my favorite place will always be with you.”

“*Whoa.*” It wasn’t even a word but pure awe. It wrapped us in a bubble, muting the rest of the world, where it was just us and the only thing time measured was the distance between two hearts.

Reaching behind us, his hand fisted my jacket and pulled me around. One moment, I was against his back, and the next, I was in his arms, his mouth slanting over mine.

He kissed to claim. Aggressive and eager, covering my mouth until it was wholly owned by him. His lips were confident and caressing, moving against mine like he didn’t need a map because he already knew where he was going. There was nothing tentative about this, about the way he literally gobbled me down. He breathed in as he kissed as if he could suck out a piece of my soul. The sound it created made me feel like we were being sealed together, like he might actually murder anyone who dared to pull us apart.

I whimpered under the onslaught, slackening my jaw and letting my lips fall open. He groaned, invading my mouth and making me his captive. A captive who willingly gave herself over to the binds of his silky tongue.

I ceased to think, only registering the way our chests pressed together, how his hand flattened against my back to hold me in place while his other slid up my body and cupped my jaw. I became nothing but a living pulse hammering beneath his thumb as it bit into the hollow of my cheekbone, commanding me to stay open so he could take until he was full.

I would let him drain me. I would let him climb inside me and lick me dry. In that moment, the only reason I existed was to be everything he could need.

His lips gentled and changed direction to assault me from a new angle, and my fingers delved into the soft strands of his hair, holding him closer, giving him more. Wind blew around us, pushing my hair against our faces and binding us further together as he continued to lick and suck, hungrily slurping up everything he could reach.

Our mouths popped apart when he pulled his head away, his chest rising and falling with gasping breaths. His glittering two-toned eyes made me feel like I was being coveted by two different men who shared one heart.

I was dizzy. Unable to form a single coherent thought. I know I said I wanted a kiss. But that?

That was no kiss.

That was him hollowing out a home in my soul.

"Whoa," I echoed his earlier sentiment, though it was woefully breathless. Hell. I might never breathe deeply again.

“You can’t say shit like that to me and expect me to hold back,” he said with a note of pained apology. “I’ve tried, final girl,” he lamented, eyes dropping to my well-kissed mouth. Swiping his thumb along my bottom lip, he whispered, “I tried. But I’m fucking starved.”

“Kiss me again.”

KRUGER

KISS ME AGAIN.

Leaving all our shit where I dropped it, I spun with her still in my arms, her legs still wrapped around my waist.

I didn't think or speak. I barely fucking breathed.

Years of waiting. Imagining. *Living* solely for this moment. I built this up to epic proportions in my head... but even still, the expectation paled in comparison to the reality of her.

The sunny winter day turned dim when I stepped into the shadow of a nearby building, and I stopped, letting her body slide down mine. The hem of her sweater caught between us, revealing a patch of her waist.

I slid my hand along the bare curve, pushing her up against the cold stone wall, enjoying the way her breathing hitched when skin met skin.

“You trying to show everyone out here what's mine?” I rumbled, leaning down so my lips practically brushed hers. After another quiet caress, I glided to the small of her back, fitting my palm into the dip just above her ass. “Right about

now, they're all thinking what a lucky bastard I am," I said, tipping my chin just a little and dropping my voice. "They'd be right."

Pulling her away from the building and fully into my arms, I covered her mouth to kiss deeply, sweeping my tongue into the wet heat, and hummed in satisfaction as blood turned to fire in my veins. Pulling my palm from the small of her back, I reached between us, tugging the shirt down before trailing over her hip and around to where her ass met her thigh.

I grabbed her leg and lifted, shifting to settle between her legs. She gasped, surprise flaring her nostrils. I smiled into the kiss, grasping more firmly around the outside of her upper thigh, holding it against my hip.

Our lips smacked when I broke away, slitting my eyes enough to capture her stare. "Gotta keep the weight off that foot, baby girl," I murmured, then crashed into her again.

Moaning, she melted into the wall, arms winding around my waist and gripping handfuls of my shirt. The way she clung made me feral all over again, and I went harder, fucking her mouth for the entire campus to see.

Let them look. Let them all see she is mine.

The world was fuzzy when I lifted my head, the wintry air icy against my slick, warm lips. Even though I'd just inhaled her, my tongue darted out to slurp up every part left behind.

I knew now what it was to be an addict. To never be full. Because even though I still tasted her on my tongue, I already yearned for more.

Expelling a deep sigh, she allowed her head to drop back as though it was too heavy for her neck. I barely got my hand

up to keep it from smacking into the unforgiving stone.
“Watch your head, sweetheart.”

Her cheeks were rosy, her mouth a dark blush. Satisfaction rumbled inside me, expanding my chest with pride.

“People are staring,” she whispered, hands curling into my chest before dipping her face in it too.

“Bout time I got some PDA,” I mused, feeling pretty fucking proud of myself.

She lifted her face. “You left all my stuff over there on the sidewalk.”

“I held on to what was most important,” I said, tugging her just a little closer.

A bashful glint shone in her chocolate stare, and she ducked her face to hide it. She shivered, and I carefully lowered her cast leg down.

“Are you cold?” I asked, eyeing the sweater she wore beneath an open jacket. “Why isn’t your jacket zipped up?”

She shrugged.

“Take it off,” I demanded, shifting back to give her room.

Her head snapped up. “What?”

I gestured to it. “The jacket. Take it off.”

“Why?”

Annoyed she wasn’t doing as she was told, I grasped the edges and peeled it over her arms and shoulders.

She gasped. “Ben.”

“Aren’t you the one who said your clothes were uncomfortable and you wanted mine?”

Her lips curled in. “You remember that.”

“Baby girl, those words live in my head rent-free now.”
Pretty sure my heart beat to them. *I’m already somewhere I love because I’m with you.*

Damn.

She helped me pull the jacket off the rest of the way, dropping it right there on the ground at our feet. I tugged the blue hoodie I was wearing over my head, and when I looked up, she was pulling her arms out of her sweater.

Alarmed, I straightened, holding out my arms and widening my legs to try and hide her from sight. “Woman, what in fresh hell are you doing?”

“Putting on your hoodie.”

“*Putting on your hoodie,*” I repeated oh so innocently. Scowling, I folded my arms across my chest. “Flashing a little skin is one thing, but taking off your shirt in the middle of campus... No. I forbid it.”

“I forbid it,” she intoned, her voice all deep and ridiculous.

I arched one eyebrow. “You mocking me?”

“You were just mocking me.”

This conversation was going to Nowhereville. Holding up my hoodie, I said, “You can put this on *over* your sweater.”

She ducked her head so I could help her, and I hurried to do just that. Did I mention the insane amount of satisfaction I got dressing this girl in my clothes?

Fucking right. It was my favorite.

Well, it was until I kissed her.

“How’s your head, sweetheart?” I asked when it appeared from the blue material.

She looked up, and strands of hair obscured her face.

I tsked and stepped close, my foot bumping into hers. Using both hands, I smoothed away all the strands, gently lifting the length caught in the neck.

“It’s a little sore,” she admitted, standing there watching me fuss with her clothes and hair.

I ached to kiss her again. To take her somewhere private where I could get her naked and cover her body with mine.

Her eyes flickered as if she knew what I was thinking, the tip of that sinful pink tongue darting out to wet her bottom lip.

I swayed forward. “I got you something,” I whispered instead of kissing her the way I wanted.

It took a moment for her attention to redirect from my lips to my eyes. “You did?”

Smiling, I reached into the pocket of my sweats to pull out a brand-new iPhone. “It has the same number as your old one.” It made me wonder. “Do you remember that?”

Dividing a wide stare between me and the phone, she asked, “You got me a new phone?”

“Yours broke. You can’t be running around here without a way for me to call you.”

“It’s pink,” she observed.

I held out the pale-pink device for her to take. “It’s cute. Like you.”

Her throat worked. “You think I’m cute?”

“Among other things,” I murmured.

“What things?” she wondered.

“Girl, don’t you want this?” I mused, pushing the device closer to her.

She’d yet to push her arms through my hoodie, so she wiggled her arm free to reach for it, turning it gently in her hand. “This is way nicer than the one I had.”

“How do you know?” I questioned.

“Because I know I’m too cheap to have the newest model.”

I made a rude sound. “It’s what you deserve.”

“It’s too much.”

I scowled. “Says who?”

“Says the girl who will have to pay you back, and—” She gasped, pulling the phone into her chest.

“What?” I worried, reaching out to palm her arm.

“I don’t have insurance.” Her face wrinkled. “Did you give them my address for the hospital bill? Oh, it’s going to be so much.”

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

“But—”

I cut off her protests. “I took care of it.”

“How?” Her eyes widened. “Did you pay the bill? You shouldn’t have done that!” Thrusting the phone at me, she insisted, “I can’t take this.”

I made no move to take it back. “You can and will.”

“That’s not your responsibility.”

I grunted and gently grasped her chin so I could hold her gaze as I spoke. “Listen to me and listen good. I’m your

fiancé. That means everything about you is my responsibility. I put that ring on your finger because I want to take care of you. Arguing with me is a waste of breath. No wife of mine is gonna get some half-assed care over a couple dollars, and she sure as hell won't be running around without a phone in case she needs to call for help."

Her feisty, fighter spirit sparked in her eyes. I hadn't seen it since she woke up. "First of all, I'm not your wife."

I made a rude sound. "Close enough."

"Second of all..." She continued as though I didn't speak at all. "I'm sure that bill was *more than a couple dollars*. I can't ask you to pay that."

"You didn't ask. You don't have to. I want to take care of you."

She nibbled on her lower lip for a few quiet seconds before whispering, "Can you even afford it?"

Cupping the back of her head, I pulled her in, wrapping my arms around her. Hers were still trapped under my hoodie so she couldn't hug me back, but her body melted against mine almost instantly. And I gotta tell you... it was a fucking rush.

"Yeah, baby girl," I whispered. "I can. I've worked real hard the last few years to make sure I can give you everything you need and then some."

I felt her arms try to lift, either to push away or pull me closer, but I didn't want either. I liked her exactly as she was in that moment.

"Let me hold you," I rasped.

She stilled, and I smiled over her head.

"I guess you aren't a scholarship student like me?"

“No, baby. I’m not.”

“Doesn’t it bother you?”

“What?” I asked, soaking in her soft voice, how right she felt against me, knowing she was in my clothes *and* my arms.

“That I’m broke and you aren’t.”

I pulled back, cupping her face in my hands. “I don’t care about money. I never have. Yes, it makes life easier, but it isn’t what makes me rich. You are.”

She inhaled, eyes glimmering with emotion. “Ben.”

I shook my head once. “You’re more important to me than paper currency will ever be. As long as I have you, I have everything.”

“I see why I agreed to marry you,” she whispered.

Even as my heart constricted, I smiled. “You’ll keep the phone?”

She nodded. “Thank you for getting it for me.”

Leaning in, I pressed my lips to her forehead, letting them linger. “I put everyone’s numbers in there already.”

“Thank you, Benji.”

Her memory loss made it easier. Evaporating barriers that always existed between us and making it easier to get my way. Yes, I was taking advantage.

And yes, that made me a shitbag.

My phone went off.

She pulled out of my arms, gesturing with her chin to my pocket. “You should get that.”

Pointing at the hoodie, I instructed, “Put your arms in the sleeves,” then fished the phone out of my pocket to glance at the screen. Seeing who it was, I accepted the call. “Bro. What’s up?”

Prism’s voice filled my ear. “Are you coming to second swim and the gym?”

“Uhh...” I hedged, glancing briefly at Jess. “I’m busy.”

“Coach was asking about you this morning.”

I made a sound. “I’ll be at practice tomorrow.”

“He’s gonna shred you in the pool. You better come work out.”

I turned, eyes snagging on Jess’s crutches and bag that I’d left in the center of the sidewalk. “I’m with Jess right now,” I told him.

“Is she okay?” he asked, instantly concerned.

“Yeah.” I assured him, turning back to where she stood.

“Is that Matt?” she asked, completely covered in my hoodie and her sweater dangling from her fingertips. The sweater I told her *not* to take off.

“Girl! Did you seriously just do a strip show for the campus?” I demanded.

Prism made a strangled sound in my ear. “What?”

“You better come save your sister,” I told him. “I’m about to spank her ass.”

She seemed completely unthreatened. It offended me. “Can I talk to him?”

“No.”

“Please?”

I sighed. “Jess wants to talk to you,” I told him, handing over the phone.

“Matty,” she called into the line.

I got a little jealous. I’d just kissed the shit out of her, and she didn’t sound like that when she talked to me.

I crossed my arms and glared. Seconds later, she made a rude sound. “Oh my God, I didn’t strip in the middle of campus.”

Smirking, I cupped my hand around my mouth to yell, “Give her hell, P.”

“I pulled it off underneath the hoodie,” she explained, exasperated. “You’re both ridiculous.”

Prism said something that made her look at me. “You haven’t been to practice in four days?”

I grabbed the cell from my girl. “Tattletale,” I said into the line.

“If you miss any more, Coach is going to bench you at the next meet. It’s one of our last ones for the season.”

There was an anxious undertone to his words. I’d been focused on Jess almost twenty-four-seven the past few days, and I hadn’t checked in with him. Even if he didn’t want to admit it, he needed me too.

Lying to your girl. Being a bad friend.

“I won’t miss any of the meets we have left.” I assured him. Then, “You doing okay, P?”

“I’m fine.” He straight lied.

“Bro code.” I reminded.

He sighed. “Fuck you.”

“You know I had to do it.”

Evoking bro code meant he couldn't give me some bullshit answer. Bro code was sacred, a pact we'd made a long time ago to be truthful and loyal to each other no matter what. I didn't evoke it very often now that we were older, but sometimes it had to be done. When we were younger, it was the only way to get a truthful answer out of him. But like I said, I'd been a little preoccupied the past few days, and now I needed to make sure I didn't miss something.

He was quiet on the line, and I waited him out.

Eventually, he sighed. “It's been a little loud lately.”

He's struggling. I nodded even though he couldn't see me. “The chaos has been real.” I agreed, flicking a glance at Jess who was quietly watching me. “I'll meet you at the gym.”

“You don't have to,” he said, voice quiet. But there was relief there too.

“I want to,” I said truthfully, skipping the joke I could have made.

A hint of timidity came through in his next words. “Can we swim before we hit the weights?”

It was good I'd pulled out bro code. “Bro, sure.” I agreed. “See you at the pool. And P?”

“Yeah?”

“Wear that little Speedo I like.”

He laughed. “Fuck you.”

A joke was needed after all.

“I love you, bro!” I yelled into the line, and he hung up.

Smiling, I tucked the phone back into my pocket.

“Is everything okay?” Jess asked, voice slightly unsure.

I nodded. “Yeah, but instead of taking you to the theater, how about we go to the pool?”

She straightened off the wall, wobbling a little with her weight balanced on one leg. “You were taking me to the theater?”

“Figured you might be missing the piano.”

Several emotions flickered over her features all at once. “How’d you know?”

I stepped forward, slipping my arm around her waist, offering to support some of her weight. “Because piano is a part of you.”

Her hands came up to rest against my biceps. Just that simple touch had my heart bouncing around erratically. “Like swimming is part of you.”

“Mm.” I agreed.

“You’ve been missing it?”

Dividing my stare between hers, I whispered, “I’ve had more important things to focus on.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Isn’t swimming your passion?”

Unable to help myself, I dragged the pad of my finger down the bridge of her nose. “Not my only one. Not the most important.”

Her lips curled in. A whole symphony of emotion played across her face. It was no secret I loved this girl’s piano skills, but that silent song was now my favorite. I should feel like the

world's largest ass, like a criminal in handcuffs. What I was doing was wrong.

But goddamn, she felt so fucking right.

The openness of her stare. The way she lit up when I said something she liked. She looked at me the way I always wanted. Like I was her sun, moon, and sky. Like she loved me the way I loved her.

I can't go back to being just her friend. I can't go back to less.

“Ben?” The timid call in her tone was like honey to a bee.

“What’s up, baby girl?”

I felt her chest inflate as though she was gathering the courage to make a confession. Anticipation built inside me as I waited with bated breath.

“What if I forgot how to play?” The words rushed out in a pained confession.

Even if I had hoped she’d say something else, I was not disappointed. Anything she entrusted me with was something I would be grateful for.

“Hey,” I called, gently grasping her chin to push it up so she’d have to look at me. “Have you been worrying about that?”

She bit into her lower lip, eyes shimmering with tears. “That’s why I’m here at Westbrook, right? Because I’m crazy good at piano.”

“Crazy good.” I agreed, rubbing my thumb over her jaw.

“So what if I forgot? What if, when I sit down at the piano again, I don’t know how to play? Or how to read music. What

if whatever it was that made me so good is gone with all my memories?”

I whistled low. “Those are some heavy thoughts.”

Her head bobbed. “I could lose my scholarship.”

I made a sympathetic sound, wrapping her in both arms, wishing I could shield her from her own thoughts. “Bring those Bambi eyes up here,” I beckoned, and she lifted them instantly, making my heart skip a beat.

“Good girl,” I praised. She flushed, and I suppressed a smile. *Someone’s got a praise kink.* “I know it’s scary up in here right now,” I said, lightly tapping against her temple. “But there is one thing I know as sure as the sky is blue.”

Taking her chin, I pushed her face up. “See? Sky is definitely blue, right?”

She giggled, making the bottom fall out of my stomach. I fucking loved her. I loved her so much I wondered how I’d managed to keep myself in check all these years.

What’s going to happen when she finds out about your lies?

“It’s more azure today,” she sassed.

“Listen here, you cheeky little brat,” I said, tightening the grip on her chin to give her face a light shake. “It’s blue.”

Smiling, she nodded. “Yes, Benji. It’s blue.”

My hand fell away from her chin, and I rocked back a little into my heels.

Alarm flashed over her features. “What’s the matter?”

“You called me Benji again.”

Her eyes widened, realization dawning. “I didn’t even think about it. It just came out.”

I swallowed.

“You said that’s what I normally call you.” She paused, wary. “Right?”

I cleared my throat once, then again, trying to scrape the fucking emotion hardening in my windpipe like concrete. “Yeah.”

“Then why do you look like that?” Between us, her hands began to wring.

“It just,” I said, rubbing my palm over the back of my neck while staring down at my shoes. “You never quite said it like that before.”

“Like what?”

Dripping with affection. Like a woman teasing her lover. The ache that caused. The intimation that I was more than just her childhood bestie. The desperation I felt to hear it again.

“Ben?” She worried.

I’d been quiet too long. Lost in a river of feels. “I liked it,” I said, the admission seeming minimal compared to what raged inside me.

“You did?”

I made a noise and cupped the back of her head, pulling her in. Her cheek pillowed against my shoulder, and I scratched my still-unshaven chin over her hair. Touching her was second nature now, almost as though she was an extension of my own body.

The second I'd found her at the bottom of those stairs, something inside me shattered. I couldn't keep my hands away. It was like I had to continually assure myself she was here and not just a dream.

"That's the worst fucking nickname." I spoke over her head, and I continued to stroke her hair. "But damn, if it doesn't sound like perfection rolling off your tongue."

Her arms wound around my waist, hugging me. "The sky is definitely blue today, *Benji*."

My heart inverted, and I made a sound, turning my face to pillow my cheek on the crown of her head. She was a damn good height. Just perfect for me to cuddle.

"You didn't forget to play piano, baby. You've got a whole symphony inside you. A song all your own. I still remember the first time I heard you play. How mesmerized I was. You've only gotten better since. The second you sit down at those keys, your body and mind will take over and it will be like it always is when you play."

"And how is that?"

"Like you've stolen all the oxygen out of my lungs and replaced it with your melody."

Her arms tightened around me, squeezing so tight I worried she might hurt herself. But I didn't complain. I never would.

"I'd take you to the theater right now and prove it, but I gotta meet Prism."

She pulled back, and it made me a little grumpy. Spinning on my heel, I dropped in front of her and patted my shoulder. "Uber's here."

“What’s an Uber?”

I nearly fell over. “Oh shit, you forgot that too?” Bracing my hand on the cold ground, I glanced over my shoulder.

The vision she made was an arrow through my heart. Strands of brown hair blew around her like an unruly halo, and her long legs stretched from beneath my blue hoodie, the sleeves concealing her hands.

My final girl.

“You know what? You don’t need to know about that anyway. You can’t be getting in cars with strangers. They’ll kidnap you, and then I’ll spend the rest of my life in jail with a roommate named Chex, and he’ll have a weird fascination with watching me use the toilet in our cell.”

I shuddered just thinking about it.

“That is disturbingly detailed,” she mused.

“The point is you aren’t allowed to ride in an Uber.” I gestured. “Let’s go.”

She climbed on my back, and I stood, adjusting her as I went. “Ben?”

“Mm?” I hummed on the way over to get all our stuff.

“I know what an Uber is. I was kidding.”

“Your memory is coming back,” I observed.

“Yes, little things here and there. And in some of my classes, I knew the answers to questions the professors asked.”

“That’s good,” I said, stomach clenching. I wanted her to get her memory back. Even if remembering meant I got caught in a lie. Even if it meant that first kiss might be our only.

It hadn't exactly been what I had in mind for our first kiss, but I'd rather amputate my nut sack than give it back. It was hard to even feel guilty that I just took it like that because it was so damn satisfying.

She squealed when I bent to pick up her stuff, and I pretended I was going to dump her off my back. She clutched at me and hollered, making me laugh.

I absolutely wanted her to get her memory back... but maybe I wouldn't mind if it took a little longer because maybe I wasn't ready to let this go.

JESS

BEN WANTED ME TO GO TO THE POOL AND GYM WITH HIM. I considered it. Part of me did want to go. I liked being around him. Something about him just settled me. A strange description perhaps, but I could think of no better way to describe how he made me feel.

Getting back to classes and my routine was overwhelming. Looking around at all the people and places that I should know and seeing the unfamiliar was scary. Despite having trivial things come back to me throughout the day, I was still anxious I wouldn't remember. If I didn't, it would be like starting over, but how would I start over when I was already in the middle of my life?

It was because of this that I wanted to stay with Ben and Matt. It was also why I didn't.

Yep, that's me. A walking oxymoron.

Yes, Ben and even Matt made me feel safe and not so overwhelmed. It was nice. Comfortable. The urge to cling to them was definitely there. However, I needed to remember. To do that, I had to keep to my stupid routine.

I was beginning to hate that word.

So instead of going with Ben like I wanted, I had him drop me off at my dorm. It wasn't exactly true to my routine because, apparently, I should be at work at the music store off campus. Ben had called and told them about my accident, and they gave me a week off. He also called the people I gave piano lessons to and canceled those for the week too. Things I probably should have done for myself, but I had to admit when he did them, I was relieved.

We avoided telling my boss and students about the retrograde amnesia. In fact, I didn't tell anyone at all except my roommate and the professors I saw today. The only reason I told them was that it was need-to-know.

It seemed too overwhelming to explain to people. The curiosity of others was a burden I didn't want to bear. I was hoping my memory would come back quickly and it wouldn't even matter. Even after an entire day of going to classes, basically retracing steps I'd taken all semester, it wasn't enough to shake free the block on my mind.

So I was here. In my dorm instead of the pool, further familiarizing myself with my own room while hoping it would somehow flip the switch in my brain.

Okay, fine. I was mostly daydreaming about that kiss. Because *holy hell swoon*.

As I replayed the way it felt to be practically inhaled by Ben, I poked around, looking at my sad stash of snacks, impressive collection of slasher DVDs, and binder filled with sheet music. Frankly, how was I supposed to remember anything when I was consumed by the way his tongue felt lashing across mine, the rumbling sounds he made as he devoured me, and the way his arms radiated power when he

literally carried me across the quad to put me up against a building and make out with me all over again?

My body seemed to have no trouble at all remembering the effect he had on me, which, frankly, was nothing short of devastation.

My body bounced when I belly-flopped onto my bed and pushed my face into my blankets to inhale. I hoped the scent would trigger a memory or more, but all it did was make me think of the way Ben's scent wrapped around me in his bed last night.

The way he had to.

“Get it together,” I told myself, reaching for the drawer in my nightstand and pulling it open. My hand closed around a small notebook, and I pulled it in front of me. It was bound in red leather (that probably wasn't real) and had the word *journal* stamped across it in small gold block letters.

It also had one of those stretchy type of bands around the side that opened to keep it closed. Sliding the band away, I flipped it open, wondering what was inside.

Ooh, a diary. “Secrets from my own mind,” I mused, flicking through the pages that were filled with handwritten entries. This would for sure jog my memory.

“This calls for popcorn,” I announced to literally no one and left the journal there while I reached for the crutches so I could make a snack.

Have I mentioned how annoying those crutches were? One star. Do not recommend.

The end of one tangled in something lying on the floor, and I nearly went down. Frustrated, I glanced down and

groaned. Clothes were scattered everywhere, and the cord of a blue nylon bag was twisted around the rubber tip of the crutch.

Using the bed, I sank onto the floor, sitting with my legs stretched out in front of me. After untangling the cord, I picked up all the clothes, stuffing them back into the bag.

The door to the room opened, and Lainey strolled in, stopping short when she saw me on the floor. “Did you fall?” She worried, tossing her bag onto her bed and coming closer.

“No,” I explained. “My crutches got tangled in this stuff.”

Lainey laughed. “You do say your laundry is your arch nemesis.”

I gave the clothes a dubious stare. “This is my laundry?”

My roommate straightened, hopped over the wrinkled clothes scattered about, and went over to the small shared closet to reach inside. “Yep. You always let it pile up because it’s your least favorite chore.”

Considering the fact the bag was so full it was bulging, I would have to say that Lainey was not lying. “When’s the last time I washed clothes? Winter break?”

She laughed. “I’m glad to see your sense of humor is still intact.”

“I was being serious,” I deadpanned.

She glanced back at the heap and then up at me. Both of us burst out laughing. “I’m surprised you have underwear left.”

“Maybe I don’t wear any,” I mused. Then I wondered. “Do I?”

“Well, I’ve never asked, but considering those lacey things right there,” she said, toeing the end of her sneaker toward a

pair of black briefs partly falling out of the bag, “I’d say that you do.”

“Most girls with amnesia wake up and find out they’re married to a billionaire. What do I learn? I’m a slob.”

Lainey laughed again. “Not a slob. Just someone with an aversion to washing clothes.”

“Where’s the laundry?” I asked. “Do we have one here on the floor?”

She scoffed. “In this old building? Fat chance. The shared laundry room is in the basement.”

“How cliché,” I mused. “Let me guess. It’s dark and creepy too.”

“It’s not so bad actually. They remodeled it a few years ago.”

“Guess I’m doing laundry.”

“Are you sure you feel up to that?” she asked, pulling on the jacket she’d gotten from the closet.

I shrugged. “I’m not doing anything else. All I have to do is put it in the machine and wait.” Maybe me doing something I clearly hated would help jog some memories loose.

“Well, I’m on my way out to my weekly lab, but I can help you get it into the elevator and downstairs.”

“Really?”

“Sure,” she said, grabbing a white plastic laundry basket nearby. “You can just put it all in here when it’s clean and push the basket into the elevator with your crutches.”

“Great idea,” I said, shoving everything into the bag and then using the bed to stand.

Lainey tightened the string at the top and tossed it into the basket, then added a container of detergent. “Ready?”

I snatched the journal off the bed and tucked it into the basket with the bag. I could read through it while I waited for my clothes to wash. After that, I pulled on my small crossbody bag and grabbed the crutches.

Using her body to hold open the room door, Lainey gestured for me to go first, and when I did, my attention instantly went to the stairwell door at the end of the hall. More specifically, someone slipping through quickly and pulling it closed behind them.

An odd feeling came over me, and I stopped in the center of the hall, staring at the now-closed door. I don’t know why it struck me as odd. I mean, people take the stairs all the time. I took the stairs all the time. *Hey! Another memory!* It was good exercise, and sometimes it was faster than these old elevators. Especially in the morning when everyone was rushing out to get to classes on time. They often took forever because they had to stop on every floor on the way down (or up).

So why were my senses tingling? Why was my breathing suddenly uneven and the pounding of my heart erratic?

“Jess?” Lainey asked, stopping beside me with her armload. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just saw someone in the stairwell.”

She made a sound. “Did you remember them?”

I guess she would assume I recognized someone considering the way I was staring. Pulling my eyes away from the door, I smiled at her. “Nope. Barely saw them at all. They were moving fast.”

“Probably late for class. Which is what I will be if we don’t get a move on. Let’s go,” she said, going to the elevator and hitting the down arrow.

I followed along, the crutches slowing my pace. She held the door, and then we rode it down to the basement. Luckily, the elevator opened right into the laundry space, which was less horror movie chic than I expected.

“See?” she said, hauling my laundry to the closest washing machine and setting it down. “Not so terrible.”

Considering the memories I had of my childhood home—and I use the term home loosely—and those of the laundromat I used for my uniform in high school that was the equivalent of a rundown gas station bathroom, this place was a palace. The walls here were brick but painted over with white. Large pendant lights hung from the ceiling, keeping the shadows at bay, and a long butcherblock counter for folding clothes ran across the wall to the right. There were some comfortable-looking chairs, a large round coffee table, and two vending machines. One filled with snacks and one with drinks. On the far end of the room, there was another vending machine, but it had laundry essentials in it like detergent and dryer sheets.

The floor was dark slate tile and there was a large slip-proof mat that ran in front of the row of washer and dryers.

“Do you need help with the machine?” Lainey asked, pointing.

I shook my head. “Nah, I got it. You better go so you aren’t late. Thank you so much.”

“Sure thing,” she said with a little wave. Instead of hitting the button for the elevator, she crossed the room to a propped-

open door with the word stairwell posted on it. “See you later!”

I called out a goodbye and then listened to her footsteps echo as she jogged up the stairs. Balancing on the crutches, I gazed around, realizing no one else was down there. I took advantage of that and separated out two different loads of laundry, using a washing machine for each. At least this way it would take less time.

As I was closing the top of the second machine, the music coming through the speakers around the room faded away and a voice I knew filled the room.

“And there you have it. The newest smash single from current chart-topper, Envious. Hit me up and let me know what you think about his latest release. Should he put a pin in it or keep unpacking bangers? I personally would like to hear something with a little more tooth, but we all know Triple A likes to go hard...”

“Triple A,” I repeated, my own voice conjuring up information. “Arsen Aaron Andrews.”

Arsen was a DJ at the campus radio station and also at campus parties. Sound recording technology was not the first class I’d had with him. We had one together last semester too. Both having music majors, we crossed paths often on campus. No wonder he seemed so familiar with me. And Ben with him.

Groaning, I turned to hit a few buttons on the washing machine. He probably thought I was insane freaking out the way I had. He was hardly a stranger. *You didn’t know that at the time.* Still, I was embarrassed. He tried to help me when I stumbled, and I nearly had a panic attack!

Another thought occurred to me, and I paused, finger poised over the start button on the controls. If we'd known each other since last year, if we were familiar enough to share notes, why did he seem so surprised when Ben called me his fiancée? He acted like he didn't even know we were together.

I started the second machine and spun, leaning against it. Confusion rose within me, along with a healthy heaping of self-doubt.

I hated feeling like my life was a puzzle that I had to assemble. I hated even more that so many pieces were missing. How could I put any of it together when I didn't even have enough for a full picture?

Suddenly weary, I pushed the crutches beneath my arms and went back to the laundry basket to fold up the now-empty clothes bag. As I was putting it aside, my gaze caught on the journal, and I reached for it.

My phone went off, and I jumped, one of the crutches clattering onto the floor, and I fell into the side of a dryer, gripping the remaining crutch.

The phone went off again, and I pressed a hand to my chest and rolled my eyes at myself. Straightening, I reached into the crossbody to pull out the new phone Ben had just gifted me. Guess I wasn't used to the ringtone yet.

Who needs a creepy basement when you jump at the sound of your own phone?

“So not final girl material,” I muttered. My head came up, and I stared across the room, not really looking at anything, too busy feeling what I knew wanted to be a memory, but it was just out of reach.

I grabbed at the chord of familiarity my own words had somehow inspired. But the more I reached, the farther away the memory got.

Ben calls me final girl. It's probably just something to do with that. The thought felt wrong, though. Like it didn't have anything to do with Ben.

In fact, when Ben called me final girl, it didn't feel familiar at all.

You like it, though.

Well, duh. Of course I do. I also like his tongue.

The phone went off again, this time ringing with an incoming call. Pushing aside my busy thoughts, I looked at the screen.

I snorted so loud you could hear it over the filling washing machines. He'd programmed himself into my phone as *Fiancé*.

Why did that give me insane butterflies?

Swiping to answer the call, I pulled the phone up to my ear. Before I could even say anything, the device beeped, signaling a dropped call. Pulling the phone down, I glanced at the screen, noting the low signal.

"No matter how thin you slice it, it's still baloney," I muttered, rather grumpy that I wasn't able to hear Ben's voice.

AKA It didn't matter how nice you fixed up a basement, it was still a basement, and the Wi-Fi down here sucked.

It had only been a few hours since I saw him last, but I missed him. Following that thought, I tried to dial him back. That call dropped too. Remembering the notifications before

the phone rang, I pulled up my texts, seeing Ben had messaged too.

Excuse me. My *fiancé* texted.

Girl, are your legs tired? 'Cause you've been running through my mind.

I giggled out loud.

You better not be running. I forbid it.

Finishing up at the gym. We're all going to dinner. I'll come pick you up.

Jess?

I need you to reply, baby girl.

Where are you?

A notification for a missed call flashed onto the screen, and I swiped on it, seeing that Ben tried to call me again, but this time it didn't even ring.

Knowing he must be worried, I pulled up the texts again and typed out a message, hoping it would go through. *I'm doing laundry in the basement. No service.*

The way he looked standing in the hospital bathroom a few days ago with his forehead pressed against mine flashed through my head. *"You scared the hell out of me."*

His worry had been so palpable in that moment that I could still feel it now. Or you know, maybe that was because most of my head was empty, so the memories I did have had room to be bigger.

Whatever the reason, guilt crashed over me. He was probably freaking out. He got me this phone so he could always get in touch. *And now he can't.*

Something akin to dread worked its way up my legs to pool into my belly, making it feel bloated. The idea of Ben being upset was something I could not endure. I might not have all the memories of us he did, but one thing I knew so clearly: He cared about me. So much. Clutching the phone, I looked at the elevator. I could just ride up a couple floors, call him, and then come back down to finish my laundry. No one was down here, so it wasn't like my clothes could get mixed up with anyone else's. And there was no rule that said I had to stay here with my unmentionables as they washed.

Okay, maybe there was a sign that said DO NOT LEAVE CLOTHES UNATTENDED, but what were they gonna do, throw my clothes in the trash?

I couldn't remember what they looked like anyway. And they were dirty.

Stuffing my phone in the kangaroo pocket on Ben's hoodie (yes, I was still wearing it), I headed toward the elevator.

The heavy metal song blaring through the speakers suddenly cut out, making me glance up at the ceiling as I continued to move. Then the washing machines cut off midcycle.

The silence was abrupt, so astute that, suddenly, the well-lit, redone laundry room seemed exactly like the creepy basement.

I stopped walking, the silence skittering up my spine like the quick legs of a spider. I swiveled at the waist, looking over my shoulder toward the washing machines that were suddenly out of commission.

Slam! The large wooden door to the stairwell banged closed. I jolted so hard one of the crutches slipped from under

me, the hollow clattering sound it made on the slate floor like a gunshot.

Heart palpitating and leaning heavily on just the one support, I stared at the heavy door that was completely shut and latched. How did it slam like that? We were in a windowless basement. There was no wind. No fan. The way it slammed so hard, it was as if someone pushed it.

But I was alone.

Wasn't I?

"Hello?" I called out. My voice sounded small against the much larger silence in the room.

A sharp popping sound knocked me back. I hit the floor, and the lights cut out, plunging the room into darkness so inky I couldn't see my hand when I held it up in front of my face.

Terror turned me cold, any warmth I had leeching out of my extremities faster than water placed in a subzero freezer. My heart, which had been pounding, slowed to a dull thud, each beat so heavy my ribs ached.

Pulling up the leg that was not broken, I bent the knee, wrapping my arm around it as I braced my free hand on the floor. *This is nothing*, I told myself. *Just a power outage.*

A power outage that slams doors.

Oh my God, if the power is out, the elevator won't work.

I can't walk up the stairs with a broken ankle.

I was trapped.

Breath wheezed between my lips as I grappled for the crutches lying nearby. I winced at the sound they made scraping over the floor. I listened acutely, hoping maybe the

custodian of the building had just come down here for maintenance, not realizing I was here.

A faint sound made me freeze. My body ached with how still I forced it to remain.

Low voices on the other side of the door made me think someone was out there. Or coming down the stairs.

I opened my lips to call out, but something stopped me. Intuition? Paralyzing fear? Final girl energy?

Whatever it was, I heeded the warning and pressed my lips closed.

The sound of the knob on the door rattling made my stomach lurch. I glanced toward the other side of the room where I knew the vending machines sat but knew I'd never make it there. Thinking fast, I half crawled, half dragged myself over to the washing machine on the end, the one that had my first load of clothes inside.

The door creaked loudly, the hinges sounding old and rusty as the heavy door opened. I huddled around the side, hoping its size and the lack of light would keep me hidden.

Cautious scuffling footsteps stepped in. A dim beam of light swept the room. I wilted into the side of the machine, pushing my hand over my mouth to muffle the sound of my gasping breaths.

Pulse hammering in my veins, I stared toward the space where I'd left my crutches. I should have dragged them with me, used them as weapons. The longer the person lingered, the harder my limbs shook, and the sensation of being stalked seemed to slither across the cold floor to coil around my ankles and slowly snake up my legs.

A horrible sense of déjà vu overwhelmed me, and I swallowed back a gag.

The weak beam of a flashlight swept the room, threatening to expose every secret it held, and it became very apparent someone was looking for something.

Looking for me.

You don't know that!

“She’s not here. Let’s go.” A hushed, hurried whisper carried through the dark.

I do now.

The light swung around, stretching incredibly close to the place I hid, instead illuminating my abandoned crutches.

“*Fuck,*” someone half growled. “She’s gone.”

Footsteps retreated.

“Turn the power back on.”

The implications of that statement were heavy, and my mind started to numb. The panic I’d been holding back began to win over, its sharp talons puncturing the self-preservation I boldly wielded.

Just hang on. They’re leaving. They didn’t see you.

The small light clicked off. The relief I felt was damn near painful. Even after the room was silent, I stayed hidden, straining over the epic pounding of my heart to hear that they’d gone.

The radio came back on first, the cheerful song startling as it punched through the surround sound, and ratcheted up my anxiety that much more. The lights flickered on right after, and

I froze, waiting for something terrible to happen. Expecting someone to scream, “Found you!”

The two washing machines I’d been using clicked like they would continue their cycles where they left off.

My body unclenched, but I was left weak and afraid. Reaching into my pocket, I grabbed the cell, reassuring myself it was still there. Since I felt safer down here on the floor and my crutches were across the room, I started to crawl, heading directly to the elevators.

Fuck these clothes. I was getting the hell out.

It happened so fast I couldn’t even scream. Someone snatched me around the waist, lifting me off the ground like I was insignificant in size.

Breath whooshed out of me, and the cell in my hand slipped free and hit the ground. I stared at it for a single heartbeat, seeing my link to the outside world suddenly out of reach. *Fight*. My brain reminded me, and I started to kick and pound my fists into the forearms holding me hostage.

Click.

Whoosh.

The world tilted. My body banged and scraped as it was forced inside a small opening, my face smacking something cold and hard.

“No!” I wailed, surging forward despite the pain echoing in my limbs.

Rough hands shot out, shoving me back.

Splash.

The back of my head smacked into something hard, and I fell into shallow water. My nose burned when the strong scent of detergent assaulted me, and I scrambled around, trying again to lunge to freedom.

The circular door slammed in my face, my palm smacking into the heavily tinted glass.

“No!” I yelled, the sound echoing around me in the chamber.

I pounded against the glass until my hand stung. “Let me out of here!”

I barely registered what was happening, the events too horrible to comprehend. All I knew was that this was bad. Very, very bad.

The sound of a lock engaging was like a bullet right to my heart. I fell back with a wail, water soaking my clothes and seeping into my cast while my body ached with fresh bruises.

A shadow moved in front of the round glass door, and anger overtook the crippling fear.

“Let me out of here, you son of a bitch!” I roared. Ignoring the piercing pain in my ankle, I threw all my weight into the door to try and push it open.

“Let me out!” I cried, a wave of dizziness making my head swim.

The shadow moved again, and I swiped my hand over the wet, tinted glass so I could better try to make out who it was.

Click. Click. The sound of something unlatching made me spin around at the metal walls enclosing me.

Water burst out of the side, rushing into the small tank in great, sloppy bursts.

I recoiled, holding my arms up, trying to keep it away as water flooded the bottom, sinking the already saturated clothes I sat on and trying to sink me too.

And then the person who'd just shoved me inside this washing machine, locked the door, and turned it on walked away.

Leaving me here to die.

KRUGER

I'M A CHARMING GUY. AND I KISS GOOD TOO.

So color me surprised when she didn't instantly reply to my flirty text. Or any of the ones after them either.

Then my calls dropped. Twice. Now they were going directly to voicemail.

I went from surprised to freaking the fuck out.

"Something's wrong," I told P, slamming the door to my locker and snatching my keys.

His head poked around his open locker door. "What?"

"Jess isn't answering. The calls are going straight to voicemail."

"Let's go," he said, pushing his own locker shut as we headed out. On the way, I pulled up the app I'd installed on her phone.

Yep. A tracker. Look, if you've been around here a while, then you understand this app is essential to Elite. If you're new here, welcome. We track our significant others because we learned the hard way what happens when we don't.

Prism swore, yanking his phone away from his ear. “Straight to voicemail for me too.”

“Tracker says she’s still at her dorm,” I told him, jumping behind the wheel of my Audi.

“You put a tracker on her phone?” he asked. Then, “Good call. Send me the info later so I can add it to my phone too.”

See? It’s what we do.

The drive to her dorm was short, made even shorter by the way I put the pedal to the metal and parked illegally at the curb. The second I got out of the car, my phone beeped, and I glanced down at the text.

I’m doing laundry in the basement. No service.

“She’s in the basement doing laundry,” I called as I jogged up the walkway. “Hey, hold that door!” I hollered to the girls coming out. They did, and I rushed past them with barely a glance and a muttered thanks.

The door banged loudly when I shoved it open into the stairwell and rushed down. The text should have made me feel better. I knew where she was. What she was doing.

But oddly, the closer I got to the laundry room, the more panicked I grew. By the time I made it to the bottom of the stairs, my heart was galloping, and I leaped forward, skipping the last three steps. The second my feet hit, I pushed off and rushed through the door leading into the laundry.

It was bright and well-lit. A couple washers were on, but the room was empty.

“Where is she?” Prism asked.

“Jess!” I yelled. “Jessica!”

A loud bang jerked my head up. “Ben!” a muffled voice yelled. “Ben, help! Let me out!”

Prism made a harsh sound as a hand slapped against the glass. “Ben!”

“*Christ!*” I spat, rushing across the room to where Jess was trapped inside a washing machine. *A fucking washing machine.*

“Help!” she wailed, beating the door hard enough to make the machine rattle.

“I’m here,” I called, grabbing the door to yank it open. It didn’t budge, the lock holding it in place. She coughed, and my vision nearly blacked out. “It’s locked! Turn it off,” I insisted, going for the power button.

At the same time, Prism yanked the cord right out of the wall.

The entire machine shut down, the lock disengaging. I yanked the door open, nearly falling back on my ass with the force of my pull.

“Jess!” I bellowed, reaching into the opening as she tried to scramble out.

She was gasping and coughing as I grabbed her, hauling her to safety. We fell back onto the floor with her sprawled over me, her clothes soaked and her teeth chattering.

“Oh my God,” she wailed, collapsing against me, her gasps giving way to deep sobs.

I pushed into a sitting position, tucking her into my lap while clutching her against me with both arms, pressing her head beneath my chin.

Holding her tight, I locked my jaw and endured the deep harrowing sobs that cut me so deep I'd wear the scars the rest of my life. As she wailed and clutched at me, I stared over her head and the washing machine I'd just pulled her out of. The door was still ajar, the glass streaked with water as wet clothes spilled out of the dark opening, creating a puddle on the floor.

Her teeth started to chatter, and I hunched around her, rocking us back and forth. "Shh." I soothed. "You're safe now. It's okay. I got you."

Her hand lifted between our bodies to curl around the back of my neck, her icy, wet skin pressing against mine.

"Ben," she rasped.

"Right here, baby girl." I promised. "You're safe."

She calmed, her cries turning into hiccups as I continued to rock us back and forth. Above her, I looked at Prism, and our eyes met. We shared a dark look, his lips flattening into a grim line.

"Who did this to you?" I demanded, unable to keep the question in a second longer.

She whimpered and pushed her cold nose into my throat. I rumbled a rude sound and peeled her away from my body, still keeping her in my lap but holding her out of my chest.

"Jessica. I want a name."

"I don't know," she whispered, head dipping toward her chest. The ends of her hair were wet and tangled, pissing me off all over again.

Using my fingers, I pushed her chin up so I could study her face. It was deathly pale. Except for the fresh, shiny bruise on

her cheek. “What the hell happened to your face?” I roared, pushing her hair back so I could get a better look.

Prism came around, dropping into a crouch beside us. He reached out, but I smacked his hand away and used mine to gently turn her cheek so he could see.

He released a short growl. “Tell us what happened,” he ordered, voice tight.

Now he’s going to be agitated all over again.

“I was doing my laundry,” Jess explained. “All the electricity cut out. I thought maybe it was a power outage, but then...” Her voice trailed off.

I gave her a little shake. “Then what?”

“Then someone came in with a flashlight like they were looking for me.”

“No one else was in here with you?” Prism asked.

She shook her head. “I had this weird sense of déjà vu, so I hid. They assumed I left, so they turned the power back on. I waited,” she whimpered.

“You did good,” I praised, pulling her in for a hug. “So good.”

“No, I didn’t!” she exclaimed, pushing away from me, nearly tumbling right out of my lap. “They fooled me, and when I went for the elevator, they grabbed me from behind and shoved me into that washing machine and locked it!” She pointed at it like it was evil.

Bro, it fucking was.

“I thought I was going to die,” she confessed, fresh tears welling in her brown eyes.

I moved to pull her in, but she winced, reaching up toward her head. “I think I ripped my stitches.”

Even though my insides felt like a grenade about to blow, I made a soft noise. “Let me see, sweetheart.”

She leaned in, and I gently probed the area where her stitches were. She hissed in discomfort, and I pulled my fingers back, noting the bright-red stain against my skin.

Temper boiling, I burst up off the floor, agitation and adrenaline fueling me with enough power that I lifted her too. Cradling her bridal style, I looked at Prism. “Call the police. Now.”

Whoever did this had better pray the cops got to them first. Because if I did? Jail would look like a vacation.

JESS

DID YOU SEE WHO DID THIS? No.

Did you recognize any voices? No.

How many people were there? Not sure.

*Do you think this is related to your accident on the stairs?
Do you remember anything from that night?*

My interview with the cops was brief and pointless. The more questions they asked, the more answers I didn't have. I was cold, banged up, and feeling utterly helpless. The more frustrated I grew, the harder I searched my mind, which seemed to make it even harder to think.

Ben interceded, and he and Matt acted like bodyguards as we moved through the crowd of nosy students so he could put me in the car and drive to the hospital.

I was really beginning to hate that place.

They fixed two ripped stitches and cut off my wet, damaged cast to replace it with a new one. I also had a nice shiner on my cheek and a few fresh bruises on my body to contrast the old yellowing ones from days ago.

By the time we finished with the police and the hospital, I was exhausted and disillusioned. I thought longingly of bed, but the idea of going back to my room filled me with anxiety. When we pulled up to a townhouse I definitely didn't know—or maybe I did?—I perked up in the passenger seat.

“This isn't my dorm.” I pointed out the obvious.

Ben snorted. “Like I'd take you there.”

Before I could ask anything else, he was out and jogging between the Audi and the blue Corvette parked in front of it.

“Is that Rush's car?” I wondered.

“Yep,” Matt said from the dim backseat.

My head was throbbing, so I didn't turn to look, just pointed toward the overfull driveway nearby. “And those Jeeps belong to the other Elite?”

The passenger door opened, cool night air rushing inside the car. The blue hoodie I'd been wearing earlier was traded out for a white one. And when I say traded, I mean literally. Ben was now back in the blue one, and it looked half-washed and damp. He'd literally taken the fresh one off his body and put it on mine without a word of complaint and put on the wet, wrinkly, used one.

“Where are we?” I asked, the question for either of the guys that would answer first.

“Wes and Lars's place,” Prism said.

I glanced up the sidewalk to the warmly lit window. “Wes and Lars live here?”

Ben leaned into the car to undo the seatbelt still around me. “Max and Win too.”

“What are we doing here?” I wanted to know.

Ben helped me out of the car, anchoring his arm around my waist when I was on foot to support some of my weight. My crutches were likely still lying in the basement laundry room... a place I didn't care to visit again. Still supporting me, he leaned down to adjust the seat so Matt could climb out.

The second he was upright, he tugged a pair of AirPods out of his pocket and stuffed the small white buds into his ears.

“Why do you always wear those?” I asked.

He froze, eyes firing to my face. “Uhh...”

“Come on. Let's head in,” Ben said, trying to direct me away.

I let out a loud huff. “No wonder I don't know anything,” I complained. “Whenever I ask questions, no one actually answers them.”

“Now, baby, drama will just bust another stitch,” Ben placated. Well, he thought he was placating. I thought he was being stupid.

Planting my fist on my hip, I said, “That is not funny, Benjamin Hayes.”

Prism snickered. “Shouldn't have told her your middle name.”

Throwing out my arm, I jabbed my finger in his direction. “You're in trouble too, Matthew Miller.”

Matt snapped upright, the smile falling from his face. “You told her mine too?” He accused Ben. “How could you do it to me, bro?”

“He didn’t tell me.” I spoke up. “I guess annoyance helps me remember. So go ahead and don’t tell me anything. I’ll remember it all eventually.”

Ben’s body clenched with tension, his muscles locked so tight I felt them vibrate against my side. His fingers spasmed at my waist, but his hold never waned. A pregnant, uncomfortable silence filled the night, and both boys shifted awkwardly but kept their lips sealed.

Wariness whispered over the back of my neck, prickling my skin with goose bumps and making me cold. The slight tension it left in its wake was uncomfortable, my body too tired to fight it off.

Ben cleared his throat and shifted so he was standing right in front of me, both hands on my waist. “We’re just worried about overwhelming you. Giving too much information too fast and too soon. Look at everything that happened the past few hours, you’re already overwhelmed.”

I wanted to argue, but he was right. I was overwhelmed. Still, I couldn’t let it go. “I don’t like being lied to.”

Ben’s unique eyes slid away, the muscle in the back of his jaw pulsing like he was grinding his teeth. Against my waist, his hands curled into fists. Fresh tension radiated off him in waves. Yet when he spoke, his voice was gentle. “We’re here because everyone wants to see you. They were gonna come to the hospital, but they’d have had to sit in that hell room and listen to those dragon ladies, so I told them I’d bring you by.”

Hell room? Dragon ladies? And he thinks I’m the dramatic one.

“Okay,” I said, suddenly feeling guilty for giving him a hard time. It made me a little emotional that everyone came

here to see me.

“I don’t want to lie to you,” he said, voice heavy and slightly pained. “I’m just trying to protect you.”

I bobbed my head. “I know.”

He pulled back slightly, one of his hands sliding away. “I’m sorry.” The apology was gruff but dripping with so much sincerity it momentarily robbed me of air.

The little distance between us suddenly felt gaping, and in that space was a giant wedge—a wall of some kind trying to get in the way of the connection I usually felt between us.

Instantly, I hated it. It left me reeling like I was suddenly untethered and left to float in this big unknown world alone. Not only that, but his regret was painful. More painful than any of the physical wounds I currently had.

Afraid and craving comfort, I moved forward, looping my arms around his neck and curling into his chest, trying to make myself smaller.

His arms instantly closed around me, and I let out a muffled whimper of relief.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again, his breath ruffling my hair and brushing my ear. “I don’t know what to do anymore, final girl. I’m all mixed up.”

The despair in his words fisted around my heart, and I forgot all about my confusion and pain and focused on his. “It’s okay,” I whispered into his neck, brushing my lips across his steady pulse.

He made a sound, and I kissed him there again. The way his pulse jumped under my lips made me feel like I was kissing his heart.

A sigh moved through him. It made not one sound, but oh, the way it muted everything else. Hugging tighter, we remained like that for long minutes, clinging, almost desperate as if something were waiting to try and tear us apart.

“I have misophonia.”

Pulling out of Ben’s hold, I looked over my shoulder where Matt stood nearby. “What?”

“P, we don’t have to talk about it right now,” Ben told him.

He lifted one shoulder. “You knew before,” Matt said, glancing at me, slightly sheepish. “So it really wasn’t a lie. I just don’t like to talk about it.” He was silent a moment, then, “Was hoping you’d remember.”

I made a sound and turned to go to him, tripping a little over the stupid cast.

Ben caught me around the waist at the same time Matt came forward. I held out my arms, and he moved into them. I hugged him tight, feeling sorry I’d gotten so mad before. Sorry I’d accused them of lying. They weren’t, not really. It wasn’t their fault I couldn’t remember.

“I’m sorry, Matty,” I whispered.

He patted me on the back. “It’s okay.”

I pulled back enough so I could look into his face. “What’s misophonia?” Concerned, I reached to cup his jaw. “Does it hurt? Oh, Matty, are you in pain?”

Behind us, Ben’s feet scuffed. “He will be if you don’t stop holding his face like that.”

I rolled my eyes.

Matt's lips curled as he chuckled beneath his breath. The low laugh sent a burst of that déjà vu feeling, this one much more pleasant than the last.

Still cupping Matt's face, I glanced behind me at Ben to scowl. "Be quiet. I'm talking to my brother."

Offended, he pointed to himself, more specifically at his hoodie. "I'm wearing a wet, smelly rag so you don't have to."

Clearly, he was the dramatic one.

Turning back, I refocused on Matt. "Are you in pain?"

His brown eyes turned soft as though me worrying about him was something he appreciated. "You asked me that the first time I told you too."

"I don't want you to be in pain."

"I'm not."

"How long have I known?" I asked.

"Since high school."

I nodded, looking inward, trying to see that time in my mind. Seeking the memory vault that I knew had to be somewhere inside me.

"Don't give yourself a headache," Matt said, reaching to gently tug my hands away from his face. He didn't release me, though. He slid an arm around my waist to take some of my weight. "How's the ankle?"

"This isn't about me right now," I told him.

"It's always about you," Ben said, making my stomach flip and my stare stray in his direction.

"Misophonia is a severe sensitivity to sound," Matt told me, stealing my attention once more.

“I haven’t heard of that before,” I murmured but then grimaced at my own stupidity. I had heard of it before.

Matt patted my waist. “It’s a newly recognized medical condition, a brain disorder actually. Not a lot of people know about it. And there isn’t much research on it because it is so new.”

“So sound bothers you?” I asked.

“Not all sound. Certain sounds. They, ah, elicit an emotional response. For some people, it’s just like an annoyance, but for others, it’s more severe.”

“An emotional response?”

Matt swallowed and nodded. “Yeah, ah, it triggers a fight-or-flight response. For me, it also causes anxiety.” Matt glanced over at Ben, almost seeking reassurance. I recognized the look because it was one I also wore when looking at him.

“P just gets overstimulated easily.” Ben went on, talking like it was no big thing. “Wearing the AirPods helps drown out the noise and helps him keep his cool.”

I felt my brows lift. “Do you get angry?”

A shadow of wariness moved behind Matt’s eyes.

I grabbed his hand, giving it a light squeeze. “It’s okay if you do.”

“Sometimes,” he admitted.

“So do you listen to music? Or just use those to muffle sounds?” I asked, gesturing to the pods in his ears.

“Both,” he said. “It depends on the day.”

I nodded, then leaned in to hug him. “Thanks for telling me, Matty.”

The front door of the townhouse opened, and Max poked his head out. “Get in here,” he demanded. “Everyone’s worried.”

Ben moved in, sweeping me off my feet without even asking. I squeaked, arms automatically winding around his neck for balance. “Ben!”

“No crutches.” He reminded me, starting over the sidewalk. “I’ll get you some new ones in the morning.”

Beside us, Matt cleared his throat. “Jess?”

“Hm?”

“I never told anyone else about this,” he said, pointing to his ear.

Surprised, I glanced at Ben. He met my eyes head on but then glanced over at his best friend. “She won’t say anything, P.” His eyes came back to rest on mine. “Right, final girl?”

“Of course,” I said instantly. “If you don’t want anyone to know, then I won’t say anything.” I made a motion of locking up my lips and throwing away the key.

“It’s not that I care if they know... It’s just an odd condition. Hard to explain and understand.”

“You know Elite will have your back, bro,” Ben told him. “Just like I do.”

“You’re different,” Matt said, voice gruff.

Does that mean I am too?

As if he could read my thoughts, Matt looked at me. “You too.”

“How are we different?” I wanted to know.

“You’re family.”

Ben nodded. “Always.”

The anxiety I hadn’t even noticed clinging to Matt lifted, his shoulders shifting as if he were lighter. I glanced at Ben, my stomach dipping as it occurred to me just how much Matt relied on him. And it made me think maybe the AirPods weren’t the only buffer Matt had for his misophonia. Perhaps Ben was one too.

How lucky am I to be part of them? To be someone they consider family.

The second Ben’s foot stepped up on the small porch, the front door to the townhouse swung wide, Max on the other side, holding it open.

“I’ve seen pregnant turtles move faster than you two,” he grumped. Glancing at me, he said, “Not you. Take all the time you need.”

“Wes!” Ben bellowed into the house. “You better get your man. He’s hitting on my fiancée.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Max snapped, slamming the door.

Prism’s shoulders hiked up toward his ears, and he reached into his pocket for his phone. After a couple taps, he sent the screen dark and shoved it back into his pocket.

He must be turning on music. Feeling me watching him, our eyes connected, and I smiled.

Wes appeared, in his hand a paper cup with a black lid that had become very familiar to me in the past few days. “Figured you could use this.”

“Trauma latte,” I mused, reaching for the coffee.

“With caramel.” Wes agreed.

“She needs it after dealing with Kruger,” Max grumbled, appearing to grab Wes by the back of the neck and pull him around for a deep kiss.

Wes didn’t act startled, just made a soft noise and leaned into Max as he scratched his fingers into the curls on his head. Max let out a low rumble, and I saw the flash of tongue before he lifted his head slowly, hand still fisted in Wes’s hair.

“I don’t need to hit on your woman. I’ve already got who I want,” Max said, lips slick from the kiss.

Wes’s cheeks flamed, but he made no move to untangle himself from Max’s grasp. I found myself glancing over at Ben, more specifically his mouth, and remembering the way he kissed me earlier this afternoon.

Had that only been a few hours ago? God, it felt so much longer.

“Bring that girl over here,” Jamie called from the large gray sectional on the other side of the room. “We gotta inspect her.”

“The only thing you’re going to inspect is my fist in your face,” Ben muttered.

“I already ate, bro,” Jamie told him.

Ben’s stomach growled angrily.

“You must be starving,” I said, thinking how he and Matt never got any dinner.

“We brought takeout home for you guys,” Lars said, standing from the end of the couch. “I’ll get it. Win, help me.”

“I forgive you for being better looking than me!” Ben hollered after them on their way to the kitchen and sat me on the sofa in a place everyone had made for me. The second I

was seated, Rush and Ryan pushed the coffee table close, Rory put a pillow on the hard surface, and Madison helped position my cast on the cushion.

Landry passed a blanket over, and Ben spread it out over my lap. “You good, baby girl?” he asked, smoothing the hair back from my face.

It seemed strange to have so many people fussing over me. Surreal that so many cared.

“Jess,” Ben called, reminding me he’d asked a question.

Pulling the trauma latte into my chest, I practically hugged it. “Yes, thank you.” Glancing at everyone lounging around, I told them, “I’m sorry to make you worry. Thank you for coming.”

“We would have come to the hospital but didn’t want to make the situation more overwhelming,” Ryan explained. Sitting forward on the cushions, he rested his elbows on his knees. “What happened?”

“But first,” Rory said, laying a hand on Ryan’s arm. “Are you okay? Is there anything we can get you? Do you want to change clothes or anything?”

Ryan made a gruff sound. His blue eyes dropping to my cheek, he asked, “Do you want some ice for that shiner?”

“They iced it at the hospital for a while,” I said, taking in both Rory and Ryan. “My clothes are mostly dry. I don’t have any extra with me anyway.”

The cushion dipped when Ben sat close to me, the side of his body brushing against mine. Without thinking, I settled a little closer against him, and he reached over to tug the blanket higher into my lap.

“Oh.” Madison sat forward. “We went and got a few things from your dorm for you.” She pointed over to the wall with the large flatscreen.

I made a sound, starting that my laundry basket was there along with another, both filled with folded clothes. There was also a small bag sitting beside them and my crutches. “You got my laundry?”

Landry nodded. “When we got there, you guys were already gone to the hospital,” she explained. “But the police let us in the laundry room to get your clothes. We brought them here and rewashed and dried them.”

I felt my eyes widen.

“We grabbed your crutches too, and your roommate let us in your room so we could grab some other stuff in case you needed it.” Rory finished.

“Oh my gosh,” I said, overwhelmed. “You didn’t have to do all that.”

“We wanted to,” Madison replied.

Lars and Win appeared with containers that Ben and Matt practically growled at.

“I am so hungry I could eat scabby donkey.” Matt groaned.

I made a face as Win cackled, handing over two burgers and a massive container of fries. Matt grabbed the burger and shoved a huge bite in his mouth, groaning as he chewed.

Ben dug into his similar plate as Lars handed me a container with one burger and a much more manageable serving of fries.

“Thank you,” I told him, the scent of the food enticing, but I was still unsure if I would be able to eat.

“Here, baby,” Ben offered, taking the lid off a small container of ranch and nestling it with my food. “For your fries.”

“I don’t know if I can eat,” I told him, feeling guilty.

He made a sound. “Try. And drink some of that,” he said, nudging the coffee toward my lips.

Settling back into the couch, I sipped at the coffee, thankful it was still warm.

“So,” Ryan said.

I told them about what happened in the laundry room, the memory still so fresh in my mind.

“You must have been terrified,” Madison whispered, curled beneath Jamie’s arm.

“I thought I was going to die,” I whispered.

The half-eaten second burger Ben was destroying dropped onto his plate with a plop, and he burped. “This conversation is giving me indigestion.”

“I’ll eat the rest,” Jamie said, leaning forward to reach for his plate.

I smacked his arm. “Let him eat his dinner.”

Pulling back, Jamie grumbled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Eat your dinner,” I told Ben, then glanced over at Matt. He’d already polished off both burgers and was working on his fries.

“You haven’t taken a bite,” Ben scolded.

Well, I’d been busy reliving my own personal horror movie. FYI, being in them is way less fun than watching them.

I did drink the coffee, though. Guess it really was good for trauma.

“Here.” His voice was gruff, body warm when it brushed against me as he dunked one of his fries into the ranch and then held it up to my lips. I made a face, and he rumbled his displeasure, pushing it against my mouth. “Bite,” he demanded.

I did, side-eyeing him the entire time. The second the ranch and warm potato burst over my taste buds, I hummed a little in satisfaction.

“Mm-hmm,” Ben mused. “That’s what I thought.” After dipping the rest of the fry back in the ranch, he offered it to me once more.

This time, my lips parted immediately, and he pushed it inside, fingertips brushing my lips. Tingles raced over my scalp from the brief contact, and beneath the blanket, my thighs clenched together.

As if I wasn’t already invaded, Ben leaned closer, swiping some ranch off my lower lip with his thumb and then sucking it into his mouth. I glanced at him, the fry in my mouth completely forgotten. I don’t know how he did it, but somehow as I sat in a room filled with people, talking about how someone had literally tried to murder me while the fresh stitches in my head throbbed, I forgot about all of it.

None of it seemed to matter in that split second. Time had no meaning, other people had no presence, and food had no taste. All I focused on just then was how close he was, how he made my heart pound, and the fact that it wasn’t his thumb I wanted against my mouth but his lips.

“Chew,” he said. Even his voice was slightly intrusive for the feelings he stirred within me, and it took a moment for the order to sink in.

Everything came flooding back at once, and I wondered if this was how Matty felt when his senses were overloaded because it was honestly too much.

My jaw moved on instinct, chewing the food he fed me, but I didn't taste it at all.

Ben's two-toned eyes glinted as if he felt the chemistry between us too, and I stared so hard at him that the green and brown of his irises blended into a single shade.

“Good girl,” he murmured, caressing my chin before sitting back.

Conversation resumed around me. I assumed they were talking about everything that happened, but I wasn't sure. The only thing I focused on was swallowing the food he'd put in my mouth and then doing the same when he fed me more.

“... So that's why she's staying here.”

My attention snapped back like a rubber band stretched too far. “What?” I said, whipping my eyes to Ben.

“Here?” Max said, surprise in his tone.

Ben glanced over at Max who had his whole sleeve of tattoos on display. “You're the only ones that live off campus. The only ones I trust enough to watch her.”

“I don't need watched,” I said instantly.

Ben made a rude sound. “Well, you sure as hell aren't going back to that dorm.”

I grimaced, twisting the blanket in my hands. Hadn't I just been dreading that very thing as we left the hospital? Even still, there was nowhere else to go. The dorm was where I lived.

"I just won't go in the basement," I said.

"And what about your roommate?" Ben asked, turning toward me, eyes flashing.

"What about her?" I asked.

"She was the only one who knew you were in the basement today."

The implication in his words made me feel cold. "B-but she helped me carry the laundry. Then she went to class. It wasn't her."

"Are you sure?" Ben pressed.

I fell silent. How could he ask me that? He knew I wasn't sure about anything right now.

"You can't stay on campus right now, sweetheart," he said, his voice gentling. "There's not enough privacy. We have no idea who—" His words cut off abruptly, lips pressing into a thin line.

"Who wants me dead," I stated, flat.

He pushed up off the couch and moved across the room to pace. My eyes shifted to Matt who was watching me with a concerned expression on his face.

"You can have the spare room as long as you need it," Max announced.

Win made a sound of agreement. "Bro, sure. We won't let anyone bother you."

“I can’t just stay here,” I protested.

“All your stuff is already here,” Wes pointed out, and Lars nodded.

Ben stopped pacing, relief cloaking him. “Thanks, bros. I appreciate it.”

“Can’t I just stay with you?” I asked, slight panic edging my tone.

Ben’s demeanor softened when his attention turned to me. “I’d like that, baby, but off campus is better.”

I glanced at Matt for help, but he agreed with Ben. Traitor.

“Bro, you can stay here too,” Win told Ben.

“Really?” he asked.

“Beats sleeping in your Audi at the curb,” Jamie said.

My brows drew downward. “What makes you think he’d do that?”

All the men in the room laughed as though they had some sort of secret.

“Idiots,” Madison muttered.

“Nothing wrong with a man wanting to protect his girl,” Jamie said, tugging her into his lap.

My eyes drifted back to Ben, and his were already on me.

He nodded. “I’m staying.”

KRUGER

BY THE TIME WE HAULED JESS'S STUFF UPSTAIRS INTO WES'S old bedroom—he roomed with Max now—and everyone left, it was late, the sky long dark. And while everything around us calmed down, everything inside me was more stirred up than ever.

I'd been holding back a lot of my personal reactions to finding Jess locked in a washing machine, watching her spill out, sputtering, half-drowned, and scared to death. I didn't share my thoughts while sitting with her at the hospital and through being questioned by the cops, all the while knowing if we'd been just a couple minutes later, she might be dead.

No matter how many times I went over it, I couldn't figure out who would do this. Or why.

It was making me crazy. Making me doubt myself. Was there something going on in her life I hadn't known about? Did she have some sort of relationship with someone I didn't know—someone who was now trying to hurt her?

I couldn't even ask Jess because she didn't know either.

I was operating in the dark, balancing between truth and lies. Guilt and responsibility chewed on my conscience, making me prickly and on edge.

What a fucking clusterfuck. And I had no idea how to fix any of it. The only thing I knew for sure was that whoever was trying to hurt my girl was going to fucking pay.

“Ben?” she called as though she knew I was spiraling inward and wanted to bring me back.

I turned to where she sat on the foot of the bed, plaid blankets beneath her, her long legs stretching far enough so her feet rested on the floor.

Her long brown hair was ruffled from everything and cascaded over her shoulders in tangled waves, and her cheeks were still pale.

“I’m gonna take the couch.” I pointed to the door, a lump in my throat.

Surprise flitted through her expression. “The couch?”

“Mm.” I agreed.

“Why?”

“Ahh,” I scratched behind my ear. “So you can be comfortable.”

“Why would I be more comfortable with you on the couch?”

“I’m just trying to do the right thing,” I told her, strained. If she only knew how damn hard it was to walk away. To not tackle her onto the bed and hold on so tight she molded to my frame.

But how could I? How could I do that when I'm pretty sure it's not what she would want if she could remember?

“But you slept with me in the hospital and then in your dorm room last night.”

Had that only been last night? God, it felt like forever ago.

“You were having nightmares.” I defended. “I don't like hearing you cry.”

“You don't?”

I scoffed.

“What if I have more nightmares tonight?”

“I'll hear you. I'll come.”

“Or you could just stay.”

My chest clenched, squeezing my heart uncomfortably. I stared at her for long moments, a war raging inside me, a war between what was right and what I wanted. It was so hard to deny myself when she looked at me like that.

I never quite realized it before, or maybe I had. Maybe that was why I'd spent so many years trying to be worthy. Trying to prove my worth. I might never have acknowledged it, but clearly, something deep down inside saw. The way she looked at me now versus then was different. She'd been guarded. Like she held back a piece of herself.

Now?

Now her brown gaze was open. Trusting. Like everything she was, she invited me to see.

I was so fucked. Like fucking fucked.

I was a bad, bad bro, but goddamn, that look in her eyes was my kryptonite.

I had to fight it, though. I'd already crumbled far too much. When she remembered....

“Getting into bed with you right now would be a lot different versus when you were having night terrors,” I said.

“How?”

I made a rough sound and turned away, staring at the wall to pray for patience. This wasn't her fault. She had no idea.

“Did we not sleep together before?” she pressed.

I turned back. “What?”

“We're engaged. I would think we spent the night together.” Her gaze turned shy, the paleness to her cheeks suffusing with color.

God, she was fucking adorable.

When I said nothing, just continued to stand there and stare, she spoke again, her voice timid. “Didn't we?”

Groaning, I lifted my hand to bite into the back of my finger, the urge to pounce on her so strong it made me angry. “That's why I can't just crawl into bed with you,” I said, slightly harsh. “You can't remember. You can't really consent. Me getting into bed with you because you were scared and needed comfort is a lot different than me getting in bed with you because I want to.”

“So you do want to?”

I laughed, humorless and loud. “Girl, I'd skin myself alive just to make a coat to wrap around you.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Benji, that's gross.”

I groaned again. “Don't call me that.”

“Why?”

“Because it makes this that much fucking harder!” I snapped.

She jolted back, eyes widening.

I dropped a few curses into the room. Closing the distance between us, I dropped onto my knees in front of her, reaching into her lap to cup her hands. “I’m sorry.” I apologized sincerely. “You didn’t do anything wrong, and I shouldn’t take my own frustrations out on you.”

“Why are you frustrated?”

I laughed under my breath. “You’re full of questions tonight.”

“I want to know.”

“I know, baby. I’m sure it’s hard to not remember.”

“Tell me something.”

I met her gaze. “What?”

“Anything. Something about us.”

I love you and never told you. I lied and ruined everything. I’m scared you’ll never forgive me. Scared you’ll never want me the way I want you.

“The first time I watched a horror movie with you, I screamed like a girl, and you laughed for ten minutes.”

“For real?”

I nodded sagely. “Spilled the popcorn everywhere and embarrassed myself.”

One of her hands pulled free of mine, and she pressed it to her mouth, muffling her giggles. “You’re a chicken.”

“I am not!” I said, springing to my feet. “It was one of them jump scares. Got me good.”

She laughed more, falling back onto the bed.

The sight and sound had butterflies going wild in my stomach.

“I don’t know why you like that shit,” I muttered. “It’s gonna rot your brain.”

“What movie was it?” she asked, pushing up onto her elbows.

I gave her a look, and she gave me a too-big cheesy smile.

“*The Ring*,” I answered, gruff. Then, “I don’t jump now, though. I’m used to all those tricks.”

“So you still watch my scary movies?”

My answer was simple. “You like them.”

“Stay in here tonight.”

The whispered request was a heavy anvil, dropping my stomach to my toes. I groaned, the invitation so fucking tempting. The want I had for her was literally unmatched by anything else I’d ever known.

“I can’t.” The refusal actually caused pain.

The undercurrents in the room resurfaced, growing bolder and harder to deny. That was another difference between us then and now. Chemistry always existed between us, but now it surged like high tide, filling up the room and attempting to take over. How I wanted to submit. How I wanted to get caught up in a wave of desire... to explore just how deep our connection went.

“Because I can’t consent.”

“Mm.” I agreed.

“But I’m wearing your ring,” she said, holding her hand up to stare at the gold bow.

I felt my lip curl derisively. “You deserve a diamond.”

“I like the bow,” she said, still staring. “Like you thought I was a gift.”

I swallowed, the action abrasive because of the emotion clogging my throat. “You are.”

“You kissed me earlier.”

I moaned. “You make me fucking weak.”

“I liked it.” She went on. “I liked it so much.”

My hands curled into my palms, legs wobbly. “Don’t do this,” I pleaded.

“I have amnesia, but I’m of clear mind right now.”

“Our relationship...” I stalled, trying to come up with an explanation for my betrayal. “It’s complicated. There’s a lot between us we need to work out. I don’t want to do anything now you might regret when you remember.”

Her brows furrowed, and I could almost hear the wheels in her mind spinning to try and make sense of what I said. “So we were fighting? Not getting along?”

“Something like that.”

“But you love me?”

All the breath left my body. My stomach turned inside out, and sweat slicked my palms. There was no lying here. There could never be a denial. Because in truth, it didn’t matter we weren’t actually together. The answer was still the same.

How could I just blurt it out? *Of course I do. Or, Yes.*

It was a first she thought she already had. A love confession she already experienced. And if I continued with that lie, it would rob her of something I couldn't ever give back.

But I couldn't say no either.

My shoes were muffled against the carpet, the faint scuffing sound somehow adding anticipation to the already heady currents buzzing through this room. When there were mere inches between us, I hit my knees in front of her again.

My hands were unsteady, and my heart pounded uncomfortably. She sat forward, widening her legs, and I fit myself between them, fingers brushing at her waist. She was so familiar to me yet suddenly brand new. Her scent, the sound of her soft breathing, the way her knees brushed against my sides.

She watched me quietly, and despite the doubt I knew she must harbor, there was confidence in her gaze.

So yeah, there would be no lying. There would be no takebacks. There would be nothing in this moment but the truth and the creation of a first I hoped she would never regret.

Sliding my hands from her waist, I palmed her face, gently swiping my thumbs along her cheekbones, enjoying the glide of her skin against mine.

Her pink lips parted. All her attention was mine.

“Do I love you?” I whispered, still stroking her face. “Yeah, baby girl, I love you. I love you like I've never loved anyone or anything. It's a once-in-a-lifetime kinda love. A love that won't ever stop.”

Her lower lip wobbled, and she reached up to curl her hands around my wrists. “I can feel it,” she whispered. “My brain might have forgotten, but my heart remembers. My heart remembers you.”

I inhaled, hoping to drag the remnants of those words into my lungs. To let them be the oxygen I consumed, the air that kept me alive. Fuck, it was hard to remain impartial, to keep telling myself she didn’t know what she was saying. How could I not succumb to words I’d been waiting years to hear?

My hands shifted, thumb rubbing beneath her lip.

“Ben?”

“Hmm?”

“Please kiss me.”

My body stilled, the pad of my thumb freezing in the fleshy part of her lower lip. Stares flying up, they connected, and I searched her for a hint of doubt. I couldn’t find it, and it shattered me.

Groaning, I moved forward, winding my arms around her back and taking her mouth with enthusiasm. Her lips parted instantly, the tip of her tongue slipping out to caress mine.

A satisfied rumble vibrated my chest as I swept deeper into the warmth of her mouth, practically salivating to devour every ounce of her I could find. Her body went boneless, her surrender fucking sweet. Ripping my mouth away, I pushed off my knees, dragging her body up the mattress and then covering it with mine.

She fit perfectly beneath me as I claimed her mouth again, bodies pressed together to create a single indent in the bed.

My brain turned fuzzy. Everything but her seemed so far away. Her fingers dug into my back muscles as she arched up, clinging to me as I made love to her mouth in a way I always wanted but had been denied.

Pushing my arms between her and the bed, I held her tighter, loving the way her curves felt along mine, how soft she was, how responsive. Her hand slid from my back down to my ass, filling her palm and making me thrust against her.

Our mouths dropped apart, both of us gasping. On instinct, I thrust into her again, and her legs parted, my throbbing body dropping between them to fit our bodies intimately together.

I shuddered on contact, my dick so hard it fucking hurt, and it took every last bit of awareness I had to keep from driving it into the center of her body, which she unknowingly offered up.

“Ben.” She gasped, tilting her hips as if she would come to me if I wouldn’t go to her.

Planting my hands on either side of her body, I pushed up, hovering over her as our chests heaved and I looked through narrow, desire-heavy eyes at the woman lying beneath me.

“You’re testing my patience,” I rumbled, the words more of a growl than anything.

The foot without the cast wound around my ankle, rubbing salaciously against my leg. “Everything is so confusing, Benji,” she whispered, her fingers finding the hem of my shirt. “Except when I’m with you. When you’re here, everything feels exactly right.”

The sinful words were punctuated by her hand delving under the fabric to meet skin. My muscles rippled on contact. Tingles raced over my scalp.

“Jessica,” I warned, my head falling between my shoulders as she lightly dragged her nails along my spine. “I’m only a man, sweetheart. I’ve wanted you for so fucking long.”

Shoulders leaving the bed, she leaned up, catching my lips and making me groan. I cupped the back of her head and sank into her, letting the moment swallow me whole.

Both hands found their way under my shirt, pushing it up so the cool night air could brush against my heated skin. Her blunt nails were a welcome contrast to the soft pads of her fingers.

Ripping my mouth free, we gasped for breath as I kissed across her jaw and down to her neck. She tilted her head back, offering more room, and I took it like the greedy bastard I was, smearing wet open-mouthed kisses down the column of her throat.

She whispered my name, and it went right to my dick. Latching on to her earlobe, I sucked it into my mouth, tugging and making it wet. Releasing it, I brushed her hair away and dove into the space behind her ear, her entire body convulsing.

Smiling, I knew I’d found a hot spot, so I latched on, not even thinking about the mark it was going to leave. She mewled and moved beneath me as I sucked and nibbled across her neck, my dick so hard it ached.

My arms grew weak, the muscles trembling from holding my body off hers. I shifted, and her arms wound around me, pulling me in.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Please.”

I surrendered my weight, hiding her away from the rest of the world and putting her in a cage that only I could find.

“You’re mine,” I rumbled, finding the hem of her shirt so I could get to skin. “*Mine.*”

She purred when my fingers dragged over her waist, and I shifted so I could touch more. Her skin was warm, her belly soft, and I reveled in the ability to feel her this way. Pulling back, I licked my fingers and then swirled them around her belly button, making her arch up into the touch.

Unable to deny the urge, I slid down her body to kiss across her stomach and twirl my tongue around her navel. “You are fucking perfect in every way,” I said, kissing her again, pushing my fingers up toward her ribs.

Grabbing her shirt, she tugged at it, fumbling to rip it off her body. Frustrated, she pushed up into a sitting position, making me fall back between her knees.

Her lips were plump, cheeks red, and hair ruffled. Desire practically wept from her pores as she pulled at her clothes.

“Tell me what you want,” I beckoned, greedy for more of her desperation.

She didn’t reply with words. Instead, she lifted her arms and stared at me with a hot, suggestive gaze. I pulled the shirts over her head, throwing them aside.

She wasn’t wearing a bra, and every inch of her was suddenly available to my eyes. “I’ve never seen anyone more beautiful.”

“Touch me,” she beckoned, lying back against the bed.

Beyond thinking, I went on instinct, gliding my fingers over her ribs and dragging along the underside of her breasts. Her nipples were already pinched tight, a deeper color against the rest of her skin. They were full and round, sitting in the center of her chest, just waiting to be enjoyed.

My hands covered them instantly, too greedy to touch one at a time. She mewled in pleasure, and I moved up, straddling her hips as I continued to massage. I plucked and pinched her nipples, tugging them at the same time, loving the way her body responded, instantly arching up for more.

Leaning down, I took her into my mouth, sucking deep and settling into a tugging rhythm, while my tongue laved at her erect nipple. She gasped, hands sliding into my hair to tug as I moved from one breast to the other, feasting on her flesh.

When they were both swollen and damp, I slipped down, licking the underside of them and making her sigh. Trailing down, I kissed her stomach and licked along the waistband of her sleep shorts.

She was restless, parting her legs even wider. I swear I could smell her desire, and I reached into my sweats to palm my throbbing dick. The tip was weeping, and I smeared the precum around my head before circling my hand around my base and giving it a tight squeeze, silently telling it to behave.

Hand still on my cock, I stared down at her well-kissed body, noting the way her chest rose and fell heavily and the kiss marks I'd left on her breasts. Her legs widened a little more, and the urge to bury myself so deep inside her was so strong it made me nauseous.

Ripping my hand from my pants, I sat back, taking a deep breath.

“Ben.”

“We need to stop, baby girl,” I told her. “This is exactly why I said I would sleep on the couch.”

“Please don't leave,” she whispered, despair dripping from her voice.

Crawling up her body, I wrapped her in my arms and rolled so she was draped over my chest. Leaning up, she boldly took my lips, dragging me into yet another mind-numbing kiss.

When awareness found me again, she was straddling my hips, our bodies moving together in perfect rhythm.

Groaning, I grabbed her hips, stopping the movement. “Baby.”

She looked up, face and chest flushed, teeth sinking into her well-kissed lip. “I want more, Ben. I want you.”

I made a split decision then. I could give her me. I just wouldn't take her.

She squeaked when I rolled us abruptly, pinning her to the bed and kissing her deep.

Slipping down her body, I grabbed the waistband of her shorts, hooking my fingers into the cotton. “Can I take these off?”

She lifted her hips.

I swiped them down her legs, forgetting to pull them off completely because the sight of finally seeing her naked trumped it all.

I let out a low string of curses. Or maybe it was a prayer. My eyes ate her up, just staring at her long frame, the swell of her hips, and luscious thighs.

“If I thought I was ruined for other women before...” I murmured, shaking my head. “I swear to God you are my only. My final answer. I would rather have nothing and no one than someone who is not you.”

She made a sound and parted her thighs, revealing everything those trimmed brown curls had been hiding. She was wet already, slick with the desire I'd made her feel.

Groaning, I shoved down my dick, reminding it this was not about him. If she got any sexier, I'd fucking blow right there in my pants.

“Can I touch you?” I whispered.

“Yes, Ben. I'm yours.”

Spots swam before my eyes; that's how bad I wanted her. Inhaling through my nose, I slid my hands up the insides of her legs, her little purr of delight going right to my dick.

Kneading her thighs, I pushed them wider then settled between them, my face level with her core. She was hot and wet, her body relaxed and open to mine. I swirled my fingers around her lips, gently swiping over the swollen bud in the center. Her legs shook, and I leaned over to kiss her inner thigh before burying my face in her opening.

She gasped, and I held nothing back, lapping and licking, sucking and nibbling. Her flavor was addictive and everything I knew it would be. She was so wet she drenched my tongue, and I found myself pushing two fingers into her opening while twirling my tongue around her clit.

She moved and rocked against my fingers, and I sucked a little deeper. She cried out, her hands fisting in my hair. Pulling my fingers out, I lifted my face to stare up her long, naked frame. Panting, she angled her chin down so our eyes could meet. Boldly, I stuck the two fingers that had just been inside her right into my mouth. My eyes rolled back when I tasted her, and I sucked them so hard my cheeks hollowed out.

“It’s not enough,” I said when I’d licked them clean and dove back into her center.

True hunger came over me as I laid my palms against her thighs, holding her open for me to feast. I swiped up her slit, then shoved my tongue inside her, making her body bow against the bed.

Gripping her thighs, I held her there as I fucked her with my tongue, her juices smearing all over my face. She started to tremble, her whimpers filling the room.

With one last lick, I lifted my face. “Come for me, baby girl. Come all over my tongue. Come so hard I still taste you in the morning.”

Pushing my tongue back inside her, I rubbed two fingers against her clit, and she splintered apart so hard she jolted up the bed. I followed her, refusing to lift my mouth, humming my pleasure as I drank down every last bit of her orgasm. She was so saturated, her curls damp, her inner thighs smeared.

I ate her through the orgasm until her shaking, spent body fell boneless against the bed and she heaved a sigh of relief. Even then, I gentled my tongue, licking up what was left before pressing a kiss to her clit, swollen lips, and then her entrance.

“Good girl,” I murmured, kissing her inner thigh. “Good fucking girl,” I repeated.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, lying on her back and staring up at the ceiling. “Is it always like that?”

Is it always like that? Might as well have been ice water. Extra icy.

Because oh my fuck.

Oh my fucking fuck.

What did I just do?

I did exactly what I told myself I would NOT do. I was an asshole. Seriously heinous. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Ben?” My silence must have been loud because Jess pushed up onto one elbow to look at me.

I was still between her legs. I sat back, even as I felt like scum, and swiped what was left of her on my lower lip and sucked it into my mouth.

So good.

“Are you okay?” she asked, doubt crossing her flushed features. Then, “Did I do something wrong?”

With a sound, I launched forward, tackling her back into the mattress. “Wrong is a word that does not belong in your vocabulary,” I told her. “You’re my favorite.”

The relaxation cloaking her came back, and she smiled.

“You feeling okay?” I asked, sweeping my gaze over her features.

“After that, how could I not?”

“I’m the man.”

She smiled. “I guess so.”

Tenderness shoved out some of the still-hammering desire in me, taking a little of the ache out of my still-rigid dick. “I do love you,” I whispered.

Her eyes melted. “I—”

Panic assaulted me. I scrambled back, putting a hand over her lips. “I don’t know if you were gonna say it, but I forbid

it.”

Her voice was muffled against my hand.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Her brows drew down, eyes questioning.

“I don’t want to hear it unless you mean it. And you can’t mean it until you remember.”

She tried to talk again.

“Girl,” I swore. “Can’t you just lie there in post-orgasm bliss?”

Humor glinted in her eyes, and I felt her lips curl into a smile.

“That’s more like it.”

I pulled my hand away.

“You forbid a lot,” she observed.

“Mm,” I answered. Getting up from the bed, I went to my duffle bag near the door. “I’m going to take a shower. Try and get some sleep.”

“A shower!” she exclaimed. “Now?”

“It’s been a long day.”

She sat up. I tried not to stare at her naked chest, but I failed. She was hot.

“But what about that?” she said, pointing.

Following her direction, I glanced down at the tent in my sweats.

Yep, still painfully rigid.

I grunted. “Don’t worry about that.”

“What if I want to?”

My cock spasmed, nearly screaming for her attention. I wouldn't do it. I'd already gone way too far tonight.

I didn't trust myself to go across the room and tuck her in. To try and soften the rebuff with some sweetness. If I went anywhere near her right now, I'd give in completely.

“Not tonight, baby girl,” was all I said, palming the handle on the door. “You need to rest.”

I slipped out into the hallway before she could say anything else. Damn girl was like a witch, casting spells on me and making me forget we weren't actually engaged.

How I wish we were.

Her flavor still filled my mouth when I walked into the bathroom, and I opted not to brush my teeth because I wanted to savor something I might never taste again.

JESS

THE HOUSE WAS DARK AND QUIET WHEN I SLIPPED INTO THE bathroom, the running shower covering any light sound I made.

The fixture above the sink was off, the only light from the dim overhead in the ceiling. The curtain was pulled closed, but his uneven breathing floated up to the ceiling.

My heart pounded unevenly, and despite the powerful orgasm still making my legs weak, a new wave of desire swept through my veins.

“Jess,” he moaned, voice low.

Leaning the crutches against the wall, I moved forward to peek into the shower stall.

Ben stood with his back to me, completely naked, with one hand braced against the wall. The cut muscles in his back strained and flexed as he hunched forward while the water sloughed over all that bare skin.

His ass was clenched, the muscles so taut they looked like stone.

He moaned under his breath and whispered my name again. The hand not supporting his weight against the wall was in front of him, his arm moving furiously as he stroked the dick I'd been so eager to touch just moments ago.

I watched his body tremble, the water raining over him plastering his hair flat to his head. There was not an ounce of fat on him. He was all tight skin and muscle, power radiating from his form. He stroked his cock quickly, his breathing coming in short gasps. Head bowed toward the floor, he groaned again.

"Fuck, Jessica."

"Want some help?"

His body went rigid, slumped posture bolting upright. The hand wrapped around his cock dropped away, and he turned, looking through the spray and over his shoulder. Pushing the curtain back just a little, I shifted my weight and met his incredulous yet hazy gaze.

"I told you to go to bed."

"Come here."

It was almost comical the look of panic that crossed his eyes, but then it stopped being funny.

"Do you really not want me?" I whispered.

"Oh, baby," he groaned. "I fucking want you so bad I can't even think."

"Come here," I repeated, this time curling my finger.

"I can't."

"You can."

"You will regret this later."

“Benji.”

His broken sound echoed up to the ceiling, drowned out by the falling spray. His eyes seared me as he closed the distance between us. The salacious, hungry glint he stared with made me want to lie down and just spread my legs.

His cock stood straight off his body, a thick vein running down the side. The tip was flushed and swollen, a white bead at the very end. His balls were tight and drawn up, water from the shower drenching all his skin.

“I can’t come in there because of my cast,” I rasped, not bothering to take my eyes off his dick. It spasmed as I dropped to my knees.

“Jess, what—” His garbled groan cut off all words when I wrapped my hand around him and licked across the tip. “*Oh fuck,*” he said, wet hand finding its way into my hair.

I smiled against his hot flesh. “Be a good boy, Benji, and let me have you.”

A broken sound filled the air, and my scalp prickled when he jerked my head back by my hair. His eyes were like fire, glittering with heat greater than that of the sun. The pure, unfiltered want in his stare swallowed me whole and robbed me of breath. For several heartbeats, we stared at each other, him pulling my hair, the shower running in the background.

“Let me make one thing clear,” he said, his voice unrecognizably deep. “You could never touch me, and I would still belong to you and you alone.”

The words sank into me, embossing themselves somewhere deep in my heart. He’d never have to say that again, but I would never stop hearing it. In that moment, my amnesia was inconsequential. Whatever he hinted at in our

past was exactly that: the past. All that existed was this moment, this reality that was so new it wasn't even a memory, and it was all I needed to know.

Keeping my eyes glued to his, I leaned in, stretching my mouth around him, and sliding my lips inch after inch over his dick.

His throat bobbed, eyes slitting. I held his stare until he hit the back of my throat, and my eyes watered, gag reflex starting to flex. He started to pull back, but I made a sound and slapped my hand against his bare, wet ass, the sound echoing in the quiet room.

He groaned, and I dragged back, only to sink onto him again, settling into a bobbing rhythm I liked. His hips juttled over the edge of the tub, and I leaned into the side, taking him deep as he fisted his hand in my hair and held me tight while I sucked and licked. It all felt so new, my knowledge of giving head wiped from my brain. I was clumsy and a little sloppy, my saliva dripping over my chin and running down his length. I gagged more than once, but whenever I did, he seemed to grow harder like the idea of me choking on his dick was something that turned him on.

Keeping that in mind, I reached around to palm his ass with both hands and jerk him forward, sending his rigid dick deep into my throat. I gagged around him, eyes watering more, but dug my nails into his ass to keep him from pulling away.

When I was completely out of air, I pulled off, both of us gasping, my fingers digging into his ass crack for balance.

“Jesus Christ, Jess,” he swore and grasped my chin to pull my face up.

I stared through watery eyes, feeling the tears soak my face. My throat felt stretched from his girth, lips slick from all the saliva.

“Look at you taking this dick like the good girl you are. Made just for me,” he praised. “I’ve never seen anything more fucking sexy than your mouth stretched around my dick. I even like the way it feels when you choke.” He stroked my face, eyes going hazy. “I’ve imagined this a thousand times. Not once has any dream ever lived up to the reality of you. You’re magic, baby girl. So good for me.”

He released my chin, and I dove back on him, swallowing him down. He moaned, hips starting to thrust, and I settled, opening my mouth and staring up his cut body.

Both hands found their way into my hair, and he held my head as he thrust, gently at first into my open, willing mouth. Between my legs throbbed. The action of him using me for pleasure turned me on like nothing ever had before.

I loved the bite of his fingers, the slight tug on my hair. The way he felt gliding in and out of my mouth made me purr. His thrusts got chaotic, breathing labored. Against my tongue, his dick began to pulse.

He started to withdraw, but I grabbed his hips and pulled him in, suctioning my lips around his head.

He let out a hoarse shout as warm spurts of cum spilled over my tongue, going as far as to splash the back of my throat. I moaned, enjoying his climax like it was my own. He gasped and bucked into me, trying not to be rough as his body shook and jerked while he emptied himself into my mouth.

I stayed with him, sucking until he sagged, then licking across his head to make sure I’d gotten every last drop. When I

released his dick, I pushed it up and then leaned in to nuzzle his balls, which weren't tight against his body anymore.

In a rush of fondness, I kissed them before pulling back, slightly dizzy.

The tops of Ben's cheeks were red, his eyes drunk, and his hair was half plastered to his forehead, half sticking up.

He swayed slightly on the inside of the tub, staring at me like I was literally the sun, the moon, and every star in the sky.

My heart hammered, stomach fluttering under the intensity of his gaze. He didn't have to say anything because the awe shining in his expression was loud and clear.

I had no idea why he thought I would regret this later, but he was wrong. And if he didn't want me to say out loud that I loved him, then I wouldn't. But he couldn't stop me from feeling it.

Nothing could.

KRUGER

A MAN ONLY HAD SO MUCH SELF-CONTROL, AND IT SEEMED I'D met the end of mine.

I shouldn't have touched her. I shouldn't have let her touch me.

But Jesus, seeing that girl on her knees for me was more than I could withstand. The minute her lips wrapped around my dick?

Total eclipse.

Whoa.

And now I was guiltier than ever. More afraid than ever.

She was literally better than any fantasy I could conjure.

I couldn't go back. But when she realized what I'd done...

I might not have a choice.

JESS

I FELT LIGHTER SOMEHOW. LIKE A WEIGHT I DIDN'T EVEN know I carried was suddenly gone. Vaguely, I wondered what it was, but the thought was fleeting. I was too busy floating along in euphoria, the memory of last night saturating every thought I had.

This morning, a smile played on my lips almost as if it were my resting state. It didn't seem to matter amnesia cloaked my mind, some faceless person or persons clearly wanted to do me harm, and I was now holed up in a townhouse with five men for safety.

Really, it was the perfect plot for a slasher film. Maybe one where the love interest ends up being the villain and tries to kill the final girl in the end.

Butterflies erupted in my middle, making me feel fluttery. *He did call me his final girl.*

Except in this movie, Ben could never be the villain.

That mouth, though. Perfectly sinful. The way he wielded his tongue kind of was like a weapon, slaying me with his

skill. I was seriously having doubts about my brain. How could it mind-dump something so incredible?

The things he did to me last night still echoed in my limbs this morning. The way it felt as he pulsed and spilled across my tongue kept me so full I didn't even want breakfast.

Honestly, if I still wasn't so high on what we shared, I'd be morosely sad at all the intimacy I'd forgotten. How many incredible nights like that did I forget?

And if it was that incredible between us with just hands and mouths... how explosive would we be when we had sex?

Again, how the hell could I forget that? Frankly, it was shameful.

I found his hesitation endearing. The way he worried so much about consent. It was kind of adorable the way he wanted to respect me, how much he clearly cared. The thought of him denying himself after giving me so much I couldn't bear it. Hearing him moan my name while he was in the shower alone made me bold. Made me want to please him.

I wasn't sure what was better, feeling his tongue drive into me while I went higher and higher or feeling his hands in my hair as he whispered how good I was for him.

Letting out a faint sound, I pressed my hands against my heated cheeks.

"It's too early for all that," I told myself even as I replayed parts in my head again.

After the shower, he didn't go downstairs to the couch. Instead, he crawled into the bed beside me and opened his arm. I slept tucked against him, under the protection of his arm with the reassurance of his heartbeat beneath my ear.

It was the first night since my accident I didn't have a nightmare. And I knew it was because he kept them all away.

No, I didn't remember loving Ben.

But I understood why I did. I felt it deep, swirling inside me, almost like our love was just waiting for me to discover it and put it back in my heart where it belonged.

Funny, this morning, I wondered if it even mattered if I found it because it seemed my heart was filling on its own just fine. I guess I didn't need to remember that I loved him because it was instinct.

His alarm went off at an ungodly hour, the sun not even awake yet in the sky. When he tried to slide out from beneath me, I clung, whimpering in protest.

The sheets whispered softly when he came back, fitting himself exactly where he'd been. Exactly where I liked him best. I sighed and felt his hand cup my head, his honed body shifting slightly closer to mine. His lips kissed my forehead, his morning breath warm against my hair. I loved the way his arm flexed around me as he pulled me even closer into his chest.

"You mean so much to me," he whispered. "So damn much."

My palm slid over his middle, curling around his waist.

He made a sound, kissed my head again, then slowly started to withdraw. "I have practice, baby," he murmured. "I have to go."

My hand dropped in the space he'd just occupied, and I pressed it into his remaining body heat. "Stay," I said sleepily.

A pained sound floated overhead, and then the quiet room filled with the rustle of clothes and the zip of a bag. The mattress dipped, and I cracked one eye to see his knee on the edge. He smelled of chlorine when he leaned over me, my eye fluttering closed once more.

“Be a good girl while I’m gone. I’ll be back in a little while to take you to breakfast.” This time his lips brushed my cheek, and it made me smile.

Before he could go, I reached for him, turning my face to blink at him through sleep-drenched eyes. “Bye, Benji.”

He made a sound. “Too damn pretty for your own good,” he murmured then brushed his lips over mine. “I love you.” He whispered the words right into my mouth, and I swallowed them down.

He left, and I lay there in a state of languid relaxation, the fluttering of my heart untamed. Ultimately, I was too aroused to sleep. It seemed I needed his comforting body beside me for that. Instead, I lingered in the warm sheets that bore his scent until the need for the bathroom forced me out.

Back in the bedroom, I eyed the baskets of clothes near the bed, so I propped the crutches against the mattress and lowered to sit beside them on the floor. I started looking through the neatly folded stacks, hoping I had something nice to put on for breakfast with Ben.

All of it was jeans and leggings, something I wouldn’t be able to fit over my cast unless I cut the leg, which seemed like a waste of clothes because, in two weeks, I’d be transitioning to a boot and would be able to dress normally. I didn’t have the funds to replace the clothes I ruined.

At the very bottom of one of the baskets, I found a pair of loose sweatpants that looked like they would fit over the cast. Not exactly the look I'd been hoping for, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

The hem got caught when I pulled them out, and I reached down to untangle whatever it was caught on. My hand brushed against something hard, which made me jolt. Dropping the pants into my lap, I tipped the basket up and saw the red journal I'd found before in my nightstand.

With everything that happened, I completely forgot about the small notebook and my curiosity about whatever I'd written inside. Forgetting about my search for a breakfast outfit, I leaned against the side of the bed and pulled off the little band that held it closed.

The book fell open onto a random page in the center, and I picked it up to flip through the pages to see how much of it I'd filled. Anticipation made me excited as it felt like I'd just found the answers to so many things I wondered about.

As I flipped, a loose piece of paper fell out, sliding over my leg and onto the floor beside my hip. The red leather was cool against the bare skin of my legs when I set down the book and reached for the loose page. It was crinkled and folded, and when I opened it, I noted the jagged edge along the side, which made me think I'd ripped it out of another journal and put it into this one. Like whatever was written here was important. If it wasn't, why bother ripping it out to keep it?

In the top corner was a date. Four years ago. I'd been holding on to this paper for four years... *Why?*

Curious, I started to read.

I refuse to write Dear Diary at the beginning of this because it makes me feel cheesy and like I'm talking to someone who doesn't even exist...

...I'm writing this out for my future self. So she can come back here and read these words and see how far she's come. Also so I don't forget.

How ironic I wrote a journal entry to myself so I wouldn't forget. Almost as if something in me knew I'd have amnesia someday and need this reminder.

The irony made me even more interested in what I could possibly have written to myself four years ago that was so important.

And then my heart was in my throat. The tight fit made it hard for it to beat and for me to breathe. The more I read, the worse it got until the paper shook like a leaf clinging to a tree on a windy day. I kept trying to swallow, but my throat didn't work, so emotion and saliva pooled right there above my paralyzed heart, which remained fisted in my throat.

I blinked rapidly, trying to clear my blurring vision. The words were terrible, the emotion rising inside me a sick taste of déjà vu. I hadn't even wanted this moment the first time... so I shied away from reliving it again.

The sob unable to break free from my throat twisted in my chest, and I let out a piteous moan, pressing a hand against my stomach. A rogue tear dropped from my lashes, splashing the page and smearing the ink.

No. This can't be right, I thought as I struggled to concentrate on the rest of the words.

It didn't make sense. We were engaged. In love. Crackling with so much chemistry I felt it even with a blank mind.

If this had been what happened between us, then how did we make it here?

The paper crinkled against my grip as I forced my eyes back down, mind spinning. I kept reading, thinking all the answers could be found on this page.

But it seemed the more I read, the more hurt I felt and the more questions filled my empty mind. When I got to the last line, I read it three times.

Dear future self, you can forgive him, but you should never forget.

“But I did forget,” I whispered, letting the paper drop against my bare legs.

And I couldn’t possibly understand any of this without the context of everything that happened after. Without my memory of who we were.

Something Ben said last night whispered through my mind. Words that didn’t seem like such a big deal then but suddenly had all new meaning.

Our relationship. It’s complicated. There’s a lot between us we need to work out. I don’t want to do anything now you might regret when you remember.

“I need to remember,” I whispered, picking up the paper once more, staring at the spot where my tears smudged the ink.

And then with the force of an oncoming train, memories slammed into me, knocking me into the bed and taking me hostage.

Suddenly, everything I’d forgotten was remembered.

KRUGER

NOT EVEN THE FRIGID TEMP OF THE ELITE POOL COULD COOL the boiling blood in my veins. I was overheated, distracted... undeniably in love.

There were a lot of nights I doubted, hell, even hated myself for the hard line I'd drawn.

Her or no one.

My final girl.

There were nights when alcohol thinned my blood, diluted my patience, and I watched through seething, jealous eyes as my friends pounced and bounced their way through high school and college. Being a swim god at Westbrook basically gave me a pass with all the girls. The barnacles of Elite (as Rory and Madison named them) were plentiful, and I could have crooked my finger at any of them and had my way.

Sometimes when hormones clouded my brain and my body was pissed, I denied it so much I wondered, *How can you even know she's your final girl when you've never had a sample of anything else? Hell, of her?*

Easy. I wasn't a manwhore. As much as I sometimes wanted to be. I'd come close a few times, but in the end, I always pushed them away. My heart was stronger than my hormones, and my heart knew exactly where it and my dick belonged.

After last night, nothing whispered with doubt. Everything inside me bowed down to the loyalty my heart demanded she deserved.

Worth the wait.

The cold showers. The nights where my hand and thoughts of her were all I had. My brain was near short-circuiting this morning as it replayed last night over and over again.

God, the way she looked all sleepy and warm in bed. The way she clung like she didn't want me to go.

I kissed her. I told her I loved her. It would have been easier to die in that moment than not to.

It was because of this I knew.

I couldn't keep lying. I had to tell her.

And yeah, being with her was like *whoa*. I couldn't keep taking everything I always wanted. Not unless she gave it willingly.

The ear-piercing yet now familiar whistle competed with the splashing waves and heavy breathing as I neared the end of the lane. Instead of popping right up, I sank beneath the surface, letting the water buffer everything for one blissful moment.

Above the surface, I breathed deep and slapped my hands on the sides of the pool as water slid over my cap, goggles, and down my cheeks.

The whistle was still squealing, and I glanced into the lane next to me at Prism. “Bro, Coach has unmatched lung capacity.”

P grimaced and slid under the water away from the sound.

Tugging the goggles off, I laid them on the edge and swiped at my face. Coach dropped the whistle against his chest, his body appearing on the deck above me.

“What the hell was that, Kruger?”

“That was you murdering our eardrums, Coach.”

“You were swimming so hard it was the only way to get your attention,” he grumbled.

“Since when is that something you complain about?”

P popped up from down below, flinging an arm over the edge.

Coach squatted, smacking a clipboard onto the tile with a hard slap. “You swam good today.”

“Again, I have to wonder why that seems to piss you off.”

“Watch your mouth,” he warned. Then, “Is everything okay? How’s my lifeguard?”

“She’s not *your* anything,” I muttered. “And she’s fine.”
Except for the fact someone is trying to hurt her.

It made me doubt my previous resolve to tell her the truth. If I did, she would be pissed. Probably push me away, which she had every reason to do. But she was also in danger. I might be a bad, lying bro, but I would never hurt her physically. And anyone who tried would have to go through me. I couldn’t protect her, though, if I wasn’t there.

Quite a conundrum I was in, huh?

Don't act surprised I know big words. I'm offended.

"I heard the cops were called to her dorm last night."

"And you think Elite gossips more than a bunch of tweens at a sleepover," I goaded. "Did you burn your tongue on the piping hot tea in the teacher's lounge?"

He made a face like he smelled a fart. Really, what he smelled was his bad attitude. "It's my job to keep an eye on my swimmers."

"Well, maybe also keep an eye out for who has it out for Jess."

"I'd been hoping it was an accident," he said almost to himself.

"Well, it wasn't. Someone pushed her down the stairs, and when that didn't get the desired results, they locked her in a washing machine and turned it on," I said, my blood boiling all over again, this time not from horniness but from anger.

"The cops have no leads?"

I met his question with a stone-faced stare.

He muttered a few curses beneath his breath.

"Language." I reminded him.

He gave me a baleful look and stood. "Your swim was good this morning. It's healthy to channel stress into something positive, but just don't overdo it. We need you injury-free. Season is coming to an end, and we have nationals coming up."

"Ah, I get it," I said, smiling wide while chlorinated water dripped off my lips to splash my teeth. "You missed my jokes."

“Your jokes are about as useful as a Christmas ornament with no tree,” Coach clapped back.

“Good one.” I commended him.

He grunted. “Get out of the pool.”

I hauled out, flinging water everywhere. “Face it, Coach. I’m the heart of the team. You don’t know how to act when I just keep my head down and swim.”

“It is kinda weird,” Rush said from the side.

“Made me uncomfortable.” Jamie agreed.

“Thought maybe your Speedo was cutting off circulation,” Ryan cracked.

I threw up both middle fingers and headed toward the locker room.

“Kruger,” Coach called. When I turned, he was right behind me. “If you need anything, just call.”

He might be a grumpy whistle tyrant, but he did care about us, and I appreciated that. “Thanks, Coach.”

The door to the locker room wasn’t even shut behind me when my smartwatch buzzed with a notification. I glanced at it as my feet slapped the cold tile floor, thinking it was just some random spam or even my heart rate monitor adjusting now that I was out of the pool, but it wasn’t.

It was a text.

From Max.

My feet squeaked under the force of my stop as I tapped the screen to bring up the full message.

You better get here. Now.

Panic snapped my spine upright, and my limbs started to buzz with adrenaline. Running to my locker, I threw the door open to grab my phone.

What's wrong? I texted and then stared impatiently at the screen for a reply.

When none came, I called him. It rang and rang then went to voicemail.

Frustrated and fucking worried, I snatched the keys out of my locker, leaving the rest of my shit where it was, and ran for the door.

JESS

HE LIED.

Not just a little either. *A lot.*

He told me we were engaged, but we weren't even dating. I glanced down at the ring on my finger and wondered where it came from.

Because it wasn't mine.

He never put a ring on my finger. I'm not good enough.

Suppressing a sob, I grabbed the ring, ready to pull it off my finger and throw it to a place I'd never have to see again.

The second the cool gold bow touched my heated fingers, I recoiled. It made me sick to wear it but equally sick to pull it off.

My head was spinning, stomach nauseous. The stitches in my head throbbed like an extra heartbeat, and everywhere my teary eyes landed was just a stabbing reminder of how many lies I'd been told.

And not just from Ben. From all of them.

They weren't even my friends. Not really. I made sure of it. So why were they acting like this now?

And worse, *I liked it.*

Exactly why I held them all at arm's length to begin with. Something I hadn't known. Something Ben neglected to tell me.

A hot surge of anger ripped through me. Swiping at my damp eyes, I used the bed as leverage and stood, wobbling a little as I balanced on one leg.

Another sob scraped my throat when I glanced down at the rumpled sheets and felt utterly humiliated at how happy I'd been lying tangled up in them just an hour ago. How much I loved being in Ben's arms. How what I experienced last night was basically something I thought I would never, ever have.

She's not good enough.

That's what they said and that's what I always believed. He never told me otherwise. He never tried to be anything more than my friend. I was just a poor scholarship girl from the wrong side of the tracks, and he was a rich athlete with pedigree for days.

We were friends. *Best friends.* But I knew it could never be more. Girls like me didn't belong with guys like him. I settled for friendship and told myself it was enough.

So now all the old memories clashed and collided with my new ones, their pieces from two different puzzles giving me no hope of ever fitting them together.

He gave me a taste of the life I genuinely ached for, and I went along without knowing the cost. How was I supposed to go back and pretend friendship was enough?

I didn't think I could.

I'd been so wholly immersed in the present that my reality this last week was better than my previous twenty years.

How could he do this? *Why* would he do it?

I couldn't stay here. I had to go. I had no idea where, but I *needed* out. To think. To strengthen the walls around my heart before I faced him.

He would be back soon for breakfast. A breakfast I'd been foolishly awaiting. I started to scold myself, but you know what?

No.

This was not my fault. I would not call myself foolish. Or stupid. Or take the blame for any of this hurt inside me. This was him. Everyone.

But not me.

I hesitated to grab my phone because it was something he gave me, but fuck that, I was taking it. I needed it to call an Uber to get the hell out of there.

Too upset to bother changing, I stuffed the cell into the pocket of my sleep shorts and grabbed the crutches, jamming them under my arms. My eyes flicked to the hoodie lying across the foot of the bed, and my lip wobbled because, yeah, I wanted to put it on. I wanted to feel comforted by the soft, oversized fabric and a smell that, up until five minutes ago, I thought was home.

It wasn't. I'd just freeze.

Dramatic? You're damn right.

The journal entry solely responsible for bringing my memory back crinkled under my fist as I wrapped it and my hand around the handle of the crutch. I made my way out into the hallway and then stopped at the top of the stairs.

Thoughts of the way Ben carried me upstairs last night flashed through my head, and more tears threatened to fall.

“Oh hell no, Jess. You are not crying over some lying liar who reeks of chlorine.” I decided, dropping the crutches onto the floor with a clatter. I sat on my butt, legs out over the top step.

I didn't need man muscle to get down the stairs. I could do it myself.

Snatching the crutches, I held them in one hand, jammed the note in my pocket with the other, and then slid off the top onto the step below it.

It was awkward. The stairs were fairly steep, and trying to hold on to two long wooden crutches was making it worse. So I let go of them.

Oops.

I watched them slide down the steps, knocking into each other and then hitting against the wall at the bottom and landing in a heap.

“What the fuck?” A faint voice echoed from somewhere downstairs.

I ignored it and went about my business, sliding down onto another step.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?” Max intoned, appearing at the bottom of the stairs.

“What the fuck does it look like?” I intoned back.

He sighed loudly like I was being ridiculous and stomped up the stairs.

“Get away from me,” I told him.

He rolled his eyes. “If you wanted to come down, you could have just called for me.”

“I’d rather roll down these stairs like a tumbleweed in the desert before asking any of you for help,” I smarted off.

His eyebrows arched halfway up his forehead, the ring in his brow glinting. I swear I saw a hint of a smile before he reached down and scooped me up like I wasn’t heavy at all.

Gasping, I went rigid.

“If you don’t stop flopping around like an uncoordinated giraffe, we’re both going down these steps like a tumbleweed in the desert,” he deadpanned.

“I don’t want your help.”

“Does it look like I give a damn?” Grunting, he went down the stairs, carefully avoiding the crutches lying at the bottom. “You could’ve gotten hurt,” he gruffly scolded as he walked toward a table adjacent to the kitchen.

“Like you care.”

Surprised, he glanced at me. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

I pointed to myself. “Me?” I scoffed. “I’m just the girl everyone has been lying to through their teeth since she opened her eyes in the hospital.”

His arms tensed, and it reminded me he was still carrying me.

“Put me down.”

“You got your memory back?” he asked, voice quiet.

Saying nothing, I turned my face away from him, momentarily aware of the coffee smell in the room.

Sighing, he settled more firmly into his stance like he was refusing to put me down until I answered.

“Go ahead and hurt your back,” I told him.

His lips twitched. “I carry Wes around.”

“I have a bigger ass than Wes.”

He laughed.

The sound squeezed my heart and reminded me these weren't really my friends. They were Ben's.

“Jess.” Max's voice was stern.

“Yeah. I remember. Everything. Including the part where everyone is lying to me.”

Using his foot, he dragged a chair from beneath the table and sat me in it.

“I need my crutches,” I said, pointing to where they lay.

“No.”

Incredulous, my mouth dropped open. I pushed up to get them myself, but he put a hand on my shoulder, guiding me back into the seat.

“Sit. I'll get you some coffee.”

“Why do you even care?” I asked. “It's not like we're friends anyway.”

He drew back, shock written all over his face. “What?”

“You guys made it out like we're this big happy family. A bunch of besties. The reality is, yeah, I see you guys at swim

meets and we've had a few meals together, but you're Ben's friends. Not mine." I sniffed. "If we were a bunch of anything, it would be rotten bananas."

"I don't like bananas."

"Well, you'd be the annoying fruit fly hovering around everything."

"You're a brat. Just like Wes." He decided, almost fondly, and then went into the kitchen to get a mug out of the cupboard.

He poured some coffee into it and turned. "Cream?"

"I'll drink it black so it matches my soul."

He carried it over and set it on the table beside me. I glanced at the pitch-black liquid and withheld a grimace. I didn't think my soul was as black as that tar.

"Did you make that?" I asked, still looking at the drink.

His muffled laughter echoed inside the fridge. "Bratty like Wes and a coffee snob like Lars." He carried over a bottle of creamer and set it by my elbow.

"I told you I was drinking it black."

He patted me on the head.

Rude.

He went back into the kitchen and turned his back, and I took the chance to sneak some of the creamer into the brew. The last thing I needed was reflux to go with all the other betrayal in my life.

He snickered as if he had eyes in the back of his head and knew what I was doing. I glared, and when he turned from the

counter, he brought over a spoon, which he held out. “So you can stir the creamer you *didn't* put in that coffee.”

I took it and stirred my coffee. “I thought you were the mean, grumpy one.”

“I am.”

I licked the spoon and waved it at him. Mean, grumpy, tattooed men did not hand out creamer and spoons for coffee stirring. Especially after being insulted.

“To people that aren't my friends.” He finished.

His words caused a pang in my heart, but I pushed it away. “You're pretty mean to Jamie and Ben,” I pointed out.

He grunted. “They deserve it.”

I wasn't about to sit around and defend any of them, so I said nothing. Remembering the phone in my pocket, I tugged it out to call for an Uber.

Max took the phone from my grasp.

“Hey!” I cried, trying to snatch it back. He stuck it into the pocket of the sweats he was wearing and dragged a chair out to straddle it in front of me.

“I get that you're pissed. I would be too.”

“Thanks for the permission,” I said. Then suddenly, I felt contrite. This wasn't really his fault. Yet here I was, sitting in his kitchen after sleeping in his house with coffee he'd made at my elbow. He was right. I was being a brat.

“I'm sorry,” I said, slumping a little.

“Sorry?”

“I was being a brat,” I mumbled.

He turned his ear toward me. It had several piercings along the cartilage. “What was that?”

I gave him a look. He smiled.

“I said I’m sorry I was being a brat.” I spoke louder this time. “I am mad at everyone for lying, but I shouldn’t take all of it out on you. Friends or not, you let me stay here last night when I was afraid, and you came to visit me at the hospital. If you give me my phone, I’ll go.”

“We are your friends.”

“My apology does not give you carte blanche to lie to me some more.”

Max shrugged. “Every person that was here last night is your friend. Yeah, we don’t see you as much, but you don’t come around as much. I’m pretty sure the girls invite you everywhere we go.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Right?” he pressed.

I nodded.

“This past week, we’ve just been treating you the way we always would if you let us.”

I shook my head.

“If you remember everything, then you know it’s true. I just figured you didn’t come around as much because Kruger was so annoying.”

I sat up straight, searing him with hot eyes. “Ben is not annoying!”

Max looked pleased with himself for getting that out of me.

I curled my lip at him, disgusted. “He might not be annoying, but he’s a liar. He lied to me.” My voice lowered. “In the worst way.”

Dropping my hands to my lap, I began fussing with the hem of my shorts, suddenly so interested in how they were sewn.

“He feels like shit about it.”

I looked up. “What?”

Max got up from the chair and went to the kitchen to snag his cell off the counter. On his way back over, he tapped the screen, and as he sat back down, he held it out for me to see.

I leaned in, taking in what looked like a capture of a text thread. “What is that?”

“It’s the Elite group chat. It’s filled with a bunch of idiocy.”

“Then why are you in there?”

“Because when I leave, they re-add me.”

My heart pinched again. It hurt knowing they all had some big group chat and I wasn’t in it. Just further proof that everything was a lie. “Why are you showing me this?”

He nodded toward the screen. “Read it.”

ELITE GROUP CHAT

Kruger: I can't tell Jess about the fake engagement.

Max: You mean that you lied to her.

Kruger: Yeah. I lied. And it makes me feel like shit. It never even crossed my mind she would wake up with amnesia. I thought she'd wake up and we'd laugh about it. But now she's looking at me with those big eyes like everything I say is the law, and I feel like my insides are being chewed up by a meat grinder.

Lars: You can't just tell her the truth?

Kruger: Doc said to keep it low stress. Not to argue with her or tell her she's wrong. He says she needs stability. How am I gonna rip what little bit of that she has out from under her by telling her I lied? She'd be confused all over again.

I BIT MY LIP, LOOKING UP FROM THE SCREEN BUT NOT directly at Max. “So? He felt bad. Boo-hoo. Didn't stop him from lying, did it?”

“The doc said—”

I waved my hand. “Yeah, I read that part too. I guess the doctor didn't think about how I'd feel finding out I had a fake fiancé.”

“Why do you care?”

That question made me feel like I had whiplash. “What?”

“I mean, yeah, it sucks he lied. But he only did it so you wouldn't be alone in a hospital room. He did it because he

cares.”

“You don’t lie to someone you care about,” I argued.

“Is it because you’re disappointed?”

Again with the whiplash. “What?”

He half smiled. “Because you liked being engaged to him and now you aren’t?”

Yes. Yes, because now I know what it would be like to have the one person I always wanted. But I can’t have him because he doesn’t really love me.

Oh my God, he told me he loved me.

The realization made me lurch from the chair, nearly pitching over when my foot screamed from the weight.

Max jumped from his seat, catching me just before I landed in a heap on the floor.

The front door banged open. “Jess!” Ben’s feral roar vibrated my insides.

Clutching Max’s arms, my head whipped up, and I stared from around him at the man barreling into the room, wearing literally nothing but a pair of Speedos and a swim cap.

“You couldn’t have put on pants?” Max bitched, pulling me upright.

“What the hell are you touching her for?” Ben demanded, grabbing Max’s arm to pull him away.

I wobbled again, and both men rushed forward.

Ben got there first. His bare skin was ice cold, but when his arms went around me, I automatically leaned in. Realizing my natural reaction, I jolted back so I could be upright on my own.

“Don’t touch me,” I said, holding out a hand when he moved toward me again.

His face fell, then brows furrowed. “What’s the matter?”

“You lied,” I said, a catch in my voice.

I watched the realization dawn over his features, and then the realization leached the color from his cheeks.

“Jess.” He took a small step forward.

I stumbled back.

Max cursed and went to get my crutches, stepping between us to stuff them beneath my arms. Before pulling back, he straightened to meet my eyes. “Give him a chance to explain. He loves you.”

I looked away. *No, he doesn't.*

Clearing his throat, Max turned to Ben. “I’m, ah, heading out. Gonna meet Wes for breakfast.”

“Thanks for texting, bro.”

I gasped. “You texted him!”

Max glanced at me. “It’s what friends do.” He started away but then turned back. “You good?” he asked.

Ben scoffed. “You don’t need to worry about my girl. I’ll take care of her.”

“I’m not your girl.”

Ben sucked in a breath and slid cautious eyes to me.

“Lying is not a good look on you, Ben.”

“Jess,” Max said, reminding me he was there.

“I told you to go,” Ben intoned.

“I’ll go when she tells me it’s okay.”

I looked between the two men squaring off, and a feeling of defeat overcame me. “It’s fine, Max. Just go.”

“If you need anything, just call,” he said and then left without another glance back.

Silence befell the house as we stood there together yet miles apart.

Ben cleared his throat. “You remembered everything, didn’t you?”

I met his gaze. “Yes.”

KRUGER

MOMENT OF TRUTH.

I knew it would come. I knew it would suck. But like everything else when it came to this woman, my imagination never fathomed just how much *more* it would be.

Suck was the understatement of the year for the way she was looking at me. For the distance swelling between us. When Max texted, I thought maybe she fell. Or had another nightmare.

But then I saw her. The moment I looked into her eyes, I knew my time was up. Any hope I had she wouldn't be mad spit in my face and made me feel like the moron everyone liked to tease I was.

"Max shouldn't have texted you," she said, voice tight.

"I'm glad he did."

"I don't want to talk to you."

"Just listen, then."

Her eyes flashed. "Listen to you lie more?"

"I didn't—"

A bitter laugh cut me off. “Don’t even bother denying it, Ben.”

“I’m not,” I snapped, voice sharp.

She stiffened, and I cursed, scrubbing a palm down my face and heaving a sigh. She had every right to feel betrayed. I couldn’t be mad at her for reacting to something I did.

Keeping my voice calm, I tried again. “I’m not denying it. I did lie. What I was trying to say is that I didn’t mean for the lie to become so big.”

She scoffed. “Because lying about us being engaged is such a small thing.”

“It was a means to an end.” I defended, realizing only after I said the words how terrible they sounded. *I’m just fucking all this up.*

Her laugh was hollow. The pain it carried echoed around inside me and knocked on my heart. I don’t know why it bothered knocking... It was already inside.

“The truth isn’t helping you,” she said.

Unable to stand back, I closed the distance between us, swiftly grasping her arm with a gentle tug. “Would you please just listen?”

She gazed down at where I held her, but I refused to let go. My fingers were icy. It was probably uncomfortable against her warm, supple skin, but I couldn’t pull away. I had to touch her just then.

Whispering, she said, “That’s all I’ve been doing, listening to you lie.”

Solemn brown eyes lifted, their sorrow the sharpest sword right through my heart. A million micro expressions flitted

through her eyes and shone in every facet of her face. But I couldn't read them, not anymore. And it was then that I realized she'd always been on guard. Something I hadn't recognized because it had always been there.

Until she lost her memory.

Until she forgot why she couldn't be so open.

I wanted to shake her. I wanted to scream. *Why? What have you been hiding? What is it you guard? You don't need it with me. Never with me.*

How beautiful her innocence had been. How heartbreaking to see it corrupted. To wonder if I was the one who corrupted it.

The breath in her lungs hitched. "I trusted you."

I let out a broken sound, firmly grasping her face. "You still can."

A swift denial flashed in her eyes. I expected it to roll right off her tongue. Instead, all she said was, "You're freezing."

I shrugged. "No time to change."

"You drove over here in nothing but a Speedo."

I'd have come in less. "You needed me."

"I didn't ask for you."

"I came anyway." *I'll always come.*

She glanced away as if looking at me was suddenly too hard. It deflated my heart.

I'm going to lose her.

"Go put on some clothes."

"I'm fine the way I am."

“You’re going to get frostbite.”

“I deserve it.”

She snorted. “Yeah. You do.”

I said nothing.

She took a step back, such a small movement, but it packed a massive punch. “Go change, Ben. I’ll wait.”

I hesitated, not wanting to let her out of my sight. “You won’t run off?”

“Kinda hard to run with crutches.”

That made me wonder... “How’d you get down here?” I asked, glancing at the stairs.

“Max carried me.”

Hot jealousy seared my organs, the heat so fierce a growl of displeasure rumbled in my chest. “Sit down,” I said, hating that he touched her. That I wasn’t here when she needed help. Still, I used gentle hands to guide her to the chair.

“I can do it,” she insisted, denying my help.

I stepped back but hovered close as she seated herself and set aside the crutches. Once settled, she reached for a mug of coffee close by. “Max made me this too.”

My tongue slid over my teeth, jealousy eating away at my insides. “I’m going to change,” I told her, unable to keep the edge from my tone. “If you run off, I’ll chase you down.”

“I won’t run.”

“I’ll chase you down,” I repeated. I meant it. I’d chase this woman to the ends of the earth.

She said nothing, and I quickly jogged up the stairs. The bed was still ruffled, reminding me of everything that had happened between us last night and the way she'd slept in my arms. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd ever get to have that again. If she regretted the things we'd done.

Shoving away the thoughts, I grabbed the change of clothes I'd left here, a dark-gray pair of sweats and a matching hoodie with a popular sports brand logo repeated all over it. I whipped the swim cap off my head and let it fall where I dropped it, not even bothering to fix my hair. Not wanting to waste another minute, I grabbed some socks and pounded down the stairs.

She was exactly where I'd left her, slumped against the back of the chair, cradling the coffee like it was a shield. The second she heard me coming, her body language changed, tension tightening her form and straightening her spine. Despite the shitty reaction to my presence, I was relieved. Relieved she was still there.

I was gonna have to toss together a big-ass apology salad, and fuck that compliment dressing. This salad needed grovel croutons and prayer.

The relief I felt must have been evident on my face because she sighed. "Where would I go, Ben? Why even bother? Might as well just get this over with."

"It will never be over with us," I said, stalking over to toss the socks on the table.

"There is no us."

Her words made me pause halfway to the kitchen, the urge to swivel back and fight the declaration epically strong. Instead, I breathed deep through my nose and searched a few

cupboards for a mug to fill with coffee. My fingers were so cold it was fucking painful. After reaching into the fridge for a bottle of creamer, I carried it over with the coffee and flipped the chair around to face her.

The sound of the mug hitting the table echoed through the charged silence. The popping lid of the creamer ricocheted around us like a gunshot, and the sound of me swallowing some of the unstirred mixture was deafening between my ears.

She avoided looking at me, but our awareness of each other was undeniable. Everything about her commanded my attention, and it didn't matter she was pissed and hurt because I loved those parts of her too. I just wished it wasn't me who'd made her feel those things.

It was kinda fucked up, but in that moment, I was sort of glad for the amnesia. For the glimpse it showed of her unguarded. How it sort of swiped away all the shit between us, shit I was too stupid to see. No. Not stupid. Just so conditioned that I didn't know it was there.

But now I knew. I also knew how fucking sweet it was when she was all in. I wanted it back. I'd do anything to get it.

I sprawled in the chair so my body language was open, stretching my legs so my feet were mere inches from hers. She shifted hers away. I stayed where I was. I'd been waiting years for this girl. I'd wait longer if I had to.

My forearm draped over the table, one palm wrapping around the warm mug. The other fell into my lap. My heart beat erratically. My stomach roiled.

“We found you at the bottom of a set of stairs. There was blood everywhere, your leg was at an odd angle, and no matter what I tried, I couldn't get you to wake up,” I told her, the

horrible memory replaying behind my eyelids like something you would see on TV. “You called me.” I continued, voice strained. “You called me for help, and I didn’t get there in time.” It was something I might honestly never forgive myself for.

“What did I say?” she asked, curiosity filling her voice.

I tilted my head. “I thought you remembered?”

Her face screwed up in concentration, and the way her nose wrinkled was hella cute. “No. I remembered everything *but* what happened that night. It’s still blank. I know I was there for orchestra practice and I think a piano lesson...” Her words trailed away as she continued to comb through her mind. “But when I try and think past that, my head aches.” She lifted a hand to her head as if it pained her.

Leaning forward, I caught her fingers. “Don’t,” I said gently. “Don’t think about it if it hurts.”

“But I need to know. It’s pretty clear after what happened yesterday that it was no accident. Someone wants to hurt me, Ben. And I genuinely have no idea why.”

Leaning forward, I palmed the back of her neck and tugged. Surprisingly, her body followed my instruction, and she fell forward into my embrace. I kept it light, our bodies meeting halfway in the space between our chairs. She felt so right. Even when everything around us was a disaster, she was perfection.

“You must have seen something,” I concluded, thinking out loud. “Something someone didn’t want you to see.”

She pulled her head up, looking at me with Bambi eyes. “What makes you think that?”

“What other explanation could there be, baby girl? Everyone likes you. You’ve never given anyone a reason to want to harm you. I might have believed that night had just been some random attack, but then yesterday...”

She nodded. “I’m scared.”

“I know,” I murmured, pulling my hand from her neck to brush the backs of my fingers over her cheek. “I’m not going to let anyone hurt you. They’re gonna have to go through me to get to you.”

Apprehension found its way back into her eyes as though she remembered she didn’t trust me. “I’m not your responsibility.”

“No. You’re my everything.”

A moment of stillness followed the declaration, and it was swiftly followed by a look of panic in her eyes. She sat back, reclaiming the distance I thought I’d gained.

“I promised you,” I explained. “In the ambulance, I promised I would stay with you. I’d be by your side and you wouldn’t be alone. And then they kept me away from you at the ER. They took you for brain scans. They did your IV, your stitches, even prepped you for surgery. And they wouldn’t let me back. You had to do all of that alone,” I said, reliving the torment of knowing she was traumatized and hurt and I could do nothing.

“I was unconscious.”

“I don’t care,” I said, fierce, feeling my eyes flash. “I wanted to be there. And those assholes kept me away! I didn’t know how you were, if you were awake. What was going on. No one would tell me anything.”

She was watching me. Listening.

So I went on. “They kept asking about a relative. I was afraid they’d call your mom.”

She grimaced, the idea of her deadbeat mom showing up at the hospital exactly what I knew it would be. A drama shit show of epic proportions.

“So yeah, I lied. I told them we were engaged. I told them I was your family.” I let out a frustrated noise and stood. “I *am* your family,” I declared, pacing behind the chair. “It shouldn’t matter if we’re engaged or not. I care about you more than anyone else. You’re mine. I had every right to be there, and they were trying to keep me out.”

“I’m not yours,” she had the gall to declare. After I stood there and poured out the torture I’d lived. All those hours of wondering if she was even still alive.

I turned to face her, everything about me daring her to deny me again. “Yes,” I intoned. “You are.”

Her eyes dropped to her lap, but I continued to stare.

“Where’d this ring come from?” she asked, holding up her hand.

“Madison gave it to me.”

“So I’m wearing some other girl’s ring for an engagement that isn’t real.”

“It’s real to me!” I hollered, my whole body moving with the outburst.

“W-what?”

I wanted to laugh at her surprise. But how could I laugh? The joke was on me. Of course she was surprised. Of course she didn’t believe me. I never gave her reason to.

“I lied about the engagement, but everything else I said to you is true,” I confessed.

I didn't really know what I was expecting, but fury was not it. Nor the way she burst up from the chair, nearly pitching sideways because of that damn broken ankle.

Rushing forward, I reached to catch her, but her angry growl kept me back. Straightening to her full height, she wobbled just a little and reached out to balance herself on the back of her vacant seat.

“Maybe I haven't remembered everything,” she said, voice cool. “Because I never would have thought you cruel, but that's exactly what you're being right now.”

“Cruel?” I questioned. “What about what I said makes me cruel?”

Her lower lip wobbled, and the anger I felt at the insult slipped away as if it hadn't been there at all. The urge to comfort her was so strong right now. So strong my hands shook with it.

“You told me you loved me.”

“I do.”

“Stop lying!” she yelled, the outburst causing her to pitch to the side.

This time, I ignored her protests and caught her around the waist. Her hands fisted in my hoodie, bunching the material as she tried to push me away. I locked my arms tighter, pulling her body flush with mine.

“Look at me,” I demanded.

Her body obeyed, something she hated if I were to judge by the stubborn, angry glare that met me.

“I am not lying. I do love you. And I’ll never love anyone else,” I swore, and then I captured her mouth with mine.

JESS

HE KISSED LIKE HE MEANT IT. LIKE HIS LIPS DIDN'T JUST speak the words but would somehow brand them into my skin. I was not strong enough to push him away because, though we'd already shared a kiss, this one was with knowledge behind it. This one spoke to the four-year-long yearning I carried in my heart.

In that moment, familiarity warred with instinct, and it made me realize how much experience influenced everything a person did. Since I'd woken up with amnesia, I operated mainly on instinct, and looking back, it seemed so much simpler. In the last hour since the resurgence of my memories, my view on everything skewed. Everything was so much more complicated now. My instinct was still the same, however, it was in a battle with my head.

I liked it better when all I had to do was feel.

But that brief time was over, and now I had to think too. Even still, I surrendered to his kiss, taking something I always wanted, understanding I probably wouldn't get it again.

He hummed deep in his throat, the sound vibrating between us as his tongue explored me intimately. I opened wider, overwhelmed by desire but wanting more, wanting everything he would give.

He didn't pull away at once, instead gradually gentling the kiss until our mouths separated but still so close we shared air as his forehead rested against mine and his palm possessively claimed my lower back.

"Did that feel like a lie?" His voice seemed foreign to my thundering ears as he reached up to brush the hair from my cheek. His fingertips dragged lightly over the shell of my ear, and tingles raced across my scalp.

That kiss was so good it almost convinced my head what my heart wanted so badly to believe.

Almost.

But as powerful as that kiss was, it could not erase four years of hurt and memories. It could not make me forget.

Dear future self, you can forgive him, but you should never forget.

I pushed him back, and he went, wariness glowing in his two-toned eyes.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the crumpled journal entry. "This is the catalyst that brought back my memory," I told him, holding up the wrinkled mass of paper.

He glanced at it. "What is it?"

"Yesterday, I found my journal. I was going to read it while doing laundry."

My thoughts tried to stray to what prevented me from reading it, but I pushed them away. Wasn't what I was dealing

with enough right now?

I had ninety-nine problems, and they could all just get in line.

“This entry was from four years ago.”

His attention slid to the paper once more. “From high school?”

“Mm,” I confirmed. “I read it, and it brought everything rushing back.”

“Let me see.” He took it, the page so rumpled he laid it on the table to smooth it out against the hard surface. When it was as unwrinkled as he could get it, he lifted it and started to read.

Dread sat in my stomach like a rock as I watched his eyes move over every word. Watched him read what I considered a defining moment in my life. His eyes flicked up, staring at me over the top of the sheet.

“Jess...” His voice cracked.

“Keep reading,” I told him.

His gaze shifted back, his jaw growing harder with every sentence he read. When he finished, the paper crinkled again as he pulled it down, holding it beside his thigh. His eyes were pained, as was his voice. “You heard them that night?”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “I heard them.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked.

“Why didn’t you tell them they were wrong?” I countered.

He let loose a pained sound. “Is this why you stopped coming to the house as much?”

“I wasn’t welcome there.”

His nostrils flared, angry denial written all over his features. “Yes, you were! You’re welcome anywhere I am!”

“You didn’t tell them they were wrong.” I didn’t say it as a question this time, just a statement of fact.

I think that hurt me more than anything. Judgment from others was practically my birthright. I was used to it. Accepted it. But knowing he agreed? That hurt me to my core.

He balled up the paper and threw it. It hit the table and bounced over the side. “Because you can’t argue with stupid! Because telling them they’re arrogant snobs would be taken as a compliment. Because I was sixteen years old and still depended on them to live.”

“Or maybe it’s because you agree with them.”

He laughed, an empty sound. “Agree with them?” He scoffed. “If I agreed with them, why would I be here right now?”

I shrugged, my chest aching, stomach churning. I never planned to say this to him. Never wanted to admit my deepest pain. But after a mere week of existing without the weight of my personal demons, I knew I had to. I might never be as “light” as I was without any memory and experience, but I didn’t have to be this heavy either. Tears flooded my eyes, blurring my vision as reality assaulted me.

Maybe it’s time I let him go. Time to admit to myself that being his friend just won’t ever be enough.

“Maybe because you feel sorry for me.”

Incredulousness overcame his personality, so much so that he stuttered. “W-what?”

I nodded succinctly, committed to the path I'd just stepped upon. "The girl with deadbeat parents and not a penny to her name. I drive an ugly old beater, wear basic brand clothes, and while you and your friends are off at the diner or a party, I'm working one of my three jobs and studying so I can keep my scholarship. I don't fit into your world, something your parents made very clear. I'm not good enough for you. And it doesn't seem to matter how hard I work or what I try and prove, I'm still just that scholarship girl from the wrong side of town."

He exhaled, dropping into the nearby chair and rubbing a hand over his hair. "I—do you seriously think that stuff?"

"I don't think it, Ben," I said honestly. "I live it."

Hot anger glinted in his stare. "I've never treated you like that. Less than."

"You're right, and that's probably why I fell in love with you."

His head snapped up, eyes wide. "What?"

I smiled, sad. "Even knowing I wasn't good enough. Pretty enough. Rich enough... I couldn't stop the way I feel. You're a good friend. The best actually. To me. To Matty." I smiled, my heart weeping for what I was giving up. "You have a thing for strays, Ben. Beneath your sarcasm, obnoxious one-liners, and Speedo is a big heart. One that I wish you let more people see."

"I don't care about other people. I care about you."

"I told myself being your friend was better than nothing at all. But it's not," I said, a catch in my voice.

He pushed out of his chair, and I held my hand out, silently keeping him at bay. "I lost my memory, and I loved you still. It's an instinct for me, so easy. And you lied, Ben. An innocent

lie, sure, but it showed me what it was like to have you in a way I thought I never would. I understand why you did what you did. I was right four years ago. I can forgive, but I can't ever forget. I won't ever be able to forget what being loved by you feels like. Even if it was pretend."

"Pretend," he spat. Grabbing my hand, he pushed it against his chest, pinning it there right over the frantic beating of his heart. "You feel that? That heart ain't pretend, and you're the reason it beats."

I tried to pull my hand back, but he practically snarled and squished it tighter against his toned chest.

"I knew you were it from the moment my mismatched eyes looked your way. I never once questioned it. Or doubted what my heart knew. But we were so young, so I made you my bestie until I could make you my wife. I let my parents think I was their obedient pedigree son, and they paid for my entire education while I was silently building a portfolio, a life they would have no control over. A life worthy of someone like you."

I drew back. "Me?"

He nodded. "You're so damn brilliant. So full of determination and strength to make your own way. How could I not do everything to make you mine? So I started playing the stock market, investing the allowance my parents gave me every month, then eventually reinvesting my own gains. I even own some real estate too. It took me some time, baby girl, but I did it. I built a whole kingdom to bring you home to."

My mind was reeling. Everything I forgot then remembered. Everything I believed was being challenged. I was overwhelmed. Confused. I wanted so badly to believe what he was saying.

“Please don’t say things you don’t mean,” I whispered.

Releasing my hand, he palmed the back of my head and drilled his stare into mine. “I call you final girl not because of your terrible movie addiction but because that’s what you are. Not my charity case. Not a stray I found on the street. Not even my best friend. You’re it. The one. The only. My final answer.”

His voice turned soft, eyes apologetic as his thumb appeared to gently swipe away the tears I hadn’t even noticed I was crying. “I should have told you all that from the beginning because what the fuck good is a kingdom if it doesn’t have a queen?”

I couldn’t say anything, my heart, words, and oxygen all clogging my throat like some epic traffic jam on a single-lane street.

He cleared his throat. “In case you didn’t get that... *you* would be the queen.”

All of it burst out of me in the form of a sob, and I melted forward, burying my head against his chest, face turned into his neck. His arms wound around me, one hand sliding up to cup the back of my neck.

“I’m sorry, final girl,” he whispered. “I should have told you sooner, but the more time that passed, the harder it seemed. You’ll never wonder again. I’m gonna tell you so much and so often now that I love you that you’re going to be begging AirPods off P to muffle my voice.”

I let out a jagged breath, and tears smeared across his skin. “Never.”

“I like me a challenge.”

My arms slid up around his neck, hugging tighter. Being friends with him would never be good enough. But being his final girl?

That was something I definitely could do.

KRUGER

MY BROS WEREN'T JOKING ALL THE TIMES THEY CALLED ME A moron.

They were being serious. They were right.

I was good at numbers. Swimming. But people? Love? Negatory.

This girl's been walking around with my whole heart for years. *Years*. There I was, minding my own damn business, and she literally robbed it right out of my chest. But she thought she wasn't good enough?

I should have seen. I should have known. I should have told her sooner.

Pulling back from my arms, she tipped her chin, and I was assaulted by the wariness filling her beautiful brown eyes.

"Do you really mean it?" The question was hesitant, voice echoing the caution reflected in her stare.

See? Only a moron could inspire such doubt in someone so perfect.

A gruff sound fell between us. “That I love you? That you’re my final girl? Baby, I’ve never meant anything more.”

“But.”

I raised one eyebrow, daring her to come up with a single reason she didn’t own me.

“I’m just me.”

I nodded. “Yeah, *just* a brilliant piano player, *just* the smartest girl I know, *just* more beautiful than anyone else I’ve ever seen.”

She made a face. “Your eyes are disobedient, Ben. You can’t believe them.”

Amusement shot through me, but instead of smiling, I scowled. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“They can’t even agree on what color to be.”

I laughed. “Fair point. But they *do* agree you’re their favorite thing to look at.” Brushing the back of my fingers lightly over her cheek, I continued. “The only woman my heart wants.”

Her lashes fluttered, cheek pushing a little closer into my touch. “I know I just remembered, but I spent years wanting you. Years believing we’d never be anything more than friends. But now, suddenly, you’re saying all the things I’ve always wanted to hear. It doesn’t seem real.”

“Mm.” I agreed. “You’ve been through a lot the past couple weeks. It’s probably confusing and overwhelming. There’s a lot up here to sort out,” I said, tapping the side of her head. “No pressure from me, okay? We can go slow. As slow as you want. I’ll wait. I’ll do whatever it takes to prove how real this is.”

Hey, moron, you're doing a lot of assuming right now.

The intrusive thought hit me like a shovel to the face, and I grimaced. "Ahh," I said, taking a small step back, putting a little distance between us. "You do want to be with me, right?"

She never actually said. I mean, yeah, she said she loved me and she wanted me, but that was sort of in the past.

What about the present? The future?

I wanted it. All of it.

But what if my lies ruined it? What if our timing was wrong?

Unable to stand still, I left her sitting on the tabletop to pace over the floor. "I said I'd give you time, and I totally meant that. But this," I said, stopping midpace to gesture between us. "This is endgame, right? *We're* endgame."

She blinked, and I started pacing again. I know I said fuck the plan, but, bro, rejection was *not* part of it.

She isn't just my endgame. She is literally my only game. The only life I want.

"I'm definitely confused right now. And overwhelmed." My heart shriveled, hearing her say those words. Like went down an entire size. I was about to turn into the Grinch. I totally saw why the green dude hated people.

"Scared too," she whispered.

I stopped pacing again.

"You're going to scuff their floor," she scolded.

"Serves Max right," I muttered and went back to pacing. Carrying my girl down the stairs. Making her coffee. I should toilet paper his bedroom.

Ha, the Grinch has a dog named Max. The Grinch is Max's master.

I heard her say something, but I was too busy plotting my Grinch-style TP revenge. I was gonna wet some of it. Probably gonna have to apologize to Wes, but look, this was what happened when you dated a buttinsky.

“Ben!” This time her voice was louder, more insistent.

I swung toward her. “Sorry, sweetheart. I was thinking.”

“Brooding.” She corrected.

“I don't brood.”

“It's kinda cute.”

“Yeah?” I reconsidered. “Well, maybe I was doing it a little.”

She giggled.

The sound made my heart levitate. That giggle was something I hadn't heard enough of lately. “Now, about you being scared...” I started, ready to let her know I was gonna take care of whoever was trying to hurt her. Just Grinch right out on them.

Oh, you want to know my plan for that?

I don't make plans anymore.

“Benji,” she interrupted, the nickname wiping out all my thoughts. Exactly why I didn't bother with plans now. All that work, and I'd just toss 'em out anyway.

“I said there was a time when I wasn't confused or scared.”

I held out my arms. “Well damn, girl, lay it on me.”

Her face dipped a little, almost like she was suddenly shy. “When you kiss me.”

My arms dropped to my sides, and my stomach flipped. “Say that again,” I said, turning so my ear was directed toward her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her lift her face. “When you kiss me.”

My head whipped around, stare automatically dropping to her mouth.

“Maybe you could do it... right now?”

I *definitely* left skid marks on the floor as I rushed to fulfill that request. I mean, *hell yeah*.

Her knees were still parted from when I stood between them before, so I bulldozed right in, wrapping my arm around her waist and colliding our chests with enough force she arched over my arm.

My lips slanted over hers enthusiastically, both our bodies bowing as I kissed her with everything I’d kept hidden for years. My brain whispered I should ease into it, but the rest of me was too far gone. The desperation to claim her, to confirm she was mine, was unmatched by anything else.

She made a small sound deep in her throat that went straight to my balls, and I licked over the seam of her lips. They parted with a breathy sigh, which I gobbled up like the starved man I was and swept my tongue into her mouth, coaxing hers to mate with mine. She tasted like coffee and I like chlorine, a combination that should not work but was now my favorite flavor. Her hands pushed through my short strands of hair and up to the top where she anchored her fingers, my scalp tingling from the way she tugged me closer. My arm

started to quiver from the weight of our bodies, and I gentled my tongue, drawing back to suck her bottom lip between mine. I nibbled and licked the plump flesh as a vivid image of those lips wrapped around my dick the night before flashed into my mind.

Groaning, I kissed across her jaw. Her head fell back, and I reached up to cradle it as I dragged hot, wet kisses down her neck. She arched against me, breasts flattening against my chest as her hips moved restlessly. My body moved instinctively, shifting so I could thrust my raging hard-on right against her core.

Ripples of ecstasy forced a groan right out of me, the friction of our bodies so powerful my lips dropped away from her skin. Panting, I thrust into her again, my rigid cock stabbing at her core with desperation.

She gasped, and I drew back, shifting my hips from the center of hers. “Sorry, sweetheart, he doesn’t have any manners,” I said, reaching between us to try and adjust my rock-hard dick before pulling her up to sit. Sheepish, I said, “I really meant what I said about going slow.”

“Four years is slow.”

I froze. “What?”

“I mean, technically, it’s longer because we met in middle school.” She peeked up at me, cheeks fuchsia. “Didn’t you say you knew when we met?”

I nodded dumbly. “The very minute.”

I watched her chew her bottom lip before leaving it to say, “Don’t you think that’s enough foreplay?”

My cock literally sprang between us, tenting my sweats in a way that should have been embarrassing but wasn’t. For one,

he was as good-looking as the rest of me. And two, it was irrefutable proof of how much I wanted her.

“What are you saying?” I asked, trying to be the good guy. Trying to make sure I wasn’t thinking with my good-looking dick.

Her fingers spider-crawled over my forearm and up toward my bicep where she pinched the fabric of my hoodie and tugged. “We’re alone in this house right now.”

I groaned.

“Maybe we should go upstairs.”

A haze of desire dropped over my mind, clouding my thoughts and vision with pure lust. Too far gone to think of something flirty or polite, I grasped her chin and pulled her face up. “If I carry you up those stairs, I’m gonna rip off all your clothes and bury my dick in your body. I’m gonna claim you the way I’ve always wanted and never let you go. So if you aren’t all in with me, then you’d better say so right now because I’m not just taking your first time. I’m laying claim to all of them.”

She gasped. “Who says I’m a virgin?”

I rolled my eyes. “Please, woman. You think I didn’t chase off every guy who ever came sniffing around?”

Her mouth dropped open.

I crossed my arms over my chest, and my dick spasmed as if it were angry we had to have a conversation. See? Mannerless.

“You didn’t,” she refuted.

I made a rude noise. “Fuck yes, I did. Lame-ass losers coming around. There were a lot more than you think too. I

got to most of them before they even approached. A couple sneaky bastards got around me. I got rid of them, though.”

“Benjamin Hayes Kruger,” she threatened.

“Jessica Anne Park.” I wasn’t scared.

Even though she was perched on the table, she still fisted her hands on her hips and glared. “Are you telling me you’re the reason I’ve never had a boyfriend?”

“Yep,” I said, popping the P at the end. I was mighty proud of myself.

Throwing her arms up in the air, she exclaimed, “I thought I was ugly and no one wanted to date me!”

My arms dropped from my chest. “What?” Was this girl for real? Did she not own a mirror?

“How could you?” she accused.

I sniffed. “I’m not sorry.”

She gasped.

I sighed. “I *am* sorry you thought no one wanted to date you. It’s obviously not true. They all did. But I forbade it.”

Shock put a faraway look in her eyes for long seconds, but then she snapped back, an angry glint replacing her surprise. “You are unbelievable. What a freaking double standard.”

“What?”

She scowled. It was kinda adorable. “So I couldn’t date around, but you could?”

I scoffed. “Like I’d date someone who isn’t you.”

That seemed to take a lot of the heat out of her fire. “What?”

Ohh, I get it. Leaning forward, I braced my hands on the table on either side of her hips. Our faces were close, our noses almost touching. I looked into her eyes, affection swelling inside me so abundantly I struggled to draw in air.

“I wouldn’t let anyone touch you because you’re mine,” I avowed.

“You didn’t even ask me if I wanted to be yours!”

I ignored that because she was a negative Nancy, and I was trying to be romantic.

“And I wouldn’t let anyone touch me because I’m yours.”

She stuttered. Her mouth dropped open. I chuckled, leaned forward, and pressed a fast kiss to her slack-jawed expression.

“You’re lying,” she asserted.

I drew back, anger putting a bite in my words. “I know I lied about the engagement, but I am *not* a liar, Jessica.”

Her brows knitted. “But you’re Elite. You go to parties all the time.”

I shrugged. “I can dance with a girl without jumping her bones.”

“You’re seriously telling me you’re a twenty-year-old virgin?”

“Why is that so hard to believe?” I wondered.

Her eyes dropped to my still-tented sweats, and she pointed accusingly. “Because he has no manners!”

“Using my own words against me,” I muttered. “All the relationship with none of the perks.” I went on, mourning my misfortune.

“What did you just say to me?” Her voice was low and calm.

Yikes. Pity party for one has been canceled. “Of course he doesn’t have any manners right now, baby. His favorite girl is right here in front of him.”

She pursed her lips. “You’re so popular. And handsome. And rich. An athlete. There’s no way you haven’t had the chance.”

“I’ve had opportunity. I’ve turned it down. I’d never disrespect you by touching someone else. I don’t want to. I’m not giving any of myself away because that would be less I could give to you. And you, sweetheart, you deserve everything I have to give. The only one to get that part of me.”

“Ben.” She sniffled. The unshed tears in her eyes glimmered like diamonds in the sun. “You really saved yourself for me,” she whispered, a lone tear slipping free and creating a glistening trail down her cheek.

Leaning in, I kissed the wetness off her skin. “You’re my final girl,” I answered.

Her soft sound echoed between us as her cheek turned so her lips could catch mine. It felt like fireworks going off inside my chest, sparks of energy shooting through my core making my stomach flip. The back of my neck tingled, and sensation buzzed down the length of my spine. The kiss itself wasn’t passionate like the one before. There was no tongue, no rubbing lips or panting breaths. It was steady and solid, the fusing of two hearts... of her hopefully finally getting even a glimpse of what she looked like through my eyes.

The sound of our lips parting echoed in my ears, but before she could pull back completely, I caught her face and kissed

her again.

“Soo...” She began when some of the thickest tension in the room ebbed, giving us a little room to breathe. “That kiss the other day on campus... Was that your first?”

I grimaced. “Technically, no. I mean, we used to play spin the bottle all the time in middle school and high school.”

“Seven minutes in heaven too,” she mused.

“Girl, you better not have been shut up in a closet kissing some bum!” I demanded.

She laughed.

My dick wilted, and I pointed at it accusingly. “Now look. He’s mad.”

She made a sympathetic sound and reached for it. Just literally reached out and grabbed it. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from thrusting into her palm.

“Poor baby,” she purred.

“He forgives you.” What? He’s mannerless *and* forgiving.

“Take me upstairs, Ben.”

Didn’t have to ask me twice. I picked her up and carried her up the stairs to the bedroom. You’d think I might be worn out after a grueling swim, but hell no. I could be half dead, and this woman could crook her finger at me, and I’d crawl out of my grave.

The second the unmade bed came into view, my cock jerked excitedly and my heart started to pound. I kicked the door shut and moved to the bed, sitting her on the edge, but I backed up instantly, the urge to tackle her into the mattress almost scary.

“Ben?”

“Tell me, Jess.” The words ripped out, deep with desire I could no longer mask. “Tell me the second I come over there, you’re mine and always will be.”

“I’ve always been yours, Benji,” she whispered. “Even when I thought you didn’t want me.”

I launched onto the bed, kissing her until my lungs burned and I was forced to come up for air. Pulling back, I took in her flushed face, swollen lips, and messy dark hair spread out over the blankets.

“I’ve always wanted you,” I whispered, holding her gaze. “I want you so much no else was even a thought.”

“You’re my endgame, Benji.”

Bro, my stomach just opened up and swallowed my heart. Whole. Felt kinda good. No, it wasn’t kinda good. It was... *whoa*.

Holding her gaze, I lifted her hand and pressed a kiss into the center of her palm. The air in the room turned heavy but not suffocating and uncomfortable. In that moment, everything we’d been holding back for so long was uncaged and urged me even closer in her direction.

I was nervous and excited all at once, and even though it took years to get to this moment and I sometimes doubted we ever would, suddenly, it was here. She was in my arms. She was mine. And this time, it wasn’t fake. This time, it was real.

Still holding the hand I kissed, I laid it on my shoulder and stretched out along her body. Her legs parted, and I fit between them, elbows resting on either side of her so I could cradle her upper body with mine. The shiner she sported on her cheek

was a bit darker this morning, and anger at whoever hurt her tried to steal my moment.

Not today, Satan. No way in hell would I ever give that assbag a chance to ruin something I'd been fantasizing about forever. Something that was mine and no one else's.

Leaning down, I kissed the bruise, then again. She sighed softly, and my heart clutched, so I kissed the bridge of her nose, the tip, and then brushed my lips across her brow.

"I love you," I whispered. "I love you so fucking much."

She grabbed my ears and pulled me down, dragging me into another passionate kiss. My skin buzzed, thoughts turning faint as I sank deeper into the moment, pressing us so closely together I could feel the combined thud of our heartbeats as if they'd merged to create just one.

Flicking my tongue across hers, I pulled back to trace the seam of her lips while finding the hem of her T-shirt to push my hand beneath. Her skin rippled upon first contact, and I groaned at how smooth and warm she was. I fucking loved the differences in our bodies. I was all hard and toned from all the swim training, pretty much just chlorinated skin stretched over muscle. But her?

She was forgiving where I wasn't, her body soft enough to mold against mine but strong enough to also retain its curvaceous shape. Her skin didn't seem like armor, instead a warm, tangible wrapping for the heart and soul I'd loved on sight. I rubbed over her waist, enjoying the quiver of her belly as I curled my hand around the dip in her side, giving it a squeeze before dragging down over the rounded curve of her hip.

She squirmed restlessly, our lips popping apart when her head fell to the side while she panted. Sliding up, my palm settled heavily over her rounded breast, making my eyes fall closed. It was just as soft as the rest of her, fitting easily in my palm as I kneaded the sensitive flesh. In the center, her nipple puckered tight, and I swiped a thumb over it, reveling in her light whimper.

Impatience growing, I worked the top off her body and tossed it onto the floor along with mine.

Her breasts were heaving, skin flushed, and I filled my hands with them before lowering to suck one into my mouth. She arched into me, and I sucked harder, her little gasps encouraging more. Gently, I bit into her nipple, then licked over the sting before closing my lips around the hard pebble to suck. She gasped, fingers digging into my shoulders, and I dragged a wet trail from one breast to the other to repeat the action.

Her body was shaking as I kissed down her stomach, licking over her belly to nuzzle her hip with my nose. My cock strained against my sweats, the head so swollen and sensitive that every time it brushed against the fabric, I shivered.

Hooking my fingers into the waistband of her shorts, I pulled them down her legs, pausing to work the clothes over her cast.

“Leg okay?” I asked, eyes trailing up the length of her bare thigh.

“Mm-hmm,” she purred.

Unable to resist, I ran my hands up her inner legs, and she opened in invitation. I kept going to the juncture of her thighs,

groaning out loud when my fingers slid into her wet, warm center.

“You’re drenched,” I said, swirling two fingers into the silky liquid.

“I want you.”

“Good answer, baby girl. Good fucking answer.”

“You gonna give me what I want?”

In response, I laid my thumb over her clit and rubbed. She sucked in a breath, her body arching up, and I pushed a finger into her. Her muscles contracted around me, and all I could think about was how it was going to feel with her squeezing my dick.

“You feel like heaven,” I told her, adding another finger to slowly pump them inside her. She was so wet it dripped down the digits and smeared my palm. After a few more strokes, I sat back and pulled out, lifting the drenched fingers to my mouth. Her eyes widened as she watched me suck them, groaning around the snack I’d just made of her body. “Taste like it too,” I said, sucking them clean.

Her eyes fell to the tent in my sweats, and I practically fell backward off the bed, getting up and ripping the remaining clothes off my body. My dick was so hard it hurt, standing straight off my body, the tip already leaking. I went to my bag and pulled out a condom, carrying it back over to the bed.

I kissed across her skin as I crawled over, settling once more between her spread thighs. Her arms wrapped around me, pulling me down, our naked bodies meeting everywhere and making me groan. On instinct, my hips thrust, and the head of my cock slipped across her slit. I hissed, the feel of all the slick coating me for the first time indescribable. *I’ve*

waited so fucking long for this. I couldn't resist thrusting again, my shaft sliding along her crack.

"Oh," she purred, rocking into my thrusts until I was in danger of coming all over her instead of inside her.

Pushing back, I grabbed the condom and ripped it open with my teeth, well aware of her heated stare. Before I was finished rolling it on, she pushed up onto her elbow, teasing her fingers down the underside of my shaft and gently cupping my balls. My hands fell away, and I stayed on my knees as she rubbed and tugged, gently exploring my groin.

The entire time she played, I thought of hairless cats, old people in underwear, and poopy diapers. It barely worked, and too soon, I tugged her hand away and pushed her onto her back.

My hands hit the mattress on either side of her head as I positioned myself at her entrance. "Tell me you're mine, Jessica."

"I'm yours," she answered without hesitation.

I claimed her with a single thrust, a groan ripping out of my throat. She was hot and tight, gripping me in all the perfect places and creating an instant addiction. I wanted to move. I wanted to pound into that warm, wet sleeve until I was blind and deaf and the only thing that existed was pleasure.

But I wasn't going to do that. Not yet anyway.

Sweat gathered between my shoulder blades and beaded my hairline. My arm muscles quivered with effort as I held my weight off her and forced my attention down to the girl who was mine and only mine.

She was already looking at me, looking at me like I was literally all that existed.

And goddamn, it was so fucking *it* that, for a moment, I forgot to think with my dick. “Did I hurt you?” I rasped, my voice gravelly and low.

“No,” she whispered and touched my face. “I think I was made just for you.”

Groaning, I dropped to my elbows and kissed her deeply. Inside her, my cock jerked, and she responded by rocking her hips. We moved together, my thrusts shallow because I was already deep in her body. We strained against each other, and the room turned warm from our gasping, the air deepening with the scent of sex. Her body loosened the more I rocked, her sighs of pleasure a rhythm I moved to until tension built in me so tight that nausea rolled over my stomach.

Rising onto my hands, I pulled back, nearly leaving her body. She started to protest, but I cut it off by surging deep once more. She groaned, and I rolled my hips again, thrusting into her with fervor, finally taking her the way I craved. I pounded into her, my guttural groan masking the slapping of our bodies and the squelching of the condom. The bite of her nails stinging my hips as I drove into her only added a sharp layer to my bliss as I went higher and higher, pressure coiling within me so tight I knew I was about to explode.

Palming her hips, I surged so deep my balls smacked against her skin. Her legs locked around my waist, and I pushed my face into the side of her neck and sucked her sensitive flesh into my mouth. A slight tilt of my hips rubbed my cockhead against a spot that made her gasp.

I held myself there, and she ground against me, her hips practically lifting off the bed.

I smiled against her skin, loving that she was taking what she wanted. “There you go, baby girl. I got what you need. Let

go for me.”

She whimpered, and I took over, driving into her again. She came apart beneath me, her body collapsing against the blankets while her walls spasmed around my dick. Hands fisted in the blankets, her body bucked and writhed, coating my dick in a new rush of warmth.

“That’s it,” I crooned. “Good girl.”

She shuddered and shook, and I latched back on to her neck, sucking hard enough I knew there’d be a mark. Just knowing she’d walk out of here later with my personal brand on her pushed me over the edge.

The orgasm cracked over me like a sudden bolt of lightning through my entire middle. I bucked into her, mouth falling away from her neck as I shouted into the pillow beside her head. My hand slapped her hip and held her in place as the orgasm went on, nearly ripping me in two. More sounds of ecstasy fell from my lips as my dick spilled into her body, wave after wave of euphoria literally blacking out everything else.

I wrapped my arms around her, squishing us together as aftershocks rippled through us both until I was able to form a coherent thought. Rolling onto my back, I took her with me, draping her partway over my chest and burying my fingers in her hair.

I stared up at the ceiling, barely seeing the glow-in-the-dark stars stuck all over the place. This was why I waited. This was why I didn’t bother sticking my dick in the first girl who offered. I didn’t need them. I didn’t want them.

I wanted this and only this.

“Please tell me you liked that,” I said, too satisfied to sound as desperate as I felt.

She giggled.

Frankly, it offended me. I rolled so she was no longer on top of me but we were on our sides, facing each other. The second I got a good look at her, I forgot I was insulted.

“Why are you so pretty?” I asked, reaching up to wrap her tangled hair around my finger. Her skin was pink, eyes bright, and mouth thoroughly kissed by yours truly.

Smiling, she dipped her face, trying to bat my hand away, but my finger was stuck.

“Your hair is eating me!”

She made a noise, exasperation filling her tone. “You’re being dramatic.”

My mouth fell open. “Me? You’re the one who just laughed when I asked you if you liked my dick.”

I mean, I know it was my first time and all, but I did good. Right?

“You can’t just ask a girl if she likes your dick.”

“I didn’t just ask a girl. I asked you.”

The humor in her eyes gave way to something softer. “You’re better than I thought you’d be.”

Uh, what now? “That is not a compliment, Jessica.”

She threw back her head and laughed. The movement exposed the long column of her throat, and I caught a flash of the hickey I sucked there.

With a growl, I reached between her legs, laying my bicep right up against her still-wet core, and braced my palm against

her back. She squeaked when I lifted, picking her lower half right up off the bed and dragging her against me. My thigh pushed between her legs to replace my arm, and I grabbed her thigh to drape it even farther across my hip.

Securing my arm around her waist, I pulled her chest flush against mine and pushed her face into my shoulder.

Holding her tight, I rested my chin on her head, enjoying the feel of her wrapped against me. “All right then, final girl. Tell me how I can do better.”

Her body went rigid, a far cry from the languid way she’d been pressed against me a second ago. “What?” Her voice was muffled against my chest, breath hot on my skin.

“That was, ah...” I started, feeling my pride sting. “My first time. I’ll do better next time.”

Slapping her palm against me, she pushed out of my body. “You can’t!”

My eyes narrowed. “Now see here, you might have me wrapped around your finger, but—”

“I like your dick,” she announced loudly, cutting me off.

I paused. “What?”

She groaned again. “Oh my God, Ben! I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Seemed pretty clear to me,” I grumbled.

She started to laugh but then covered her mouth with her hand. Her brown eyes danced, and seriously, I couldn’t even be mad. I had it bad. Like so bad it was embarrassing.

“I wasn’t talking about the sex,” she said, pulling her hand from her lips. “I was talking about all the times I imagined

what it would be like with you.” She gazed up shyly. “Like if you were mine.”

“I am yours.”

“Well, you are way better than I could even imagine,” she told me, eyes glimmering. “I love you.”

Yeah. She owned me.

“I love you too,” I whispered, leaning in for a kiss.

Her arms circled my torso, grappling at my back muscles as I licked into her mouth and made myself at home.

“So about my dick,” I said when we finally parted.

Her laughter echoed up to the ceiling. Laying her palm against my cheek, thumb brushing near the corner of my mouth, she said, “I more than liked it. It was the best first time any girl has ever had. I’m glad you chased all those other guys away because they would never have come close to this. To you.”

“To my dick.” I confirmed.

Pushing her hand between us, she reached for him. But it was snatched back just as fast. “*Ew!*”

Groaning, I fell onto my back. “I’m gonna have a complex.”

“The condom,” she said, pointing. “It’s sticky.”

Reaching down, I pulled the rubber off, tied the top, and tossed it over the side of the bed.

Before I could say anything else, she leaned down and brushed her lips against the shaft. “I’m sorry,” she told him, kissing again. “I think you’re perfect.”

He jerked, already perking to life. “He forgives you.”

Smiling, she crawled up my chest. Stacking her hands beneath her chin, she looked at me. “You really saved yourself for me.”

“I’d do anything for you,” I told her truthfully.

“Or you could just make love to me again.”

My eyes flew to her face, and she smiled.

“I knew it,” I announced, rolling on top of her, already settling between her legs. “You’re addicted.”

She laughed. “I definitely am.”

“That’s okay, final girl, because I am too.”

JESS

MY FINGERS FLEW OVER THE BLACK AND IVORY KEYS, perfectly playing chords and challenging scales I'd been terrified were forgotten. But the second I saw the piano sitting grandly on the theater stage, a sense of fierce longing and homesickness filled my chest, making me sorry I'd stayed away for so long.

And now I sat here slightly bowed over the keyboard, practically one with the instrument as the harmony I needed no sheet music for spilled from my pores. I questioned how I could ever have thought I would forget this.

Turned out some things were just ingrained so deep they were impossible to forget. Some things so essential to my soul they were embedded in my DNA. Like piano. And Ben.

Just thinking of him fluttered my heart and curved my lips in a smile. All this time, I'd believed I wasn't good enough. I let insecurity and pride rule the way I lived. Even as I fought and clawed my way to a better life, working three jobs and maintaining my scholarship, I wondered deep down if I deserved it.

When I looked in the mirror, I saw my flaws, heard the echoes of Ben's parents telling him I was beneath him. I'd assumed he believed it too.

I was wrong. So wrong.

All this time, he'd been biding his time, focusing on the future, a future he wanted with me.

I want you so much that no one else was even a thought.

My light squeal blended with the crisp staccato as I continued to play in tune with my heart. Maybe all his swoony words would have meant less, but Ben didn't just toss together pretty words. He brought receipts to back them up.

Stocks. Money of his own. Real estate. Education. An entire plan to become his own man so he could be who he thought I deserved.

Me.

All this time, I'd tried to be worthy, but to him, I already was.

All this time, I thought he was like the rest of Elite, sleeping his way across campus. The nights I laid in bed after a grueling day of work and class, exhausted and tearful, I believed he was out hooking up with someone who would never be me. Avoiding invitations to hang out, keeping my distance from his friends so I wouldn't have to feel not good enough for them too.

All that wasted time and hurting just because of pride. If I'd gone, maybe I would have seen that my assumptions were completely wrong. I'd always thought Ben was different. Wasn't that how he got into my heart?

Maybe I'd been afraid of that too.

Of showing up and seeing proof he wasn't some playboy athlete, because if he rejected me anyway, it would be even worse.

But he didn't reject me.

He rejected everyone who *wasn't* me.

I'm not just taking your first time. I'm laying claim to all of them.

I wasn't a virgin anymore. And neither was he.

Him lying about us being engaged was such a small thing compared to everything else. In fact, it was just another way he showed up to love me.

Ben loves me.

I squealed again, the high note joining the crescendo of the piece I played. It continued to swell the vast space with sound, ebbing gracefully even after I lifted my fingers from the keys.

Breathing deep, I closed my eyes, letting the music settle. Even after the notes went silent, the room remained alive with energy in a way only the piano could achieve.

The sharp, loud sound of two palms slapping together made my eyes spring open and heart leap into my throat. I glanced over my shoulder as the clapping continued, the sound disturbing the melody I'd left in the air.

The cuffing of two palms was joined by heavy footfalls from heeled loafers as a tall frame stepped from behind the curtain stage left.

“That was just incredible. Truly inspired!” Director Fields exclaimed, still clapping on his way toward me and the piano.

His sudden appearance caught me off guard, as I'd been lost in thought and music and assumed I was alone.

I really needed to work on assuming things because it was not my best quality.

"Oh, Director Fields," I said, "I didn't realize you were there."

"Where else would the head of the Westbrook orchestra and music department be if not for the stage?" he said, sweeping his arm into a wide arc.

"I suppose that's true," I allowed.

"I'm surprised to see you here," he said. "I heard about your recent accident and didn't expect you until next week."

I nodded. "Yes, well, I was anxious about piano. Worried I'd forgotten how to play."

And Ben taught me I should just face things head on because sometimes worry was just fear trying to hold me back.

Director Fields's eyebrows arched, my eyes automatically following their movement because they looked like thick gray caterpillars perched above his eyes. "Forgotten how to play?" he admonished. "You are the most gifted pianist we've had here at Westbrook for many years. There is no forgetting how to play."

"Well, when you forget everything else, the possibility seems very real," I mused.

Something in the air shifted, and the back of my neck prickled.

"What do you mean?"

He was looking at me sort of strangely, and it made me uncomfortable to be partly turned away from him. Bracing my hand on top of the bench, I scooted around. His eyes slid down to the cast on my foot, which was partially concealed by the loose sweatpants I wore. They were Ben's.

I refused to cut up any of my pants to make room for this cast, but Ben had no such issue. Even though the hem was loose already (which was the entire point of me wearing his pants), he still sliced through the red fabric partway up the calf to make even more room. When I told him he was insane, he kissed me and forbade the pants to be even a little too tight on my healing bone.

It made me wonder what would happen if someone dared to do something he'd forbidden. Which, frankly, was becoming a long list.

Director Fields cleared his throat, eyes sliding from my cast to the crutches propped against the side of the piano. I didn't particularly like the way his appraisal of my injuries made me feel. Somehow weak. Defenseless.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I assumed the administration informed you of my injuries. They did all my other professors."

"Well, I've been quite busy running this department, and I don't make it my business to meddle in student affairs," he lamented, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his light-tan tweed pants. They perfectly matched the tweed jacket he wore over a plain white dress shirt with the collar open at the throat.

I wasn't sure how me falling down the stairs and getting amnesia was considered an *affair*, but okay.

"I have amnesia," I told him, then reconsidered. "Well, had."

His spine straightened, hands coming out of his pockets. “Amnesia?”

I supposed I couldn’t blame him for his sudden curiosity. I mean, amnesia was curious.

I nodded. “When I fell, I not only broke my ankle but hit my head, and it caused retrograde amnesia.”

“I had no idea,” he murmured, gaze sharpening. “So you don’t remember what happened?”

“No,” I confirmed, once again searching my memory for any sort of hint. Once again, I came up empty. “No one really knows because I was by myself when they found me.”

“A terrible thing,” he said, making a sympathetic noise.

Suddenly, I wondered. “You didn’t hear anything that night?”

“Me?” he said, incredulous. “Why would I have heard?”

“Because I fell in this building. In the stairwell,” I explained, pointing in the direction of the stairs. “You did just say how you’re always here.” Wrinkling my nose, I thought. “I think I was at orchestra practice that night. Do you remember seeing me?”

“Well, I’m not sure. What night was that again?” he asked.

I told him.

“Hm, well, I do believe you were there. I don’t think we had any absentee members that evening. You know how I frown upon missing rehearsals.”

I nodded. “You didn’t notice anything strange? I didn’t seem... off?”

“Off?” he repeated as though he didn’t even understand the term. Sighing, he shook his head. “I just told you, Miss Park, I do not meddle in my students’ business. I only focus on the music.”

“So it must have happened after rehearsal ended,” I surmised, ignoring his huffing as I stared across the empty auditorium. As I did, an ominous sense of foreboding crawled over me, pungent panic smacking me right in the ribs and making it hard to draw in breath.

Hand falling to the edge of the bench, my fingers curled around the side, digging into the smooth wood as I gazed over the rows of chairs, my eyes straying back to one row in particular again and again.

I’d been hiding.

“What did you mean before?” he asked, drawing me away from the memory trying to reveal itself to me.

Jolting, I glanced up. “What?”

“Before, you said you have amnesia, but then you corrected yourself and said had.”

I nodded. “I’ve started to remember things.”

“What kind of things?” he asked, eyes narrowing.

I shrugged one shoulder. “Just stuff I forgot.” Glancing at the piano, I smiled. “And clearly, I didn’t forget how to play.”

He made a sound. “Of course not. Being gifted is not a memory. It just is.”

I glanced back at the row of chairs but this time felt nothing. It made me doubt what I’d felt before. Suddenly, I gasped. “I had a piano lesson!”

“Pardon?”

I glanced at the director, excitement widening my eyes. “I remember! I was giving a piano lesson that night in the practice room.”

“Don’t you do that often?”

Something about the general statement rubbed me the wrong way. “I thought you didn’t pay attention to student affairs.”

His eyes narrowed. “Unless it has to do with music.”

“Right.” I agreed, the back of my neck prickling again.

“Well, now that I know I haven’t forgotten the whole reason I’m here at Westbrook, I should go,” I said, using the bench to help me stand. “I have some work to make up.”

“Can I expect to see you at rehearsal later this evening?”

I paused. Something about that seemed like a veiled threat. Or maybe a challenge. Whatever it was made rehearsal the last place I wanted to go.

Clearing my throat, I focused on the action frame of the piano instead of on him. I knew it was rude to not make eye contact when being asked a direct question, but I found it increasingly hard to look at him. He was making me uncomfortable, and the presence of that discomfort was sending off alarm bells in my head.

“Actually, I think I will take the rest of the week off from rehearsals as my doctor recommended.” I lied. Suddenly, getting back to my “routine” seemed like the worst thing I could do. “I wear out quite easily with this cast, and—”

He shifted closer, something I felt rather than saw. My eyes snapped up, confirming that he indeed had moved.

“And?” he questioned, reminding me that I’d been speaking.

“And,” I said, swallowing, “the stitches in my head are quite sore.”

He made a sound that was not at all sympathetic. “You should probably go home and lie down. Don’t think too much.”

I glanced at the crutches, which he’d somehow moved in front of. “I think that’s good advice,” I said. “Excuse me,” I asserted, gesturing to the crutches.

He glanced between me and the walking aids, then stepped back.

On one hand, I was immensely glad he was out of my personal space. On the other, how freaking rude. I was literally standing there balanced on one foot, admitting the stitches in my skull were hurting, and instead of handing me the things I needed, he stepped back as if he wanted to watch me struggle.

If he were in a horror movie, he’d be the first to die, and the people in the audience wouldn’t even feel remorse.

Served him right.

Bracing my hand on the piano, I hopped forward, the bench dragging against the stage when I bumped it.

“I’m sure it’s quite difficult to get around like that,” he observed, hands sliding into his old-man pants.

“It’s better than being dead,” I said, caught off guard by my own brashness. It was one thing to give Ben and Matt hell but another to be disrespectful to the director of the orchestra. His position here at Westbrook was one of the most

prestigious. His reputation was so strong that he'd received tenure long before I even enrolled.

Knowing I should apologize, I turned, but his laughter rang out over the stage. Something about it was like nails on a chalkboard. "I suppose it is."

Forgetting the apology, I grabbed the crutches, shoving them under my arms. My heart was thumping heavily, adrenaline coursing through my veins. The fight-or-flight response rose inside me so fast I didn't have time to be surprised. All I really wanted was to leave. Because of that, I turned so quickly from the piano that my feet got tangled in the wooden helpers, and I pitched to the side. One of the crutches clattered onto the floor, the loud sound echoing through the large space. The one I was left holding dug into my armpit, making me wince as my fingers tightened around the handle for balance. I managed not to fall, instead just awkwardly sagging toward the floor.

Blowing out a breath, I pushed upright, brushing the hair out of my face.

"You should be more careful," Director Fields observed, his voice low and oddly emotionless. "Another fall like the one before, and you might not be as fortunate."

The blood running hot in my veins turned icy, the sudden drop in temperature startling. I sucked in a breath and looked at the older man, trying to read his vibe.

"It sounds like you're implying something." I spoke, making an observation of my own. Fear and anxiety might have been pummeling me, but I would not cower.

"Just a concerned director cautioning one of his best musicians."

Right.

Instead of bending over to get the lost crutch, I squatted, wobbling a bit on my one good foot. Once I had both under my arms again, I started away without another glance in his direction.

I got maybe a foot away when his hand slid around my upper arm. “Miss Park.”

The rubber stoppers on the ends of the wood squeaked against the polished stage, and I stopped moving, body alert but still facing away.

“You should take my advice. Don’t think too much.”

The grip of his fingers felt like a vise around my throat, not my arm. The urge to wrench away from him was so strong, yet somehow I stood there paralyzed and impotent like an animal caught in a trap.

Down below the stage, the door burst open. The forceful way it slammed against the wall was a welcome respite from the turbulence whipping around this room.

“Final girl,” Ben bellowed like he wasn’t even worried he might disturb someone.

The sound of his voice was such a welcome sound I sagged, letting out a light whimper. His head whipped up, seeing us standing there on stage. Everything about him shifted from relaxed confidence to assertive defense.

He jogged up the stairs, taking them two at a time, his sneakers slapping onto the stage when he topped them. “Get your hand off my fiancée,” he practically snarled.

The hand around my arm but choking my throat slipped away instantly, and I sucked in a much-needed breath. “Ben,” I

rasped, rotating toward him.

He came forward, and I let go of the crutches, letting them fall at our feet. His arms replaced them, winding around my waist and pulling me in so his body could buffer my weight.

My lungs shuddered as I leaned into him, my body soaking up his warmth and scent like I'd been drained. Without thinking too much, I laid my cheek on his shoulder and turned my face into his neck.

Safe.

“Hey there, baby girl,” he murmured, his voice ruffling my hair. I had to work not to purr when his palm rubbed up my back like he was brushing away everything that ailed me. “Finished up early. Thought we'd come by.”

At his *we*, I looked up, finding Matt standing just behind his shoulder. “Matty,” I called.

Matt smiled, but then it slipped when his eyes shifted past Ben.

“This guy giving you trouble?” Ben asked.

“Pardon, but I am the director of music here at Westbrook.” Fields began, his voice haughty and creepy.

Ben made a rude sound. “You could be the richest man in the world handing out a billion bucks, and I wouldn't give a flying fuck because, when I walked in here, you had your hands on my fiancée. Where they *do not* belong.”

I thought about reminding him we weren't really engaged, but well, I liked his growly tone and the way he used it on Director Fields.

Behind him, Prism made a sound of agreement, and I peeked over Ben's shoulder again. Seeing my stare, Matty

glanced at me and winked.

“This is absurd. She was having trouble with her crutches, and I was trying to help her.”

Ben drew back enough to look down into my face. “Baby, you having a hard time?”

“I want to go.”

His lips pursed, and he nodded once. The arm around my waist tightened, and he lifted me off my feet with just one arm and swung toward Matt. “Stand here with your brother,” he ordered, shifting me into Matt’s hold without any trouble.

Before I could even ask him what he was doing, he pushed up into the director’s personal space, using his larger size as intimidation. “What’d you do?” he intoned.

“I beg your pardon.”

“You keep asking for pardons, but you ain’t getting them from me.” His arms folded over his chest, which gave me a view of his bulging back muscles. *So sexy.* “She’s upset. So I’ll ask again. What did you do?”

“What’s your name? I’ll need to call the dean.”

“Benjamin Hayes Kruger. But don’t call the dean. Call Coach Resch.”

He looked as if he’d swallowed a lemon. “Coach Resch.”

“Mm,” Ben hummed. “I’m Elite,” he informed and tossed a thumb over his shoulder. “And so is he.”

Director Fields did his best to look down his nose at Ben even though Ben was several inches taller. “Does Coach Resch know how uncouth his swimmers are?”

“Do you know you can read a dictionary, but it still doesn’t make you sound smart?”

Prism’s chest vibrated with silent laughter. I smacked him in the middle, and he just laughed more.

“Go ahead and call Coach. Call the dean too. You can tell them how uncouth I am, and when you’re done, me and P here will tell them how we came in here to you manhandling a student, one who’s already been attacked on this campus.”

“Attacked!” His eyes flew to me. “I thought it was an accident.”

I don’t know why, but I shrugged. “Memories are coming back. I’ll know soon enough.”

He flushed, several expressions playing over his face at once. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a department to run.” His shoes clomped over the stage as he went. Just before disappearing backstage, he stopped and turned. “And, Miss Park, considering the pain in your head with the stitches, I would also agree that it’s best you don’t return to rehearsals until next week. Follow your doctor’s orders and stay home.”

Ben spun to look at me, concern all over his face. When the director was gone, Ben rushed over, gently tugging me away from Matt and into him. “What’s this? You’re in pain?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Not really.”

Ben’s face darkened. “Jessica.”

I sighed. “My stitches are a little sore.”

“Let me see,” he said, voice soft and fingers gentle as he grabbed my head to pull me in so he could look at the offending area. “P, how about an assist?”

Matt came forward, switching on the flashlight on his phone and aiming it at my head.

“This is ridiculous,” I announced.

“That man’s suit was ridiculous,” Ben muttered.

Matt snickered. “Bet when he goes outside, birds try and build a nest on his shoulder.”

“Good one, P.”

I laughed. It caused the stitches to tug, and I winced.

“This calls for desperate measures,” Ben declared, crouching in front of me while Matt pocketed his phone and picked up my crutches.

“What?” I asked.

Ben tapped his shoulder. “Up you go.”

I climbed on his back. I wasn’t about to argue against a piggyback ride. I liked them. I liked that he could haul around my five-foot-seven frame like it was nothing even though it was anything but nothing.

“Where are we going?” I asked when we stepped out of the building.

“I think you need a movie night,” Ben said, glancing over his shoulder.

“A movie night?”

“Mm.” He agreed. “Call up the Speedo gang, P. Let’s find out which Elite screams the loudest.”

KRUGER

IT'S JAMIE.

Biggest bro in the room, and he screams like a little girl.

“You should be embarrassed,” Max told him from the other side of the giant gray sectional in his living room. “I’m embarrassed for you.”

“Bro, that clown dragged that kid right under the bed,” Jamie declared, stabbing a finger at the flatscreen. He shook his head. “Demons torturing kids. It ain’t right.”

Madison’s voice was nothing but a muffled rumble as her arm slid out from beneath Jamie to wave to the room.

“You’re suffocating your girl, bro,” I said, tossing some popcorn into my mouth.

The second the clown dragged the kid under the bed, he’d screamed and jumped on top of Madison, his bulky frame making her disappear completely.

Grunting, Jamie shifted back, revealing his girlfriend who was pancaked into the cushions. “Jamie Michael Owens,” she said, dragging in a deep breath.

“I had to do it, Maddie. You’ll have nightmares.” Sliding the rest of the way off her lap, he sat beside her, his wide shoulder pressed against her much smaller one. “Eyes as pretty as yours shouldn’t be seeing that.”

Face softening, she reached across his middle and gave it a pat. “Thank you for protecting me from the movie, J.”

He leaned in next to her ear. “Aren’t you even scared a little?”

She pressed her lips together, stifling a laugh. “I’ve seen *Poltergeist* before. I knew it was coming.”

He burst up, shoulders leaving the back of the sofa, feet hitting the floor. Rotating at the waist, he stabbed her with an incredulous glare. “Well, why didn’t you warn me?” he demanded.

“Because she didn’t know you were such a pansy,” Rush cracked.

Snickers echoed around the room.

On the other side of Max and Wes sat Win, and on his side was Lars. His white-blond hair practically glowed in the dark room, not needing the light from the TV to highlight it.

“Clowns are creepy,” he said, backing Jamie.

Jamie let out a noise and pointed to Lars. “Yes.” He agreed. “My bro knows what’s up.”

“Are you scared, angel?” Win asked, reaching under him to pull Lars into his lap. “I’ll protect you from the clowns,” he said, tucking a blanket around them both.

“Maybe we should turn on something else,” Landry said, glancing at Lars with a frown.

Beside her, Rush nodded.

“We definitely can. Lars, do you want to watch something else?” Jess asked. Her body was relaxed into my side, my arm tucked around and holding her close.

But as she spoke, she pulled back to tap my middle. “Ben, you should turn on a different movie.”

“I was literally over here screaming about that clown a few seconds ago, and you all called me a pansy. But Lars says he’s creeped out, and now everyone wants to turn on a comedy? Bros, my feelings are hurt.”

Rory giggled.

Jamie turned to her with an exaggerated sigh. “I expected better from you, camera girl.”

Making a sympathetic sound, Rory burst up from Ryan’s lap to hug Jamie from behind. “I’m sorry, Jamie. But you screamed like a girl. It was funny.”

Behind them, Ryan grinned, his teeth flashing white in the dark.

“You can leave it on,” Lars told the room. “I want to see what happens.”

“You sure?” Win asked, touching his chin to Lars’s shoulder.

Lars nodded. “Creepy movies are fun.”

Jess beamed. “They so are. After this, we should watch a slasher film.”

A few heads nodded, and Max dropped his feet off the coffee table. “Anyone want another beer?”

Win held up his empty bottle. The rest of us declined. We had a meet we needed to be in top shape for.

Before going to the kitchen, Max leaned down and ruffled Wes's hair. "You want anything from the kitchen, Nemo?"

"No thanks. I'm good."

Max caught his chin and pulled Wes's face up to drop a kiss on his mouth. For the first time in a long time, the PDA didn't give me a twinge of jealousy. I glanced at Jess and smiled.

"You can un-pause it," Max said as he left the room. "I'll know if anything scary happens because I'll hear Jamie scream."

On the other side of Jess, Prism laughed.

"Fuck you!" Jamie hollered, and Max cackled.

Jess palmed the remote. "Is everyone ready to turn it back on?"

Prism nodded.

"Isn't anyone gonna ask me if I want to keep watching it?" Jamie complained.

"Bro, do you want us to turn this movie off? Just say the word," Ryan offered.

"I was starting to wonder when my best friend was gonna show up," Jamie told him. "About time."

Ryan chuckled. "I'll even check under your bed tonight for clowns."

Jamie beamed. "There's the love."

"Here, J. Have some more movie snacks," Madison said, handing him some popcorn.

“Oh, add these,” Jess said, leaning over P’s lap to hand them a pack of chocolate candies. “They melt into the popcorn. So good.”

“Salty and sweet,” Jamie approved. “You’re a snack aficionado,” he told my girl, taking the candy and dumping the entire thing into his bucket.

“I hope they taste okay,” Lars said from Win’s lap. “You could have just used M&M’s.”

“No,” Win refused. “Those things aren’t welcome in this house.”

“But I don’t have to eat them,” Lars argued.

“And neither does anyone else,” Rush put in.

Win nodded. “Exactly. If it’s not one-hundred-percent nut-allergy friendly, then it’s persona non grata in this house.”

Lars still looked a little guilty like it was his fault his bros couldn’t eat everything they were used to.

Jess must have seen it on his face because she said, “It’s really no big deal, Lars. These actually melt better into the popcorn.” Shifting her gaze to Win, she went on. “You’ll have to tell me where you get them. I want to buy some.”

Win beamed. “I order them online. A specialty place.” He kissed Lars on the cheek. “Only the best for my angel.”

“*Min hund*,” Lars said, clearly embarrassed but also charmed.

Just FYI, *min hund* means my dog in Swedish. Yep, my bro lets his other half call him a dog. I don’t look so whipped now, do I?

“I’ll send you the link,” Win told Jess, then turned thoughtful. “I’ll just drop it in the Elite chat. You in there yet?”

“Adding her now,” Landry said, producing a cell from beneath the blanket she was sharing with Rush. A few chimes went around the room, and Jess picked up her phone to look at the newly illuminated screen.

“Elite group chat,” Jess repeated.

“Easier than sending ten different texts,” Ryan explained. “You ever need anything, you can just message in there, and someone will answer.”

Jess pulled up the message thread and looked down, the bright screen illuminating the awe on her face.

Max came back into the room with two bottles of beer and handed one off to Win.

“Thanks, bro.”

“Is this the chat thread you showed me?” Jess asked Max, holding out her phone for him to lean over and look at.

He nodded. “Ah, they finally added you. Welcome. You’ll never get a moment’s peace again.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, jealousy making my stomach hot. I glanced at Max. “You showed her the chat?”

“Screenshots of it.”

Jamie sputtered. “Bro. You have screenshots of our chat convos?”

“Evidence of all your stupidity,” Max mused.

“What the hell are you doing showing my girl screenshots of the chat?” I demanded. Maybe everyone else thought it was funny, but I sure as hell didn’t.

“There was stuff she needed to see,” Max said, tipping the mouth of the bottle to his lips.

“What kind of stuff?” I asked, suspicious.

Max shrugged.

The back of my neck grew hot, and I started to push up off the couch.

“Ben.” Jess’s hand fell onto my thigh, a complete distraction. “I was upset. He was being a good friend.”

“You really just remembered everything just like that?” Wes asked her, snapping his fingers.

Jess nodded. “Pretty much.”

“And you’re okay?” Rory asked.

Jess answered, but besides noting the hum of her voice, I didn’t hear what she said. It still really pissed me off Max was here and I wasn’t when she remembered. That I hadn’t been here the second she needed me.

The hand still resting on my thigh squeezed, and I forgot about Max. Glancing down, I couldn’t see her fingers against my leg because the blanket hid the sight, but I felt it. I felt it so good my cock started to stir.

“He didn’t want me to be mad at you,” she explained, voice low. “He told me you love me.”

I made a harumphing sound. “I do. But that’s for me to tell you, not him.”

Her smile lit up her doe eyes. “I know.” Her hand pushed a little deeper between my thighs, and my cock jerked.

“I’m gonna turn the movie back on,” she told the room.

“Let’s do this, piano girl,” Ryan quipped.

Surprise rippled through her body. Glancing at Ryan, she said, “What did you call me?”

“Piano girl.” Ryan smiled. “You’re officially Elite now. Gotta give you a name.” He pointed at Madison. “Theater girl.”

Jamie pointed at Rory. “Camera girl.”

Both Ryan and Jamie pointed at Landry, and all the guys said, “Scrappy.”

Landry groaned. “You threaten a man’s balls one time.”

“It was more than one, little siren,” Rush mused.

“I’m sure they deserved it.” Madison backed her up, and Landry nodded.

“Piano girl fits you,” Ryan said, eyes going back to my girl.

I was about to tell him he should look at his own when Jess said, “Really?”

Fuck. I couldn’t be jealous when this clearly meant so much to her.

“I like sis better,” Prism said.

Jess tugged her hand from between my thighs and hugged P.

Forget what I said about being jealous. I was.

I ought to TP all these assholes’ rooms.

“Well, come on then, piano girl,” Rush said and pointed at the TV. “Turn this on so we can listen to Jamie scream some more.”

She hit play, and everyone settled back into the couch, eyes going back to the movie. But not mine. Why the hell would I want to watch some ancient horror movie when I could stare at the girl my heart loved most?

She was so damn cute snuggled up against my side with a blanket thrown over our legs and a large bucket of popcorn in her lap. Her eyes were bright, a soft smile on her lips even as she stared at the screen, but I knew she wasn't really watching. She was inside her head, thinking about how this entire room filled with people just became her family. She was happy.

Her happiness was all I wanted.

Well, that *and* her safety.

She played it off, but I knew whatever the fuck I'd walked in on at the auditorium earlier had upset her. That douche director did something. Said something. Something that unsettled her. I couldn't quite tell what, and I didn't want to push because she needed a break. She needed time to relax and be with friends. It was so good to see her here with everyone, smiling and laughing, not pushing any of us away.

All this time, she'd been keeping part of herself separate because she thought she wasn't good enough. Protecting herself... *from me*.

Made me lowkey crazy. Made me feel guilty. Made me want to snatch the stars out of the sky and give every last one to her. She deserved them. She deserved everything I could give her. I never wanted her to doubt me again. Doubt us.

I realized now that the stocks, bonds, and real estate meant nothing if I didn't have her trust. It wasn't the things I could give her that would earn it. What would earn my final girl's trust was me. My heart.

Light from the TV flickered through the room, casting shadows as the people onscreen shrieked. I glanced at Prism to make sure he was doing all right, and he gave me a thumbs-up without even turning his head to look at me.

Reaching into the bucket, I pulled out some popcorn and held it up to Jess's lips. They parted, and I dropped the snack inside, letting the tips of my fingers linger on her mouth before pulling away.

In my lap, her hand shifted, brushing against my semi-hard dick. I sucked in a breath on contact, and she paused in chewing to glance up at me.

I dropped a kiss on her forehead and tugged her toward my shoulder. She shifted a little and cuddled closer. She was warm and pliant, her body molding against mine like she was melting. Desire unfurled in my stomach, creating an exciting buzz in my chest.

I'd waited for this girl a long time. Even when it was frustrating and hard, even when I worried she might not have me when I finally made a move, I waited anyway. She'd been worth it.

Now that I had her, though? I wondered how the hell I'd managed so much self-control. I wanted my hands on her all the time. I could barely think about anything other than the glide of her skin against mine, the tight sheath of her body, and the sound of her whimpers when she was beneath me.

The hand between my thighs pulled away, and disappointment took its place. But it was short-lived because her hand found its way beneath my hoodie, fingers lightly caressing my stomach. I knew she could feel the way my abs contracted beneath her touch, but she remained the same,

lightly dragging over my skin, the sweet torture boiling the blood in my veins.

My breathing turned uneven, blood rushing south. Even though she didn't touch them, my nipples pebbled so tight they turned sensitized against the cotton of my shirt.

My hand dropped from her waist to curl possessively around her hip. My dick was so rigid I tugged the popcorn bucket from her lap into mine, using it and the blanket to hide.

Her cheek dragged along my shoulder when she lifted her face. I glanced down, our eyes colliding, letting her see the stark heat boiling my veins. Silently promising that later when we were alone, I would take what I desperately wanted.

The rest of the room disappeared as she held my stare and slowly pulled back from my stomach to float her touch down to the tent in my sweats. I bit the inside of my lip to keep from groaning, and a naughty little glint lit those beautiful brown eyes. Slowly, her hand fisted around my rigid dick, the tight squeeze relief and torture all at once.

My Adam's apple bobbed, fingers biting into her hip in warning.

She smiled. A wicked little curve to those lips I wanted to devour. She squeezed again, even tighter this time, but then pulled away, leaving me aching.

I stared at her, incredulous, and she popped a piece of popcorn into her mouth and smiled. Then this little cock tease turned back to the movie as if she hadn't just riled me all up and left me to suffer.

Little did she know... two could play this game.

Drawing my hand away from her hip, I smoothed the hair from her face. "How's your stitches, sweetheart?" I whispered.

“They’re okay,” she murmured.

I kissed the top of her head and tugged the blanket farther up around us, burying my arm beneath it once more.

Sighing, she sank into me as screams erupted from the speakers on the flatscreen.

“Hey, what do you call a poltergeist who nuts a lot?” Jamie randomly asked the room.

“I don’t know. What?” Wes asked.

Max groaned. “Don’t encourage him, Nemo.”

“I kinda want to know too,” Win mused.

Jamie tossed some popcorn in the air and caught it in his mouth. “A ghostbuster.”

Rory and Madison groaned.

Ryan held his fist out so Jamie could pound it against his. “Good one.”

Rush made a rude noise. “You were funnier when you were screaming.”

Jess giggled, her body vibrating mine. Slowly, I slid my hand over her side to cup her breast. Her giggles immediately silenced, and her breathing paused. Smirking, I stared ahead at the TV, not at all paying attention to the show. I massaged the soft globe until her breathing turned slow and even, her body relaxing back into mine. My thumb flicked over her nipple, and it hardened instantly. Grasping the newly formed bud, I squeezed it gently between two fingers, and I felt her thighs clench.

After another pinch, I rubbed the fabric of her shirt over the sensitive nip, then left it to ache, sliding my hand down

over her hip and pushing my fingers into the waistband of the sweats.

I felt her attention even though she didn't look up. Her body remained still under the blanket, but tension radiated from her pores. The rush I felt knowing I could affect her just as much as she did me only turned me on more, my softening dick going back to stone.

My fingers slid down, slipping beneath the lace waistband of her panties and then stopping their perusal. She shifted restlessly, and I suppressed a smile. Slowly, I started moving, dragging my fingers back and forth just above her pubes, occasionally scratching into the trimmed curls.

Her breathing was heavy, her chest rising and falling rapidly against my side. My heart was pounding, blood roaring between my ears. Since the arm wrapped around her body couldn't reach past her groomed curls, I slipped my other hand down to her center, pushing between her thighs.

She froze and looked up. I stared into her eyes while slowly sliding one finger into her slit. Oh, the effort it took to not groan upon meeting her already wet center, at the way her silky softness coated my skin instantly.

Adding another finger to the one already playing, I dipped a little farther, her thighs relaxing in invitation. The second I pulled free of her waistband, she looked at me accusingly, and I smiled. She looked adorably disgruntled when I reached into the popcorn bucket.

“Open up,” I said, my voice a low murmur.

Her eyes narrowed, but I persisted, shoving the snack and my fingers right against her lips. The second she felt it, her

eyes flared, awareness shooting through her body. I smirked, rubbing my wet fingers over the seam of her lips.

They parted, and I pushed the popcorn in along with the fingers I knew tasted like her. I pushed the popcorn to the side and dragged those damp fingers across her tongue. Her lips closed around them, prolonging the drag as I pulled them away.

“Taste good?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Watch the movie like a good girl,” I said right against her ear, then pushed my hand back into her pants.

Her thighs trembled as I found her slit and pushed my fingers inside, stroking and teasing with the lightest touch. Her head slid from my shoulder to my chest, her heavy breaths hot against the fabric of my shirt.

What turned into a game quickly morphed into something else. Of me playing with her in a room full of people, secret pleasure a blanket concealed.

I knew I should pull away and finish this later. Let her ache the way I was. But it wasn't enough. I wanted her pleasure, and I wanted it right now. I wanted to watch her fall apart while having to hold it together. I wanted to take her in this room filled with people while no one knew what I was doing.

Just knowing she was writhing on the inside, her panties soaked, and her clit swollen and throbbing was pleasure all its own.

Her arm wrapped around my waist, fingers clutching at my side.

I kept my stare straight ahead and pressed against her engorged clit. Her fingers dug tighter into my waist, and I continued to stroke that spot. Her leg moved restlessly under the blanket, and I stopped moving. She stilled, and I started touching her again, dipping the tip of my finger into her drenched opening. Leaving it pushed inside, I laid my thumb against her button and pressed.

Her entire body tensed, and I knew she was close to falling over the edge. Body shuddering, she pushed up off my chest and looked at me, need and panic warring in her eyes.

“Benji,” she whispered, voice wobbly.

My finger was still buried in her body, my thumb pressed against her clit. “What’s up, baby girl?” I asked quietly.

“I think I need some ice for my head.”

“Mm,” I said, pulling my hand out of her pants.

She sagged at the loss of contact, the tension in her body still making her tremble.

“Come on then,” I said, lifting her off the couch as I stood, using her body to hide my erection. “Be right back,” I told the room as I carried her down the hall.

Instead of going into the kitchen with the ice, I hauled ass up the stairs and hurried into the bedroom.

“I couldn’t do it,” she said the second we were behind closed doors.

“Do what, baby?”

“Not say your name when you make me come.”

Groaning, I tossed her on the bed and furiously ripped the clothes down her legs. Too impatient, I left them bunched

around her cast and shoved my sweats down around my hips.

My dick fell out, heavy and hot, practically ready to explode even untouched.

Grabbing a nearby condom, I rolled it on in record time and pushed her legs wide.

“How about you say my name right now?” I said and thrust into her body.

We both groaned, her arms falling away from me as I started to move, thrusting into her body with the desperation she made me feel.

“You feel so fucking good,” I whispered. “I cannot get enough of you.”

“More,” she whispered, and I obliged, thrusting so hard her body moved up the mattress.

I was already cresting, the need to fill her up irresistible. “You worked me up too good.” I panted. “I’m not gonna last.”

Shoving deep, I ground my hips against her, the tight fit of her body literally the best thing I’d ever felt.

“Say my name, final girl. Say my name when I make you come.”

One last swivel of my hips, and her body arched, head falling back as she came. “Bennnn,” she groaned, hands gripping my biceps as her body took over and she ground herself against me, shuddering as the orgasm kept going.

I palmed her hip, rocking her through it, stroking my pulsing dick against her clenching walls.

She said my name again, and I lost control, driving sloppily into her as my dick emptied again and again.

Groaning, I buried my face in the blankets above her shoulder, trembling with aftershocks as I continued to thrust.

Collapsing on top of her, I let out a long sigh and then rolled, dragging her body with mine.

The stars on the ceiling glowed brightly because I hadn't bothered to turn on the light when we came in. I blinked up at them, satisfaction filling my bones.

"Think they know I didn't really need ice?" she mused.

I laughed. "Ask me if I care."

"I love you," she whispered.

I rolled again, pinning her beneath me and looking into her eyes. "Not nearly as much as I love you."

"It's not a contest, Benjamin," she scolded, but her eyes were soft.

I kissed her.

"Why the hell is my room covered in toilet paper?" Max's voice roared through the entire townhouse.

I jumped off the bed to quickly discard the condom and pull my pants back into place. When I was done, I helped Jess into hers and pulled her off the bed.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs, and muffled voices filled the hall when I pulled the bedroom door open and glanced out.

Elite stood around Max and Wes's open bedroom door, the light spilling out into the dim hall. I helped Jess out of the room, planting her next to Prism.

"Brooo," Jamie heckled, filling the doorway. "Who'd you piss off?"

Max swung toward him, the hoodie clutched in his fist swinging with the force of his movement. “You do this?” he demanded.

“I wish,” Jamie mused.

Ryan laughed. “Bro, your room’s so white it looks like snow.”

Wes stepped around the crowd and into the room he shared with Max. “We’re gonna be finding toilet paper in this room till next year,” he mused.

“Sorry about that, Wes. You’re kinda collateral damage, but some things have to be done.”

“Our room’s clear,” Win said, coming out of his and Lars’s bedroom.

At the same time, Max swung to face me. “You did this!”

I shrugged. “You think you can just carry my girl around, make her coffee, and show her screenshots without retaliation?”

“Oh my God, Ben!” Jess exclaimed. “Is that why you took so long in the shower this morning?”

“I was trying to help you,” Max said.

“By helping yourself to my girl.”

“I’m gay!” he yelled.

“Technically, you’re bi.” Win corrected.

“No. He’s mine,” Wes announced.

Max scrubbed a hand down his face. “You just had to make friends, didn’t you, Nemo?” he muttered but then held the hoodie out to him. “Put this on before you get any colder.”

Wes took it and smiled. “Thanks, Maxi.”

“I texted you to get over here before she could run off, and this is what I get?”

Well, yeah, he did do that.

“I told her to give you a chance.”

“You did?”

“He did,” Jess replied.

I nodded. “That was really decent of you, bro. Let’s just call it even.”

Max turned incredulous. “Our bedroom looks like a mummy costume gone bad.”

I blanched. “You might need to scrape off the wet globs behind your bathroom door.”

Someone laughed.

Max lunged at me.

Rush caught him around the waist. “This is why everyone calls you a moron,” he told me as Max struggled against him.

“I was mad.”

“Now I’m mad!” Max said, breaking free of Rush, only to be caught by Win.

“Start cleaning, Kruger,” Win ordered.

“Me?”

“Well, Wes and I sure as hell aren’t doing it,” Max declared.

Everyone turned to look at me. I sighed. “Fine.”

Prism leaned toward me. “Make sure you take some pics first.”

“Good thinking, P.”

“You better do a good job, or you’re sleeping in your car tonight,” Max grumbled.

Everyone started toward the stairs.

“Isn’t anyone going to help me?” I called.

“You do the crime, you pay the fine,” Rush mused, and everyone nodded.

I guess fair was fair. I started toward Jess. “I’ll take you downstairs before I deal with this.”

“I got her,” Prism offered, picking her up without any trouble.

“Fine,” I muttered.

“So he can haul her around, but I can’t?” Max quipped.

“He’s my brother,” Jess said, smiling up at P. Then, “Besides, I’m so not his type.”

“Still waiting for him to tell us what his type is,” Lars muttered.

“I’ll take you downstairs,” Prism said, taking my girl and leaving. She leaned up and whispered something in his ear, and he made a choked sound.

She giggled.

I started after them, but Max pressed a hand in the center of my chest, stopping me. “You have a mess to clean up.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered, turning to the TP castle. “Hey, Max,” I called as he was heading down the stairs.

He stopped and glanced over his shoulder.

“You deserved this,” I said, thumbing toward the two-ply streamers decorating his room. “But, ah, I really do appreciate you texting me. I appreciate you being her friend. She needs them, especially good ones like you.”

He stared at me.

I cleared my throat. “And yeah, thanks for telling her to give me a chance. I appreciate you being my friend too.”

He huffed. “You’re welcome.”

I started to smile.

“You’re still cleaning all of it up.”

“Fine.” I relented and got to work.

JESS

HAVING AN EMPTY HEAD WAS BETTER. BECAUSE THEN I DIDN'T have to think. To be haunted by the past. My head was no longer empty, so here I sat—haunted.

In a bathing suit.

Which was ridiculous because I had a broken ankle. Do you know what does not go with a red lifeguard suit? A cast.

How easy it is to fall prey to the past, to insecurities I thought were gone. They weren't, though. They were masked by a full heart. Love.

Sadly, it didn't take much for them to rear their unwelcome and ugly head. Once again, I was transported back to the girl who wasn't good enough.

His parents were here. Walked right in all smiles and well-dressed with an air of superiority like they had every right to be there.

They did.

And here I was, woefully underdressed and unprepared. They walked right by me on their way to the stands without so

much as a flicker of recognition, and it made me feel invisible. But I belonged here too. And not because Ben said so. Because this was *my* school, a university I earned my way into with talent and hard work. I was a lifeguard at this pool, for Elite, and while I might not be working today, I was still here in “uniform” to support my fellow lifeguards and keep a watchful eye on the swimmers. And maybe give a little extra eye attention to Ben.

Technically, I was off duty. I could stare.

I spent all night folded into Ben’s embrace, his body heat more of a blanket than anything else on the bed. When my eyes blinked open, he was the first person I saw, his sleepy voice the first thing I heard. *I love you.*

I hated the doubt creeping in slowly, trying to muffle everything else. I’d have to fight that too, just like I fought for everything else. I was tired of fighting, clawing my way through life. I didn’t have to fight for Ben, but old habits were hard to break. I didn’t doubt his heart or even his love, but I doubted my ability to hold on to it.

“Hey, roomie, I brought you a coffee.”

My attention snapped up to Win who was standing right beside me, a big grin stretching his face, aviators stuffed in the neckline of his shirt, and a paper cup in each hand.

Glancing between him and what he held, I said, “That’s for me?”

He nodded. “This one,” he said and held out one of the cups. “It’s a latte. Not caramel, though. Those are for trauma.”

“Right.”

“Figured you could use it since you have to sit around in a swimsuit for like four hours.”

To be fair, I was wearing a windbreaker over the suit, but they weren't really made for warmth.

"That was really nice of you, Win," I said, suddenly a little emotional at the unexpected gesture. I took the cup, wishing I could wrap both hands around it but needing one to brace myself on the crutch I was using. "Thank you."

He shrugged like it was no big deal. Maybe to him, it wasn't. But to a girl who was quite literally standing here feeling invisible, being seen meant so much. "No big deal. I was getting one for Lars. Meet tradition, you know," he said, holding up the remaining cup.

"Smile!" Rory called, appearing with a camera poised in front of her face.

Win shifted closer, and we both smiled while she snapped a photo.

After a quick glance at the screen, she smiled. "Perfect."

"I better get this to my angel," Win told us, heading toward the locker room. "Can't have him getting cranky."

Rory took his place beside me. The strap of her camera was covered in Elite buttons, each one of them boasting the name of all our favorite swimmers. She had two buttons for Ryan, one on each side of her neck.

"What's it like living in a house filled with boys?" she asked.

"Noisy," I griped, then glanced at the coffee in my hand. "But I kinda like it."

"They're good guys," Rory said. "But don't tell them I said that. They all have egos the size of Mount Everest."

I laughed and sipped the latte. It was vanilla.

“I haven’t had a lot of friends in my life,” I said, the vulnerability just spilling right out as though the arrival of Ben’s parents, the sweet gesture from Win, and my own self-doubt loosened my tongue.

Rory laid her hand on my arm and smiled. “Now you do.”

“Girls pic!” Madison exclaimed, stepping up to my other side.

Rory laughed and held out her camera, the three of us smiling.

“I have no idea where to look,” I said, the digital camera nothing like a cell phone.

“Me either.” Madison laughed.

At that moment, Landry and Coach stepped out of the locker room, and we waved her over.

“Smile!” Rory announced and snapped a couple times.

“Let’s see,” Landry said, and Rory turned the camera around so we could look at the screen.

We were off-center but smiling.

“Looks good to me!” she announced.

Madison nodded, then said, “Send it to us.”

“We need to start a group chat with just us four,” Landry suggested. “No boys allowed.”

“I’ll create one and send the pic that way.” Rory agreed.

The announcer’s voice boomed over the speakers, and Landry rushed off to Coach. Rory went to snap a few more photos for the school’s website, and Madison found a spot in the bleachers.

The team came out of the lockers a few minutes later, the boisterous cheers filling the natatorium until I couldn't hear my own thoughts.

I sipped the coffee, watching for Ben to appear, and he did with Matt right beside him. My heart somersaulted as I watched him smile at his best friend, loop his arm around Matt's neck, and say something in his ear. Matt smiled and pushed him off, making Ben laugh.

He must have felt my eyes because he looked up, then veered in my direction. His eyes felt like a hot caress as they scraped over my body all the way down to my toes. By the time he stopped in front of me, I was flushed with awareness.

“Woman, what the hell are you wearing?” he grumped, eyes dropping to my legs.

“The same thing I wear to every swim meet.”

“You can't lifeguard with a cast on your foot.”

“No, but I can still support the team.”

“You don't need a swimsuit to do it,” he grumbled. “And why aren't you sitting down? You can't stand with one crutch for four hours.”

“I'll sit down when the meet starts.”

Matt appeared with a folding chair, which he snapped open and placed near the bleachers. Both boys pointed to it like I was expected to obey.

I rolled my eyes.

“How's the coffee, piano girl?” Win asked, totally cheeky, on his way past.

“It's good. Thank you.”

Ben squinted. “Where’d you get that?” he demanded, looking at the coffee as though it morphed into some baby alien in my hand.

“Win got it for me. Wasn’t that sweet?”

Ben glowered. “The last guy who made you coffee got his bedroom toilet papered.”

Amused and onery, Win stuck his face between Ben and Matt, eyes sparkling. “Well, I was worried she’d get frostbite standing around in that itty bathing suit.”

In a quick move, Ben slung his arm around Win’s neck, putting him in a headlock. “Did you really just tell me you were staring at my fiancée in her suit?”

Win wheezed with laughter.

“Bro, I will kick your ass so hard your vertebrae will pop out of your mouth one by one like a Pez dispenser,” Ben threatened.

It only made Win laugh harder.

Coach’s whistle squealed as he strode over. When Ben didn’t let Win free, Coach leaned in and blew the whistle right beside his ear.

“Damn, Coach!” Ben hollered, finally releasing Win. “If I swim like shit today, it’s because I can’t see straight ‘cause my ears are ringing.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Kruger? Attacking your own team physical therapist in front of all our competition.”

“He’s an intern,” Ben grumped.

Coach blasted his whistle again. “What’s that?”

“Sorry, Coach.”

Trainer Russel called out for Win, and he jogged off.

Coach turned to me. “Park, how are you feeling?”

I nodded. “Doing good, Coach Resch.”

He nodded. “Glad to see you on deck today. But just take it easy, all right? Let the other on-duty lifeguards handle the swimmers.”

“Yes, Coach.”

“You’ll agree with him but not us?” Ben said, incredulous.

“You two.” Coach gestured between Ben and Matt. “Get your Speedo-covered asses over there with the rest of the team.” He didn’t wait for them to listen before blowing his whistle at someone else and rushing off to give another order.

Ben slid his arm around my waist, and Matt took the crutch from me. “Come on, sit down.”

“I don’t want to sit down,” I grumped. I was used to being up and moving around at these meets. I was used to being busy nearly twenty-four-seven. Since my fall, I’d been more idle than ever before, and it was making me stir crazy.

“I know that, baby girl, but you need to heal up. Not too much longer and the stitches will be out, and you’ll have a boot on your foot instead of a cast.”

I sat in the chair Matt set up for me, and he propped the single crutch against it. Ben shrugged out of his Elite windbreaker and shook it out around me.

“I already have a jacket on,” I protested.

Ben leaned in, his bare upper body rippling with his movements, the familiar scent of his skin tickling my nose.

“This one’s mine,” he said, tugging it beneath my chin.

A second later, another jacket draped over my lap, concealing my bare legs. I looked up, and Matt smiled.

“To help keep you warm,” he explained, just as naked as Ben now.

“Should have just worn pants,” Ben grumped.

“This is what I always wear.” I reminded him. “It’s routine.”

Ben’s brows drew down. “Hey,” he said, squatting in front of my chair. The way he angled his body toward me, widening his legs so I was partially between them and he was a shield, made my stomach flutter. “You doing okay? Are you overwhelmed? Confused?”

Funny how the word “routine” took on a new meaning since my bout with amnesia. It almost made Ben nervous and on guard, like he was terrified I was going to relapse or something. I wasn’t going to relapse. I wasn’t even sure you could relapse into amnesia. But the worry in his eyes was real, and I wanted to take it away.

“I’m good.” I assured him, reaching out to brush my fingers through his sandy hair. “Better than good.” I amended. “It’s just nice to do something familiar because everything lately has been changing.”

Even good change was scary sometimes.

“Your parents are here. Did you see?”

He stiffened, shock rocking him back on his heels. “What?”

“Guess you didn’t know they were coming, then?”

“Hell no, I didn’t. Why would I invite them?”

I shrugged. I knew he said he’d been playing the good son all this time, just biding his time until he could break free of their expectations... but that pesky doubt was creeping up again.

My amnesia. His lie. It sort of forced us into the relationship we had now. Sure, he said this was endgame, but had he been ready? He talked a lot about his plan. Having everything in order. What if he wasn’t ready to challenge his parents? What if the idea of doing and actually going through with it were two wholly different things?

Why does it suddenly feel like he has to make a choice?

What if, in the end, he realizes I’m not worth it?

“Hey.” Ben put his hand on my knee. The material of Matt’s windbreaker swished under his palm. “Final girl.”

I blinked, finally breaking free of the heavy thoughts.

He stood but bent, pushing his face close to mine. “Eyes on me.”

His mismatched gaze was easy to find, easy to latch on to.

“Don’t worry about them. They aren’t important. You are.”

“You don’t have to choose, Ben. I would never ask you to.” Having parents that cared seemed like such a novelty, even if their version of caring seemed to come with strings.

His eyes burned into mine, the intensity of his stare so immense I had no hope of deciphering what it was trying to say. All I could do was let it consume me until my lungs burned and my head was dizzy.

Then, just like that, he leaned in, his lips against my temple alone to the way he burned. My lashes drooped, lips parting on an unsteady exhale.

“I love you.”

I was about to echo the sentiment when Coach’s whistle filled the air.

“Kruger! Prism! What did I tell you?”

“You gonna watch me swim, final girl?”

“Of course,” I said, his flirty tone making me blush.

“Keep that sexy ass in this chair. Don’t make me come over here soaking wet and lay down the law.”

I rolled my eyes.

Coach blasted the whistle again.

“I’m coming!” Kruger yelled. “One of these days, I’m gonna shove that whistle—”

“Ben!”

Matt laughed and leaned down to kiss the top of my head. “See ya after the meet, sis.”

“Good luck,” I told him.

The two went to sit with the team, and the back of my head prickled uncomfortably, my throat constricting so much I had to swallow twice to get down a sip of the latte.

I ignored it until my fingers started to tremble and the urge to turn and look into the bleachers consumed my thoughts.

Tearing my unseeing eyes from the pool, I glanced around, the neck of Ben’s windbreaker brushing against my cheek. The bleachers were full, people holding signs, foam fingers, and

streamers. Some were eating colorful otter pops, the icy treat something I usually enjoyed, but looking at them now, all I felt was cold.

Clutching the nearly empty latte Win gave me, I let my eyes peruse the stands, following that creepy trail that had been tapping on the back of my neck.

They didn't necessarily stand out. Being well-dressed and soaked in a monied air was pretty much everyone around here. Except for me. The scholarship girl. It didn't matter, though, because I found them easily.

They were staring. Both his mother and father looked right at me. Guess I wasn't as invisible as I thought.

What was worse: being invisible or being seen and disapproved of?

They both sucked.

Despite the wobble in my stomach and the whisper of insecurity in my head, I lifted my chin and met their stares with my own. Then, because I wasn't playing their rich-people game and I truly meant what I told Ben about not choosing, I smiled, lifting my hand in a friendly wave.

Sure, I stopped going around their house as much, but Ben and I were friends. They knew that. A little surprise at my friendly acknowledgment passed briefly over both their expressions, but then they both returned the greeting, their smiles not quite meeting their eyes.

Before I turned back, I saw the note of suspicion in his mother's stare as though, suddenly, she suspected Ben and I were more than friends.

Had she seen us talking before? Had she watched him kiss my head?

For the rest of the meet, I alternated between focusing on the game and the people sitting behind me in the bleachers. I didn't turn back and look again, though. I kept my eyes on the pool.

Ben swam well, top time in all his heats but one. If I'd been worried his parents' presence would somehow mess with his head, it was all in vain. I guess that particular affliction was just for me.

When the meet was finally over, Elite ran outside in their Speedos to ring the victory bell while the bleachers emptied.

A few of the lifeguards came over, and I stood, stretching out my muscles after sitting in that stupid chair for so long. We talked for a bit, and they went off to finish their shift and change.

I stayed put because everyone was meeting at Shirley's after and Ben was my ride. I never thought I'd say it, but I missed my rusty old Mazda and driving myself around.

"Jessica." A voice I knew well came from behind. "How unexpected to see you here."

Stomach tight, I turned rather ungracefully to smile at Ben's approaching parents. His mother had long blond hair, thick and perfectly styled in waves. Her eyes were green and her face was youthful, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was genetics or Botox. Her figure was slim, and she was dressed in a pair of wide-leg brown pants, a tucked-in white blouse, and a long wool coat that was most definitely from Burberry because it boasted their signature plaid.

Despite this being a swim meet, she was wearing heeled boots, and her nails were manicured in a beautiful shade of red.

Ben's father was dressed in dark slacks, a light-blue dress shirt with no tie, and a long wool coat with a high collar. His hair was cut short and slightly darker than Ben's. He had a baby face just like his son, but his was obviously a bit more weathered with age.

It's not that unexpected. I'm a lifeguard. "Mr. and Mrs. Kruger, it's nice to see you. I hope you've been well."

"Living the dream," his father replied, flashing a smile.

Is he for real?

"And how are you?" Mrs. Kruger asked, clucking her tongue. "You poor thing. What happened to your leg? And your face?"

Right, the bruise.

The horrors persist, but so do I. "I had a bit of a fall," I explained. "But I'm fine."

"Thank goodness you're okay," she said. It sounded sincere, but I still wondered if she meant it.

"Did you come to watch Benjamin swim?" his father asked.

"Ah, well, I'm actually a lifeguard, so I'm at every meet."

"Do you see my son often?" his mother asked. "Are you still friends? He hasn't mentioned you in a while."

Well, yeah, that stung. Even if I knew why he didn't mention me, his silence still hurt.

"Well—" I began.

"Jess," Madison called, and when three sets of eyes turned to her, she stalled a little. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were speaking with someone."

“It’s okay,” I said quickly, thankful for the interruption.
“What’s up?”

“I’m heading over to Shirley’s now. I’m going to put in some orders before the guys get there. You know how Jamie is when he’s starving.” She rolled her eyes, but there was definite affection in her tone.

I smiled.

“Did you want to ride over with me, or are you going to wait for Kruger?”

His parents turned away from Madison to look at me. Their attention was like wet underwear. Uncomfortable.

“We’re still friends,” I told them like it wasn’t obvious.

“I see,” Mrs. Kruger said. How anyone could say two simple words and make it sound so unsavory was a talent I’d frankly like to develop.

Her eyes slid over my suit, which was visible beneath the open jackets I wore. My grip on Matt’s jacket tightened as I fought the urge to pull it in front of me like a shield.

“Is that my son’s jacket?” she asked.

“Oh, are you Kruger’s parents?” Madison said, stepping into the conversation. They both looked back at her. “It’s lovely to meet you. Kruger speaks highly of you.”

His mom’s demeanor shifted, going from snobby and standoffish to accepting appraisal as she took in Madison’s sleek, long hair, made-up face, and unquestionably designer outfit.

“Is that vintage Chanel?” she asked, indicating the bag on Madison’s forearm.

Madison glanced at the bag briefly before returning her gaze to the woman. “Yes. It was my mother’s.”

I could almost hear the old-money cha-ching go off in Mrs. Kruger’s head. Imagine what she would do if she knew who Madison’s mother was. She’d probably faint.

“How lovely to meet you,” she said demurely. “Are you my son’s girlfriend?”

A strangled sound burst from my throat, and I choked on my own spit.

Mrs. Kruger slid a glance at me. “Is that so hard to believe? My son is quite the catch.”

Madison’s nose wrinkled, and she glanced at me before turning back to his parents. “Actually—”

“You know, I think I will ride over with you if that’s okay,” I interrupted. I wasn’t sure what she was about to say, but it wasn’t a good idea. None of this was.

“Sure,” Madison said.

“Great. We should go,” I said, draping Matt’s jacket over my shoulder and starting off with the crutch.

“Probably a good idea. We’ve come to take Ben for dinner, so he won’t be able to meet you.” His mom’s words followed me.

I felt myself slump a little but used the crutch to hide it. Madison was looking at me, so I smiled and called over my shoulder, “It was nice seeing you.”

About as nice as Laurie Strode’s relationship with her brother Michael Myers.

“What the hell crawled up their butts and died?” Madison asked beneath her breath as we walked away.

I laughed, but it sounded more like a tired sob. “Don’t ask,” I whispered.

Just as we were passing, the locker room door pushed open with Ben and Matt filling the frame.

“Just who I wanted to see,” Ben said, heading in our direction.

I tensed, practically feeling daggers shoot into the back of my head from where his parents still stood. I was trapped in the middle with a mere crutch for support.

“Hey,” I said. “You guys swam great.”

Ben came forward to kiss me, and I jerked back, nearly falling over in my desperate attempt to evade the touch.

I hated it. I hated it so much. I’d spent so long wanting his touch, thinking I’d never get it. And now here he was, offering it up, wanting to smother me in it, and I couldn’t enjoy it.

He froze, hurt flashing through his multicolored eyes and making me loathe this moment even more. “Jess?”

“I’m going ahead to Shirley’s with Madison,” I said.

Beside me, Madison was quiet, looking between us all curiously.

“Matty, here’s your jacket,” I said, sliding it off my shoulder and holding it out. “Thank you.”

He stepped around Ben to take it, flinging it around his neck and then slipping his arm around my waist, taking some of the weight off my one leg. “Why do you look like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like someone kicked your puppy.”

“I don’t have a puppy.”

“I met your parents,” Madison said, moving this funfest right along.

Kruger jolted. “*My* parents?”

“Well, mine sure as hell wouldn’t be here,” Matt muttered.

I glanced up at him. “But your sister never misses a meet.”

His dark eyes softened a little, a small smile curving the corner of his lips. “That’s why you’re my favorite.”

Ben made a rude sound. “She’s *my* favorite. Not yours. You need to get a man, P.”

There was a beat of silence. “A-a man?” Madison echoed.

A flash of panic rolled over Prism’s face.

Ben made a sound. “*Fuck.*”

Madison glanced at Matt, the question dangling on her lips and swirling in her eyes. Against my side, Prism was so tense he felt like stone.

But then Madison turned back to Kruger, the curiosity in her face gone. “Your mother asked me if we’re dating.”

Matt relaxed, and Kruger groaned. “She fucking did not.”

“She fucking did,” Madison concurred.

“She also said you have plans with them for dinner,” I added. “We should go, Madison, or Jamie will be left to wait while they cook his food.”

“Heaven forbid,” Madison mused.

“Matty, you want to come with us?” I asked. I hoped he said yes. I could use my brother right now. He was the only

other constant in my life besides Ben and a stack of bills.

“Sure,” he said, giving my waist a light squeeze like he could read my thoughts.

Using his muscled swimmer arm, he practically lifted me off my feet to help me walk.

We got maybe two steps when Ben pushed his way between us, replacing Matt’s support with his. “P, you go with Mads. We’ll catch up with you in a few.”

“What? No, I—”

My protests were silenced by Ben’s mouth slashing over mine. I froze in surprise for several heartbeats, but the second his tongue grazed mine, I melted into his body. He kissed me like he was starved, no shyness in his want. His tongue confidently stroked mine as his lips rubbed mercilessly against my skin, creating friction that made me hum. I clung to his shoulders, forgetting where we were, that there were people everywhere that could see. The doubt, the hurt, and the confusion clouding my mind bowed under his rule, turned their tails, and ran.

My head was fuzzy, eyesight blurred as he pulled away. My fingers dug into him for support and though he lifted his mouth, his body still buffered mine.

“You guys go.” His voice was gruff over my shoulder. “We’ll meet you.”

Ben’s hand splayed over the side of my neck, his thumb sliding up beneath my chin to press against my throat. His eyes glinted with possession and something that looked a lot like anger.

“What part of final girl did you not understand?” he intoned, voice low and gravely.

“W-what?”

“Benjamin, what on earth is the meaning of this?”

His nostrils flared, the anger in his eyes sparking like flint. “I might have been silent before, baby girl, but never, ever again.”

Those soft words vibrated my chest and wrapped around my heart. He turned, tucking me into his side, anchoring his arm around me so tight it was like he thought I would run away.

“Mom, Dad. I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Obviously,” his mother said. “Is this how you behave in public all the time, Benjamin? We taught you better,”

“There isn’t anything better than this,” he said, completely decisive.

“Son—” His dad began.

Ben shook his head. “I had planned on telling you a different way, but since you showed up here out of the blue, now is as good a time as any.”

“Tell us what?”

“Jess and I are getting married.”

What? I jolted, but his grip on me was so tight no one saw me move. My eyes flew to his face, staring at his calm profile, the strength in his demeanor.

“Excuse me, what?”

“Mm,” he hummed. “I asked her a couple weeks ago. She said yes. We’re getting married. Probably before we even graduate.”

“This is absurd!” His mother erupted, throwing her hands up in the air.

His dad cleared his throat. “We didn’t even know you were dating.”

“We told you explicitly *not* to date her,” his mother snapped.

“You told me a lot of things over the years,” he said, not reacting to their ire at all.

But me? My heart was beating so hard I knew my ribs would be bruised, and my hands shook so terribly I could barely hold on to the crutch.

“I think it’s time I told you a few things.”

“Maybe we should go somewhere private. This is hardly the place,” his father said, face flushing like he was embarrassed.

“It doesn’t matter the place,” Ben refuted. “My words won’t change with the venue. My heart won’t be swayed.”

“Y-your heart?” His mom held her fingers to her throat like she was indeed scandalized.

“Ben,” I whispered, trying to squirm away. “This isn’t necessary.”

He made a light sound. “Isn’t necessary?” He scoffed.

Panicked, I glanced at his parents.

“I’ll tell you what’s not necessary.” He went on. “The way you treat the woman I love.”

“Love.” She gasped.

“Yeah, Mom. Love. I love Jess. Have loved her for years. There’s no one else for me, and there never will be. We’re

getting married. I'm giving her my name. Hopefully, she'll give me some kids one day. Ones that look just like her. And if you want to be part of that, part of my life, then you'll respect my decision. You'll respect this woman."

His mother was slack-jawed, an expression I'd never seen someone so poised ever wear. Her eyes slid to me, and her lips slammed shut, pursing in disapproval. "But she's—"

"My choice," he deadpanned. "Mine. Not yours. Or Dad's. Or anyone else for that matter. I know you don't approve, which is stupid by the way, and I don't give a damn. Your control of me and my life stops here. Now."

"You might feel differently without access to your trust fund," his dad intoned.

Why did everything always come back to money? Having it. Not having it. Trying to get it.

Laughing, Ben reached into his back pocket. Needing both hands, he pulled his arm from around me. "Lean on me," he whispered, pushing his body closer so I could do just that.

Opening his wallet, he pulled out three cards and tossed all of them into his father's chest where they smacked into his well-pressed dress shirt and then fell onto the cold tile of the pool deck.

"I don't want your money. I don't need it. I hope that pile of cash keeps you company at Christmas."

His mom gasped. "Benjamin!"

"Leave it, Brenda. He'll change his mind when the money runs out."

Ben laughed. "You forget that I was exactly who you wanted me to be for almost twenty-one years. You think I

didn't learn? You think the minute I heard you disparage the girl I was going to marry that night four years ago that I didn't do what you taught me to do?"

Dad straightened. "What does that mean?"

"We weren't really a family, were we, Dad? It was business, and you're a good businessman. I learned from the best." He toed one of the cards lying near his feet. "I have my own money. My own accounts, untouchable to you. I have assets working for me even as we speak. I am more than capable of taking care of myself." He glanced down at me, the hard planes of his face softening. "Of you."

"I don't need you to take care of me, Ben," I said.

"I know. You've proved that over and over again."

"All I really want is for you to love me."

"Done."

Despite standing here under the resentful and shocked stares of his snobbier-than-snobbish parents, all I felt was warmth.

"This is very admirable, son. I'd like to hear how you've done it. What you've done." His father went on.

"But?" Ben goaded, slipping his arm back around my waist.

"But you can't possibly have amassed the amount of money that's in your trust fund."

Ben shrugged. "No amount of money will ever equal her."

My hand bunched in the shirt covering his back. My knees felt weak, and my heart felt less like a heart and more like a pair of hummingbird wings.

His words, *his actions*, were like burning sage to the ghosts of the past, clearing out the pain and self-doubt so all that remained was the future he promised.

“You would really give up your family, your inheritance, for her?” His father was incredulous.

“In a heartbeat.”

Silence fell heavily around us as if his declaration killed whatever remained.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Ben said softly. “Let’s go. I’m starving.”

I glanced toward his parents, and he made a gruff sound, snapping my eyes back to him. “They don’t matter.”

“Benjamin,” his mom said, her voice a mere whisper.

He was unruffled when he turned his head. “This is my choice. Now you can make yours. If you want to be a part of *our* life, mine and Jess’s, and any grandkids you might have, then we are amenable to that.”

His mother’s eyes slid to me, pleading for me to stop this.

He made a noise, angling so he was in front of me, blocking me from their attempts. “But first you have to apologize to her. For the shit she heard you say all those years ago. For making her feel not good enough when, in reality, she’s better than all of us put together. And then you have to back up your sincere apology with actions. I’m telling you right now I won’t have it. I won’t have one ounce of anything but respect and acceptance toward her, so if you can’t do it, don’t bother coming around.”

I didn’t see their faces because Ben blocked them from view, but their silence was thick when he spun and swept me

up in his arms, carrying me, my crutch, and his duffle to the door.

Clapping erupted from off to the side and was punctuated by a high-pitched whistle. I glanced over to see Ryan, Jamie, Wes, Max, Win, Lars, Rush, and Landry standing there in a row, delivering a standing ovation.

On the end right beside Landry was Coach, the whistle dangling out of his mouth as he, too, clapped.

“Nosy assholes,” Kruger called. “Glad you enjoyed the show.”

“Bro. That was a glitter bomb of glory.” Jamie congratulated him.

Despite the way my insides were popping and fizzling with nerves, I pushed my face into Ben’s shoulder and giggled.

His hand came up to cup the side of my head, holding it against him.

“Sometimes a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do,” he told our friendship audience.

He pushed through the glass doors leading outside. Wintry air swirled around us, fluttering my hair and brushing against my bare legs. People and vendors still milled around, and the sun was bright but low in the sky.

“Benji,” I said as he carried me toward his Audi.

“What?”

“You really didn’t need to do that,” I said. “But thank you.” I couldn’t even pretend it wasn’t everything I ever wanted to hear... except better.

His feet scuffed against the pavement when he stopped walking. I dropped my head back so I could look up at his handsome face.

“I meant every word,” he vowed. “Every single one.”

He was so sincere, so absolute, that doubting him was unimaginable.

KRUGER

I LOVED THE DAY AFTER A SWIM MEET BECAUSE WE GOT A LATE show and a light swim. Hell yes. It was even better today because there was a luscious woman in my bed. Tangled all up in my arms and legs. Hell yes times two.

I was so used to waking up before the sun that my version of sleeping in was still early. So imagine my surprise when I stretched and rolled and blinked open my eyes to find a set already staring.

“How do you expect me to ever go back to sleeping alone again?” I asked, voice still husky and slow.

Smiling, Jess ducked her head a bit into the pillow.

Finding her chin, I pushed her face back up. “You’re so pretty lying here in my bed.”

She tried to suppress a giggle, but I heard it anyway, and it played my heartstrings oh so good. “Technically, it’s Wes’s bed.”

It was a short song. “I just told you how pretty you look, and you tell me you’re in some other guy’s bed?” I shook my

head. “Tomorrow morning, I’m gonna tell you about your bad breath, bedhead, and crusty eyes.”

She gasped, hand flying up to cover her mouth as her other hand rubbed at her eyes and hair. It was cute as hell the way she was all embarrassed and fighting with the blankets to try and get out of bed.

Chuckling, I wrapped an arm around her waist and dragged her against me. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To shower!” she said, struggling to get free.

I just locked my arm tighter and laughed against the back of her head.

“Benjamin Hayes Kruger, let me go!”

“No.”

She gasped. “What did you just say to me?”

I was gonna have to start saying no to her more often. Girl didn’t even know what it meant. She was spoiled. Rotten.

“Keep wiggling that sexy ass around and find out what happens,” I growled into her ear.

She stilled. But it only lasted a second because she pushed back against me, almost curious to see if the threat was real.

I tilted my hips, stabbing my rigid length right against her ass cheeks. The friction was so good I groaned.

She melted into me, a low whimper of delight falling from her lips.

The arm I used to anchor her lightened so I could drag my fingers along her stomach.

A shiver worked its way down her body, but she slapped my hand. “Ben, no. Let me go brush my teeth first.”

I grinned into the back of her head, so wide her hair tried to floss my teeth. Reaching around, I brushed it all away from her neck, exposing the creamy skin of her throat. Leaning in, I nibbled across, loving the way her head dropped to give me more room. “You don’t need to brush your teeth. You don’t need to do anything at all but exist. You’re perfect to me. Literally can’t get any better.”

“You say some really beautiful stuff, Benji.”

“You inspire me,” I murmured, kissing her neck again while driving my erection right between her cheeks.

She rolled so her back was no longer to me, our bodies chest to chest. She didn’t have morning breath or crusty eyes, and the bedhead was sexy as hell. Even if she did, it wouldn’t matter.

“They aren’t just lines, final girl. I meant every word I’ve said.”

“You said that yesterday too,” she whispered.

“You believe me?”

She nodded. “Ben?”

“Tell me,” I beckoned, hearing the wariness in her voice. I’d find a way to eradicate that. It would take time and persistence, but someday, this girl would never hesitate to say anything to me because she would know whatever she said would never be bigger than how much I loved her.

“I didn’t want you to do that,” she said, peeking up from beneath her dark lashes. “And I feel bad for—”

A swift denial formed on my tongue, my lips parting to let it out, but her fingers pressed against my mouth, trapping my words.

“Liking it,” she hurried to say.

I asked her with my eyes what she meant, and she smiled.

“No one has ever done anything like that for me before. It’s not that I want you to fight your parents or give up your trust fund, but you did. You did it without even blinking like it was no big deal.”

I tried to speak again, but the words were muffled because her hand was still pressed to my lips.

“Like you really think I’m worth all that,” she whispered.

Reaching up, I tugged her hand from my mouth. “You are. You’re worth all that and more.”

Her fingers wove into my hair and tugged while mine palmed her hip, pulling so our lower bodies met at the same time as our lips. All the chemistry between us swirled so thick it became physical, rocking our bodies together and creating friction that was hot enough to spark actual flames. I wanted her so much that frustration welled beneath my skin, creating enough tension to make me burst. Even though our hands were everywhere, the back of my neck stung from the scrape of her nails, and our bodies strained together, it just wasn’t close enough.

I’d grown used to sexual frustration, to denying my raging hormones because I’d been waiting for her. Now that I had her? It seemed even worse. Now that my body knew the relief it could find only with her, I became starved for touch and attention, desperate to feel her in every way.

I tugged at her shirt, the fabric in my way, but the way we were lying made it impossible to just tug off her body. I knew I had to break the ongoing kiss so I could pull it over her head, but it was too much in that moment. Too big of a price. So I

reached beneath it, hand going right to her breast, and she moaned into my mouth.

In my boxers, my dick was so hard it ached, lightning bolts of pain going from my balls up into my abs and contracting them so tight I knew I'd be sore later. My tip felt sticky with pre-release and the urge to swipe it all over her skin and let it soak in was primal, but again, that would require me to pull away.

I'd spent all these years working on being strong. Physically. Mentally. Financially. Building myself up in every way for her. But here I was—weak. Weak for this woman in a way I never anticipated.

My hand slipped past the waistband of her panties, cupping her rounded ass cheek as my fingers slid along her crack.

As we kissed, her nose flared, her surprised groan only spurring me on. I hooked my fingers between her cheeks, gripping tight to her flesh, and rolled onto my back, dragging her over me. With my back against the sheets, I thrust up, my eager dick going right to her center as her legs spread over my hips.

Our kiss broke, the heavy sound of our breathing filled the room, and her hand fell onto my chest so she could push herself up. Still feeling mighty feral and greedy, I made an angry noise and tried to pull her back.

She evaded my hands and pulled the shirt over her head, revealing her heavy, flushed breasts and all that soft skin.

My shoulders sprang off the mattress, hands going around her back to hold her as I latched on to her breast and sucked it

into my mouth. Her head fell back, the ends of her long hair tickling my fingers where they dug into her skin.

She moaned, the sound filling the room and contracting my muscles as she started to rock against my dick.

Her hands turned impatient, finding my hair and pulling it so my lips had to pop off her breast.

My breaths were just gasps at this point as she yanked my hair and I stared up at the vision she made straddling my waist.

Her fingers slid away, and I dropped back into the mattress, tugging at the waistband of her panties. Rising onto her knees, she yanked my boxers down, and I lifted so she could get them under my ass.

My dick slapped against my abs, then shot up, standing stiffly off my body. The end was red and angry, the tip smeared with pre-come.

She reached for her panties, but I was too desperate, so I grabbed the crotch and yanked so hard the sound of a seam ripping filled the room. I ignored it, stretching the cotton aside to make enough room for my dick.

The second I saw that gorgeous pussy, my brain went offline, and I shifted my hips to try and get inside her. Her hand rested over my heart as she rose to meet me, her drenched lips wrapping around my head.

I watched with voracious eyes as she reached between us to grab my dick and guide it into her opening. My deep, guttural groan was loud and ripped from a part of me I hadn't even known was there as she slid down, all hot, wet silk fitting around me like the tightest of sleeves. When her ass hit my thighs, another garbled moan ripped out of me.

It was the first time I'd ever entered like this, and it was fucking indescribable. I was deep inside her, deeper than I'd been before. Without thinking, my hand moved to her belly, pressing against the softness below her belly button.

I thrust up, moving inside her, pushing even deeper. She gasped, but I barely heard it because I felt the slightest bulge of my dick where it filled her up.

Awe and something stronger had me lifting my eyes to find hers. She was already looking at me, cheeks flushed, hair falling over her shoulders and naked breasts on display.

"You fucking own me," I told her, my insides shaking with vulnerability, wondering if she understood just how wholly I was hers.

Her hand pressed over where mine already was, and she bore down, forcing me even deeper. She bent at the waist, our bare chests rubbing. I cupped her face to pull her into a kiss, but she stopped just before they could seal.

"Really?" she whispered, lips tickling mine. "Because right now, it sure feels like you own me."

Our lips met as I thrust up into her, feeling like a wild bull. I fucked into her so intensely we couldn't maintain a kiss, and her body draped over mine in submission. I grabbed her around the waist, fingers digging into her ribs as I lifted her and dropped her on my dick, loving the way she clenched around me every single time.

My back was drenched in sweat, my abs screaming, but even as I fell into the pillow, my hips stayed tilted up, still holding her hostage on my dick.

"Ride me," I said, chest heaving. "Let me watch you come."

Hands braced on my chest, she pushed up to sit above me. She watched me through heavy-lidded eyes as she rocked against me slowly, swiveling her hips in a sinful dance. Her skin glistened with sweat, the long strands of her hair sticking everywhere they touched.

My hands fell to her thighs, and she dragged her nails down my abs, picking up the pace until the entire bed was rocking.

“I love watching you fuck yourself on my cock,” I said, reaching down into the thatch of curls above where I filled her.

She cried out and ground down against me, our bodies so tight together I couldn't get my fingers near her clit.

Instead, I reached up and fondled her breasts, lightly pinching her nipples.

“Ben,” she whimpered, falling into my chest as the orgasm crested over her, pulsing through her body like an earthquake. I wrapped my arms around her, and she arched and cried out. When her hips stuttered, mine kept the pace she'd set.

“Oh yesss,” she hissed, her voice right by my ear.

Her little croons and whimpers coupled with the way her walls contracted around my dick pushed me right over the edge I'd been teetering on. Moving swiftly, I rolled us. With one final surge, I bucked up into her, lifting my ass and her off the bed with the force of my explosion. My leg muscles quivered and shook as the orgasm rocked my entire body, blanking out literally everything but the all-encompassing pleasure ripping me apart.

When it let go, we collapsed onto the bed, and she fell over me, her body boneless, our sweat-slicked skin sticking.

Neither of us said a word. The only sound in the space was that of our breathing and the hum of the ceiling fan.

When I could form a coherent thought, I began lightly dragging my fingers up and down her spine. Her inner walls contracted, giving me one last squeeze before relaxing completely.

We were wet and sticky, my softening dick still buried in her body.

“Shit,” I swore, realization dawning.

“What?” she asked, not even bothering to lift her head.

“I didn’t wear a condom.”

“I’ll go to the clinic on campus and get on the pill.”

“Do you want to do that?”

“Well, I definitely want to keep doing *that*,” she said and giggled.

I rolled, my dick slipping out of her as I pushed her into the blankets. Our skin was still overheated, but I draped myself against her anyway, lifting enough to look her directly in the eyes.

“We’re *definitely* gonna keep doing that. But I have no problem wrapping it.” I grimaced. “I just got carried away this time. I won’t let it happen again. You don’t have to take those pills.”

She nodded. “I definitely think we should use the condoms, at least until I’ve been on the pill for a while. I know you said you wanted kids, but I’m not quite ready for that yet.”

“Hell no, me either. I want to be selfish and greedy with you for a while before we even think about that. And it isn’t

just what I want. It's what you want too. Even if you decide you don't want kids, I'll be okay with it."

She seemed surprised. "Really?"

"As long as you want me, I don't care about anything else."

Surprisingly, tears welled in her eyes. "I really love you."

"I love you too." I kissed her softly.

"I'd love to have your baby someday, Benji. In the future."

"I'll give you as many babies as you want." I agreed. "But not until we're ready. So condoms."

"And the pill."

"You sure?"

She nodded.

"I'll pay for it."

"You don't need to—"

I gave her a hard look. "Don't sass me, woman. The only reason you're taking that pill is because of me. The least I can do is pay for it."

"Pretty sure it's free at the clinic."

The clinic. No. "I'll take you to a doctor out in town. Who knows who's running that clinic? Probably some quack with no degree."

"This is Westbrook, Ben." She reminded me. "You know they only hire the best."

I scoffed. "I bet you half the staff around here is nuts."

An odd look crossed her features and then her expression turned faraway. Kinda offended me, to be honest. I'd just

rocked her world, and she was already daydreaming.

“You daydreaming about my dick?”

Her eyes fired to mine, and an amused sound fell out before she spoke. “What?”

“Why do you look like that?” I asked, gesturing to her face. “The only acceptable answer is that you’re daydreaming about my dick.”

“I don’t need to daydream about your dick, Ben. Your cum is literally smearing my thighs.”

I jumped up and moved down her legs, pushing them apart.

“Ben!”

“You can’t say something that hot and expect me not to look.”

She groaned but widened her thighs so I could see. I reached down, and yep, sure enough... there I was, claiming her entrance and glistening on her thighs.

“The pill is definitely the best option here,” I deadpanned. “Because I need to see this as often as possible.”

“It could be a couple weeks for the pill to start working.” She cautioned.

I nodded. “I’ll wait, sweetheart. I’ll wait as long as it takes.” Relaxing between her legs, I let our chests brush but settled my weight on my elbows on each side of her body. “You make the appointment anywhere you want, and I’ll take you, okay?”

She was quiet a minute, then, “Ben? Do you really think some of the staff here is nuts?”

I hadn't meant to scare her, but gazing down at her apprehensive face, I realized I had. "Hey." I spoke softly, reaching up to brush across her cheek. "What's that look?"

She shook her head.

"Is this about whatever I walked in on at the auditorium?"

Her eyes lifted to mine, and I saw the answer before she had to speak. I rolled off her, pushing into a sitting position, and pulled the sheet over my lower half. "What did he do?"

"He didn't do anything, not really," she said, but the words didn't match her vibes.

"He did something."

She shook her head and pushed to sit up too. I got a little distracted by her perky tits just right there on display.

"It was just... weird. Like he didn't say a lot, but he implied it."

The muscles in the back of my neck squeezed, and it made my temples ache. "Implied what?"

She shrugged.

I caught her chin and brought her face around, looking intently into her eyes. "I want an answer, Jessica."

Her eyes rounded, but I didn't relent. This was her safety. If she felt creeped out by that old tweed-wearing dude, then I was going to take that seriously.

"He said I should be careful. Another fall like the one before, and I might not be as lucky."

What. The. Fuck?

I drew back, not wanting to have my hands on her as my temper spiked. "He said what," I repeated, low and quiet.

“I asked him what he was implying,” she said, pausing to swallow. “And he told me he was just showing concern for a student.”

Yeah, and I was the tooth fairy.

For real, though, what does she do with all those teeth?

“Did you believe that?” I asked.

She seemed doubtful but also scared to admit it out loud. “I mean, he’s the head of the music department. His reputation is pristine. He’s the one who put me in for a scholarship here, and I’ve never had any trouble with him in the past. So why would it be anything else?”

Why, indeed?

When I didn’t say anything, her hand wrapped around my wrist. “Benji?”

I glanced up, noting the fear and confusion swirling in her eyes. It was the same look she wore a lot in the hospital, and it twisted my guts. Gently pulling from her hold, I lifted her into my lap, tugging the plaid comforter up around us. Resting my chin on the top of her head, I stared across the room at the wall.

“It was probably nothing,” I said, hoping to make her feel better. “But maybe don’t be alone with him for a while, okay?”

“If it was nothing, then why does it matter?”

“Because I’m overprotective and jealous,” I declared.

She snorted but snuggled into my chest.

“How’s your stitches?” I asked, grazing my lips close to where they were. “And your ankle?”

“They’re okay.”

“If they hurt even a little, you have to tell me.”

She hummed in agreement.

“Want me to help you in the shower?”

I felt her smile against me. “Yeah.”

“You are gonna be so clean.” I promised. “You’ll squeak when you walk.”

She laughed.

I didn’t bring up the director again, but he lingered in the back of my mind. Because what he said to my girl was not an implication. It was a threat.

JESS

I WASN'T SUPPOSED TO GO BACK TO MY JOB AT THE MUSIC store off campus for a few more days, but when they called and asked if I could cover a shift this afternoon for a sick coworker, I agreed easily.

I wasn't used to sitting around with idle time. I'd never had it before, and having it now only gave me time to overthink. There was no point in staying home anyway. My memory was back, I knew how to do my job, and I needed the money. Following that line of thought, I pulled out my phone and sent off a few texts to the people I gave piano lessons to.

Hi, it's Jess. I just wanted to let you know that I'm feeling better and ready to resume lessons. I'm sorry for missing a few, but I hope you still want to continue. If you don't, just let me know. Otherwise, we can continue to meet at our normally scheduled times.

“Who you texting over there?” Ben asked.

My stomach fluttered the second I looked up. I didn't know what it was, but seeing Ben behind the wheel of his Audi always made my insides squirm. Maybe it was the way

his arm lazily stretched out and his long fingers wrapped around the steering wheel. Or maybe the way he reclined slightly with his thighs spread on the leather seat. Something about his driving screamed confidence, but not in an arrogant way. The way he sat there in calm control as the interior of the sports car sort of molded around him and the dash glowed red. One of my favorite things about Ben was that he wasn't forceful or loud about his strength. People sometimes didn't see it because of that.

And, well, because he made a lot of stupid jokes.

But that was the thing, wasn't it? He didn't care if his stupid one-liners made people think he was a pushover. He wasn't. His inner core was shrewd and solid, so much so that he didn't have to walk around with it on display.

I don't think even I realized the full extent of this until we'd become fake engaged and he practically took over my life. Instinctually, I always sensed it. Probably why I'd been drawn to him since we'd met. Ben had the kind of strength I lacked my entire life, the kind of presence that screamed security. Hence, the reason I could never rip my eyes off him when he was behind the wheel, cutting through water, or doing any other thousand things. Naively, I'd thought it was just sex appeal. And yeah, partly, it was, but it went deeper. He had sex appeal because of who he was at his core.

“You keep looking at me like that, baby girl, and I'm gonna pull this car over and toss you in the back seat.”

My ears burned when I ripped my eyes away from him to glance into the tiny back seat. “We wouldn't fit back there.”

“You underestimate the determination I have to get you naked.”

“I’ll never underestimate you, Ben,” I said, voice soft but serious. “I know what you’re capable of.”

The Audi swerved to the side of the road, abruptly gliding to a stop. After putting it in park, he hefted himself over the small center console and straddled my lap.

He was broad and muscular, the interior of this sports car not big enough for this.

“Ben.” I part gasped, part laughed.

“You haven’t kissed me in twenty minutes, final girl. I’m starved,” he said, grasping my face between both palms and diving into my mouth.

I purred, the sound vibrating between us as he claimed me deeply, the entire width of his tongue licking over mine as he angled my face so he could get even deeper. I was low in the bucket seat, his body hovering over me in a way that made me forget I was five-seven and feel I was much smaller. I was completely engulfed by his hands, his lips, and his entire body. Between us, his cock strained against his jeans, poking me in the chest like it was jealous it was still tucked away.

The crown of my head rubbed against the leather seat, and his hand trailed away from my face to caress the column of my throat, the pad of his thumb pressing hard enough to leave a tingling trail in its wake.

The interior of the car grew thick and warm, the winter air standing no chance against the heat he brought. His body was heavy in my lap, holding me hostage as we kissed as though he hadn’t just been inside me this morning.

We both gasped for air when our lips parted, but his body relaxed farther into mine.

“You’re squishing me,” I complained, but it was way less harsh in a breathless tone.

“You like it.”

He was right.

He did, however, look over his shoulder to make sure my casted ankle and foot were okay. “If you don’t want me to kiss you like that, then don’t look at me with fuck-me eyes.”

“I do not have fuck-me eyes.” I didn’t even know what that was.

“Mm,” he said, disagreeing. He wagged his eyebrows salaciously. “Want to have sex in the back seat?”

Yes. “I’m going to be late for work.”

He groaned and slid back into the driver’s seat. “You shouldn’t even be going to work at all.”

“Now is as good a time as any,” I said.

“But backseat sex, baby,” he whined.

I laughed. “Later.”

He shot me a look. It made my thighs clench. “Promise?”

“Mm.” I agreed.

My phone chimed as he was pulling back onto the road.

Thanks for letting me know. I will keep the schedule we have set, but I was wondering. Do you have time for a bonus lesson this afternoon? I’m worried I’ll lose the progress I’ve made if I go too long.

I snorted as I read the message. Then I felt bad and covered my mouth like that would somehow erase the rude sound.

“Babe,” Ben said.

I glanced up. He gave me a *what’s going on* look.

“I’m going to hell,” I told him.

“Not exactly the honeymoon I was thinking of, but you know I’ll follow you anywhere.”

Honeymoon? He did know we weren’t actually engaged, right? I lifted my left hand to stare down at my ring finger, feeling a little sad when I confirmed there was, in fact, no ring. I hadn’t worn that little bow very long, but I’d gotten used to it.

I told myself I shouldn’t miss something that wasn’t even mine to begin with, but well, my heart was a terrible listener.

The Audi downshifted and pulled into the parking lot of Allegro, the only music store in Westbrook. The first time I saw it, I got old slasher film vibes, which, frankly, only made me want to work here more. The standalone building looked like a small, old church perched right in the middle of town. The outside was light-colored stone with a gable roof, and what kept it from looking too plain and triangular was the large square portico at the entrance that was framed in dark wood.

Beneath the portico were large double glass doors, the only windows in the entire place. A large black rubber welcome mat lay in front of them, and chimes were tied on the handle inside so they jingled whenever someone came in.

Beneath the portico and on either side of the entrance were lanterns that were electric but looked like they flickered with real flames. The landscaping around the building was mature, some of the large bushes green but the rest lackluster and barren because winter was still hanging on.

The smooth purr of the Audi was the only sound for a few heartbeats as I watched a curled-up brown leaf dance across the sidewalk out front.

Ben shifted, and I remembered I had a text to reply to.

I'm sorry, but I can't do it today. I'm already at my other job. But I can stay an extra thirty minutes on our regular day if that would help?

The reply was immediate. *Yes! Thank you! See you soon!*

I sent the screen dark and looked up, noting Ben already watching me. He arched a brow in question.

“One of the piano students I tutor wanted an extra lesson today. She’s worried because I missed a couple lessons.” I giggled.

His eyes warmed, lips tilting upward. “Why’s that funny?”

“Because she’s so terrible, Ben,” I said, dissolving into laughter. “It’s awful of me, but the first thing I thought was that missing a few practices wouldn’t put her behind because she has yet to get ahead.”

He smiled, his white teeth on display. “She that bad?”

“I mean, she knows how to play, but her rhythmic ear is skewed. And she knows the notes, but her timing is off.” I tried to explain, knowing it probably made no sense but not knowing how else to explain.

“Well, you’re a brilliant piano princess, and if anyone can teach her, it’s you.”

My lips curled in, his words making me feel special. “Thanks for the ride, Benji.”

“Sure you don’t wanna just quit?” he asked, hopeful. “I can leave skid marks on the way out.”

I laughed. “I need this job. I like it.”

“You would like it here. Place gives me the heebie-jeebies,” he muttered, popping his door open to come around and open mine.

“The heebie-jeebies?” I asked when he reached in to help me out.

“Probably built on some ancient evil burial ground and the guy knew it so he made the place look holy to try and keep the bad spirits away.”

I grabbed him by the arm with wide eyes. “Maybe that’s why I sometimes hear a flute playing when I’m working in there alone.”

“Oh, hell no!” he roared. “Back in the car. You ain’t staying here. I forbid it!”

He tried to push me back into the passenger seat, but I was laughing so hard I doubled over at the waist, making it impossible.

“Are you playing me right now?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest to glare.

Stifling my laughter, I clung to his forearm and straightened. “You are so gullible.”

He scowled.

Leaning in, I pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “You didn’t like my joke?”

He made a harumphing sound.

I started to pull back, but he moved quick, sliding his hand around the back of my neck and leaning in to kiss me again.

“You should tell Jamie that story. Then I’ll ask him to come pick you up from work one night. I’ll stand in the back and play the flute. I bet he pisses his pants.”

I smacked him in the chest. “That’s mean. Besides, you can’t play the flute.”

“I can play it as good as some ghost.”

He was ridiculous. I really loved him.

He helped me inside (even though I told him I didn’t need it), said hello to the manager who was sitting behind the small counter, and then promised to be back later to pick me up.

Not long after, my manager’s shift was up, and she was looking at me with guilt in her eyes. “I’m really sorry to have called you in, Jessica,” she said, eyes going from my cast to my face. “Tom is down with the flu, and no one else was answering their phone. Even injured, you’re the most reliable employee this store has.”

“It’s okay,” I told her. “I don’t mind coming in. I need the hours, and I was starting to get bored.”

She hesitated, looking me over again. “Are you sure?”

Holding back a grimace and the urge to look at myself to see what she found so sorry-looking, I said, “Positive. I know I look a little banged up, but it appears worse than it is.”

“And you’ll be able to get around okay?” she asked.

I gestured to my crutches. “Yep, I’ve become an expert at using those.”

That might be an exaggeration, but I could manage for a few hours in a small music store.

“Well, Mrs. Vaughn will be here later to pick up that new clarinet that was on backorder. But other than that, you shouldn’t expect too much except the occasional drop-in and probably a few nosy teenagers.”

I glanced at the wall of guitars hanging on the wall and then to the one in the center of the room propped on a stand beside an amplifier. A musical instrument store was a niche business, and that meant it didn’t get very busy like other retailers. A lot of my shifts were quiet and uneventful except when teenagers who had dreams of becoming famous musicians came in to try out all the guitars.

We weren’t supposed to let them play around with the displays, but sometimes I let them have their fun.

“Sounds good,” I answered.

She gave me a few other instructions and the rundown of anything I missed while being off and then left out the staff break room at the back where there was a single, self-locking door.

From the stool behind the counter, I gazed toward the glass doors and the dim light filtering in from outside. It was overcast and gray today, and coupled with the fact the only windows in this place had a large portico shading them, the natural light in here pretty much sucked. It made it feel much later than it was, and I knew that by six o’clock, it would probably be pitch black outside.

Inside, the store boasted plenty of artificial light, so much so that it made the outside seem that much darker. Aside from the large overhead lights hanging from the pitched ceiling,

sconces illuminated the walls and spotlights aimed at instrument displays.

There was even a vintage Tiffany lamp perched on top of the piano on the far side of the room. I hadn't bothered to turn it on, though. I didn't feel like walking over there. Since this place was the only music store in Westbrook and the neighboring town, Allegro sold a wide variety of instruments, parts, and everything in between.

The floor space in here was crammed and the walls basically cluttered. Instruments and accessories filled the entire place, and there was even a small vinyl collection in the back corner for people who collected records.

I did a few random tasks at the desk and then opened the case to organize the sheet music. By the way it looked, it probably hadn't been done since I was here last. It was tedious and boring, but I could sit down while doing it, and considering my foot, I took that as a win.

I'd barely picked up the first stack when the landline on the counter rang. Rising to my knees, I felt around until my hand hit the cordless phone. Pulling it down, I answered the call.

“Allegro Music and Instruments. How can I help you?”

Silence.

“Can I help you?”

The light inhale and exhale of someone breathing in my ear raised the hair on the back of my head.

Yanking the phone from my ear, I stared at it, the distraction of my pounding heart making it take longer than it should have for me to realize this phone didn't have a screen on it to see if the call was dropped.

Rolling my eyes at myself, I ended the call and dropped the phone back on the counter.

Just as I settled myself on the floor again, my casted leg stretched out and sheet music covering my lap, the phone rang again.

I let out a loud, “Ugh,” and sat there debating if I really even needed to answer it.

My luck, it would be my manager calling to check in, and when I didn’t answer, she’d get worried and come over here. Then I’d get in trouble for ignoring the phone and potential customers.

The sheet music fluttered off my lap and onto the floor when I shoved up again to grab the phone.

“Allegro Music and Instruments. How can I help you?”

Silence.

“Hello?”

The line disconnected with a click in my ear.

This time, I set the phone on the floor beside me when I got back to work. Not five minutes later, the phone went off again, and my heart leaped into my throat.

Adrenaline punched through my veins, making my lungs shudder. Despite the warmth flooding my face, an ominous chill tingled the rest of me, and suddenly, the creep factor of this place didn’t seem that fun.

“If a flute starts playing somewhere, I’m quitting,” I told no one, my voice echoing into the vaulted ceiling.

“Allegro Music and Instruments. This is Jessica. How can I help you?”

An ear-splitting shriek came from the line, so loud that it rang my ears. “Dieeee!”

Just kidding.

There was silence.

I think you might be as gullible as Ben.

Okay, so there wasn’t complete silence. We were back to the heavy mouth breathing. My stomach coiled, icy fingers clamping tighter around the phone, as I listened to whoever it was consuming air.

Suddenly, I had a greater understanding of the irrational, nerve-pinching, gut-punching rage that Matt must feel hearing certain sounds.

“Hello!” I called into the line.

Silence.

“Hello!”

Someone answered. “Hello!”

The phone fell out of my hand when I jerked back, the sheet music ripping and crinkling under my sudden movements. The phone hit the side of the cabinet and then clattered unceremoniously onto the floor. Chest heaving, pulse erratic, I popped up from behind the desk just enough to see over it.

“Ah, there you are,” a woman with short dark hair and a long coat exclaimed. “My gods, I thought I was losing my mind hearing someone greet me and then not appear.”

Imagine how I felt.

Before standing up, I snatched the phone off the floor and ended the call before dropping it onto the counter. If it rang

again, I'd just flush it down the toilet.

Maybe my manager would believe this place was haunted by a flute-playing evil spirit—with a hatred of phones—just like Ben.

“Mrs. Vaughn?” I asked even though I knew it was her.

“Hello, dear. I'm here to get the clarinet.”

I nodded. “It's all ready for you in the back. Just give me a moment to get it for you.”

When I picked up the crutches, she made a sound. “Oh, do you need help?”

“No, ma'am,” I said. “I'll be right back.”

My legs trembled the entire way into the back, and it wasn't because of these stupid chopsticks. I still couldn't manage to get my heart under control and my nerves to settle.

“You're being ridiculous,” I scolded myself. “This is the kind of stuff you scoff at in movies.”

I had to admit I was starting to feel a little kinship and empathy for all those people being stalked and harassed in the movies I loved so much.

I'd have to tell Jamie. And Lars. It might make them feel better.

Back in the stockroom, I took a minute and leaned against the wall, breathing steadily to try and even out my pulse. The entire time, I listened for the phone, but it stayed silent.

“Probably just some stupid prank,” I told myself, checking the clarinet and making sure everything was in the case.

Back out at the counter, I slid it across for Mrs. Vaughn to inventory. Once happy with the order, she signed the receipt

and left.

I finished up the sheet music, not even once side-eyeing the phone as I worked. *Lie*.

Once the tasks in the front were complete, I moved into the stockroom to organize—clearly something else no one had done.

The bells on the front door jingled, and I called over my shoulder, “Just one moment, please.”

I expected the raucous sound of the electric guitar to lurch through the quiet, but that didn’t happen. Instead, the dark tone of “Dies Irae” echoed through the store.

The portentous, deep tune dragged its bony finger of dread right down the column of my spine, bypassing my skin to scrape right against bone.

A short riff played again, ballooning into the rafters like a heavy, dark cloud.

I stood unmoving in front of an oversized cabinet and idly wondered if I could climb inside and shut myself in. Hiding wasn’t an option, not only because I’d literally just called out to whoever was out there but also because I wasn’t a giant wiener.

I probably wouldn’t even think the song was that dire if I wasn’t already creped out by the mouth breather on the landline earlier.

The door of the cabinet creaked loudly when I shut it, the latch clicking into place like a loud boom in the room. Squaring my shoulders, I took the crutches and went out into the front, heart back in my throat, panic clawing my guts.

When I cleared the door, my brow furrowed because no one was there. “Hello?”

Nothing.

You know, I was getting really tired of calling out and being greeted by silence.

“Anyone here?”

The bells on the front door bounced against the glass, making an unpleasant clattering sound. The howling wind outside must have rattled the door. Usually, it was too heavy for that, but if someone had just left, the wind probably had time to catch it before it fully closed.

I started forward to latch it, and when I made it around the counter, something in the corner of my eye shifted, and I screamed. One crutch fell to the floor as I stumbled back, but I gripped the other, raising it like a baseball bat.

“Oh!” she cried, appearing from around a large display. “I didn’t mean to scare you!” she professed, lifting her arms like I was pointing a gun at her and not a piece of wood.

I sagged, relief making me dizzy. “Chalene! Oh my gosh,” I said, pressing a hand into my chest. “You scared the crap out of me.”

“I’m sorry. I thought you heard me call out a minute ago.”

I shook my head. I hadn’t heard that. “I heard you playing ‘Dies Irae’ on the piano,” I said, gesturing across the room.

She wrinkled her nose. “Is that a song we’ve practiced?”

I groaned. Chalene really was not that great at piano. I couldn’t understand why she tried so hard and why she wanted to play in the Westbrook orchestra next year so badly. Even with all the lessons I’d been giving her, I still didn’t think she

was at the level of talent required for a program like Westbrook's.

“Well, no. But I thought maybe you'd practiced it on your own time,” I said. ““Day of Wrath””—I used the more common term that song was known by—“is a very popular tune.”

“I didn't play the piano,” she said. “I just got here.”

I literally heard that song playing. Was this it? Was this my punishment for punking Ben about the flute?

I studied her a moment, wondering if Ben somehow put her up to this. If this was some elaborate joke. But he wouldn't call her. He didn't know her. He didn't have her number. She was just a high school student her rich parents were paying me to tutor.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Her demeanor changed, eyes going toward her shoes. “I came to see you.”

Alarm skittered along my already frayed nerves. “How did you know where I was?”

“You told me. In your text,” she explained, finally looking up at me but her eyes still not quite meeting mine. “You couldn't do a lesson today because you were at your other job.”

Right. And I'd told her before that my other job was here.

I shifted my weight onto the crutch beneath my arm and looked longingly at the one I'd dropped. I could bend down and pick it up, but for some reason, the urge to stay upright was so strong I was near paralyzed with it. “So what did you need? Some new sheet music or—”

“I’m so sorry!” she burst out, completely cutting me off.

I stopped talking, eyes widening into disks, and I stared at her without blinking. I started to tremble. My temples began to throb. The muscles in my neck locked up like vises, so tense that electric jolts of pain shot up into the back of my skull.

The stitches in my head throbbed, suddenly so tight they felt stretched to the point of bursting.

“Why would you be sorry,” I asked, voice a mere whisper as I teetered unsteadily on one leg.

“This is all my fault,” she exclaimed, rushing forward.

Her sudden movement upended my precarious stance on the crutch, and I fell backward, my tailbone hitting the floor with a thud so heavy it vibrated my bones.

Grunting, I pushed up into a sitting position as Chalene rushed over, towering over me from her feet.

It felt like a trigger being pulled in my mind. One minute, I was hunched on the floor, and the next, I wasn’t even in the music store anymore. I was suspended somewhere between present and past, memory and current day.

The gaps still missing in my mind, the blank spaces that left me to wonder who, what, why, and how, flooded my brain like a tsunami, flickering so fast I could scarcely grab on to one before it was gone and another was in its place.

I relived that entire night in the span of just a few seconds, all the missing pieces locking into place as I finally remembered.

Remembered exactly what happened the night of my accident.

Except it wasn’t an accident.

It had been intentional.

When the current memories finished pummeling me, my entire body was weak and shaking. Sweat dotted my hairline, my bra stuck uncomfortably to my back, and hair stuck to my lips like I'd been thrashing my head around.

Every muscle ached, my head screamed in pain, and I was dangerously close to puking up everything I'd eaten today.

Forcing myself up into a sitting position, I supported my weight on the palm of one hand.

Chalene bobbed from foot to foot in front of me, the movement making me seasick. All at once, she squatted in front of me, her eyes big, face pale. "Jess?" she asked, voice wary.

My chin snapped up, and though I was dizzy and in pain, my stare hyper focused on her. Through gritted teeth, I accused. "It was you."

KRUGER

IT DIDN'T FEEL RIGHT LEAVING HER AT THAT UNHOLY CHURCH passing itself off as a music store and driving away. It wasn't the first time I'd been there, and I always thought it had a creep factor of one hundred and ten.

But today was the first time I'd driven away with a rock of dread in my stomach. I almost turned back twice, but I knew if I did, I'd have to tell her I was suspicious AF of that no-good director and what he'd said wasn't maybe a threat but a definite one.

At least she wasn't on campus. At least the guy didn't know where she worked.

She'd be safe there. Right?

When I walked into the Elite weight room, everyone whistled and clapped.

"There he is," Rush called. "Bro. Way to lay down the law to the parentals."

I grunted in acknowledgment, tossed my duffle bag, and stripped off my hoodie.

Ryan appeared beside me. “You okay?”

“Don’t I look okay?”

“Actually, you look like Jamie did the other night when we were watching that movie.”

“I heard that!”

“I didn’t whisper!” Ryan tossed over his shoulder.

Prism appeared on my other side, plucking one of the AirPods out of his ear. “Where’s Jess?”

“I dropped her off at work.”

“Which job?” Prism wanted to know.

“The music store.”

“The one off campus?” Ryan asked.

I nodded.

“You don’t look too happy about it,” he pressed. Ryan always knew when something was up. Probably why everyone thought of him as a leader of sorts.

“I got a bad feeling,” I confessed. I told them what the director said to Jess. By this time, Wes, Lars, Jamie, and Rush were standing there with P and Ryan.

“Do you think he was the one to push her down the stairs?” Wes asked.

My head whipped up. “What?”

Wes shrugged. “Why else would he tell her not to think too hard? It’s like he doesn’t want her to remember.”

I dropped onto the nearest weight bench. “*Fuck*. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because the idea that someone of his reputation could do that is blinding,” Lars said, his accent a little thicker than usual.

Rush reached out and grabbed the back of his neck, giving it a squeeze. “Yeah, but around here, we believe each other and not some stranger’s faulty reputation.”

Rush was the perfect example of someone not being what their reputation fronted.

Knee bouncing a mile a minute, I glanced at Prism, and a worried look passed between us.

I shot to my feet. “I’m going over there.”

“Call her,” Ryan urged. “Ask her if she’s okay.”

“Yeah.” I agreed, fishing out my cell. Calling her first would be better. It wouldn’t freak her out as much as me bursting in there. After I heard her voice, I could drive over there and sit in the parking lot until she got off.

I hit the button for her number, and the line rang. And rang. Then rang some more.

When her voicemail picked up, anxiety punched me in the gut.

“Maybe she’s with a customer,” Wes suggested.

I dialed her again, reaching into my pocket for my car keys.

Hey, this is Jess! Why are you calling? Hang up and send me a text.

A flashback of the night I found her sprawled out in a puddle of her blood rocked me back on my heels. She didn’t answer that night either.

That feeling of dread I'd been hauling around since driving away from her?

It morphed into feral panic.

“Something’s wrong,” I roared, grabbing Prism by the arm and yanking him with me as I shoved through our bros to run for my car.

Please don't let me be too late.

JESS

SHE DIDN'T DENY THE ACCUSATION.

She whimpered—a clear admission of guilt.

My thoughts were still whirling, my mind still confused as I tried to process the information literally unleashed into my mind. Not everything was as completely clear as I'd thought when it was assaulting me, but as soon as I was able to shake off some of this nausea, I'd be able to think straight.

As soon as this girl stopped staring at me like I was the murderer and not her.

Gasping, I said, “You tried to kill me!”

“What?” she yelled, the force of it raising her to her feet. She stumbled back a couple steps, and I was grateful.

I wasn't scared of her, per se.

I was older. Bigger. I grew up in a rough neighborhood and was left to fend for myself because my parents were drug addicts. I knew I could take her. But she had literally tried to kill me. Almost succeeded. And that knowledge shook me to my core.

“No,” she refuted. “That wasn’t me. It wasn’t. I would never try and kill anyone.”

I scoffed. “Well, the broken ankle and stitches in my head say otherwise.” I gasped. “Oh my God! Did you shove me in a washing machine?”

How the hell would she manage that?

She made a keening sound. It seemed kinda painful. *No, do not feel bad for her!* “That wasn’t me either.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Tears gathered in her eyes, and for the first time, I noticed the dark circles beneath them. The way her bottom lip was dry and scabbed over like she’d chewed it raw. She was a thin girl, always had been, but she seemed frailer than before. Like a strong wind could blow her over.

“Look at me,” she said, holding out her arms. “Do I look like I would be able to shove you into a washing machine?”

Kinda wanted to ask her if she was calling me fat, but that was inappropriate. I’d just ask Ben later. No. He’d lie. I’d ask Max. He was mean. He’d tell me the truth.

“If you didn’t do it, then who did?”

She fell quiet, her chin wobbled, and her breathing hitched.

“Crying won’t work on me,” I told her. “I’m the one with a busted body and amnesia.”

She sniffled.

“You were there that night. I remember.” I went on. “You were there and—” I gasped. The fog draped over my mind whisked away, revealing the complete picture.

Our eyes met. She nodded miserably. “It was him.”

Director Fields.

I saw it so clearly now. So clear I wondered how I'd forgotten at all.

To be fair, though, it was something I wished I could scrub from my mind again. So incredibly... ew.

"You," I said, swallowing. "You *and* him."

Tears wept from her eyes as shame and panic wept from the rest of her. "It wasn't like that."

"I saw you in his office. After hours. You were on your knees. His... his... *You were sucking his dick.*"

I'd been so horrified and disgusted at the sight of my high school piano student giving head to a man old enough to be her grandfather—an authority figure at that—I couldn't even contain my revulsion and gave myself away.

He'd heard of course. He knew right away he'd been caught and what it meant. His impeccable career, all his achievements. The tenure he enjoyed at the elite university where he led an entire department. He was married, had kids. His reputation was pristine.

It was all a cover. A façade for something much more sinister.

She started to weep in earnest, heavy sobs rolling through her chest as her shoulders bowed under the weight of dejection. "I know," she keened. "He made me do it! He told me if I kept up my lessons with you and got better and... and did things for him, then he would make sure I got into the music department here at Westbrook next fall. We both know I'm not good enough to get in on my own. I suck at piano!" she wailed. "I don't even like it. But it was my mother's dream for me. She wanted me to go there so bad. To be just like her."

She swiped at her cheeks, lifting red-rimmed eyes to me. “She died two years ago. I just wanted to do this for her.”

“Oh my God,” I said, angry and heartbroken all at the same time. The emotions were like a force of nature inside me, battling it out to see which would prevail. I was shaking and sweating, unable to even wrap my mind around someone who would take advantage of an underaged girl who was trying to fulfill her dead mother’s dream.

“Oh, Chalene,” I whimpered, propping up the crutch and using it to try and stand.

She came forward, hesitating right before touching me.

I held out my hand. “Will you help me?”

She was there instantly, her blond hair limp on her shoulders, her face blotchy and red. The second I was on my feet, I pulled her into a hug, balancing our weight on my one leg as it wobbled.

“This isn’t your fault,” I told her earnestly. “You aren’t to blame. He is.”

She pulled back. “He told me we were just going to talk to you that night. He asked me to help him find you. That we would all just sit down and talk and he would ask you not to say anything.”

I never would have kept my mouth shut. Even now as I stood here, I itched to get to my cell phone—hell, even that damnable landline—and call the police. I wanted to call the dean of Westbrook and demand Director Fields be terminated and that everyone know what he was.

It wasn’t even me I was most upset for. Attempted murder seemed almost kinder than what this girl had been through.

“How old are you, Chalene?”

“Seventeen.”

I wasn't sure what the age of consent was in this state, but did it even matter? She was a child compared to him. He coerced her. He...

I shook my head. “Did you... Did he make you do other things?”

Her lips trembled, and she nodded once.

I sucked in a breath.

Her hand shot out, gripping my wrist with a force I wouldn't have thought her capable of. “But we hadn't, you know...”

“Had sex?”

She nodded. “I know he wanted to, but we hadn't yet.”

Yet. I was going to be sick.

“After that night... After he shoved you down those stairs...” She shook her head. “I didn't know what to do. Who to tell... if I should. I was so scared you were going to die. He told me that if I didn't keep my mouth shut, he'd tell everyone I'm the one who pushed you and they'd believe him because he was him and I was me.”

She went on like the weight of carrying all this around for so long had truly been torture, and now that she could get it out, she wanted to bleed until there was nothing left to confess. “We have lessons every week. I was there with you that night. I was the last one to see you. They would have believed him. He said he'd tell everyone that he overheard you telling me I was terrible at piano and I'd never get in here. He said he would tell everyone I shoved you because of it.”

I hugged her again, my arms squeezing tight. “I know it wasn’t you. No one will believe that. I’ll tell everyone what he did. You aren’t alone, okay? They’ll believe us.”

“He heard you got out of the hospital and that you canceled your lessons.” She gave me a guilty look, and I knew that meant she’d told him when I canceled.

I nodded encouragingly, trying to smile so she knew I wasn’t mad.

My smile probably made me look like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, but hey, I tried.

“He never wanted to just talk. He wanted to kill you so you couldn’t tell anyone.”

I nodded again.

“He shoved you in that washing machine.”

“I know,” I told her. “I know.”

“I was going to tell the police, but I didn’t want my dad to find out. You know? The stuff I’d done... He’s still pretty broken up about my mom.”

“I don’t blame you. This is Fields’s fault,” I repeated. I’d say it as many times as I had to.

“Anyway, then we heard you had amnesia. I was so relieved.” She glanced at me, sheepish.

“Because if I couldn’t remember, then I couldn’t tell anyone.”

Her nod was eager, like a puppy, and it broke my heart a little more. “Yes! I thought we’d both be safe.”

“But then you remembered.”

We both whirled. Director Fields stepped out of the shadows from behind the piano. His heeled loafers clicked over the floor.

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

He looked like he always did. A distinguished scholar with an arrogant air, upright posture, and a suit that told his age more effectively than the gray in his hair. Matt was right. I bet birds really did try and build a nest on his shoulder. Poor birds.

“I warned you, Miss Park,” he said, shrewd eyes drilling into mine. “I told you not to think too much. Not to remember.”

“You’re sick,” I told him.

“Perhaps. But I’m the one with the power.”

Chalene shrank into my side. I wanted to wrap my arm around her, but I needed it to use the crutch. Instead, I whispered into her ear, “Don’t listen to him. He’s lying. He’s only doing this because he knows he’s not as powerful as he claims.”

“It’s a shame, really,” he said, fingers hitting a few piano keys as he walked by. The sound lifted the hairs on my arms. “That you were so nosy and had to come snooping. You really are quite gifted at piano. It’s why I wanted her to continue her lessons. I was hoping your talent would rub off on her.”

Hearing the words *rub off* come out of this man’s mouth made vomit fling itself up the back of my throat.

“Unfortunately, you saw, and you didn’t die like you were supposed to. Poor, talented scholarship student with no family to question the fact she took a tumble down the stairs and died.”

I sucked in a breath.

“I didn’t realize you had so many friends. A fiancé,” he said, eyes glinting as he stared at me with malice. “They made it impossible to get to you in the hospital. How convenient it would have been to just slip something into the IV. And then they just had to show up at the laundry room.” He shook his head. “I suppose it all worked out in the end, though, hm? I knew this one wouldn’t be strong enough to keep her mouth shut.” He gestured to Chalene. “And now you’re both here. Two birds. One stone.”

“There’s just one problem with your logic,” I said, matching his conversational tone.

“And what is that?” he asked, almost amused.

“You’re outnumbered,” I declared and lunged forward, swinging the crutch like a bat.

It cracked against his body so hard the vibration shot pain into my hands. He pitched sideways, and I let go, the crutch falling onto the ground between us.

“Go!” I told Chalene. “Go next door and get help. Tell them to call the police!”

She hesitated, bouncing from foot to foot. Director Fields groaned and rolled.

“Go!” I told her.

She took off, but the old man was faster, lurching up off the ground as if he had springs for knees. He caught her leg and yanked, making her do a belly flop right into the floor.

He leaped on her as she struggled, and he wrapped his hands around her throat from behind.

“If you think I’ll let you two little girls take away my entire life and reputation, you have no idea who you are dealing with.”

Crack!

This time when I hit him, it was in the side of the head. The sound of the wood smacking into his skull was unpleasant, and his skin split, blood spurting even as he dropped like dead weight off to the side.

“Go!” I told Chalene, hobbling forward to yank her to her feet and push her toward the door. “Go!”

She took off, her wheezing breaths and ragged cough echoing behind her. The bells on the door rattled loudly as she shoved out into the dark night, screaming for help the second she was there.

The crutch bumped and rattled over the floor as I limped to where Director Fields lay sprawled. His head was gashed open and bleeding, the crimson a stark contrast to his pale skin. Standing over him, I shuddered and panted, anger and fear keeping me on my feet. He groaned piteously, and I raised the crutch, ready to hit him again.

I glanced at the door, hoping Chalene would hurry. Hoping that the shop across the parking lot already dialed the police. I glanced across the store to the counter where my phone lay and thought first of Ben.

I wanted to call him. To hear his voice.

I could. But after.

I’d call the cops too. I’d tell dispatch everything so it was documented more than once.

I'd never let this asshole get away with what he'd done. Never.

I glanced back down at his unconscious form. "You even breathe too heavy and I'll split your skull and look at your brain," I told him.

Graphic? What did you expect? I watch horror movies.

He didn't move at all, so I lowered the crutch and went for my phone. The second I turned, it started to ring, and for whatever reason, the sound somehow shattered the tight lock I had on my emotions.

A sob burst in my chest and bled out of my mouth, a cross between a wail and a moan. I gulped in air, but it was like my lungs had holes in them because, even as I dragged it in, it seemed to leak right back out.

I focused on the phone, knowing it was Ben calling and wanting so badly to answer.

I quickened my steps, putting more weight on my broken ankle than I should but not caring about the consequences.

Something heavy and hot slapped around my ankle, shackling me like a heavy-duty chain. I screamed and went to shake it off but realized quickly I couldn't lift my good leg without compromising the bad.

"No!" I wailed, kicking out anyway and then pitching forward the same way Chalene had. I slammed into the floor, but I didn't stay down, rolling onto my back and using my cast as a battering ram as Director Fields tried to attack me.

I only caught him in the chin, which seemed to piss him off. He leaped on me, straddling my waist and wrapping his hands around my throat to squeeze. Blood streaked over his face, creating an uneven trail to his mouth where it slipped

over his lips and outlined his teeth. His eyes were crazed, and the gray hair on his head stuck up at odd angles where it wasn't matted with blood.

“You stupid little girl,” he growled, voice cracking. “You never should have gotten in my way.”

My eyes bulged as my airway compressed. Panic tried to steal rational thought, and I fought it off as I slapped and clawed at the man's arms as he tried to choke the life right out of me. I bucked and wrestled, my body draining quickly of energy and air.

In the distance, my phone went off again, and it was like a jumpstart to a dead battery, giving me just enough fight to try again.

I whispered something, something that made no sense.

His grip loosened just a fraction as he leaned in. “What?”

I grabbed his head and dug my thumbs into his eye sockets, the squish and roll of his eyes making me gag, but I kept up the pressure as he wailed and lurched off me.

Wheezing, I scrambled back, scooting on my ass across the floor, trying to get away from him as fast as I could.

My back hit the counter, and I used it as leverage to stand, not once turning my back to the man writhing on his knees.

“I'm going to kill you!” he roared, bursting to his feet and rushing me. I reached across the counter and grabbed the pair of scissors out of a small basket near the computer.

He grabbed me by the throat and yanked me away from the counter. Our eyes met in a clash of defiance. I swung my arm, sinking the sharp end of the scissors into the soft spot of his shoulder just behind his collarbone.

Shock lit his sinister eyes, and we stared at each other for a fraction of a second before he let go of my throat and stumbled back.

“Jess!” The sound of Ben yelling my name was accompanied by the violent shaking of the bells on the front door. I sagged upon hearing his voice, gasping for breath, and I stumbled backward, falling into the counter.

Director Fields dropped to the ground, contorting in pain, his hands hovering around the area the scissors stuck out of his neck. He coughed, and blood splattered his lips.

And then Ben was there, his body filling my vision and blocking out everything else. His hands were warm and steady, his shoulders a solid wall to lean on. I started crying the second he pulled me against him, melting a little because he felt so safe.

“What the fuck is going on in this evil church?” he bellowed, clutching me to him like I might disappear.

Matt reached into Ben’s chest, hands grabbing my face to gently pull it out so he could look at me. “You okay? Tell me you’re okay.”

My lips wobbled. I was so lucky to have them. “I’m okay, Matty.”

Sirens wailed in the distance, proof Chalene had made it to safety. I gasped, the force of it dislodging Matt’s hold on my face, but I didn’t fall because Ben still had his arms around me.

“Jesus Christ!” he yelled, getting a good look. “Why are you so bloody? Get a goddamn ambulance here now!” he demanded to anyone and everyone who was listening.

“Chalene,” I said, not even worrying about the blood because it wasn’t even mine. “Where is she? Chalene!”

Ben pulled me in, his arms so tight they nearly cut off circulation. “We don’t know a Chalene, P.” He panicked over my head. “She’s lost her mind again.”

A laugh bubbled up inside me, but it came out like a sob.

“All right now, baby girl. I got this. I got you. Don’t you worry about a thing. Just stand here and let me hold you. Snot all over my shirt. I got you. No one’s getting through me.”

“Or me.” Matt promised.

That made me remember Director Fields.

I ripped back from Ben, nearly falling on my ass. He lifted me, and I shook my head, adamantly pointing to where I saw the director fall. “It was him! He tried to kill me. He’s a pedophile. Don’t let him get away.”

Matt moved so close to Ben’s side that his arm brushed my body, and the two of them rotated to stare at the man gasping for breath on the floor. The store filled with flashing blue and red lights, and the air filled with sirens and shouting people.

I pointed to the man on the ground, and Ben obliged, he and Matt moving like a unit to stand over him and glare.

“You stab him, sweetheart?” Ben asked.

“Yep.”

“Good fucking girl.”

Matty made a sound of agreement, reached out, and patted my head.

“You do this to my wife?” Ben growled. “You’re lucky the cops are here already because, if they weren’t, I’d yank them

scissors out and watch you bleed.”

Director Fields said nothing. He didn’t even look at Ben or Matt. His eyes locked on me like he hated me so much I was literally all he saw.

His lips moved as he tried to speak, and I patted Ben’s arm to put me down. He did so reluctantly but kept both hands on me.

It was loud and chaotic. People were rushing in, and soon, this store would be filled with caution tape and cops.

“Kruger!” Ryan bellowed from somewhere outside.

“Jess!” Max echoed.

“Prism!” Jamie followed up.

Guess there would be trauma lattes too.

“Why wouldn’t you just die?” the director rasped. The effort it took to speak made blood spurt out around the blade impaled at the base of his neck.

I bent lower, strength and determination winning the war over fear. Pushing my face into the man’s, I stared directly into his eyes, matching his malice—no, raising it—and didn’t flinch at all.

“Final girls don’t die.”

EPILOGUE

KRUGER

I WAS KINDA NERVOUS.

Okay, not kinda. Hella. I was hella nervous.

The dating life was not for me. Not that I really ever considered myself dating Jess. She was my fiancée. My wife. My final girl.

She was *not* my girlfriend. That was a pitiful fucking label, and I wasn't having it. I forbade it.

I was tired of people saying shit like, *You know you aren't really engaged, or, You can't call her your wife. You aren't married.*

So I was putting a ring on it. Not a fake one either. A real one. With diamonds. One fitting of a final girl.

You know, that was if she said yes.

She was totally gonna say yes, right? Who wouldn't say yes to all this?

Fuck. She's gonna say no.

Here's the thing. I talked a good game. I even backed it up with actions. I was confident in the way I felt, in knowing with

one thousand percent clarity that this girl was it for me. But what if she wasn't as absolute as me?

What if she took one look at the ring I picked out and said she wasn't ready to get married? What if she said the dreaded D-word?

Dating.

What if she wanted to date before committing to an entire lifetime? I'd never make it, bro. I didn't half ass shit.

A hard slap on my back had me pitching forward with a strangled sound. Spinning around, I glared at Ryan.

"Stop freaking out. She's going to say yes."

"You think so?" I asked, hopeful.

He smiled. "She'd be crazy to say no, and Jess ain't crazy."

"I don't know, bro. Some of that shit she makes us watch is kinda morbid," Jamie said nearby.

"Oh, please, you love our movie nights," Madison refuted.

Jamie grinned. "Well, yeah, but don't tell Jess that. I think she likes when I scream."

"You scream because you're actually scared, not because Jess likes it," Prism said.

"He ate that kid's eyes, P," Jamie said emphatically. "Probably didn't even chew."

I grinned, thinking of the family movie nights we'd started having at the Sinclair townhouse on a weekly basis. Jess was schooling everyone on all things scary movies. Just as a good final girl should.

We'd watched *Jeepers Creepers*, and I think it gave Jamie nightmares.

“Hey, you have something in common. You don’t chew your food either,” Ryan mused.

Rory giggled.

Jamie turned to her. “You think that’s funny, sis?”

She held up her hand, pinching together her thumb and forefinger so they barely touched. “Just a little.”

Moving fast, Jamie snatched her up, her loud squeals echoing around the natatorium. Jamie flipped her upside down and stalked to the edge of the pool, dangling her over the water by her legs.

“Jamie!” She gasped, trying to smack him in the legs. “Put me down.”

He jolted like he was going to drop her. “Down in the water, you mean?”

“Ryan!” Rory yelled.

Ryan stalked over to Jamie’s side. “All the blood is rushing to her head, bro. Her face is going to be as red as her hair.”

She gasped. “You admit it! Finally! My hair is red and not orange.”

Jamie swung her around, and Ryan grabbed her, pulling her into his chest. “Nah. You’ll always be my carrot.”

“This place looks great,” Landry said, leaning her head against Rush’s arm. “So romantic.”

“Now look what you did, Kruger. You make the rest of us look bad,” Rush bitched.

“I’m leveling up, bros. You can be boyfriends. I’m husband material.”

“I always thought Max and Wes would be the first engaged,” Win mused. “He beat you to it, bro.”

Max glowered. “I don’t need to put a ring on Wes to know he’s mine.”

“No, you just permanently tattooed him instead.” Lars cracked.

Max turned smug. Asshole was totally proud of himself.

Wes smiled and pulled up his shirt for like the one-millionth time since Max tattooed him. I mean, really, I was shocked he even wore a shirt at all now. He was so proud of that ink.

“Should have just let him tattoo your face,” I told him. “We’re tired of seeing your chest.”

“I like it,” Landry said, looking at the small grouping of stars and half-moon on Wes’s pec just above his heart. “I think it’s sweet.”

So sweet that Max literally tattooed his name right there with the stars. But yeah, I’m the over-the-top one for planning a proposal.

“If you want to look at tattoos, you can look at mine,” Rush said, sliding up the sleeve of his shirt to reveal the arm full of ink he was working on. Pretty soon, he’d have a full sleeve like Max.

“Yours are my favorite,” Landry told him, and Rush smirked.

I glanced at my watch. “She’s gonna be here soon. Everyone get out.”

“Thank you, bros. I appreciate the last three hours you spent turning this pool into some romantic hideaway,” Win

mocked.

I rolled my eyes. “Thank you, bros.”

Everyone moved off toward the doors.

“For real, though, thank you. I really appreciate everything you’ve done and how you’ve made Jess one of ours. That means more to her than she’ll ever say.” I paused. “To me too.”

Rory came forward to wrap her arms around my waist in a hug. I hugged her back but found Ryan over her head. “You aren’t allowed to hug my girl. Her hugs are just for me.”

Prism made a sound.

“You can hug her, P.” But he was the only one.

“Good luck,” Rory said when she pulled back. “But I know you don’t need it.”

I patted her carrot head. “Thanks, shrimp.”

“The pool is yours for the night.” Landry reminded. “I made sure my dad and the rest of the team know not to come by.”

“Thanks,” I told her.

Everyone left except for Prism who lingered in the door.

I hitched my chin at him. “What’s up, bro?”

He came back inside, shaking his head a little. “I just never thought this day would come. You pined after her for so long I was beginning to think that’s all you’d ever do.”

I scoffed. “You know me better than that.”

“I do,” he said, cleared his throat, and looked down. “That’s why I know there’s no one else I’d let marry my

sister.” He looked up, meeting my eyes. “You’re one of the good ones. She’s lucky. I’m lucky too.”

“Are you confessing right now, P?” I cracked even though my heart swelled with real emotion. “I told you I don’t lean that way.”

Prism laughed under his breath.

“But if I did, you’d be the only one for me,” I said.

“Fuck you,” he said. “You aren’t my type.”

I laughed. “I know. I’m not dark, pierced, and tatted enough.”

Prism rolled his eyes.

“I’m not a DJ either,” I said, sly.

He made a sound. “I told you. I’m not into Arsen.”

“You can say it all you want. I don’t believe it.”

“He’s a DJ,” Prism complained like that wasn’t something that totally got his dick hard.

“Yeah, and you love it. *He’s so cool*,” I said, repeating something I’d heard my best friend say more than once as he looked at our campus DJ on stage.

“From a distance,” Prism allowed. “We both know he’s too loud, too hyper, and—”

“He’s good to Jess,” I interjected.

Prism sighed. “He’s probably straight.”

“I told you I’d ask him.”

“I don’t want you to ask him. I’m better off single, and we both know it.”

I knew that was what he thought. I also knew it wasn't what he really wanted.

"Just propose to my sister, would you? And don't take no for an answer."

Nerves assailed me all over again. "You think she'll say no?"

"Never."

"Don't wait up for me tonight."

He grinned. "I never do."

"Hey. You cool with this? You know me and Jess being officially official doesn't change anything between us, right? You're still my ride-or-die. You'll always be my brother."

Things had been so crazy with Jess and everything going on with that tweed-wearing pervert that my time was more divided than it used to be. And I'd never say it out loud, but P required time. And attention. Something I didn't mind but also something I needed to be conscious of.

"Of course I'm okay with it," he said. "This just, ah, makes her more officially, officially my sister, right?"

"Of course. Hey, you wanna take my name too, P? Then we'll all match."

"No," he deadpanned.

I laughed. "Offer's on the table."

He hesitated, and I lunged forward and caught him in a quick hug, banging my hands against his back. "I love you, bro."

Yeah, I said it. Why shouldn't I? It was true. Men needed to hear it sometimes too. Especially P.

“Love you too.” His voice was gruff, a little shier than mine.

On his way out, Jess pulled into the lot. Her shitty old Mazda made me grimace. That thing’s days were numbered. I wasn’t having her driving that shit wagon around much longer.

I watched P jog into the middle of the parking lot and Jess smile at something he said. She glanced in my direction, and butterflies erupted in my gut. After pulling her into a hug, Prism left, and Jess headed my way.

I slipped out the door, putting my back to it and appreciating the view as she closed the distance between us.

“Where are your crutches?” I asked, looking at the walking boot on her lower leg. She was still supposed to be using them even if she now had a boot.

“I needed a break from them.”

I made a face and strode forward to sweep her up into a bridal-style hold. Kinda fitting for the occasion, right?

“I can walk,” she protested.

“Your ankle is still healing,” I refuted. It was healing, but she still needed to be careful.

“What are we meeting here for?” she asked, leaning up to peek over my shoulder.

I made a tsking sound. “Eyes on me.”

“It’s not a bad view,” she replied.

Yeah, I had this in the bag.

“You trust me?” I asked.

“More than anyone.”

“Don’t open your eyes until I say.”

She closed them like the good girl she was, and I carried her inside, stopping just in front of the pool. “All right. You can look.”

I forgot to be nervous for a few when I watched her crack one eye slightly and then the other. She blinked slowly and then turned her face to look at the pool.

Her gasp echoed around the quiet space and amped up the nerves she’d just managed to calm.

“Oh my God.” She exhaled the words, hand slapping into my chest to bunch in my shirt. Her face remained turned away, though, and it kinda made me a little grouchy. I wanted her attention. I also wanted to see the look on her face as she took in everything I did.

Okay, we. I had help.

But this was my idea.

Well, Madison helped with that too.

Whatever. You know what I mean.

“Ben, did you do this?”

This was why I was marrying her. She knew it was all me.

I didn’t answer right away, and she tapped my chest and then lifted her face. God, she was fucking beautiful.

“You like it?”

She made a sound and wiggled to get down. After placing her on her feet, I moved to her back so I could wrap my arms around her from behind.

“This is incredible,” she said, awed. “I never thought this pool could look so romantic.”

Dropping my chin on her shoulder, I stared at the pool that was filled with floating white flowers that lit up in the center. They were of various sizes, all white, and gliding slowly through the rippling water.

Besides the hundreds of glowing flowers (bro, I mean *hundreds* of them) large clear plastic balls floated around like giant bubbles. White string lights lined the deck and draped overhead. Paper lanterns sat in groupings around the corners, and there was a bridge lined with more lanterns and string lights leading from one side of the pool to the other.

“Where did you get a bridge?” she asked, pointing.

“Madison borrowed it from the theater department.”

“Can we walk over it?”

“We can do whatever you want, baby.”

She started ahead, practically running, her arm stretched behind her because I refused to let go of her hand. “Come on,” she said, giving me a light tug.

Laughing under my breath, I jogged forward and caught her around the waist, lifting her off her feet and running us to the bridge. Before stepping on it, I set her down and gestured for her to go first.

“You sure it can hold us?”

“Jamie and Ryan were running across it. I’m sure.”

“They all saw?” she asked.

“They helped me set it up.”

“They’re good friends.”

“What about me?” I asked.

Her face softened. “You’re my best friend.”

I mean, that was awesome. For so long, I worked real hard to be her best friend. But that wasn't what tonight was about. I was done being friends with this woman.

"I can do better than that," I murmured, playing with the ends of her hair.

She glanced back at the bridge. The twinkling lights played off her skin and sparkled in her eyes.

"Go on," I urged, nudging her gently.

She held out her hand for mine. "Together?"

"Always."

We walked across the bridge, and it was cute as hell the way she braced herself for it to plunge into the pool but tried to hide the fact she was worrying about it.

Halfway across, we stopped, standing in the center of the giant pool. The waving blue water lit us from below while flowers and bubbles bobbed on the surface.

The entire space glowed, the flickering lights in the water reflecting off the ceiling in a wave pattern, making it seem like we were inside a giant fishbowl.

She gasped again, tugging my hand. "You did that too?"

I glanced to the far end of the pool where a giant teepee was set up, the white fabric creating the walls glowing warmly from the lanterns inside. Round, bulbed string lights draped over the wooden poles holding it together and lined the entrance where the curtains were pulled back on the sides. From here, I could make out the white fur blanket on the inside and a few of the pillows scattered around. A few vases filled with white roses were wrapped with fairy lights and created a little walkway to the makeshift door.

“Mm, thought we might hang out for a while,” I said.

When she turned back, tears glittered in her eyes and her stare bounced between mine. “Benjamin Hayes Kruger, this is the sweetest, most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me. This is my favorite.”

“Well, the dick I slipped you this morning was pretty good too, but I guess girls do like them fairy lights.”

Her head fell back with a bright laugh, and her hand curled around the back of my neck. “Maybe you should try and wrap him in fairy lights and see what happens.”

“Christmas is gonna be so fun this year,” I mused.

“You know I don’t expect stuff like this, right? Just having you is everything I always wanted.”

“That’s exactly why I’m gonna do stuff like this. Not because you expect it. Because you deserve it,” I said, dropping a kiss on the tip of her nose.

She turned to the small railing on the bridge and gazed at the glowing flowers.

I blew out a breath, then shook out my trembling hands. The fluttering in my stomach was so powerful I put a hand to it to try and calm it down.

“Ben?” Jess said, turning back to me with a concerned look on her face. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I said, the word sort of blasting out with intensity I didn’t mean.

“No?”

“I need to ask you something.”

“You can ask me anything.”

I nodded, too tongue-tied to make a joke. I exhaled again, heart pounding.

“Just ask,” she implored, hand moving from my stomach to curl around the base of my elbow.

“When I saw you at the bottom of those stairs that night...” I started, the vicious memory flickering into my mind. “It was the most afraid I’ve ever been.”

She made a crooning sound, but I shook my head, asking her to just listen. She nodded once, eyes intent and all her focus on me.

“All I could think was, *I never got my chance*. I waited and waited, did so much shit to try and be worthy of someone as good as you. But there you were, bleeding and unconscious, and I realized, out of everything I did, I skipped the most important.”

Her lips parted like she wanted to speak, but I forged on. Now that I was talking, I had to get it out.

“I never told you I loved you. I never said how my days basically start and end with you. I never kissed or touched you the way I wanted. I realized as I worried you might die that it didn’t matter what I did to be worthy of you because I never would be, but I love you anyway. I love you so damn much.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks, the fingers around my elbow tightening until it almost hurt.

“I know we’re still young, and I don’t have everything figured out. But I can’t date you, Jess. I won’t do it.”

She blinked, brows drawing down like she was confused. “You don’t want to date me?”

“No,” I said, absolute.

She pulled away, stepping just out of reach.

I dropped to my knees right there in front of her. Not just one. Both. That was the effect this woman had on me. She brought me to my knees. The second I pulled a small box out of my pocket, her hand flew to cover her mouth.

Her eyes were wide and luminous, filled with surprise... and love.

Yeah, I got this.

“You aren’t girlfriend material, Jessica Park. You’re my final girl. My fiancée. My wife.”

The other hand not pressed to her mouth lay against her belly. The action caused my heart to constrict, and I found myself nodding. “You’re my kids’ mom too.”

Her sob was muffled behind her palm, but that was okay. I heard it just fine.

Opening the box, I held it out, showing her the glittering silver set inside.

“Ever since you pulled that crappy gold ring off your finger, I’ve been walking around with a hole inside me, a feeling that something isn’t right. And yeah, I know you think that ring was fake, but what it stood for was real. I got you this, one I picked out with you in mind. I want to see it on your finger, baby. I don’t ever want to see you without it.”

Her arm fell to her side.

“Marry me, Jess. Please, marry me. I swear I’ll love you good. I’ll never stop.”

When she reached out, I thought it was for the ring, but she bypassed the box between us to grab my face in her palms and drop to her knees in front of me.

So there we were, both on our knees for each other, my offer of forever poised between us the biggest yet easiest promise I would ever make.

“I love you so much, Ben. Of course I’ll marry you. There is literally nothing else I’d rather do.”

“No takebacks,” I warned her.

More tears rolled over her cheeks as she laughed. “No takebacks.”

I pulled her against me, sealing the deal with a kiss and then burying my nose in her hair. “Mine,” I whispered, nuzzling her cheek. “My wife.”

“You can’t call me that yet—”

My growl cut off her words.

“With my ring on your finger, I damn well will call you my wife. Anything else is forbidden.”

“Ben?”

“What?” I asked, surly.

“What happens if someone does something you forbid?”

I blinked. “What?”

“What’s the punishment?”

Well, fuck, why did I have to think of everything? It was a burden to be the handsome *and* smart one.

She was looking at me all expectantly, and I couldn’t tell her nothing because then she wouldn’t listen when I forbade stuff.

“Bad things,” I intoned, hoping it sounded really dire.

“Bad things?”

I nodded sagely. “Wanna see your rings?”

“Yes!”

When in doubt, distract your girl with diamonds.

“Wait. Did you say rings? As in there’s more than one?”

“I don’t half ass shit, final girl.” I reminded her and held up the velvet box.

Her sharp intake of breath told me I did good.

“You got me a bow?” she whispered, emotion flooding the tone.

*Did I get her a bow? *scoffs** She loved that previous bow so much it shone in her eyes whenever she looked at it. And I knew why.

Of course I got her a bow. I just upgraded it.

“Gifts need a bow, sweetheart. Of course I gotta put one around the biggest gift in my whole life.”

Her lower lip stuck out in a pout, then had the audacity to quiver.

I pulled it from the box. “It has a solid white gold band, but you can see there are diamonds lining the bow,” I said, moving it a little so it would glitter against the string lights. It was bigger than the ring I gave her at the hospital. The bow would take up more room on her finger.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, staring but not touching.

“You like it?”

She nodded.

Slipping the bow around the tip of my finger, I grabbed the second ring out of the box. “I hope you like to stack rings

because this one goes with it.”

When she said nothing, I glanced up, finding her already watching me. I smiled. “You know about stacking rings?”

She nodded. “I’m surprised you know about them.”

“Madison told me,” I muttered. Then, “But I picked these out myself. Well, P helped. He’s nosy. I couldn’t leave him home.”

She giggled.

I held up the two-carat round solitaire on a thin white-gold band. “That bow didn’t have enough diamonds in it. You deserve something big and sparkly, and this is your traditional style engagement ring.” I gestured for her hand, and she held it out.

I slipped the solitaire on her finger first, mentally high-fiving myself when it fit perfectly. Next, I slid the bow after it, admiring the way it nestled right up against the solitaire.

“When we get married, we’ll slide a wedding band on there too,” I told her. “I’m gonna fill that whole finger up with diamonds, baby.”

Sniffling, she swiped at her damp face, not tearing her eyes from the glitter. “They’re just... This is more than I ever hoped for.”

“You gotta up your standards, baby.”

“It’s too much, Ben. I don’t need all this—”

I covered her hand with my mouth. “Remember, you don’t want to find out when people do shit I forbid. It’s ugly. Real ugly.”

Laughter danced in her eyes.

“This is what I want to give you. It will make me so happy to see that frosting on your finger. My little cake.”

Her eyes rolled, and she licked my palm.

I wagged my eyebrows. “Kinky.”

“Are you sure?” she said when I pulled back to wipe my palm on my shirt.

“I have never been so sure about anything ever in my whole life.”

“But your parents—”

“Are not an issue. I threw the ball in their court. If they want to be part of our life, they can make the effort.”

“What if they don’t?”

I shrugged. “Long as I have you, that’s all that matters.”

She looked back down at her hand. “I really love it.”

“I really love you. Wifey.”

She smiled. “Can I call you husband?”

I pursed my lips. “Makes me sound old. You should say handsome husband. Sounds better.”

Her eyes rolled, and I caught her hand, bringing it up to kiss the rings I’d put there. “I’m not waiting too long to marry you. How about this summer?”

She made a sound. “That’s only a few months away.”

“You’re right. It’s too long. How about next week?”

“Ben!”

“Tomorrow?”

“This summer.”

I nodded once. “Wanna go have sex in the teepee?”

“Yes!”

“I love your enthusiasm,” I said, getting to my feet, then helping her.

“It’s so pretty,” she said, glancing around at everything as we walked toward the tent. “I can’t believe Coach agreed to this.”

“He’ll probably make me swim extra laps for weeks after this,” I mused. “It’s worth it.”

After she flitted around and admired every rose, candle, and light around the giant teepee, she poked her head inside. “There’s pillows!” she exclaimed. “And wine!”

“I was gonna get drunk if you turned me down.”

She laughed. “Like I’d ever say no to you.”

I caught her around the waist, tugging her inside. The light was golden, the fur blanket soft, and the pillows scattered around like clouds.

After propping up her foot on a pillow, I grabbed the wine and two glasses.

“Aren’t there cameras in here?” She worried.

“Why do you think I built a tent?” I said, handing over a glass.

She smiled.

“How was the lesson?” I asked, not wanting to put a damper on our engagement night but also wanting her to know I cared and that nothing was off-limits if she needed to talk.

“It was good,” she said as I lowered beside her.

Sighing, she laid her head on my shoulder, and I slipped my arm around her waist.

“Chalene started seeing a counselor, and I think it’s helping. Her dad has been really supportive as well, and I think him telling her that none of this is her fault and her mom would be proud of her no matter what also went a long way.”

“You told her that too.” I reminded, poking her gently in the side.

She nodded. “She asked me if I’d keep giving her lessons.”

Surprised, I glanced at her. “I thought she decided not to pursue the orchestra at Westbrook.”

“She isn’t,” Jess explained. “But playing piano helps her feel close to her mom. I think it’s her way of honoring and remembering her. And honestly, since the pressure of performing and getting into the orchestra is gone, she’s actually been playing a little better.”

“No shit?”

Jess laughed under her breath. “No shit.”

“Probably also helps that dickweed tweed wearer is locked up behind bars,” I said, getting pissed off all over again about all the shit he put my wife through.

I’ll never stop saying it. Wife. Wife. *Wifey*.

“My lawyers are sure he won’t get out,” she said.

I knew this, but I nodded, understanding that she needed to say it sometimes to reassure herself.

“It was so nice of Rory’s parents to represent me. They really didn’t have to. I could have handled the police on my own.”

I belched. “You’re giving me indigestion with all that talk.” I scolded her. “You aren’t talking to the cops about murder and perverts without proper representation. If Rory’s lawyer duo parents hadn’t flown in from Chicago, I’d have hired someone myself.”

“Which is exactly why I took them up on their pro-bono offer,” she murmured around a sip of wine.

She didn’t like when I spent money on her. I understood why, but I wasn’t going to stop. If she needed something, I was going to make sure she had it. It was the reason I played the stocks so much. The reason I owned property. The reason... “I rented us a townhouse.”

The wine she was drinking sprayed from her lips.

“Damn, girl, that’s good drinks,” I said, yanking up the blanket to wipe her mouth.

“Benjamin Hayes Kruger!” she demanded as if she didn’t even notice the way I was patting her face. “You did what?”

“We aren’t living apart. You can keep sleeping in our dorm room, but I need some privacy with my wife. The townhouse beside Max and Win’s went up for rent, so I put down a deposit. We’re moving in next month.”

“But Matty,” she worried. “We can’t leave him alone at the dorm.”

“He’s moving with us.”

“He is?”

“It’s a three-bedroom.”

She didn’t say anything.

A hollow feeling whirled through my stomach. “You, ah, you cool with P moving in?”

She jolted and gasped, her wine sloshing over the lip of her glass.

“What are you, a human sprinkler?” I asked, taking it from her.

“Of course I don’t mind! I’m so relieved. We can’t leave him by himself!”

I half smiled. “I know, baby. That’s why he’s coming too.”

“How much is it?”

“Cheap.”

She glared, and I sighed. “I already paid it, okay? Through summer. Now you don’t have to stress about where you’re going to go and if you have to see your parents.”

Her eyes swelled with tears again, and she crawled into my lap. “I love you.”

I stroked her hair. “Me too.”

“I’m paying the utilities.”

My tongue slid over my teeth. “Fine.”

P said he was paying them too, so I’d let them hash it out.

“It’s right next to Max, Wes, Win, and Lars?” she asked.

“Yeah.” I agreed. “We’ll be neighbors. We can have movie night at our place.”

“I like that,” she whispered.

I knew she would. That’s why, as soon as Wes told me it was up for rent, I called the office and put down a deposit. She liked staying with them, and I knew she was a little sad when

Director Fields got locked up a few counties over. She wasn't upset that the douche was in jail. Good riddance to him. According to Coin & Coin, Rory's high-powered attorney parents, he was going away for the rest of his life. And with his charge as a sex offender... prison was not going to be kind to him. Hope he enjoys his karma. Jess was just a little sad she had to go back to her dorm. She'd grown used to having everyone around. Family was something she didn't have much of, so leaving the one she found to go back to campus stung.

I was gonna fix it, make sure she had lots of family around her all the time. Thank God for those bros. All of them.

It's true what they say, you know? Blood makes you related, but loyalty makes you family.

We settled into a comfortable silence, but it didn't last long. "You brought your laptop?"

I nodded, glancing at the computer sitting close by. "Figured we could watch a movie."

"Hmm. What movie?"

"*Bride of Chucky*, of course."

"Did you bring popcorn and M&M's?"

What did she think this was, my first rodeo? "Duh. But you can't have any."

Her head popped up. "Why not?"

"Because I need my sugar first."

Laughing, she pushed up to straddle my lap, my hands falling to her hips.

"Wifey."

Her eyes flicked to the rings on her finger and then back to me. “Thank you, Ben. Thank you for always being there for me. For seeing past my circumstances and looking at who I was, who I wanted to be. Thank you for having the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever known. I know I grew up poor, but you taught me the real meaning of being rich. It’s not money or status. It’s having someone who will love me even if I forget them.”

I laughed. I used it to hide the fact I was getting a little choked up.

“Most of all, thank you for being my best friend... and then becoming more.” She leaned in, pressing her lips to mine like she was sealing all those beautiful words. Without lifting her mouth, she whispered, “For being my everything.”

After that, we didn’t say anything at all.

Not with words anyway.

But let me tell you... the conversation was like *whoa*.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Have you ever gotten in your car and driven home from wherever and when you pull into your driveway, you're like... *Whoa, how did I get home?* Lol. That's what it feels like to finish this book.

I feel like going back to do my re-read and edits is going to be interesting because I don't really remember what I wrote. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. It does seem like these two took over and shoved me out of the way, though, hehe.

I thought this book was going to be the "easy write" of the series. I should have known better. And really... is there any such thing as an easy write?

Truth be told, I struggled a lot with this book. Not necessarily the story but with self-doubt, motivation, and imposter syndrome. I'm not really sure why because you'd think, after twelve years of writing, I would be more confident. I'm not, though. Every book is a fresh start. Every book is different and requires a new perspective. Plus, there is added pressure there (for me) because I feel like each new book needs to "live up" to the previous. I don't want to let readers down in the series, and I want to keep up the same level of Westbrook bro-ness. Kruger was a challenge because I didn't

really know much about him besides his moron-ness. He was the goofy guy, the joker. Many readers wanted his love interest to be Prism. They started asking about them very early in the series. I admit I considered it. They have the chemistry. However, Kruger was clear in my head always. Prism is his best friend. His family. But Jess is his heart. So I stuck with that. Besides, I like his and Prism's friendship. We will see more of it in the next book, which is about Prism and Arsen. How'd you like Arsen? I think he will be a great character to add to Westbrook.

And Kruger aka Ben.... he's goofy and a little moronic, but man, what a big heart he has. I love how confident he is in who he loves and what he wants. He isn't afraid of working for what he wants either. Some guys say a lot of pretty words, but this guy? I mean, he secretly earned millions and invested in property all while getting an education so he would be able to give Jess the life he thought she deserved. He saved himself for her and her alone. He stood up to his parents for her. And though he is loud, he wasn't loud about any of that.

I like Jess's perseverance and strength as well. She blossomed in a lot of hardship, and even though her self-confidence sometimes suffered, she never gave up. She was determined to have a better life. I also love her scary movie addiction and the "final" girl energy she grew into.

Meshing together amnesia, a fake engagement, and friends-to-lovers was a challenge. I thought up this plot and was excited... And then I started writing it. I wondered WTF I'd been thinking putting all that stuff in one book. Haha. But I was committed, so I did my best to see it through. The amnesia aspect was probably the most difficult part here because Jess basically had to start over from scratch partway through the book. She had to "meet" everyone for the first

time. It was hard for me to decide how much info to give and withhold at times. It was also hard to write her authentically when she didn't know much about herself and doubted everything. Hopefully, I did her justice.

I'd like to thank a few friends: Amber, Sabrina, and my daughter Kaydence for listening to me endlessly bellyache about the headache this book gave me. And for reading pages when I really needed some encouragement.

Also my editor, Cassie, for encouraging me and telling me the book didn't suck. Lol.

And to you, reader, for all the love and support online. I truly appreciate all the love this series has been getting. It really keeps me going. I cannot believe the next book is book seven in the series. We are winding down to the end... but we aren't done yet.

Next up is Prism and Arsen. After them... Coach. Both these next books will be MM.

If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review online. Reviews help!

Thank you for reading. I appreciate you.

See you next book!

~XO~

Cambria

ABOUT CAMBRIA HEBERT

Cambria Hebert is a bestselling novelist of more than sixty titles. She went to college for a bachelor's degree, couldn't pick a major, and ended up with a degree in cosmetology. So rest assured her characters will always have good hair.

Besides writing, Cambria loves a pumpkin spice latte, staying up late, sleeping in, and watching K drama until her eyes won't stay open. She considers math human torture and has an irrational fear of chickens (yes, chickens). You can often find her running on the treadmill (she'd rather be eating a donut), painting her toenails (because she bites her fingernails), or walking her chihuahuas (the real bosses of the house).

Cambria has written in many genres, including new adult, sports romance, male/male romance, sci-fi, thriller, suspense, contemporary romance, and young adult. Many of her titles have been translated into foreign languages and have been the recipient of multiple awards.

Awards Cambria has received include:

Author of the Year 2016 (UtopiaCon2016)

The Hashtag Series: Best Contemporary Series of 2015
(UtopiaCon 2015)

#Nerd: Best Contemporary Book Cover of 2015 (UtopiaCon 2015)

Romeo from the Hashtag Series: Best Contemporary Lead (UtopiaCon 2015)

#Nerd: Top 50 Summer Reads (Buzzfeed.com 2015)

The Hashtag Series: Best Contemporary Series of 2016 (UtopiaCon 2016)

#NERD Book Trailer: Best Book Trailer of 2016 (UtopiaCon 2016)

#Nerd Book Trailer: Top 50 Most Cinematic Book Trailers of All Time (film-14.com)

#Nerd: Book Most Wanted to be Adapted to Screen (2018)

Amnesia: Mystery Book of the Year (2018)

Red: Best LGBTQIA+ Book of the Year (2022)

Cambria Hebert owns and operates Cambria Hebert Books, LLC.

You can find out more about Cambria and her titles by visiting her website:

<http://www.cambriahebert.com>

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