



INK ME

Bunnies

INK OUR HEARTS SERIES

KAY JENSEN

Published by Kay Jensen

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Playlist

Kim Carnes – Bette Davis Eyes

Pearl Jam – Alive

Guns N' Roses – Welcome To The Jungle

The Beach Boys – Surfin' U.S.A

Pearl Jam – Just Breathe

Bush – Flowers On A Grave

Daughtry – Dearly Beloved

Reamonn – Supergirl

Steppenwolf – Born To Be Wild

Chris Isaak – Somebody's Crying

Bruce Springsteen – I'm On Fire

Aerosmith – Pink

Shinedown – I'll Follow You

The Goo Goo Dolls – Boxes

Stalk me

Thank you so much for reading my book!
You have all my social media links in one place:

[Linktree](#)

Author's note

This is book 2 in the *Ink Our Hearts* series (spicy standalone novellas). Every book in this series follows the love story of different characters from different cities, revolving around tattoo artists and bikers.

Reading this series by order is not necessary but it is advised due to the appearance of characters from previous books.

Trigger / Content Warning

Loss of a family member.

A childhood memory where there's: Alcohol & drug use by a parent, child neglect, violence, and being held at gunpoint.

Attempted sexual harassment.

Tattooing, bondage, daddy kink, praise, degradation, fingering, cum-swallowing, choking, spanking, underwater activity, public play, pierced FMC, pleasure to ease the pain=sex toy while tattooing, oral sex, vaginal sex, anal sex, explicit sexual content and foul language. No cheating. No pregnancy.

This book is intended for mature audience.

suitable for individuals over the age 18.

Reader discretion is advised.

Dedication

For our loved ones.

When our past meets our present it can either guide us or control us. So remember, even if tragedy strikes not everything is a tragedy. Sometimes we're lucky enough to find peace, and that peace is worth everything.

Lennon

*“N*ext stop—Huntington Beach, California. Len, you have to come here, you’re going to fall in love with this place.”

I stare at the postcard on my windshield, the words are scribbled in faded black ink.

Well, I’m here.

My new home.

I squish my hands between my thighs, the rustle my fingernails create against the fabric stills everything as I get lost in it.

For as long as I can remember, my brain has been occupied with examining my environment in order to turn it into images on paper while music played in my ears.

The world was composed of different song themes and the notes piqued my curiosity the more I spent my time outdoors. Chasing a new adventure. Capturing a new memory. Leaving my footprints on sandy beaches along the coast.

I spent more time in the ocean trying to figure out a new move my brother showed me than I spent on land. Catching waves was the highlight of my day and watching him hovering above the water on his surfboard, amplified his connection to the ocean.

He used to laugh about my fear of sharks because every time I caught a wave I was more occupied scanning the area for a lurking creature with a fin than riding it. Until one day I wasn't afraid anymore. I surrendered. I had to, otherwise, surfing was impossible.

Much like drawing when I thought about it too much, it deteriorated.

Surfing wasn't the only thing on my mind though. It was an enjoyment unlike any other, and watching my brother's passion for it filled me inside. I knew mine was between the pages of a notebook, drawing the landscapes my eyes analyzed every minute of every hour.

The pages kept filling themselves with more and more ideas.

My parents were always free-spirited people. They let me roam freely wherever I wanted to go as long as I was with my older brother who always knew how to have a good time.

The life of the party.

"Why did you name your van, Bette?" I question Jamey and a wicked smirk crosses his face.

He flips my skateboard expertly underneath his feet. "Bette Davis Eyes... me and Bette are going to turn heads. Just wait and see."

In total amusement I reply, "She needs a bath. She's filthy and someone drew a dick on her window." I shake my head sideways, "Barbarians." Inside I'm dying not to laugh.

Jamey can't contain his laughter, "That was Dad." He cracks to himself. "It was her initiation ceremony. Now she's part of the family." The family

salacious stamp.

Growing up with parents who involved sex in regular conversations was a breath of fresh air, that open channel made them accessible to us. Jamey and I felt a lot more confident talking to them about things we were dealing with as teenagers. And they trusted us to be responsible enough to go out there and explore.

As Jamey's little shadow, I mimicked every cool thing he did, including his favorite extreme sports, a few of which I continued to participate in until this day.

He taught me what it's like to take advantage of every moment and by coming here I'm fulfilling this precious lesson.

I never wanted too much, the little I had was always enough for me, still is. It's the simplicity that draws me in—the peace in not having much you need to control or worry about.

I still dream big because that's part of a healthy life. Always aspire to do better and fulfill as many dreams as possible before time runs out.

Today is a major check on my bucket list.

The rays of light that are heating my flesh through the glass pull me out of my drifting thoughts.

I quickly grab my things, get out of Bette, my van, and shut the door behind me.

My legs skid down the street on my skateboard, it moves smoothly when I flip it and land on it again. I designed it with strokes of vibrant shades that cover each side, and it certainly catches the attention of passersby roaming the streets.

Under azure skies, rows of palm trees cross my peripheral as I glide on the sidewalk.

A wide grin crosses my face as the bass of another song drops into my ear canals through my earphones, causing me to bob my head and jut my hips.

The board stirs to my commands, and when a guitar solo plays I can't deny myself the pleasure of strumming on an invisible guitar to myself and for the entire street to witness because it is so. Damn. Good.

I'm freaking excited for this job. Nothing stands in my way of getting this dream position with one of the most talented tattoo artists in the business. I can't believe he chose me out of everyone, and I know there must be tons of talented artists sending their applications.

I'm pretty sure I only got it because of my last boss's high praise. I'm so glad she didn't resent me for leaving her and coming here to try and land this apprenticeship at *Ink Me Walker*.

I'm a baby shark swimming in a sea full of monster sharks, but one day I'll become one, it's inevitable.

I want people to want me to ink them, even though I'm new, it doesn't make me less. I work really hard and my designs are proof of that. So are my inking skills.

Despite my optimism, I never set my expectations too high. Nothing is for certain; if you think it is, you're wrong.

July may be my lucky month.

Whether I land this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity or not, I can always treat myself to some pizza.

Shit!

I halt, pushing down the curved bottom of the board with my leg, I catch it with my hand and tuck it to my hip.

As I'm replaying my morning sequence in my head the realization strikes me, I forgot my purse.

Excitement will be damned, but I'm sure anyone would lose their head when they're about to meet Dean Walker.

I've been following his work on social media for seven years and he's only getting better. Eight months ago he started messaging me on the app and it became more than just following him.

Dean Walker: Nice work! Looks spotless.

Lennon Quinn: Thank you so much, it means a lot coming from you.

Dean Walker: Sure! Hey, I learn every day.

Lennon Quinn: I doubt it...

Dean Walker: If you presume to know everything in your craft your journey is over. I am good because I never stop practicing.

Lennon Quinn: That's very true. Is there another tip you can give?

Dean Walker: Well I'm not sure which one you refer to so I'll go with a word of advice.

Lennon Quinn: OMG! I'm sorry!! It sounded less dirty in my head.

Dean Walker: Don't be! I like people who get that sense of humor.

Lennon Quinn: Good! Dirty-mouthed genes run in the family everyone had to participate at an early age otherwise you were banned from the tribe. Hahaha.

Dean Walker: Sounds like a good time.

Lennon Quinn: It was... so your advice?

Dean Walker: Believe in yourself. And whenever you get the chance to observe those who tattoo around you, take it.

Lennon Quinn: Thank you so much!

Dean Walker: Anytime.

It stunned me when I first received a message from him complimenting my work. And then he would just send me messages all the time about different

designs and tattoos I worked on at the time.

I couldn't resist the temptation of starting those conversations with him as well when all I wanted was to read his words, hear the sound of his voice, or simply spend my time with him. It was enough for me, even behind the screen in the comfort of my home.

I just wanted someone to talk to and he was there.

I didn't plan this... it just happened. Talking to him personally intensified those feelings I already carried years ago, when my brother showed me who he was.

It may sound weird but I felt like I was meant to meet him.

The man is like a fine wine you want to sip for hours, let it glide through your tastebuds, and coat your tongue with its flavor.

What am I doing?

Work relationship that is it.

Never mix business with pleasure. It's a recipe for disaster.

Who the heck am I kidding, I'd lose the ability to formulate words around him more than once, I'm sure of it.

After all, we've been flirting for months, I think.

Dean Walker: Magic touch.

Lennon Quinn: So happy with how it turned out!

Lennon Quinn: I'm blushing right now.

Dean Walker: Yeah?

Lennon Quinn: Happens a lot lately.

Dean Walker: Any particular reason?

Lennon Quinn: I like chatting with you.

Dean Walker: I'm affecting you like that huh?

Dean Walker: Good to know.

Lennon Quinn: Don't get all smug about it. It's just nice talking to someone who lets you be yourself.

Dean Walker: I agree with you. It's also your energy for me... you have something very contagious.

Lennon Quinn: How so?

Dean Walker: A hunch, and your recent posts.

Lennon Quinn: They are very dear to my heart, I live by them.

Dean Walker: So do I.

Lennon Quinn: Do you believe in soulmates?

Dean Walker: Belief is a doubt. I've witnessed a few.

Lennon Quinn: Some people's paths are meant to cross.

Dean Walker: They can be part of your journey or a lesson.

This is a fantasy a seventeen-year-old teenager concocted years ago after she saw an attractive man who shares the same love for drawing as her and is still crushing over him. He is way older than me and probably has someone already.

Just forget about him, Lenny.

I *need* to stop fantasizing about my soon-to-be new boss.

I could have read the signs wrong, maybe he was just being friendly to me while creating this safe space for us both to feel free to talk about stuff and that's it.

How will this work between us...?

Lennon Quinn: I thought about an erotic design for a client. She wants something naughty. I have never done it before but I like the challenge.

Dean Walker: Do tell...

Lennon Quinn: Hahaha, got your attention.

Dean Walker: I'm all ears.

Lennon Quinn: Two lips, tongues caressing each other or biting in red, black, and white. Maybe make it anime-inspired...

Dean Walker: I like it! It's bold.

We're strangers who talked to each other about all sorts of things and personal aspects for months as if we were best friends.

Dean Walker: Your favorite song?

Lennon Quinn: Supergirl by Reamonn.

Dean Walker: Great song!

Lennon Quinn: I know, right!? I always loved it, don't know why.

Dean Walker: No one is her chain...

Lennon Quinn: She's my girl... my super girl.

Lennon Quinn: If we're talking about chains, I'd like a hand around my neck for the record.

Dean Walker: Oh yeah?

Lennon Quinn: Preferably tight.

Dean Walker: Very kinky of you. I like giving them.

Lennon Quinn: Has anyone called you dirty dean?

Dean Walker: You'd be the first.

Lennon Quinn: Maybe I should make a tattoo design based on this.

Dean Walker: Try to create a design based on the song and another based on your kinky thoughts.

Lennon Quinn: I will.

The fresh candor we both exhibited, allowed us to be open about certain things and because of that, we felt comfortable expressing ourselves—I guess it's easier on the phone.

Yet there were times he completely ignored me while we were talking. I assumed he was busy so I didn't bother him.

It's been two months since we last talked.

I should suppress all these butterflies I restored in my belly before they would burst out like vomit.

I'm a grown woman, with needs, but no boss-related action. I just need to pass this introduction and move to the next stage where I get to learn from him and build my skills.

I can't ruin this with misunderstandings.

Why did he have to contact me? Somedays I just wish he didn't.

Ugh, Jamey. It's all because of you. You always pushed me to chase my dreams.

"Follow your instincts and be a version of yourself you're proud of. I love you, Len. I always have your back. And always will."

I came here because of him, he knew how to push my buttons. How to get me going and live my life the way I choose to live it.

I take a few steps toward the shop's door, the handle is staring back at me while I take a deep breath, exhale it, and swallow.

Inching forward, I muster my self-assured attitude and stride inside.

You can do this, Lenny!

Dean

My dream was to run away from home, travel around the world, and spread my ink anywhere I could.

For almost two decades, I fly from city to city, coast to coast, one state to another continent—pretty much anywhere I get an invite, and I get a lot of those.

I've been through the wringer *is* an understatement, but despite the obstacles I had to face from a young age, I've made a name for myself in this business.

A big lesson that I had to undergo after certain events occurred in my teen years was that you can learn from anyone. So before you judge, disregard—take notes.

It applies to every aspect of my life.

Masses of people went under my expert hand and I got the chance to bring them happiness—even if it's short-lived—it is still a beautiful thing to witness on its own.

I push the key into the door lock of my tattoo shop at a corner of a bustling street. I spent some time in Las Vegas, going to my family and friend's annual biker's meetup, but this year my mind just wasn't there so I quit early.

Now, I'm back home in California where the rays of sunshine warm my aching back and shoulder blades and the salty odor of the ocean engulfs me like a tidal wave.

Today is special since my new apprentice is supposed to swing by. I've been following a promising young woman on social media for over a year—something about her captivated my attention.

“Remember your life is a gift and it can be taken away in a matter of seconds. So go out there and live.” A post she shared eight months ago had completely stalled me. And it has been a hot minute since I rode a motorcycle and encountered the experience.

Right after that post, I started messaging her, a reckless move on my part but I couldn't help myself. I usually observe and stay away, yet this time, I couldn't. She made me curious.

She worked in another shop as an apprentice for two years and I heard nothing but raving feedback about her, hence why, I was ecstatic when she sent her application.

Lennon Quinn: I wanted to show you the design I came up with based on what we talked about, are you free?

I knew she applied for the job here and I didn't want things to feel weird between us because of a situation I got us into. Talking like we did for hours over the course of six months meant something. But my last relationship still plays a significant part in why I avoid relationships.

So when the complications rose to the surface, I pulled out the plug immediately—that was two months ago.

My sneakers squeak when I cross the maple hardwood floor, turning the lights on, I crack my neck in the process.

As I connect my phone to the speakers *Alive* by Pearl Jam blasts the moderate space of my shop.

I can't function without the incessant beat of the music in my head. Music magically translates every emotion I carry, unspoken words, dreams, and gives me refuge.

I turn away from my desk at the exact moment a young woman in a white t-shirt, ripped jeans, and pink backpack walks in the door.

I'm stuck like a sixteen-year-old who has never seen a woman in his life. Parted lips, no blinking, swallowing hard—the whole shebang.

Shaking my head, I pull myself out of the momentary trance.

She inches closer in her self-assured gait, waving her hand in greeting. “Hey.”

A few seconds pass before I finally manage to answer in a low, non-committal tone. “Hey there.” I nod my chin up.

I browse over the employee applications on the surface of the desk, appearing busy.

Her ocean-blue eyes roam around the shop, scanning the art taped to the gold-turquoise marble wallpaper encompassing us.

Her wavy, cherry-blossom-dyed hair sways around her waist whenever she shifts on her matching pink Converse to the beat of the song.

She had light-brown hair the last time I saw her online, a couple of months ago, considering she doesn't upload her images often.

Her heart-shaped lips widen until her teeth bite down her bottom lip. “Here are my designs as you asked, Mr. Walker.”

Mr. Walker?

Everyone calls me Dean or just Walker. Mr. Walker was my father and he's the last person I want on my mind right now.

Yet I get the fact she wants this to be a professional introduction. Can't say I don't admire that.

I take the notebook she hands me. "Please, call me Dean."

Bending to lean her skateboard against the desk, "Dean," she repeats with a small grin.

She's the real deal and she's willing to put in the work which is a great place to start. If she's disciplined about her craft nothing will stand in her way.

And based on our conversations she is.

The majority of her sketches contain flowers, animals, food, pop art, and a vibrant palate of colors.

I browse and pause when I see her anime-inspired designs. Colorful animation with clean lines and a gorgeous aesthetic mixed with white ink to highlight the image she creates distinctively. The contrast is tangible—giving an illusion of an atmosphere you think you can reach.

As suspected, it's freaking dope.

She has style.

I wanted someone fresh. Someone who will take some of the weight off my shoulders.

I'm the name my clients look to encounter when they walk into my shop. I'm also the person they expect to find behind the machine. Yet, I'm a thirty-eight-year-old man, and bending for hours on countless sessions results in upper body pain that doesn't neglect anyone.

We all sacrifice something to gain something else.

I'm not ashamed to admit I need help.

By this point, everyone knows that in order to get an appointment you need to book in advance. I'm swamped with work, booked for the rest of the year and I have a mile-long waiting list to add to the mix.

I can't promise anything for next year due to the fact I travel all the time.

"You prefer Lennon or Lenny?" I ask, retrieving the notebook.

"Lenny," she bites down her bottom lip again, looking at me and back to her surroundings, fidgeting on the soles of her shoes. A minute ago she wasn't, but I understand that when someone judges your art, you lose some of your courage.

In her case, she's exactly what I'm looking for.

"Lenny, did you try to ink some of the anime designs?" I ask out of curiosity.

The corner of her mouth twitches, "A few, but not many trusts an apprentice."

Yet.

I give her a small grin. "When can you start?"

"Effective immediately." Confidence and no hesitation are key ingredients in this industry.

I like her eagerness to learn. It's the impression I got every single time I talked to her.

Dean Walker: The shading you're trying to do can be very simple. Some artist never drew a real image in their life but they make incredible tattoos, it's all about the technique you're using and adapting.

Lennon Quinn: So how would you approach it?

Dean Walker: Don't rush through it so you get the details right, feather their skin, and go layer by layer. Understand the client's type of skin, and that way you'd be able to set your machine properly.

“Welcome aboard, Lenny.” The second I finish that line, Welcome to the Jungle by Guns and Roses booms, causing us both to laugh.

“That was right on time,” she utters between giggles.

Gesturing her to follow me toward the equipment, “Couldn’t have planned it better myself,” I finish.

In my shop, everything is out in the open, behind my desk there’s a bathroom and fridge and on the other side of the shop, two stations with a chair and the required equipment. Some organized on the shelves, some inside the cabinet every station has alongside a cart.

After a full tour of the gear I own. I spread a plastic wrapper around the black leather chair and take a seat, flexing my limbs.

One of the best things about tattooing is to watch all my fears fade to ink-black when the adrenaline rush starts to boost my system. To see my skill coming to life before my eyes is addictive.

She’s no stranger to this.

“Are you ready to ink me?” I didn’t schedule any appointments, knowing I wanted some one-on-one time to show her around.

She doesn’t need to practice right now yet it is part of the reason she came here.

The confusion on her face deepens, and those big ocean eyes grow in horror. “You?”

“Yes... me,” I respond in a low monotone voice, my calm and collected demeanor stays intact, showing her I have no problem with what I’m asking.

“No!” She squeals, shaking her head and her hands sideways.

Amused by her reaction, I cross my arms over my chest. “Why not?” I’m still not wavering.

“Because you’re an insanely gifted artist and you have beautiful tats I don’t

want to ruin that.” The words roll out of her tongue at the speed of light.

“I’m touched by your concern, Lenny, but I would like to get a touch of your art too.” I extend my right hand before her in hopes it would be our olive branch.

Her gaze travels upward my arm and halts on the lion tattoo I have on my bicep for a lengthy minute. She swallows hard, pursing her lips before glancing at my chest, and focusing on the shelves behind me.

There’s a small part of me that wanted to get a tattoo from her. Be under her needle as she strokes my skin, imprinting me with an idea of her own.

She waves her palms to the sides, perplexed by this situation. “What would I draw?”

“I give you full permission to come up with something cool like your sketches.”

Her blue incredulous eyes look at my blue ones. “Are you sure? I know we’ve talked about tattoos for months and you’ve seen my work but this is permanent. For life!” Her palms sway in the air.

I want to laugh because the faces she makes are quite entertaining but I don’t want her to think she is the joke so I nod instead and blink once. “Yes. I’m just like any other client you’ll have, it’s overwhelming when it’s someone who has a tattoo or several but it’s just the same.” I explain, trying to infuse doses of reassurance back into her.

“Try a tattoo artist who knows everything.” She retorts.

In a single beat, she flicks her eyes at me, and our gaze seals.

Her hands move to brush her thighs soothingly, and then clutch them tightly. Her shirt wrinkles where the collar meets her rising chest as the rhythm of her breaths increases.

The sight makes my skin prickle with excitement.

The tense air suddenly shifts to a wired-up wave of pent-up frustration after months of talking to her, I finally see her face to face and it strikes me.

She's mute right now but I know her dirty little secrets and a fantasy or two.

Dean Walker: Bad day at work?

Lennon Quinn: REALLY BAD!

Dean Walker: Then get it all out!

Lennon Quinn: What do you mean?

Dean Walker: SON OF A BITCH! GODDAMIT!

Lennon Quinn: MOTHERFUCKER! SOCIOPATH! PRETENDS TO KNOW IT ALL—ASSHOLE—WITH A LIMP DICK—BURN IN THE PITS OF HELL!

Dean Walker: Good job!

Lennon Quinn: I feel better now!

Dean Walker: Now, who do I need to kill? *wink emoji*

Lennon Quinn: He can suffer in his existence that would be enough.

Dean Walker: Bad client?

Lennon Quinn: The worst.

Dean Walker: What would make you feel better?

Lennon Quinn: My toys.

Dean Walker: Which one?

Lennon Quinn: It's a mix. Butt plug and a vibrator that has suction too and it can heat up which is such a wonderful feeling. And I pretend someone is degrading me.

Dean Walker: You wild!

Lennon Quinn: I like experimenting.

Dean Walker: Have fun! And sleep well, Lenny.

“It’s me, Lenny. You talked to me for months and had no problem.” I say calmly. “You want to imprint your art on your clients the best you can so they’ll leave with a smile on their face. You did it before on others, I’m no different.”

She looks to the walls and back to my sketching area next to my desk, where I hang all my ideas—specifically, my lighthouse sketches which are kind of an obsession, I don’t know why.

“Do you have something in mind?”

Turning her head back at me with a smile, she nods, “Yes.”

“Good g—“

Fuck no!

That one was on the tip of my tongue.

I clear my voice, “Good, now proceed to work on your design.” I ease up on the bed.

She starts designing on my tablet, taking her time with each detail that comes to her mind while I rest.

The half-sleeve ocean theme on her right hand is calming. A yawn overtakes me.

My exhaustion has been unbearable lately.

Dean Walker: Sometimes taking a break is not a bad thing, Lenny, it means you listen to your body, mind, and soul.

Lennon Quinn: I just don’t want this to ruin everything I worked hard to achieve.

Dean Walker: It won’t! If you feel like there’s something greater out there that is calling you, don’t ignore it. It’s out there for a reason.

Her light touch on my arm subdues the gut-wrenching feeling—the one I carry with me everywhere I go.

The sound of the machine ringing in my ears most days is like a remedy. I got used to the pain, at this stage, it's more soothing than painful.

“Work your magic, Lenny.”

Lennon Quinn: OMG! This is so magical.

Dean Walker: The app seems to work fine. Do you like that pattern?

Lennon Quinn: YES!

Lennon Quinn: This was such a great idea. I never thought letting someone else control my long-distance toy would be this incredible. It's not weird, right?

Dean Walker: You agreed to it. I agreed to it. It's consensual. Why would it be weird if you're having fun and I have fun as well!?

Lennon Quinn: Keep going, I like that.

Dean Walker: I'm not going to stop until you come. Multiple times.

Lennon

I zero in on the veins decorating Dean's thick forearms while I'm sliding my hands into the black spandex gloves and start to sensitize his forearm. His entire appearance is distracting.

A wave of heat is climbing up my body, I secure my bun with my scrunchie and tuck a loose strand behind my ear.

I had to mask my embarrassment after calling him *Mr. Walker*. Walking next to his towering frame for an hour made me giddy in more places than others. And there was a brisk moment when a fireball danced between us.

Just thinking about it again makes me fervid.

I had my reservations at first but tattooing one of the best artists in the world is definitely something I never thought I'd get the chance to do so soon.

Everyone will see it.

His clients especially.

I can't fuck this up.

He's got a reputation to maintain.

I take a deep inhale, chanting a little song in my head to pump me up. Fine line is what I'm currently doing and I want to expand my knowledge, and hopefully, try some challenging designs in the future.

Dean excels at many aspects of the industry and performing this task under his scrutinizing gaze could be nerve-wracking to anyone.

He leans backward, delicate waves of his black hair scatter to different sections atop his head. The short sides of his haircut lead to the various piercings in his ear. A layer of dark stubble dusts his face and accentuates his sharply defined jawline and high cheekbones.

I stop myself from analyzing my boss's spectacular appearance.

He's a sharp man but he appears to be exhausted.

Everything Dean does is everywhere around the web and he keeps posting on social media his next locations and collaborations—he works with brands and celebrities occasionally too.

He is such an accomplished man who is wearing himself down by the look of things. He is one person and thousands of people want to be inked by this master.

I press the needle to his tanned skin and pause methodically, making sure it won't burn for a long period.

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't move a muscle. Quiet as a bird.

After an hour of radio silence, I stop, dart my gaze to his face, and the man is asleep.

Eyes closed.

Shallow breathing.

Full lips resting perfectly against each other.

"I'm not sleeping," he informs, thick eyelashes still feathering his cheeks.

"A-ha," I reply, totally amused by the sound of bullshit coming out of his

mouth.

I'm pretty observant. I consider it part of the job to recognize the mannerisms the person I ink possesses. Yet, I don't need to be a genius to assess this situation.

"Am not." He continues with his 'acting tough' track of mind.

I fix the ink bottles on the table beside me, "If you need a break by all means."

"No, proceed Lenny. I want this done today." The stern tone of his voice tightens the imaginary knot in my core and my stomach somersaults.

I don't want to disappoint him on my first day. It's a major opportunity for a new artist such as myself to work with him. "Do you want to see?"

"I want to see the result. And my hunch tells me it's going to look amazing." He stretches and resumes his nap.

The natural light filters inside the shop and hits his perfectly structured face while the ring of light, I set above his hand highlights all the veins decorating his hand—I'm a sucker for those.

An extensive amount of drool cumulates on my tongue, and I gulp hard.

"Okie dokie," I mumble to myself.

Keep my standards high at all costs. Some artists become slackers with time, that's what my old boss used to say.

I take my time with every stroke, inking the lines as symmetrical as possible. They will never be perfect. They can still look spotless.

I mix yellow and a tad red to get a nice bright orange for the sun.

It's not a big tattoo but not a small one either, hence why, it doesn't take me long to fill in the color and call it a day—well, after approximately three hours.

Dean's eyes flutter open while he stretches his stiff bones.

“What do you think?” my heart hammers in my chest while I’m praying to the gods of ink that he won’t hate it and throw me out the door. “It’s not original but it suits you.” My attempts at softening the blow churn my stomach.

He veers his gaze to his hand and I just can’t look. I clench my eyes shut, my face shrinks like I tasted the worst bitter medicine in the cabinet while my fingers play with my silver septum—a force of habit that turned into a stress relief.

“Fuck!” He doesn’t shout it but it still rattles me.

My heart drops.

The four-letter word lingers in the air.

I rub the pads of my palms on my eyes.

Oh no.

He hates it.

I knew it was a bad idea.

“I love it, Lenny. You captured my entire life in one tattoo.” His large palms cup mine, the heat they project calms me and equally heightens my heartbeats as he removes my hands from my eyes.

I dare to look at him using one eye, and the first thing I see is the huge smile on his face. “Really?” then I pop open my other eyelid.

“It’s different than your style but it’s perfect.” His hooded, bright blue eyes, analyze every line and curve of my work. “Thank you.”

Various elements encircle his forearm in a straight line.

“Lighthouse represents your home. Your haven. Your work.” I explain the meaning behind the tattoo. “Ocean and mountains symbolize your travels. You followed the sun but always had a place to call home. One light ahead and one light that you left behind.”

I'm getting repulsed by my sentimental moment right now, I should cut it out. He ensnares my gaze, sucking the air from my lungs again. "I hope you like this. I did try my best." I finish.

He gestures to his hand as if showing off my tattoo. "I'm proud to expose this piece to the world."

I grin. "The meaning is important to me. It should connect to the receiving end."

"Agreed, although some people choose random tats with no actual reason. Sometimes it can be insanely creative but other times it can really—traumatize you." He expresses his final words dramatically as if to emphasize the effect.

Now I wonder what kind of tattoos he found himself executing over the years.

I wash his hand with his special water and soap bottle, the liquid sliding down his forearm and sleeking his skin, and I'm entirely immersed in the display as I soak it with a piece of paper towel.

Rubbing ointment on his new ink, I wrap it, "Yeah, some are running wild with their designs."

"It's almost five," he looks at the clock on the wall beside us, "We started the day pretty late so I think we can go home." He informs me, also, cutting our conversation short.

I guess he's tired, some sleep might do him good, and I wouldn't mind resting and cuddling in bed to some cute flick.

"Sure," I affirm as I organize the equipment, clean, and dispose of unnecessary materials.

As I head to the door, fastening the strap of my backpack, the soft tone of his deep voice shoots me like an arrow, setting my soul ablaze. "See you next

week, Lenny.” Without the music, there’s a minor rasp to it that sends shivers down my spine.

“You bet.” I slant my gaze to see him already staring at me. A small smile graces his lips when I wave him goodbye and exit.

The street around me ceases to exist as I saunter along the sidewalk. Too shocked to believe I tattooed Dean freaking Walker who is now walking with a piece of me that is engraved in his hand.

Damn, I can’t erase the smile off my face.

Bette and I are going to celebrate today—house on four wheels—hashtag-van-life.

I can go anywhere I want without worrying whether I can afford a bed or not. It’s truly the best feeling. The freedom of not depending on anyone or anything. And the perks of going anywhere you want whenever you want.

My legs stop in their tracks.

Tow truck...? My eyes hover across the monstrosity before me. “No, no, no!” I murmur to myself as horror encapsulates me.

Yellow van.

Bette!

He is loading my Bette to his truck on the side of the street like a stray animal.

This can’t be... my throat closing in on itself, the temperature rises and the air doesn’t seem to reach my lungs fast enough yet my feet pick up speed.

Tears already form in my eyes. “Please, that’s my van,” I say in panic.

“This is a no parking zone lady, pay attention to the signs next time,” he speaks but half of his words are in slow motion as panic starts to overwhelm me.

Heat courses through my bloodstream and sweat dampens my pink strands.

This is not happening to me. You've got to be kidding me.

Alright, focus. Pleading for mercy, I can do it.

"It's my house, I live there," I claim in an exasperated tone, sniffing through glossy eyes.

"Not my problem. I'm just doing my job."

He's right but what a jerk. Leave a woman homeless on the street with nowhere to go. Yeah, maybe my mind was occupied with other things. Now I'm being punished for it.

"Lenny, you forgot your skateboard." Someone mentions my name.

What am I supposed to do now?

"Please I have nowhere to go."

"What seems to be the problem here?" Now that he is closer, the deep aggravated tone of Dean's voice travels to my ears.

I spin toward his direction, the confusion settles along his features when he notices the mess I am.

I point to the truck, "It's my van."

"Lady, nothing I can do from here. Come to the pound tomorrow, pay the fee, and get your van back." The ignition of the truck roars to life, taking my sanity and peace of mind with it. "Now excuse me, have a great afternoon."

It's so great I want to pull my hair and cry.

He doesn't have a soul.

This home hijacker.

I don't know if I want to laugh, cry, or shout from the top of my lungs.

All of the above, Lenny.

Please forgive me.

Calculating my options, sleeping on the beach is the first thing that comes to my mind but I also lost my transportation.

I guess... I can walk to the beach.

Not how I planned my day. I didn't have many plans really, but I still didn't expect this to happen.

"Care to fill me in on the details." Dean stands in his broad, towering posture. Arms crossed yet somehow he manages to hold my skateboard in his large palm while a pensive expression takes his face hostage.

"Hmm, I just watched my house being taken away." I shrug like it's nothing except it is everything I own. On a Friday. And all my stuff is there.

A sigh escapes my lips.

"Oh shit." He softens his gaze, "I'm sorry that sucks. Do you have anywhere to go?" His white sneakers pause an inch from my pink Converse.

His hand is clenching to a fist at the side of his frame, and those bright blue eyes are searching between mine.

"Maybe I'll go to the beach. I don't know anyone here." This is sad. I sound pitiful and I hate it. I'm an independent woman and this will not break me. "Maybe I'll go to some motel."

With what money?

"No." Two letter words slice through the air like a sharp machete.

Eyeing him, "What do you suggest I do?" I search my jeans for some cash in the meantime, praying for a hundred-dollar bill to pop like a rabbit from my pockets.

I love rabbits.

They're calm.

I take a deep breath in and exhale it slowly. Nodding to myself, an upside-down grin pops on my face. I'm cool as a cucumber that has been sentenced to become a pickle. It's just a curve in the road, I'm still alive and well.

"You can stay at my place. It's a pretty spacious house... views the ocean."

He replies and the determination is written all over his features.

“I don’t want to intrude.” Yet my body doesn’t like my answer when it tingles in excitement so I fix my strands. “Except you’re my boss.” Isn’t it weird to sleep at your boss’s house on the first day you’ve been accepted to your new job?

Also, after you chatted online about all sorts of dirty things for months.

Well, I’m homeless now so I don’t know what to think and my pocket only produced a twenty-dollar bill, a gum, and a band-aid.

My purse is snuggling against my pillow. In. My. Van.

The silver lining is that I can buy pizza.

“First, nonsense, you need help and I have extra room. Second, I hate that word. You’re my co-worker. I rely on you just as much and I could use your help. Third, you can’t tattoo our clients if you haven’t had a good night’s sleep. I won’t let you. So it’s a lesson as well.”

His legitimate clarification beckons me to accept.

I’m impressed. For someone who doesn’t say much unless it’s part of the conversation, he is a hell of a persuader.

It doesn’t seem like I have a choice. I don’t have friends here. I don’t know anyone. And I do know him... Ish.

“Sold! I’ll be your new roomy for today.”

“In that case, that way.”

Putting his hand on the small of my back, he ushers me to his parking space and opens the passenger door of his black Jeep Wrangler.

I hop on the seat and he closes the door behind me.

My heart thumps as he rounds the hood and climbs inside, flooding the cabin space with his cologne that screams masculinity in a subtle, yet addictive way.

Turning the ignition, he smoothly backs out of the parking lot and heads to the highway.

I stare outside the car's window, the bile still whisks in my stomach but I manage to stay optimistic, knowing I can retrieve Bette and it's not the end of the world.

Pointing to a black Dodge Charger that is flying past us, I note, "Sexy muscle car with sick horsepower, nice!" I focus on lighter topics.

I look away but I know Dean's eyes are on me, I can feel him studying my ardent expression as he pushes the shifter.

"You're into classics?"

I swallow my saliva.

"Sure do! If my old Volkswagen is any indication." I declare with a sly grin. "Her name is Bette."

A tiny chuckle slips out his mouth while he shakes his head sideways.

There's nothing sexier than a man who steers the wheel with the inner side of his palm, showcasing such control of a car that is ultimately a weapon, remaining calm, and executing his performance brilliantly in front of a swooned lady.

Then acts like nothing ever happened.

Such a sexy bulked god.

His silence is endearing—it says nothing at all and so many things all at once.

We stop at a red light and he quickly connects his phone to the speakers, typing on the screen until Bette Davis Eyes by Kim Carnes plays.

My heart sinks to the floor, I turn my gaze back to the window so he won't see my watery eyes.

The atmosphere in the cabin of the car shifts.

I remain quiet for the rest of the drive and so is he.

Dean

As we enter my coastal house, I chuck my duffel bag by the door—I have a big house but everything I need is in that bag.

She was really quiet on the drive over and if anything—Lenny is not quiet—she’s outspoken. Dynamic.

I hope she’s not beating herself up over what happened. This was probably her excitement for the first day, wanting to impress me and get the job. I don’t want her to blame herself. These things sometimes happen and are out of our control. We can’t multitask without failing sometimes.

She’s trying to be cool about the whole situation, yet, the way her brows knit tells me another story.

I want her to feel as comfortable as possible. “Feel free, Lenny. Go around the house. You can do whatever you’d like.”

I’ve got nothing to hide in this place, nothing materialistic worth keeping as a secret, the only secrets I keep are the ones inside me, where no one can find or reach. They’re not secrets anymore, they are more like battle scars I carry with me.

Every chance I get, I travel, and one of my favorite places to visit is Greece. I've been to every island in this country and it's peace I find there.

Creamy hardwood tiles and creamy planks decorate the ceiling. Light-turquoise interior and a long leafy ornament embodied above the wide floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors, viewing the ocean.

The soft light seeping in highlights her features, sharpening her button nose, the smooth texture of her skin, and her big ocean eyes.

I don't think anyone can walk past her and not stop, even just for a moment to stare at her.

A plant that is sitting on the kitchen island catches Lenny's eye, she twiddles with the green leaves of my peppermint herbs, sniffing the addictive aroma it exudes.

"Your house feels like a vacation."

Pun-intended.

She absorbs the space, making her way to the wooden shelves underneath the wide screen where I collect statuettes and hang landscape photos of different places I've visited.

"That's what I was going for." I look at her over my shoulder as I fill a glass of cold water.

Playing with the edge of her loose hair, "Mission accomplished," she comments.

The wide grin on her face starts to settle as she slouches on the couch.

"I can show you the guest room, you can shower and I can order pizza if you'd like?" I hand her the glass, she takes it and gulps it down quickly.

Someone's thirsty.

My brow curves upward right as my lips rise at the edge, stealing her attention.

“I think I needed something cold to chill my system.” She mirrors my expression. Up on her feet, she replies to my question, “I could use a shower and I would never turn down pizza.”

I gesture for her to go in front of me to the stairs of the second floor, placing my hand on her back—the warmth sears me, I ball my palm into a fist on the side to calm the tornado swirling in my body.



I let the streams spray my head as I lean my palms against the white marble tiles of the bathroom. The freezing waters rinse the exhaustion away and increase my blood circulation.

I spent almost an hour switching degrees like this and the hard-on I’m sprouting isn’t helping either, so I stroke my cock to ease some of the tension, but every word she ever wrote to me runs through my head.

Fuck!

What was I thinking? Offering a refuge.

Why couldn’t I stay away like a responsible human being?

I couldn’t stand the thought she’d be out there all alone like I was when I was younger and my parents were on another drunken spree, getting high together. I didn’t want to burden others with my unfortunate circumstances so

I stayed in the streets. That was until my best friends started to invite me to their houses.

“Dean?” Danny’s voice pulls me out of my sleep. “What are you doing here?”

I rub my eyelids with my knuckles. Looking around me, it’s completely dark, and I forgot I sat down on a bench near my best friend’s house—he lives in a better neighborhood than mine.

“I figured we could go to school together in the morning,” I respond.

He nods, jaw clenched so tight it looks like it’s about to snap. “Want to sleep at my house? It’s right there.” The sarcasm washes all over his face while he points like an ass, a lovable one, but still an ass.

I shake my head sideways and roll my eyes. “Yeah, that be great,” I reply as I stand up, grabbing my school backpack.

“Beth is here too, she came in earlier, she’d love to see you.” He pulls my head by the crook of his hand into a side hug. His shoulder-length brown hair tickles my cheeks.

I shove him to the side. “Cool.”

“We can catch some waves after school.”

And I immediately grin at him.

Every now and then I think about it but it goes away eventually. I can’t erase my past, the only thing I can do is to keep going and never let it control my present. Deal with it when needed but don’t drag it too long. Don’t let it ruin a beautiful moment that I deserve.

This is my life now.

That’s what I’m telling myself, and then, I sabotage it by doing the opposite.

Lenny is young, she’s determined, opinionated, and has an exuberant

essence. Her sexy attitude and her mesmerizing personality draw me in like a moth to a flame. And don't even get me started on the sexy tattoos she flashes on her lush skin.

I've had occasional hookups a few years ago. Nothing serious for over a decade of my life, mainly due to my traveling abroad.

The way she never ceases to surprise me with her charming self is new to me. I crossed the map back and forth. I've seen all kinds of people in different cultures and time zones. This one takes the wind by a storm—if that even makes sense.

My eyes hover over the ink covering every inch of my body.

I zoom in on Lenny's work, and everything else blurs.

One of her endowed strengths is to understand the person before her enough to get their inner dialogs. She gathers enough information to come up with a design that matches their spirit.

She sees right through me regardless. It terrifies me and intrigues me, nonetheless.

I shut down the water and exit the steamy bathroom. Grabbing black sweats and a white tank top from my closet, I shove my limbs inside the clothes and head downstairs.

I left the pizza box that is still sitting on the kitchen island for Lenny. Checking inside the box, I count three missing triangles and grin to myself like an idiot.

She ate. It matters to me.

Averting my gaze next to it, a twenty-dollar bill is folded in half under my phone.

Lenny.

I grab everything including a six-case of beer from the fridge and climb

down the four grades of the back porch leading to the golden hour setting on the horizon.

The gates are wide open.

Shades of coral and lavender skies stained in burning red encase her figure.

The swing oscillates back and forth to the slow rhythm of her caramel-sand prodded feet.

A friend suggested installing a basket egg chair next to the hefty palm tree in my backyard. I lined a few beach chairs, a table, and a cooler for our friends' gatherings and it became our favorite spot.

I sit on the chair beside the swing. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," her sweet velvety voice nearly a whisper, "I don't know."

I extract two beers, open the cap, and hand it to her.

"Thanks," she clinks our bottles, "Cheers."

The light hitting her eyes flickers.

I take a long chug as we watch the sun vanishing slowly.

"You have a cat." She points to the black ball of fur snuggling at her side.

"That's Scar, he's not mine. He's free to wander around but he always comes back here." A strategic move on his part, living in a place where he knows the owner doesn't stay for long—he has the entire place at his disposal.

She observes the scar along the length of his left eye.

Scar nuzzles his nose in her thigh as she dotes on him like she has never seen a cat before.

"What a cutie pie you are."

I wish I was that damn cat right now.

I focus on something else, like the fact she borrowed my shirt and it looks better on her. It hangs loosely above her knees, exposing the cute bunny

tattoo on her thigh above a little bandage that covers her knee.

“What happened to your knee?”

“Oh that,” she chokes on a laugh, “An accident.”

“What kind?”

“Riding one.”

I swallow hard. *I hope she's speaking about the skateboard.* Long gulps fill my throat as my nerves start to go rigid.

“Skateboard injuries are part of the fun. They're like a badge of honor, really.” She explains innocently, rubbing Scar's belly.

Scratching my scalp, I stretch my hands behind my head.

She. Is. Not. Mine.

“Why aren't you sleeping?”

The bob of her throat trying to catch up with her beer-guzzling.

I don't know how to answer that question. I should go to bed. I just don't want to. I hate being alone with my thoughts, surrounded by deafening silence.

“I'm not trying to scold you or anything but you're keeping yourself at full capacity all hours of the day.” She adds.

So she has been following me too.

“I'm just used to it. I didn't have the best family growing up and I don't want to end up like them. I want a family one day and being able to provide, function, and be there for them is my goal. I want to be a man they can rely on.”

I never confessed that to anyone but I was able to figure out my life and be who I am today.

“You are, Dean. Look at all the beautiful things you achieved. You're already that man.”

We lock eyes. The voices are at peace when I'm near her. Sucked into the vacuum of her paralyzing entity. Something about her personality is strumming on my heartstrings and it creates the most beautiful harmonies.

"Thank you for saying that. I appreciate it." I am. Every single word.

We occupy ourselves with light conversations. I eat the rest of the pizza while Lenny knocks beer bottles like candies. I keep telling myself she needs it, I got her. I rather her doing it under my supervision than some fucker who might hurt her.

She sighs. "What's the weirdest tattoo you've ever inked?"

I cackle, "I can't even say it out loud." A mouthful of the cheesy delicacy gushes my tastebuds.

"Come on," she places her forearms on her thighs, leaning forward. "Now you have to."

I sigh.

"This guy walks in, telling me he wants an alien with three heads, six legs, and a long pierced tongue."

"Pierced how?"

"Three side-hoop piercings," I recall.

She flashes a bright smile. "Sick!"

I nod, reminiscing on the old days. "Yeah, up until here it was."

She places her knuckles under her chin and her elbows on her legs, "Then what?"

"Everything escalated. I'm talking a sharp incline down the rollercoaster without ever coming back up."

"Ohh," she slightly bounces in place, "Tell me."

"I asked him if he wants to add anything else and he added six nipples, an alien dick which I came up with, and sperm flying in space." I press the rim

of the bottle to my lips, sipping the cold liquid.

“Wow, the details.” Pursing her lips tightly, she holds her laughter captive. Not for long.

“It was in the early days of my career and at that moment I said fuck it, I know I can execute it. So I did. We said our silent goodbyes and pretended like it never happened.” At least I did.

Scar purrs at her side, searching for her touch.

Little fucker.

“Shame, I would’ve liked that photo on your socials.” Giggling, she goes to sit on the chair next to me with Scar on her tail—I think he’s in love with her—already.

“Not even tempted.” I shake my head sideways. “I got another quirky one, a vagina for good measure. She wanted it, it was tempting I admit. I think that was my best work, the realism was magnetizing.” My grin curves up higher.

Mouth agape, she comments, “I’m in shock. Why would someone tattoo a vagina...?”

“Weird tattoos are fine but people who don’t have boundaries are not. I hope not, but you’ll probably bump into individuals who will take their clothes off and think it would be okay to tattoo them like that. Or others who will offer you a different way to pay for their tattoos because apparently, they don’t have money. You know there is some shit you’d have to deal with. But I’ll do my best to protect you from it. I promise.”

I’m already making promises and putting her on the throne because damn me, that’s who I am.

“Thanks for the tip,” she smiles at me, “I trust your mentorship, Dean.”

“Which one?” she basically begged me to say it unknowingly.

The pleasant lilt of her hearty laugh is engraved in my head now.

“Touché.” She continues to giggle to herself.

That’s. What. This. Is. A mentorship.

Maybe if I’ll repeat it a few more times it’ll sink in.

“One of my favorites is a woman that sticks her tongue out, but her tongue is a tentacle. It’s colorful, pops out, and really catches the eye. It was fun tattooing it.”

She parts her lips, “That’s freaking cool.”

I attempt to start a lighter conversation, recalling the fact I didn’t see her holding a phone in her hand once. “How come you’re not scrolling through your phone right now? Most of the people I encounter can’t live without them.”

“I don’t like to stick my head in my phone all day. I only have one app to follow artists like you and get inspired by their work. I prefer spending my time doing anything else other than wasting it on my phone.”

The free-spirited Lenny is social-media-free too.

I lean forward, leveling my body next to hers as we gaze at the dimness enfolding us. “Old school like me.”

“You’re not old,” she says in her delicate tone.

“Said the twenty-three-year-old to make me feel better about myself,” I nudge her shoulder.

“Did not.” She exclaims.

I arch my brow, wetting my lips with the tip of my tongue. “Bullshit,” I whisper in her ear.

She glances over and here’s that contented smile again and the soft bite on her lower lip.

“Are you calling my bluff, Mister Expert?” She pokes my chest, applying a

dose of pressure to it. She had one too many beer bottles and the glaze in her eyes is an indication of that, it was quite an exhausting day, all things considered.

I stand up, taking a few steps toward the porch. “Well come on, bunny. Let’s put you to sleep. You had quite the day.”

“Yes, my house is gone.” She says in a melodramatic voice—the alcohol is starting to hit her system hard.

“Yeah, but you’re here now.”

“It’s very enchanting. I want to be like you when I grow up.” Never in my life had I heard that line. “Not homeless,” she finishes her sentimental moment.

Even her rapid mood shift is entertaining.

“Stripped of privacy. Clothes. Freedom.” Another round of self-pity and I know it’s the booze influence and the anxiety. Man, she’s a tiny thing, maybe the beer bottles were a mistake.

I turn, finding her standing with tears trickling down her cheeks. “Hey, it’s okay.” I hurry to cradle her face and wipe the steady current from her ocean eyes. “It’s going to be okay.” My voice is soft and gentle.

I slowly pull her to my chest, wrapping one hand at the small of her back, and the other I press on her head lightly—shielding her the best I can from any penetrative demons that make her feel less than what she is.

A treasure. Beauty to behold. Freedom to aspire. Spirit to protect.

“It’s the only thing I have,” she sobs and clutches onto me, “The last thing he left me.”

Confusion overtakes me, “Who?”

“My brother.” She snuffles.

Could that be why she was rattled up about the whole situation? *My*

freedom. Maybe she feels like she failed her brother by letting someone take away something that belongs to him.

Fuck, I want to know more.

“Your shirt is wet.” Acknowledging my soaked top, she rubs it in circles, which only intensifies the flames raging in my chest.

“It’s an honor to be damped by your tears.”

A sound resembling a light laugh and a choked sob escapes her.

“Don’t worry about it,” I assure her fragile state, lifting her chin to meet my eyes, “I got you.”

In mere seconds she pales and turns to pour the contents of her stomach on the sand. I gather her hair, rubbing her back in soothing circles. “Good. Let it go.”

When she finishes, I lift her across my chest. “Let’s take you to bed, you need a good night’s sleep.”

She mumbles incoherent words as I carry her to the guest room on the second floor.

The mattress hugs her tiny body. I pull the soft blue blanket on top of her to get her warm and cozy, grab a towel, and wipe the remnants of food and saliva from her mouth.

I exit and reenter the room with a glass of water, “Lenny, drink some water.”

She takes a few gulps and settles the glass back on the nightstand. “Did I ruin your porch?” she murmurs, making muffled sounds.

“You’re kidding? That’s the most action it has seen in a long time.”

She makes an audible sigh, “Mm.”

Her eyes are closed, and her pink hair is fanning the wide beige cushion. The thick eyelashes peppering her eyes rest on her cheeks as her chest rises

and falls tenderly.

I whisper, “Do you want the night lamp on?”

“M-hmm.”

I don't like to sleep in complete darkness. It makes the lines of what is real and what is a memory blur. When that happens I panic, have nightmares, and feel like I'm being attacked by ghosts I'd long forgotten. The light helps separate it sometimes—it brings some sort of tranquility.

“You're safe, bunny.”

I take out the twenty dollar bill she left on the counter from my pocket and open the zipper of the bag she placed on the dresser. I roll it inside, close the bag and exit silently.

Dean

It looks like I'm not the only one listening to music at the break of dawn. Surfin' U.S.A by The Beach Boys plays quietly from my outdoor speakers.

I place my cup of coffee on top of the rounded table by the wooden bench on my back porch.

Some waves ripple in the distance, others cutting the shore with force.

My eyes hover above the waters until I notice a surfer in the deep, waiting for something.

I prop my butt on the bench, ecstatic for the show on the horizon.

My love for the beach is endless, it was part of my escape during my childhood, and probably why I chose to live here in the first place.

A giant wave comes in her direction, she paddles on her board with measured shoves, pushing toward it with no fear. The lip starts to curl around her, she swiftly balances herself on the middle section of the board and rides through the tube.

She's gone from sight for a few seconds.

I wait patiently to see her cross on the other side, and she does, maneuvering her way out and exiting right on time.

Surfing back to the shore, she catches small waves and rides them with expertise.

As she steps on the shore, she leaps in place, seeming happy about her performance.

Damn! That was phenomenal.

The bitter sip on my tongue warms my chest.

Pink?

It's quite a large distance but now I can focus more on the details.

Holy hell!

My eyes bug out of their sockets like a cartoon character.

Lenny.

I swear this girl is a piñata, concealing all sorts of surprises inside her.

She's pacing with my board—which I now recognize—tucked underneath her armpit, droplets of water cascading down her sun-kissed skin.

Her tiny white bikini accentuates her long legs, slim waist, and sculpts her flawless body. Exposing more tattoos on her rib and her chest.

Yesterday's revelation and her mild meltdown never happened. I dig the power she has to gear up and move on. Having a weak moment doesn't define anyone. Sometimes it's necessary to let a part go to be able to carry on.

“The waves are sick today.” A full grin crosses her cheery expression.

She catches the surfboard by its tail and puts it against the fence, my gaze trails downward where the outlines of two waves, a van, and a sun are tattooed on her calf.

Sneaking glances at my shirtless figure, she smirks to herself, climbing up

the four grades of the porch.

“Glad to see you’re having fun. You’re a highly skilled surfer.”

“Oh yeah, thanks to my brother.” Her smile falters and then fades for a second before she looks back at me with a small grin, and... veers her gaze back to my biceps.

I feel like there’s a story here but I will never pry on business that isn’t my own unless she wants to talk about it.

She grabs the towel from the top of the bamboo chair, drying herself off and making eye contact with my chest as I take another sip of my coffee.

I work out whenever I get the chance in my home gym downstairs. It keeps my mind occupied. It is also the reason why a lot of women check me out constantly. I don’t hate it but it never felt authentic to me. I never felt a genuine interest from any of those women.

Yet I can’t say I don’t enjoy the way her hungry eyes lock on different areas of my body as she gets lost in it for a moment.

“I forgot I stashed jean shorts and a black top inside. I’m a chaotic eater. I eat like a child with passion and without a care in the world using my entire body in the process. You need a certain level of commitment.” She extracts the clothes out of her bag, and throws a handful of seashells she must’ve collected from the beach inside.

My chest rumbles as my laughter echoes. Those precious moments she speaks like an autostrada highway are adorable. Her sense of humor and perspective on the little things of our daily lives vibe with her personality.

I drink the rest of my coffee, enjoying the morning energy and her company.

She clears her throat, “On that note, can I make breakfast?”

“Feel free. The fridge is stocked with goods,” I affirm her ridiculous

question. I thought I already made myself clear yesterday when I told her the exact words.

“Thanks.” She turns to go but stops halfway, “Do you want anything?”

I nod my head sideways. “No thanks. I’ll eat later.”

“You sure? I make a mean toast and sunny-side-up with a side salad and fresh lemonade.” Her eyebrows curve upward while she steers her head up and down.

It does sound like a nice meal... “Why not, do you need help?”

“If you want to.”

Before she bolts to the kitchen like her ass has been stung by a sea urchin. I manage to verbalize my thoughts. “I thought we could go on a road trip to cheer you up before you go back to get your van but you seem great so—“

“Where are we going?” Excitement dances behind her eyes.

I can’t hold the smile from molding my cheeks. “Santa Monica.”

“Yes, I’m down!” She jumps, clapping her aqua-painted nails together. “I’m ready.” She twirls on the balls of her feet, waving her hands along the length of her frame, emphasizing her point.

I chuckle, “I can see that.”

“What are you waiting for? Go change and come help me when you’re done. Those lemons aren’t going to squeeze themselves.” The cute sarcastic tone is not lost on me as she winks and waltzes inside the house.

“Yes, ma’am. So busy.”

I grin to myself as I move past her and climb the stairs, “Two minutes.” I throw on a white shirt and ripped skinny jeans paired with my white sneakers. I grab my black ball cap from my nightstand before I leave the room.



“Will you choose a song already?”

Lenny has been scrolling through my phone for the past twenty minutes, searching for a nonexistent song on my playlist.

Thankfully, we’ll arrive in Santa Monica in a few minutes.

After two hours of driving and maneuvering through small traffic, I need to lift my spine off the seat since feeling my legs became a privilege.

I’m six foot three it has its defects.

By the end of the song Just Breath by Pearl Jam, we’re parking my car on the beach grounds.

“Let’s find milkshakes, I’m craving something cold and sweet.” She closes her side of the door, “I can afford up to twenty dollars. Big spender!”

That contagious energy again.

I fix my shades, “I got you,” I invited her to have fun and to forget about the problems she left at home, “Don’t worry about money.”

Rounding the car toward me, “Take it out of my paycheck, including yesterday’s food and drinks.”

I wonder if she can read my steel expression. I’m really not feeling this conversation. “Fine.” I won’t do it but if it’ll make her feel better for the time being, so be it.

“Great.” She goes to walk and stops, I almost bump into her but manage to halt in time. “Almost forgot my backpack.”

“Right...” I unlock the car again, “I’m on it.”

Thirty minutes later, strawberries, vanilla, chunks of salty caramel, and chocolate swim on my tongue—these milkshakes were worth the hassle.

I push my black shades on the slope of my nose as we bask under the sun on a blanket Lenny asked to borrow.

Kids running and playing on the sand. A flock of birds flapping their wings and chirping as they cross the teal skies.

The pier of Santa Monica is a mile to my right. People roam the different shops and vendors as they make their way to the Pacific Park rides and experiment with the boardwalk-style midway games.

A leakage of melting milkshake stains the corner of her mouth, “Oh my gawd, this is heaven.” Lenny is consumed by the blend of tastes much like I was a minute ago, now I’m consumed by her.

I can’t go there. I already blocked that conversation two months ago when I stopped texting her. Chances she did get the message, this is strictly business.

I don’t want to hurt her and I don’t want to hurt myself.

I often asked myself, how can someone overcome an ugly past? A past that shaped and molded him to become a runaway who can’t stay in one place for too long because it feels like a fortress. Too suffocating. Too quiet. Too lonely. And it doesn’t matter how big that place is, it’s still too much.

How can you not see images of people lying around in their own puke, stained with blood and shards of glass that someone forgot to clean, and are on the verge of another trip in the abyss?

The kitchenette has nothing in it, except spoiled milk from last month that I hoped would last for a while before the fridge broke down.

My nostrils flare as I rub the back of my neck and avert my gaze to her.

Lines of cocaine lying around the rectangle table in the living room. The large quantities she'd dosed over the years made her erratic, delusional, and paranoid. And other times, nonexistent. Just tossed in some corner like yesterday's trash.

"Tessa!" I don't call her mom anymore. She lost that privilege a long time ago.

Rubbing the powdered substance in her nose, she replies, "What do you want?"

"Try not to die, I would be crushed," I pretend to give a shit, "Besides, burial is expensive and... oh, we're broke because you used all our money on drugs."

Scowling, a grimace distorts her upper lip, "You're the shitiest son on the planet." She says with a sneer.

"File a complaint to CPS, I'm sure they would love to help you." I storm out the front door and slam it behind me.

I know she dealt with her own demons and her own failures, but she never tried. For me. She brought me to the world and what? Was I just supposed to join her ride and take it? Accept her sentence. Be damned along with her.

The clog in my throat intensifies. The remnants of the milkshake are bittersweet on my tongue.

Even when you move on, those images... they are just there. They don't go anywhere no matter the quantity of therapists you'd see. The past can't be entirely erased. You just continue to live your own life.

Looking to my side, a kid is trying to build a sand castle next to us, "Are you having trouble with your tower?" I ask him and he nods in return. "Want my help?"

He nods again.

I quickly make a pile of sand and sculpt it with his help. The kid smiles from ear to ear while Lenny makes another matching tower on the other side.

“No one will mess with your kingdom now,” she jokes, giving him a high-five.

The kid moves to give me a high five, “Great job.” And I finish the cycle by fist-bumping Lenny.

In mere seconds she sprints toward the ocean, I stare at the kid dumbstruck, and he looks at me with the same expression but continues to play with his castle.

I ruffle his short hair and wait for a few minutes to pass by until he stands and scampers back to his parents who sit feet away from me.

My strides are measured until I dip my toes in the water next to Lenny.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I take a deep inhale and glimpse at her as I stretch my neck.

“Are you okay?” my voice low and soft.

She immediately responds, “Yeah.”

“The ocean calms you, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” she answers, still staring at her toes wiggling in the water.

I pull my cap backward, “I feel that way too.”

“It holds a special place in my heart.” She adds.

I nod in understanding. I do. In so many ways.

Then the line hit me from one of our online conversations, “No one is her chain...”

She stays quiet for a moment before she lifts her gaze from the waters, looks at me, and hums the next line. She giggles to herself.

Something tells me it’s not fine but instead of picking at it, I’d much rather

distract her from it.

I avert my gaze to a group of adults that are playing beach volleyball.

“Want to give that a try?” I point at them. “I bet they will let us in if we’ll bribe them with those milkshakes.”

She laughs, “It looks like they’re having fun.”

“Come on,” I grab her hand, our fingers graze as I pull her gently toward them, “We can have fun as well.”

I’m well aware, she’s watching me ripping that fabric off of me. I mean business and it’s damn hot.

Lenny is positioned in front of me and those pink locks are making it hard to focus on anything else but her. Yet I did tell them we’re former champions, so I got to deliver.

The ball starts to jump from one side of the net to the other. Jokes, curses, screams, and laughter pass as well as the game progresses.

They let us play a few games before they have a private one with additional friends who just arrived.

“That was incredible! I’m so pumped!” She claps to herself. “Let’s grab lunch and try to sneak into another game.”

The hours gallop beside us and the sun slowly wanes. The Pacific Park is swarming with people yet the line ahead of us dwindles, I follow her pink Converse crossing the pier docks to our seat.

“If I puke, blame the cotton candy.” She injects another bite, “It’s on her.”

I can’t shake the laughter as it bursts out of me, it’s the best day I’ve had in a while.

I give her a side-eye look, “In that case, is the Ferris wheel a good idea?”

“Oh yeah, we’re doing this Dean, there’s no going back.” She waves the pink cotton candy in her hand, “I want to inhale higher oxygen levels.”

This girl is a Mustang, I lost my footing trying to catch up to her. We share the same traits but I'm deciding whether it's a good idea or a mistake. I know it was my idea to come here, and being around her, experiencing this... it might be too much.

Too much to resist.

The Ferris wheel operator checks the red gate of our gondola.

The cool breeze caresses her face. Her hair is secure in a bun. And those ocean eyes assess our surroundings, scouring for our next adventure.

"As a kid, I always feared someone's hand might get caught in the cotton candy machine." The casual way she says it like it's not a morbid thought.

I dump another morsel of cotton candy on my tongue. "That's disturbing."

"Rational thought." She comments nonchalantly. Her unfiltered brain keeps vocalizing her every thought and granting me the privilege of diving into her mind, being the harbor of her notions.

The wheel loads and unloads passengers as we make it to the middle. High in the air, the skies are painted magenta, ruby, and golden shades.

Yellow quivering-strokes shimmer along the water. The ocean crashes into the coastal line while the tidal drifts and the waves breaking sound echo in the distance.

The red and pink neon lights that are projected from the wheel cast radiance on the people roaming the pier, chatting with their families and friends, and bathing in the waters.

"Thank you for bringing me here." Her soft endearing voice embraces me. "I needed a getaway."

"My pleasure, bunny."

Fuck!

I clear my voice, pretending to look away while fixing my cap.

Last night she was drunk and I'm sure she doesn't remember the nickname I gave her.

Slowly, I veer my gaze back to her, and the way she bites the edge of her lip distracts me.

She slaps my lap, spurring me to look in her line of sight. "Look at that surfer."

I adjust in the seat. *Not helping, Lenny.*

I let out a deep exhale as I fix my resolve back in place.

She just got here. She's my employee. She's too young for me.

Is she?

I'm not blind to her signals. I'm observant enough to know the difference between flirting and a friendly conversation. I still don't want to put her in inconvenient situations.

I've been used before, who's to say this time it'll be different?

She's young, has a bright career on the horizon and I could be just a ticket to get ahead. Even though I want to believe that's not the case, she's pure-hearted, my mind won't let me. The walls I built around myself are old but still remarkably strong.

Tough, my mind, soul, and body drift toward her nevertheless.

Some people just connect and have a click right from the beginning I know it for a fact. Just because it's rare to find those types of relationships it doesn't make them less.

Some friendships are built this way.

If you truly want something anything is possible, right?

But I'm still going to respect her and her position.

"Lenny—"

The gondola shakes and prompts her to clasp her hand onto my palm as it

starts to descend. I hold my breath for mere seconds before releasing another shattered breath into the open air.

“Not a fan of heights,” she murmurs. “This height.”

Why are we in here then?

Maybe that’s how she conquers her fears.

I interlace our fingers, exhibiting my silent support and permitting my mixed feelings to quiet for the present moment.

We make it down safely.

Our shoes collide with the pier planks as we exit our gondola.

The black hoodie she borrowed from me at the house looks so much better on her—another item that makes me feel this way.

“I’m going to the restroom.” I haven’t gone all day and the gallon of water she forced me to drain is starting to squeeze at my bladder.

“I’ll wait for you here,” she registers with a lustful gaze.

Is it my imagination?

Two minutes’ walk, battling with myself whether to give in or not. I exit the stall and make it back to where I left Lenny.

Closing our gap, she comes to view next to the blue railings—that is not the only thing I see.

A group of young guys appearing to be in their early twenties, start circling her, one by one.

The brown long-haired one in particular catches my attention. A lopsided grin plays on his face—and again that’s not the only thing boiling my blood—her half-eaten cotton candy is in his hand too.

I crack my neck, rotating my head sideways and charging in her direction.

“Not interested.”

“Are you hurt?” I whisper into her ear and rub her back as I make my

appearance known.

“No, he simply thinks the sun shines from his ass,” she doesn’t bother covering her disdain toward him.

He flicks another piece of cotton candy, making a display. “You already thinking about my ass, pinky.”

“Get a grip. I’m not interested.” Lenny repeats the words I heard her say a minute ago.

He continues, “Let me spend an hour with you and we’ll see about that.”

I wonder if his conviction transforms in areas other than assaulting bystanders for fun. He should educate himself before he throws his garbage can of verbal fuckery into the air.

I’m starting to get pissed and I know the fucker is enjoying this way too much. “She said she’s not interested. I assume you’re not deaf, so move on.”

“What is it, bring your Daddy to supervise day?” The smugness is plastered all over his face. “Daddy, don’t worry, she even shared her candy with me.” Sharing, stealing I guess it’s all the same for uneducated kids. “Lend me your daughter for an hour, I’ll make it worthwhile.”

He’s bidding, like we’re in the middle of an auction and Lenny is the main prize.

I clench my fists at my sides, moving in front of Lenny to shield her from them, I don’t know if they have hidden weapons or not. There is no such thing too careful.

The triumphant grin crosses his clean-shaven cheeks as he winks at me, poking the bear from his dormant state, despite his dismissiveness which is infuriating on its own I remain calm.

He crossed a line.

He will not disrespect Lenny and treat her like an object.

I'm balanced around altercations like this, I'm focused.

At my age, I know the only solution without escalating things is to show the absence of fear on your face and ignore them. I don't wanna be that guy who solves situations through violence. That's not who I am. Unless they will come at me and force me to block and knock this motherfucker to the ground.

This is not how I want Lenny to remember this day. She will blame herself for it and that's the last thing I want. It is not her fault jerks like him breathe the same air she does.

I swagger toward him, puffing my chest—my face is closer to his but my towering height gives me an intimidating advantage.

I grit my teeth.

And I don't blink.

“Touch her or anything attached to her and you'll get a touch of my fist. And I'm not someone you want to mess with, boy.” I look him dead in the eye for a long second before I grab Lenny's hand and stomp to the stairs leading to the beach.

Bystanders pass us as I navigate us through the crowd. I'm on autopilot and I feel it blackening my vision.

She can handle herself. She did that on her own while I was gone. I fucking hated that predatory gaze that boy had on her. I know guys like him. That look is vile, bleak, and inhuman.

He would've hurt her one way or the other unless there was someone the size of me in his face. They are a crew. He's the entertainer, the leader, the one making the shots. The others make sure to cage the victim in their circle like prey.

I was on time when I showed up; they hadn't had the chance to form it yet. And being surrounded by dozens of people can also ruin a perfectly

orchestrated plan.

“Dean,” her small voice calls me with an urgency.

I reply quietly, “What?”

“You’re hurting my hand.”

I halt immediately and slacken my tenacious grip to check her blood circulation.

Immense contrite is reflected through my expression. “I’m sorry, I just—“
What is wrong with me?

“Fuck,” I mutter.

My chest is feeling heavy, I tip my head back and lace my hands around the back of my head while I gaze at the fluctuating tides.

I do it every time I’m getting closer to someone. My desire to save the people around me from the evil in this world is my battle against those who made me fight this war in the first place. But they don’t always need me to be that man. I didn’t even ask Lenny if she wanted to go, I took matters into my own hands and decided for her.

Pulling my cigarette pack from my back pocket, I tuck one between my lips and light it. The Nicotine sips in, smoke rolls out and my thoughts get lucid.

I don’t smoke much. Occasionally. When I need... something.

Dean

The party is becoming louder as more people round our lot; drinking gallons of beer, blasting the music aloud, and doing drugs in every corner. Living in a poverty area where lowlifes hang and ruin other's lives is life's real danger zone.

Our tiny house—mind-blowingly—hosts her junkie friends while the others celebrate in the open yard circling the shoe box-like house I call home.

The cubical room isn't much but it's enough for me. I have Tessa's old guitar in the corner, a rundown closet that squeaks to every movement, a scuffed wooden desk for my school homework, and a million papers that are my drawings.

An escape that turned into an obsession.

I turn the hourglass on my desk, go to bed, and watch the sand descends from top to bottom. Lying on my single bed, ready to go to sleep although I know I won't be sleeping tonight.

I never do when it's wild outside.

Trapped inside these four walls—an alien abduction sounds like a fucking adventure at this point.

“Where the fuck is my money?”

Someone’s shouting from the other side of my bedroom door. When these gatherings happen I make sure to lock the door so no one would roam here accidentally.

The pitter-patter sound of footsteps down the hall jumble simultaneously with the raindrops that start knocking on my small framed window.

He twists the handle sharply, banging roughly on the door a few times and stomping away. “Why the fuck is this door locked?”

I exhale a breath.

“Is someone getting some in there while I’m not getting my money!” he yells. “Tessa, where’s my money? You whore!” an object slams against the wall and shatters. “Search the entire place. Trash it for all I care.” He orders.

Her maniac laugh boils my blood. How could she do this?

The exhaustion is unbearable, my reddening eyes bulge in my eye sockets, and a thousand nails are pressing my skull but I need to focus.

I have to.

No one else would save me from this.

I fasten my grip on my pillow. My shoulders tighten. I’m barely swallowing around the lump in my throat, rubbing the back of my neck, but my eyes are fixated on the door.

I hate her so much I want to scream so fucking loud for this terror I have to walk through every day. I hate feeling helpless. I hate the fact I don’t have a way to change it. I hate bothering other people with my problems.

I don’t deserve this.

I didn't do anything wrong.

But the scream always catches in my throat.

Fuck!

I need to go to my friend's house.

How am I supposed to get myself through that door and out the front?

It's a small house but not that small when criminals are out there, all of a sudden it becomes a maze I need to solve.

Building my courage slowly, I pace toward the door.

BOOM-BOOM!

A gunshot echoes.

I stop in my tracks. My breath hitches in my throat. My heart is galloping. I eavesdrop, hoping to hear what is happening on the other side.

"W-what money, Cam?" drunk out of ass she slurs.

She was never a mother.

"Tessa, do you want a bullet between your eyes?" he says it comically but means every fucking word. "Cause here I am, aiming my gun straight... bullseye."

"I need to lie down, you're giving me a headache." Apathetic as usual.

Yeah sure. He is the one responsible for her growing hangover and not the bottles she knocks down before she inserts a needle into her vein again.

"Break that fucking door!" Cam yells again, ordering one of his men, "If she's hiding something find it."

No, no, no, no.

The dread fills my eyes as the hinges split and the door collapses to the floor.

Cam hops on it, in a conceited gait he walks a few inches and jumps off like I'm supposed to be impressed by this pointless display.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here?” he laughs maniacally like a character from a really bad nineties movie while he fixes his biker’s jacket.

Cam’s height is identical to mine, but his cruel eyes are different. They’ve seen things that must’ve left scars.

“Tessa, your boy is all grown up,” he snickers, pretending to be surprised which is getting on my nerves. “Maybe he knows where you keep my money,” he looks straight at me, narrowing his dull eyes.

“Let me go. I don’t know anything. She’s a piece of crap.” I shoot at him with no shred of emotion, yet I don’t attempt thrashing against them because my battle is lost in advance. Maybe if I play nice I get to walk out of here alive.

“Is that so,” he inches closer, “That’s no way to talk to your mother.” He studies me, “But then again, she is a worthless bitch.”

Neglectful.

He moves his hand to rest on the tucked glock in his belt. “You seem like a level-headed kid, where does she hide the cash?” He shoves his face into mine. “Don’t make it hard on me, kid.”

“She doesn’t have cash. Look at her, she’s a wreck.”

“Not my problem.” The cigarette stench on his breath distracts me for a second but I focus on the flask that slants from his jeans front pocket.

He’s not drunk though.

“What do you want,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Find me a solution,” he darts his eyes from me to his men and back to me. “Or my men can beat your beautiful face. It’ll be a shame.”

I see red.

Not going to happen.

I am not paying for her life choices anymore.

He smirks maliciously, “Tessa, I will hurt your boy,” he shouts again, “Is that what you want?”

He tries to stir emotion inside a person with no heart. She doesn’t give a fuck about me. Never did. Why start now?

His madman laugh makes me gulp. I need to fuck out of here immediately.

His face turns sinister. “Nowhere to go, kid.” He snatches the gun, and his men charge at me, holding me firmly in place.

Yet I don’t resist.

I can’t show weakness.

He points the gun to my head and my brain goes silent again.

The pile of saliva gathers in my mouth and I gulp it fast. Unfortunately, this is not the first time a gun has been aimed at my head.

I hope she will rot in the pits of hell.

Focus Dean!

I never felt helpless in dimensions I can’t contain until now and I live this nightmare every day.

The range between us is nonexistent. One bullet and I’m game over. Now I wish I stayed at the arcade with my friends.

The air is suffocating.

The small radius doesn’t allow me the space to run or breathe properly.

The smell of alcohol and smoke sticks to every corner and stays there for days.

Get a grip, Dean. I command myself as I’m browsing through my brain.

I did some gardening work to save money for food, but, I don’t have a choice. I will never forgive her for that.

“I have some money I saved.” I surrender while they still grip both of my hands tightly.

He gestures with his chin for them, taking a step back, “It’s a start. Show me.”

I fish the cash from my rear pocket and place it in front of him, he leans in to grab it.

“Two hundred,” his mouth twitches to the side, “Not enough I’m afraid.” He tsks, pressing the gun farther into my skull.

I pick through my brain and the only thing valuable that I have is my biological father’s old Mustang in the garage which is the only thing I managed to keep away from everyone. I take the keys with me everywhere.

For some reason, he left it for me.

My entire will to live is abandoning my body as I say those words, “I have an old Mustang in the garage.” Even Tessa doesn’t know anything about it.

“Ah! That’s what I’m talking about kid,” he claps his hands and rubs them together as if winning the lottery while the gun sways in front of my face, “Pleasure doing business with you,” he winks, “Till next time.”

There won’t be a next time. I peel my upper lip in disgust.

I’m not coming back here ever again.

I’ll think about something.

He puts his palm in front of me, “Keys.”

I hand them over and they stomp away.

The low grumble coming out of me is the only thing I can afford right now instead of screaming.

Anger is raging through my veins. I cock my hand back—like he did the gun in front of my face—in order to slam my fist into the desk but I stop myself an inch away.

My heart winches in pain.

The glow of the mirror on the wall catches my attention and I stare at my

reflection.

The way I feel inside morphs into a fractured reality every waking moment. I grab my jacket from the chair and stroll fast past all the chaos that I know is this house and dash out the front door.

I run all the way to Beth's house, my soiled black Converse spritzing waters of every puddle on the way, streets blur until I see shapes standing in the driveway, fuming.

When she and Danny come to view the only thing I do is clutch onto them. Hug them.

"What happened, Dean?" She pulls me into her arms, "You're sweating and you look pale."

Everything is spinning as I reply, "I'm not going back there."

She tightens our hug and I swear I can feel her curvy brow rising, "I told you, you can stay here and at Danny's place whenever you want." Her 'I told you so' strict tone tact in place.

"Of course, man." Danny hugs us both. "You're my brother."

"Mine too." Beth finishes.

She nods at Danny and glances at me again, pausing and cupping my face, "It's not your fault! You're so brave," she kisses my forehead and quickly moves inside the house.

"Tell us everything, don't spare a single word."

I break down and tell them everything. All the frustration. Everything I bottled comes out.

"You won't spend another minute in that house, Dean", Danny stares at me with awe, not pity. "We'll get your things in the morning. No one can know because you're sixteen."

I nod, already knowing that if CPS finds my ass they will take custody of

me. And I don't want to be in the system. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't.

"You're staying with us, permanently!" Beth says.

I freeze for a moment. "Don't you need to speak to your parents first before —"

She cuts me off, "Not negotiable."

That detrimental environment and those memories of that nightmare used to haunt me for years. I wish I could burn them.

They are just memories of someone who feels like a stranger from long ago.

Tessa used to play guitar, she was good at it and had a passion that transmitted to each note. Before it got ape-shit she tried to be a parent. When the drugs kicked in it all turned black. Living in darkness, shut down from the world around her. From me. The moments she resurfaced, I got a glimpse of what could've been a life with a non-addict parent.

I made peace with it. I had to.

When she passed away I was relieved. It sounds harsh but it's the truth. She was finally out of her misery. I know she was never happy, even with the narcotics. She needed a way out and that was her way until it was over. She perished the day she chose to abuse herself.

Bleeding internally without the actual bleeding.

After I left that house, I thought if life fucked me hard, I want to fuck someone harder, fill them with everything I got. Show them I didn't back down just because I came from a shitty background. I am a good person and nothing like my parents. I will never be them. I worked hard to be the man who came from nothing and turned into someone worth fighting for.

For years, during my childhood, my soul collected wounds. The only salvation I had back then was my friends. They saw me. And helped. I have

tried to do my best and rise above it all, my travels became an essential substance to me—getting far away from that place ensured I wouldn't be stuck there like them.

When I watched how my friend's parents treated each other. The love they gifted to one another through one look was enough to melt you in place and get you jealous. It all fed the urge to find that type of love.

It gave me hope.

Zooming out of the fluctuating tides, I look over to Lenny, taking another long drag as thoughts flood me.

I never met my biological father. My mother never thought to mention that the person who raised me—another piece of shit—wasn't by birth certificate my father.

She guilt-tripped me into thinking he never wanted to do anything with me.

When I first started traveling to get far away from the Looney Tunes who was my mother, I went to Las Vegas where his family still resides now.

I heard stories about him. Seen pictures. I look exactly like the father I never met. The one my mom kept away from me because he was sick.

The doctors found out he had cancer when I was born. In order for me not to get attached to a dying man, my mother decided he should not see me. He tried to reason with her but nothing penetrated her impermeable thick skull.

My sick father lived for another ten years before cancer struck again, and this time, took him for good.

I could've enjoyed ten years with the man who could've saved me from my mother. The one parent who should've cared and looked after me.

She never did.

Along with the men who raised me, they were a pair of junkies with toxic personalities that led to betrayal more times than I can count. They never

married. Simply two fuck ups who got high together and stayed for convenient reasons. After a while, he left. My mother was left brokenhearted with a kid she never wanted in the first place and a horrendous lifestyle.

Another man who left us.

A million questions used to bother me at night about my father.

Why didn't he fight for me?

Was he too sick?

But what about his remission?

Why he didn't come to visit despite my mother?

Did he love me?

Why did he send someone on his behalf to hand me his old Mustang when I turned sixteen? That's when I found out about him. The man who showed up told me a few stories and gave me my birth certificate but my father was already gone.

The eyes of a stranger stare back at me. A man who tells me my real father is not the man who left us but another man who left us. "Look Dean, your father was really sick and also a stubborn man. He wanted to see you more than anything but your mother made it difficult."

"She's a junkie, he could've easily taken custody of me." I take the old picture he gives me of me as a baby in the arms of who is supposedly my biological father.

"He took that photo anywhere he went to show you off. He used to say, that's my boy, Dean. I named him after my father who was a good, loving, and honorable man." He tells me another story instead of giving me a reason why this was difficult.

He sighs. "I know that you had to go through a lot and you will face many more obstacles but you always have a family in Las Vegas. You are more

than welcome to visit us whenever you want.”

I puff out my disbelief. Now he tells me I have a family in another city.

“One day everything will make sense.” He finishes before he hands me the keys, “Your father wanted you to have it,” he points to the parked Mustang. “Take care, Dean.”

I have a penchant to protect and shelter others because I was deprived of that. I don't want someone else to feel like they don't mean anything. While my execution may lack, my intentions are good.

I was born independent—from day one, the bitter pill of my existence was to always watch my six and look death straight in the eye.

But I forgive you, Tessa.

I put out the smoke against the carton of the box, discard it inside, and shove it back into my pocket.

“It's okay.” Lenny places her hand on mine, urging me to look down at her. “You didn't hurt me.”

I stare at the constellation of freckles covering her nose and cheeks.

She lifts her phone, scrolling and pressing play on a song I'm not familiar with.

“What is this song?”

“Dearly Beloved by Daughtry.”

Retrieving it in the pocket of her jean shorts, she twines her arms around my neck and starts slow dancing with me.

I place my palms on her hips, resting my head on hers—her coconut scent floods my nostrils and washes all over me.

She doesn't need me. She's too young, her life is just starting and I'll probably be gone soon like I always have.

Talking online was fun but that's exactly what it is—online.

“My brother was my best friend,” she tells me.

The thumps of her heartbeat parallel to mine.

“He was a huge surfing enthusiast. I think he started surfing when he was four. Loved the ocean and everything in it. Competed in a local skateboarding competition back in San Diego, for fun, but he was damn good at it.”

I lock my hands behind her back, tucking her closer to me. I don't dare interrupting her.

She pauses, taking a long breath. “Life can be ruined in seconds.” The wrath of the ocean surfaces with each wave that crashes. “He was on a trip with his friends. A man who harassed hikers attacked him, my brother stumbled on a few rocks and fell into a canyon. Medics said he died on the spot.” Her head is pressed against my chest and her body is nestled in my arms.

Our silence envelops us for a long minute while the song keeps playing.

“He was always so protective of me.”

Hearing her confession makes my heart ache for her.

“It was a lesson on how uncertain life can be. So I took his van and started traveling.”

It dawns on me.

I think it's her way of connecting with her brother, keeping his memory alive, and making new ones with him as her guiding spirit.

“I was seventeen when he died and he was my age now. It's surreal thinking about it. He would've been twenty-nine by now. Could've had a family or life goals to reach. Instead, he will forever be twenty-three.”

It must be a fragile milestone for her, being at the same age her brother lost his life. It must be heavy on her.

“From my experience thinking about, *what if*, will only trap you in a cage. Drag you down into the pit of insanity. That void will forever remain but the best thing you can do for them and yourself is to keep going. Live your life. Don’t stop for no one.” I utter the words.

She swallows the clog in her throat. “But isn’t it running?”

“It’s breaking free from the sorrow and the emptiness. It’s not running when you come to terms with the past. Nothing you can change will change you in a way. How? Is your choice. And by the look of it, you already have a long time ago.”

Talking about this with her is better than therapy. I feel like my words are sheltered underneath the glimmer of understanding in her eyes.

“You’re right. I just wonder if he knew how much we loved him, if he felt alone, and confused, what went through his head at the last moments of his life. I wish I was there to hold him and make sure he is warm and loved and at peace.”

My pupils sting.

I feel like the knot in my core—the persistent stone I have carried for decades finally ruptures.

“I’m sure he knew and I’m positive he watches over you as we speak.”

There’s nothing I want to do more than kiss her right now. Feel her lips on mine. Give her a solace escapism.

Against my better judgment.

In a blink of an eye, her lips press to mine and instead of pulling back, I deepen the kiss.

Lennon

My breath mingles with the smoke taste on his tongue and the mint of the gum he chewed earlier.

The kiss is slow. Sensual. With a choreography of its own.

He wraps his arms around me, squeezing my ribs gently and the scratch of his stubble elicits our kiss with every flick of his tongue against mine.

What have I done?

It feels so good though.

So calming, like the space around us doesn't exist at all and the ocean is a piece of soft music in the background.

An implicit regret washes all over me. Stupid impulse. Even though he is kissing me back.

I shouldn't have continued those online conversations with him, it only made it more difficult to forget about him. And knowing what I know it's just hard to face the truth.

It didn't mean anything.

And now, while I taste his lips for the first time it hurts even more. I always felt like my brother was the one guiding me toward him. Somehow it always seemed that way. The signs were all around me. But I guess, it was my imagination, forcing me to believe in something that wasn't really there.

I feel so stupid for giving in so fast.

My body is buzzing, responding to every swirl of our tongue and brush of our lips.

He locks his grip on my jaw and presses his thumb to my chin, deepening the kiss more.

I kissed him.

I kissed Dean Walker.

My boss.

For long minutes.

My body screams and begs for one more taste, yet my logic prevents me from making an inappropriate fool out of myself.

In the heat of the moment, one shared kiss on a spontaneous trip doesn't change anything.

The heat of his chest and the way we fit perfectly against each other heighten the need.

My heartbeat thrums in my eardrums. The nerves pump my blood to my face and I feel the reddish tint forming on my cheeks.

I can track the studying movement of his arctic blue eyes, shining like fluorescent lights, and pinned on me.

The regret is in the tacit engrossing us.

“Let's find a quiet place, spread the blanket, and relax.” He takes my hand in his.

I give his palm a reassurance squeeze, “I'd like that.”

For a while, we walk along the beach, scouring for the perfect spot until we find a deserted area. As we lie down on our blanket, my eyes are fixated on the blanket of stars covering the darkened skies.

His comforting presence is next to me. “What is the first thing that pops into your head right now?” he asks.

“I wish I could be a star in the sky and watch us right now. How tiny we are like a dot on a map.” I answer as I continue to gaze above us.

He doesn't say anything, letting the peaceful silence shelter us for long minutes.

I break it by asking him, “What would you do differently if you could go back in time?”

But he's silent yet again, saying things his words don't.

I wonder why we have to be reserved about what we say. We talked for months online and had no problem talking to each other about intimate stuff. Now, I guess because of our new titles he feels the need to keep quiet.

I wish he didn't.

When he didn't bite his tongue it felt natural and real. And an hour ago when he used it to explore my mouth it was all over the spectrum of mesmerizing.

“Nothing different.” He finally says. “Those moments shaped me.”

I want to know more about him but I also don't want to overstep.

“Do you want to travel around the world someday?”

I think about it for a second, “I would love to. There are some places I'm dying to see.”

“Like?”

“New Zealand, Australia, Italy, Greece and Bali.” They're all part of my bucket list so it's pretty easy.

“Don’t want to rub it in your face but I’ve been to all of them.” He slants his gaze and his cute smirk encounters mine. “I can always be a tour guide, you need to be safe in those places. I don’t mind going there again.”

I poke his shoulder, “You already did. But that’s okay because now I have a free tour guide.”

“Who said my services are for free.” He chaffs.

“You did mister tour guide, and offered protection as well.” I quip. “Either that or I’m going by myself.”

Chuckling, he shakes his head. “Always paying attention to the little details aren’t you?”

A giggle escapes me, “Part of my job.”

He puts his hands under the back of his head. His ball cap is still tacked in place, and so is the stillness in his expression.

The wide window of our kitchen views the front of our house like a frame of a picture. I sneak glances outside, trying to capture the different contrasts of the light, the shades, and the shapes of the shadows.

Analyzing everything around me is my middle name—Analyza—is what my parents always call me.

Jamey sprints across the grass, and along the stone path, He breaks into the front door like a burglar, heaving like he ran a marathon.

He signals me to wait for him to catch his breath.

“Who did you run from this time?” I mock him while I continue to draw a sketch I’ve been working on for the past week. “You’re running skills are getting better, Speedy McQuinn.”

He simpers.

He’s such a lunatic sometimes. I know he has something important to show me based on this little display and the fact I know him so well.

His blond hair sticks to his forehead and the sides of his sweaty face. His blue eyes—identical to mine—shine in reverie. Lately, he has been showing off the muscles he works hard to build and that surfer’s tan is a permanent signature on his skin.

When a set of white teeth crosses his face like a Cheshire cat, Jamey is up to something, or better, already has something cooking under his sleeve.

“Do you remember that tattoo artist I showed you from Huntington Beach?” he pulls his phone out of the pocket of his boardshorts. “Dean Walker.”

I remember he was super excited about him, and said he is a hell of an artist who has a mile-long waiting list.

I, on the other hand, forgot words existed when I saw his picture.

He is scorching hot I won’t lie.

Drawing speaks volumes to me and I know he showed me his designs because of that, oddly, what kept me flabbergasted was his humbleness.

The fame usually spills a veil over its recipients and blinds them over what truly matters.

It didn’t affect him in the slightest.

He maintained such calmness, care, and patience toward everyone he came across.

That’s not something you see every day. The rarest diamond doesn’t have to shine the brightest to be known it is one, it simply does because its quality outshines the rest.

“Well... your brother just booked a session with him.” All pumped up, he says, “In four months, right after my trip.”

I hop off of the stool and hug his broad form while I ruffle his shaggy hair. “OMG, Jam! I’m so excited for you.”

“I can’t fucking believe it.” The glimmer of effervesce reflects in his eyes. Even the sound of his voice transfers potent energy.

Raising my eyebrows, I remark in a determined tone, “Fucking believe it.”

“Maybe now is the time to ask you to work on a design for me, I want him to tattoo a piece my sister drew, and mix it with his style, that way I get something from both of you.” He clarifies, crushing the side of his mouth to his cheek. “I want a jellyfish.”

I look at him in awe, “I’d be honored if Dean would agree to use it.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll use my eloquent skills.” He smiles widely. “Devil knows I’m not lacking any speech capabilities. I woo them with class.”

I roll my eyes as I go back to my stool to finish my work, “Jam?”

“What?”

“You can woo your way out of here.”

“Don’t be jealous, Len, your eighteen birthday is coming soon and I know I’m going to hear all about the boys who are chasing my little sister.” He ruffles my hair and heads to the door. “Don’t let these bastards win you so fast, give them hell.”

“You know some boys already tried to,” I comment.

He stills in the doorway, “I know, but I want you to know that if you ever need me, doesn’t matter when, doesn’t matter where, I’ll always come for you. And run them over with Bette.”

We laugh in unison.

“The last part was a joke,” he winks at me before he exits and then I hear him say, “Or is it.”

My brother showed me what it’s like to grow up next to a reliable man, with tons of confidence and a good heart. That is a gigantic gift he gave me.

A source of endless inspiration and support. That's all I could ask for, that is all anyone can ask for.

If I could go back in time I wouldn't change a damn thing. I would simply embrace each moment I shared with him all over again.

I dart my gaze over to Dean.

His eyes are closed, his soft breath is audible, and his fingers are laced with mine—I must've zoned out by my thoughts that I didn't even notice.

His pure heart is sheltered under his rough exterior and distant manner yet he can't hide it when he was born to stand out.

I know that for a fact.

I've seen it before.

“Penny for your thought.” He suddenly spews.

If only I could get a snippet into his. Besides, I already owe him so it's only fair.

“I miss my van, Bette.”

“Why did you name it Bette?” his dreamy deep tone cloaks me like a silky sheet.

I huff in a burst of laughter, “My brother did.” Closing my eyes as well I add, “Bette Davis Eyes was his favorite song.”

Lennon

“What if a shark will eat you?” I ask.

He snorts a laugh on purpose, “Len, you can die when you cross the street after checking the lights twice. Nothing is guaranteed.”

“Doesn’t mean that it’s wise.” I rest my hands on my hips.

“No, it’s not. It means that you are here. When I’m gone know that I was happy because I did everything I wanted to do in the present moment.”

My life had turned upside down when I lost him. And when I found the letter he left me for my eighteenth birthday in Bette’s storage compartment, it broke me to pieces.

I went everywhere he traveled. Trying to find a glimpse of him in all the endless scenery and noise that encapsulated me.

Lennon Quinn: Have you ever wanted to scream so loud but just... couldn’t?

Dean Walker: Have you ever wanted to hurt someone for your pain, but didn’t have it in you?

Jamey evaluates the force of the waves. “Are you ready to duck dive?”

I paddle hard, gaining enough speed before a surging wave. Quickly, I straighten my hands and push the board underwater. Using my feet to push the tail down farther, I steer the board forward. Holding it parallel to me, I sink it and align my body once again in a curving motion to the surface of the board until the wave passes.

The water drowns the slew of emotions that infiltrate my mind, letting peace seep in for a moment and it takes me hostage.

Dealing with so many things at once is a hard task. A new job, impressing the boss, secretly having a crush on the boss, thinking about all the things that could go wrong, and losing my home for the first time weighing down on me a bit.

The frigid water underneath me eases some of the tension. Pull me out of the shore and into the peaceful dimension they create. Current upon current. Wave upon wave. I paddle on the board, letting the ocean guide me, and soak my brain in its serenity.

After the busy week we had, Dean invited me to his place for the weekend. Said I could surf and help him work on some designs.

Once again in his house, I feel perplexed.

In all honesty, a part of me thinks he wants me here. He seeks my company for some reason. Yet I don't understand what he can possibly find in someone who's fifteen years younger than him. How can I possibly excite him when we're at different stages of our lives? He made that clear by avoiding me.

He didn't say anything about it but it hangs in the air like a heavy cloud.

What happens in Santa Monica stays in Santa Monica.

We haven't talked about the kiss we shared two and a half weeks ago. It's like nothing ever happened there at all.

While I am disappointed I can't hold a grudge when I understand the consequences of our actions.

My actions.

It was reckless of me to succumb to an urge.

I can still feel his soft lips against mine, tasting, consuming, comforting. And then, I can sense him retracting.

“Whatever you do, don't get caught in the impact zone.” Jamey nods once and signals me to go first. “There's no mercy here, the waves will crush you.”

Did I throw myself into the impact zone willingly?

The water washes over my skin, cooling my system as a ray of sunshine peeks through a crack in the sky.

I don't know what to do.

Do I continue to torture myself by coming in here, and spending time with him when he made it clear it's just business?

I like his company yet it feels like I'm walking on eggshells around him. Picking my words carefully to not sound juvenile or out of place.

I don't know his intentions and I'm not sure it's my place to ask.

A nice deed does not mean more than what it is.

It could have been the heat of the moment that sucked us both, but in reality, the stakes are higher when his career comes first.

Focus on what *you* want, I remind myself like a mantra.

I want to gain the skills to cultivate my career as a tattoo artist. Gain more experience. And find my place.

“There you go, Len. Charge it. I know you can do this.”

Jamey's words are like a friendly breeze caressing my skin as a wave curls, creating a perfect slope behind me while I continue to paddle, then I quickly

move to a slightly bent standing position and ride it.

On top of a wave, I feel invincible. And I stay on it until it fades.

Getting off of the board, I take a long inhale before I dive underwater.

The peace swallows me in and casts me under its spell as I swim around, letting the bad energy sink to the depths of the ocean as foam rolls around me.

When I can't hold my breath anymore I resurface, creases form and I hone in on my blurred shape, getting lost in my thoughts again.

“Good surfers can feel the ocean. Connect to it. And become one with the tides.”

Small waves ripple a few feet away from me, and whitewater color different sections.

I should've kept our interactions minimal from the beginning.

I shouldn't have said what I said to him.

I shouldn't be entangled with my boss.

I feel so stupid.

So immature for even thinking about all of this.

He didn't even make me feel bad about it, he deftly swatted it like it was a mosquito he needed to get rid of.

Why can't I just treat him like a coworker?

I'm all over the place. I can't concentrate. Can't focus. Can't bring myself to look him in the eyes without feeling guilty.

Tears are threatening to water my eyes but it is too late, the heaviness in my chest is unbearable and I need to let it all burst.

The dam of tears has opened; water trickles down my cheeks, and into the ocean, they vanish. Like Jamey, one minute he was here, the next he was gone.

After I relax, I grab the surfboard and get out.

Layers of sand stick to my feet as I walk to the trail that leads to Dean's backyard, and something pokes the sole of my feet on the way.

I take an inch backward and I stump on another object.

Two beautiful seashells rest on the sand—as if someone put them there—I collect them right as a welcoming purr graces my ears, and then Scar meows when I enter Dean's backyard.

I put the board against the fence.

“Hey, cutie.” I pet his head and he rubs himself against me in return. “How come you're not part of the household already?”

He purrs again as if answering.

“You think he doesn't like you?” I lie down on the beach chair and Scar sits next to me while I continue to brush his fur. “He named you so you must be special to him after all.”

No one gives nicknames for free unless they have a reason to give the name in the first place. It's something trivial but not really. I wouldn't have given someone or a pet a name or a nickname if they were insignificant to me.

It automatically entangles the two and adds an emotional layer.

“I think he's just afraid of a commitment. He doesn't want to lock you inside his house when you can roam freely like him. He always travels. That wouldn't be fair to you.”

As I say those words out loud a realization strikes me, maybe that's the reason why he does the same thing about us.

He is used to it.

That's his lifestyle.

No promises. No commitments. No relationships.

“Why is it so hard, Scar?” figuring out someone when you made it clear

you're interested in them but you get nothing in return. All you hear is silence and unanswered questions.

When he speaks, my whole body likes what I'm hearing. What is a woman supposed to do with that? It's unfair.

On one hand, I want to rip his clothes off and hear him whispering seductive words into my ears. On the other hand, I know it can't happen. I'm working for him and this whole situation is ridiculous. It's just a voice. I hear men talking all the time and that shouldn't affect me.

Yet it does.

He does.

My stomach whisks. My brain works hours on end, trying to decipher what it is I should do. And my bones are exhausted, holding on to the bit of strength I possess.

“One more push, Len. Remember, it's all about your mindset and what you give power to. You have the tools to decide for yourself what is right for you. Just breathe.”

I take my Polaroid camera from my bag and snap a picture of me and Scar—he meows and I stick my tongue out. I want a memory of him, he's going to the Hall of Fame that is my windshield.

Gotta hand it to him, he's been persistent since the minute I came here.

I brush his head, “You like that.”

He presses his head farther into my palm.

I have to work on my skills and exercise to better myself. No distractions. That's what I came here for and I can't let anyone, especially someone who ignores what we shared affect me.

And I got some unfiltered messages from Dean's fans who were less ecstatic about me working with him which I wasn't thrilled about.

Jamey shouts across from me, “Don’t let some idiot who pretends to know it all discourage you.”

In the fast-paced world we’re living in, I just need a moment to breathe and stay away from the media as much as possible.

There’s a lot of good out there but it sometimes clashes with a lot of negativity. I simply don’t want that energy around me.

People will always have something to say or pass judgment on what I do, but it’s how I react to it that matters.

Accepting the fact I can’t change it can save me a whole lot of headaches and tears.

I’ll continue to do what I’m doing and whoever stays on this journey with me stays. For those who are not, the doors are always open and they can exit whenever they want.

Right as I say those words to myself in my head—shirtless and sweating, Dean carries himself with such grace, grabbing the surfboard as he crosses the yard and heads toward the ocean.

He’s ripped of pure muscle. Plains of hardlines are carved in a delectable way that water my mouth. Straight up immaculate.

Why he has to be so damn perfect?

So rude that I have to soak it in and pretend not to be affected by him when I totally am.

A sharp breath gets cut in my throat when he starts paddling on his board.

“Can you hear it?” Jamey says as he straddles his surfboard, waiting for a miracle to send us some waves.

I sluice my hand in the water, “What?” I already know what he’s about to say because I feel it too.

“The calm before the storm.” He finishes. “Be ready, something dope is

about to happen. I want to see you perform what we practiced.”

Dean

Sweat is dripping down my forehead.

I lift another set of my heavy weights in my home gym downstairs while Lenny occupies herself around the house.

I'm trying to shake the filthy thought of her from my mind, I almost do as I concentrate on my exercise, but then images of her flood my brain.

I am fascinated by dangerous degrees—degrees I have prevented myself from reaching for a long time.

She attracts me in ways I can't describe. She's Lenny, the special ray of sunshine that came into my life two and a half weeks ago and knocked me on my ass.

I knew she would.

That was one of the many things about her presence, I considered a distraction, especially around the shop. Not because I can't control myself, I can.

I just can't look away.

I can't ignore her.

I can't predict her.

And I don't want to.

Her spontaneous spirit aligns with mine as we both calmly navigate the days passing by.

I try to shove away the thoughts about her but nothing works, being near her all the time doesn't help either.

She's my coworker.

That is it.

I didn't deserve to have that kiss with her; it was wrong of me to surrender like that, even though she lit up my entire body. I beat myself up every day for it. She's here to learn. To build her skills. To grow as an artist. I don't want to stand in her way, let alone ruin it with unnecessary drama.

I never stay, that's who I turned out to be despite my reservations and I'm not sure I am what she needs. An older man with some baggage and a one-way ticket policy.

Nah.

She deserves better.

I'd love to give in to her, more than anything, but I'm the adult one, and I need to keep our relationship professional.

I only do that to protect us both.

I'm gonna get hurt and I'm trying to save myself the pain. I fell so fucking fast so fucking hard in the past that I had to gather fragments of myself and piece them back together.

I stare at the walls of our apartment, confused as fuck. "I don't understand what changed."

"We're just two different people. I need to focus on my work, build my social media strategy, and grow as an entrepreneur." Those are her words to

me.

“That’s what it was all about. Your followers list. That’s why you dated me? To get those meaningless fifteen minutes of fame.”

I felt as though I was being punished for having the capability to love someone. Maybe my soul needed to be loved. I needed to feel love for the first time in my life by someone who wanted to be around me. Get to know me. Be with me.

But it wasn’t love.

It was all a lie.

I was another thing my ex-girlfriend used to get ahead like when my mother used me to get what she wanted.

Looking back at it now, ten years later, how far I’ve come. I grew so much as an artist, I’ve expanded my horizons and got a house most only dream about.

I was one of those who used to dream about this.

I don’t even wonder about her because I simply don’t care. She was a lesson learned nothing more. The only problem with that lesson is that I didn’t want it to repeat itself so I avoided it countless times since.

After her exhibition of love, my head prevailed, and my heart kept resorting away while the years flew by.

Beth and Danny said that when you meet the right person you know. I never felt like I had, so I never bothered.

Then Lenny enters, I don’t know what the future holds but I know I want her in it.

Around me.

Around the shop.

However, I can have her.

I don't want to be selfish toward her right now.

We need more time.

I need more time to figure it out. To close that chapter.

Too bad that my dumb ass doesn't get the memo and I continue to invite her in here and torture myself.

I haven't let anyone step inside this house except my best friends.

I'm still trying to figure out why.

Why did I let her in?

She's balancing the endless tides coursing through my veins, and correlating my systems instead of corrupting them.

It doesn't mean she should be here.

Yet, I'm more peaceful knowing she's somewhere safe, being watched over and taken care of. That way Bette rests in my garage all well and sparkly after I washed her this morning.

No worrisome problems she needs to face. As long as I can help in any way I can, I will.

I miss our online chats. I stayed away from this type of conversation, yet, it was different with her. It opened up a portal inside me that longed to show this side of me. Somehow the need to feel needed played a strong part in our interaction.

Not just wanted. I know that part is there.

For the first time in my life, I felt like someone needed me and that appealed to me beyond reason.

I finish my set but instead of taking a shower, I head toward the backdoor, catching her basking under the sun next to Scar on the beach chair.

The fucker is always with her.

Slightly nodding my head sideways and rolling my eyes, I grab my

surfboard and stride to the ocean.

A nice surfing session could be the cure.

I get inside the shallowed waters, slowly walking inside and dragging my palm along the surface. Feeling the tides.

No waves.

Everything is stagnant.

More often than not it does before an awesome wave rises and breaks the silence.

I start to paddle a bit, crossing a fair distance and the hairs on the back of my neck stand. My ears perk up to the sound of a muted rebellion that is taking place underwater.

Something is coming.

And someone is watching.

I can sense her eyes on me, assessing each shift of my movement.

A slow breeze blows in my face, I breathe it in, shutting my eyes and connecting to my surroundings.

As soon as I open them again, water starts rising across from me, rolling and collecting the blanket of water into a growing wave.

Paddling fast, I manage to approach it right in time to adjust to a standing position. As the wave breaks behind me, I surf through the curling lip.

Centering myself, I crouch a bit for balance purposes and drag my hand on the shallow surface of the lip.

The tube is like the barrel of a loaded gun and I'm the bullet that is sliding through the muzzle—exiting smoothly.

I ride down a wave and swerve the board on a few small ones as I continue to catch them and steer my board across the water.

That was awesome!

My audience, consisting of a very curious bunny, surely paid attention to every single maneuver I performed. I partially wanted to get *her* attention, yet, it was mostly done to calm me the fuck down.

Love...

One time is all it took to fuck my head about it. Build the walls around me and barricade myself for years upon years. And watch me walk out of every possible chance at a new, healthy relationship with someone.

I am part of the equation, aside from my mother, biological father, and my ex.

Love always failed me. The closest people to me did. Others whom I let in.

I was also rewarded with so much love, so why can't I just forget about it?

I'm so comfortable where I am right now that I stopped chasing the things I want. I already have everything I aspired to and worked hard to get.

Now, she is right in front of me and all I do is avoid the topic. We both dance around it, searching for an answer neither of us wants to reveal.

I splash some water on my face, shake my head, and rub my eyes as I continue to contemplate while sitting on the surfboard.

We're attracted to each other.

We were open enough to talk with no restraints online.

What is stopping me?

I found everything I looked for when I took a backpack and went to my first destination at the time, Las Vegas. It's where it all started. Where I spread my wings. Where I met my mentor, Jim Wilder, the one who taught me how to ink and is part of who I am today. Watching him raising his daughter all by himself and building his businesses changed my entire perspective.

I know exactly what he would say in this situation. *"You cut your wings when you let something affect you, Dean. Risks are what make life worth it,*

and without them, you're not really living. You turn your back on the most wonderful memories."

Initiating words into action.

I got an invite from Luka, a longtime friend, and local tattoo artist from NY whose nickname is The Devil. He is a devil when it comes to his designs; they are dark, twisted, and meticulous.

He booked me for a week in late September.

I am invited to a few more shops in other cities before then. I can still teach her even when I'm away, and it'll also allow her to do things her way. She can work in my shop and I'll give her a key to my house so she can stay here, that way I know she's safe.

This can be good for us.

For me.

Dean

July

Dean Walker: I left a sack of food for Scar in the kitchen.

Lennon Quinn: Thank you! I'll feed him. I'm also cleaning him and taking him to the vet.

Dean Walker: I will be looking through the cameras in my house and the shop to make sure everything's okay.

Lennon Quinn: Don't worry, I'm not going to walk around naked.

Since I already understand her sense of humor, I know she won't be offended by my next text.

Dean Walker: Why not? The house will appreciate the view.

I bet the little fucker too.

Lennon Quinn: I'll give the house a show in the bathroom, privately, where there are no cameras. *wink emoji*

Good girl.

Dean

August

Dean Walker: I hope everything is okay with Bette.
Lennon Quinn: She's good.

Dean Walker: If you need anything, or someone to talk to, call me.

Lennon Quinn: Thanks.

In a white tank top with phases of the moon print, she moves around, dancing to her earphones right as Scar pounces on her feet.

Bending to rub his fur, her burgundy shorts accentuate her curvy ass and my eyes wander along her white knee socks.

I lick my lips.

I would be fingering the screen if it'd miraculously transfer to her. Pleasure her. Cater to her needs.

There are moments she forgets I have cameras around the house although I warned her.

Maybe she does it on purpose.

Her hand reaches down to pinch her clit, the other cups her breast and squeezes her nipple between two fingers.

I groan to myself.

The thin fabric doesn't hide her taut nipples from me—the same ones I would suck and tease if I could.

Dean

September

Dean Walker: Are you okay?

Lennon Quinn: Yes! Thank you for asking. The shop is doing well, I try to book as many clients as I can fit into our tight schedule.

Dean Walker: Don't stress yourself about it. If you need to take breaks in between to gain some energy, do it. People will have to wait.

Lennon Quinn: Yeah, I already scheduled a break next month. Thank you for this opportunity again. I've had an amazing time these past few months. I feel like I'm finally starting to utilize all these resources and take on designs I'm truly passionate about.

That's all I ever wanted.

Dean

July and August vanished in the blink of an eye while I visited tattoo parlors around the country. Even got the chance to shoot a commercial with a few other artists as a celebration of the industry. A decade of talented people showcasing their extraordinary skills.

The final days of September are painting the streets of New York with their earthy shades yet all I see is the genius who owns a fucking building, Luka Birmingham AKA The Devil.

Well, I call him the Australian darkness; dark hair, dark eyes, a huge fondness for all things dark, and an Australian accent to top it all off.

He's a good man. Probably one of the most genuine individuals I've encountered so far in my travels. His outlook on life is a miracle after the loss he endured as a young man. In his twenties, channeling all of that into a successful tattoo shop and an underground nightclub is damn impressive.

He closes the distance between us, "Hey, mate. It's good to have you here."

"Thank you for inviting me." I clap his hand and give him a quick embrace accompanied by another clap on the back. "It's been a while since the last

time I was here, how are you?”

“Busy as usual.” A side grin crosses his face. “Wild as always.”

I laugh at that.

Luka and I go way back to when he started his career as a tattoo artist. We first met seven years ago when he was still in diapers as an artist. Impressed with him, we stayed in contact, mainly because of his inviting energy.

Around that time he started to work on this place; renovating an old building and transforming it into an ink kingdom any artist would drool over, an escape during the night where you can get lost in the shadows and a home.

We get inside the shop and the black-tinted mirrored wall is the first thing that catches my attention—always does.

“You got someone special already to ride with?” I ask, staring at my reflection.

“Nah, she’s hiding somewhere.”

“How’s Ronnie?”

“Operating the ICU like a champ,” he jokes and through the mirror I see him extracting water bottles from the fridge by the corner of the room. “The club is really busy and he is... working a lot lately.” His gaze trails off. “Bad breakup.”

I know something about that.

Turning to him, “Call him upstairs later, we can have a chat about it. Or laugh and forget it ever happened.” I grab the bottle he hands me.

I’ve never seen best friends who work together so well as Luka and Ronnie—Ronnie manages the nightclub downstairs like a well-oiled machine, and they both treat me with so much respect every time I’m here.

A wide grin stretches back on his face right as his phone starts ringing, “He would love to see you.” He takes it out of his jeans pocket and accepts the

call. “Hey, Ronnie we were just talking about... yeah, I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Do they need a surgeon stat?”

“Actually, we planned a fun week for your arrival. We booked a few artists to perform in the club. And some other activities.” He takes a few sips from his bottle. “You sounded like you needed it on the phone.”

I still don’t know if what I did was the right move. The right strategy in the short time we got to spend together.

What I do know is that I needed this trip for an unknown reason that my visceral feeling urged me to accept.

“I’ll be back quickly.” He makes his way to the elevator in the back hallway. “We’re going on a ride later, I have a spare bike for you.”

I take a seat around his sketching table, flicking my cap backward, and leaning back, “Take your time.”

The live stream of my shop’s camera is playing on my phone—I promised to look after her on the first day she showed up, and I kept my promise.

So far nothing happened.

She’s safe.

I whip the air above my head in frustration.

The creases across my forehead deepen with each frame I capture.

The flow of our recent conversation has been lacking. I get lackluster responses to my messages and I don’t blame her for pulling back.

Her pink hair is tied back in a knot, she looks peaceful while still assessing every detail she inks—the most important thing to remember before tattooing is to leave your bullshit behind and center on what you need to do otherwise the results would be catastrophic, especially for your client.

The minutes slip away like sand in an hourglass as she continues to work.

She is getting bolder with her client's designs. Before that, she was hesitant and kept her best work to herself. For two months I've been following her progress—the differences are remarkable.

She practices hours on end on the shop's gear as a routine any tattoo artist needs to obtain. I even caught her tattooing one of her anime designs on her leg a month ago. It made me chortle to myself—I used to do that when I was younger; my legs were my canvas and I first practiced on myself before I tattooed a client.

I don't know what to say to her but I want to show her that I'm always a text or a phone call away. And that I didn't go away on a whim—I did it to give her space so she would find her way in this rocky industry and be in a place where she could make a name for herself—without me around.

She can do it all on her own.

I wanted her there to allow her the freedom to explore her art without the clutches of a boss who refuses to open one's mind. Her last boss was great but she kept her hidden.

I wanted her to blossom.

My mentor did the same thing for me.

The blood seethes in my veins.

I can't prolong this trip anymore.

My fingers jab the screen, and when I finish the text, I read it one more time before I hit send.

It's time to go back home and fight for what I want.

A few hours later, we're behind the building, preparing to go for a ride.

I curve my brow to my hairline, "You have more secrets in this building?"

The muffled sound of music is coming from another side of the building where the club is.

“If I tell you imma have to kill you.” He quips.

The door of the storage unit rolls upward and I swear I can hear Born To Be Wild playing in my ears as Luka shoots me a proud look when he enters.

“Duck!” and the song fades immediately.

I pivot my head to the sides, scanning the area for the mysterious squeaky voice, “You have a weird alarm.”

“It’s kangaroo.” He says, flicking the light on.

I can sense the presence of someone else in here, “Who?”

He points to the caged parrot swinging in merriment from side to side.

“You named your parrot Kangaroo?” I inch closer to a beautiful white cockatoo with boisterous behavior.

He murmurs to himself, making little dance movements, “Kan... Kan... Kangaroo.”

“He’s not mine, he’s my grandma’s—she’s going back to Australia tomorrow and needs a place to keep him while she’s out,” Luka explains, fishing out the gear from a locker by the corner.

“Of all of the places, you put him in a storage unit.”

“His precious!” His voice shifts from calm to serious with an ounce of humor, “I am a dead man if he is gone.”

“Duck!” He pretends to lower his head down, “Duck!”

“What’s that about?”

“They go sailing together all the time,” Luka replies.

“Huh... so your grandma is a pirate.” The rumble of laughter echoes from my chest.

“Very funny.” He answers as the soles of his boots resound against the floor as he strides somewhere behind me.

The rustle of a fabric tickles my entire nervous system.

“She’s old but still works.”

I spin around in confusion, “Are we still talking about your grandma?” and a black R6 beauty stares back at me underneath the cover—I can hear that song again.

“Not quite, although...”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” I hold my finger in the air. The number of times people tried to set me up with their moms and grandmas is embarrassing.

“Born... to be wild,” Kan squawks.

My incredulous eyes stare in disbelief as I slant my gaze at him.

Is he a mind reader?

Luka claps his hands, “You got that right, Kan.” He chuckles, “That’s his favorite song. You should see him banging his head when he listens to it, it’s hilarious.”

Putting the helmet and gloves on, I hop on the bike. “It was lovely meeting you, Kan.”

He swings happily again, “Born to be wild.”

Aren’t we all?

The skyscrapers roll past me as I speed on the highway and race against the wind.

“Are you going to tell me what’s been bothering you? It’s written all over your face.” Luka’s voice comes out of the helmet’s speaker.

I clear my voice, taking a long breath, “A woman.”

“So you and Ronnie are in the same boat.” He tsks. “He’s right behind us.”

A biker revs behind me, “I’m drowning that boat deep in the ocean,” Ronnie enters the chat.

“Ronnie, good to see you,” I state.

“You too, Daddy.”

What is it with this nickname? Is it written on my forehead or something?

His cheerful voice stays intact, “I saw two lunatics flying on the road, and I knew it was you two. What’s the story?”

I tried to dissect our situation to shreds by myself and I always go back to thinking she deserves someone younger, less damaged. “We talked on the phone for eight months before she started working in my shop.”

“Deep conversations or superficial ones?” Ronnie questions.

“It was intimate at times, work-related in others. She revealed her struggles to me and showed me her vulnerability when she first showed up.” I swallow my words carefully.

Have I been so fucking blind that I only now notice how she laid her heart on the table for me and I gave her nothing in return? I chose the getaway over getting to know her after I pined for her for months.

“What are you afraid of?”

“Failing again, getting hurt, giving it my all and it won’t be enough.” The words fly past my lips.

“That’s part of opening yourself up,” Luka intervenes, “If you don’t show your truest intentions, the person in front of you thinks you don’t care enough to try.”

We smoothly take a sharp turn on the road, and the wind blows on my hoodie, chilling my system.

He adds, “You got to decide, then tell her what you want and act like it. Or vice versa.”

Did I complicate such a simple thing because I thought I knew better?

“True,” Ronnie remarks, “In my case, she was the one who showed her disinterest. I had nothing to work with since she made up her mind. And

frankly, I'm glad she's out of my life although it is still hard to process and it'll take me time to get back out there, I know I was always transparent about my feelings."

"Sounds to me like she's interested if she came to work with you."

I'm quick to dismiss, "She came for the job."

"How do you know?" Luka's interrogating tone demands, "Did you ask? Maybe she came for the job and you."

I didn't.

I was quick to jump to my own conclusions before it was too late. Before I would travel more just to stay away from her and from my shop because I would never ask her to leave.

The question is burning within me, "If someone came along, and just left you dumbstruck for no reason, would you pursue her?"

Ronnie answers first. "If I think it's worth it, definitely. You never know but you can always follow a hunch because it won't let you turn the other way without going for it first."

"At the end of the day, I'm a risk taker, if she shows up out of the blue and holds my attention for more than two minutes that's going to be the best fucking adventure." Luka finishes.

I declare, "You two always know how to lift my spirit!"

"Ahh!" they are both synchronized.

"Glad it worked, mate." He signals us to turn right, "Everyone deserves closure for better or worse. Don't put her on the back burner."

My whole life I've been the man running the show, that's what I set myself to do, my ultimate goal. My want and need to start a family of my own came second. Or third.

It is ten times easier to take the duffel bag that waits for me by the door and

leave, knowing I left nothing behind. This time, not only that I leave her behind, but I let her run the show—by giving her the keys to the two biggest accomplishments I earned.

And I can't put it into words, I just feel so fucking free.

Who the fuck knows what anything is supposed to be? No one. You try, you do your best, you fall, you rise, you lose, you win, and you live. Life isn't meant to be figured out, it is meant to be experienced.

Hell, what a ride it has been so far.

Why the fuck did I forget that with Lenny?

I open my helmet's visor, the red light is almost changing, and they both avert their gaze to me. "Are you two, hazards, ready to race?" I challenge their eager faces.

"Hell yes!"

"You can sweep my dust any day, Daddy."

I laugh as we all accelerate. "You can watch me wheel this beast."

Time to be wild.

Time to put *all* the past behind me and embrace what is in front of me.

Lennon

Two and a half weeks after our road trip he told me he was leaving to collaborate with tattoo artists from other cities.

I wanted to hate him for that but I just couldn't. I knew he was giving us some space apart to figure out what it is that we truly want.

For two months I've been working in his shop and living in his house which was hard on its own—having pieces of him around me all the time, but not him.

The knowledge he can watch me whenever he wants is both exhilarating and terrifying. I need to remind myself not to do anything humiliating where there are cameras around.

At least I have Scar who is my all-time favorite companion.

Regardless, being here makes me feel safe. It relieves my stress about Bette too.

Dean Walker: You're doing great! I'll be back next week.

His texts made it clear—it was one slip-up.

Now, I need to face him every day, knowing his warmth when he's pressed against me but also knowing I cannot have him again.

I still wait for him to step through the front door and every day drudges to eternity.

Staring at my phone for the hundredth time, the commercial he'd done this summer is playing on repeat, capturing all his captivating angles.

I slightly veer my gaze away from where my phone is resting against the sugar container, Scar's green eyes pop from the island stool, observing me as I place the ingredients on the counter and plot my vegetable massacre.

A devious smile pops on my face. I wiggle my eyebrows at Scar who looks enchanted by my nonsense.

I turn my music on and Jolene blasts my earphones, extracting the marvelous dance moves out of me.

Roasting some potatoes and carrots sounds like a lovely uprising. I chop them and spread some olive oil and seasoning on top, blend everything, and toss it into a baking pan for twenty minutes.

Exhaling a tiny sigh, "Now what?" I pat Scar's head.

Jamey leans against the counter, "What are you making?"

"I'm tossing potatoes and carrots in the oven."

"Odd choice."

I squint my eyes at him. "That's the only thing I found and while Mom and Dad are on vacation I rather do the cooking since your culinary skills are nonexistent." I give him a sardonic smile.

He presses his hand to his chest, "Ouch."

I roll my eyes as I rip the oven gloves off my hands.

"We can order pizza."

"That's the only thing we ate this week."

“What’s wrong with that?” he shrugs.

“Absolutely not.” I set the timer. “We need a proper meal at least once.”

“I hope it’s edible,” he strolls away, “Otherwise I’m telling Mom and Dad you didn’t feed me properly.”

A gust of wind brings the salty scent of the ocean to marinate my skin and blend with the aroma of the roasted vegetables in the oven.

The surging waves in the distance curl and break dangerously, painting a spume across the coastline. Jamey and I used to run across it, wiggle our toes, and collect seashells as souvenirs.

My eyes brim with tears, *why does it still hurt?*

I miss you, Jam.

I miss the sound of your voice.

I miss you calling me, Len.

I miss you running around to tell me about something you’re excited about.

I miss your presence.

I miss you.

Watery streaks skid down my cheeks. All my emotions, one by one, add to the growing pile of knots I conceal in my stomach.

The truth is Dean hurt me.

I shouldn’t be hurt like this. Nothing is going on between us.

It still hurts.

I’m disappointed in myself for thinking he would want anything to do with me. And maybe a little at him for omitting what we shared. He could at least speak about it with me and reject me vocally.

For closure purposes.

Pretending like nothing ever happened is so much worse.

I was so open with him because I figured if I did he would feel comfortable

being open with me. He would want to get to know me more and talk to me.

My mind can't stop replaying our conversation and that stupid kiss that left a permanent mark on my lips. And I can't push away the constant need to hear from him.

Why does this have to be so frustrating?

Why can't I just forget he exists for as long as he stays away?

Naïve.

Rock blows smoke rings, "You're young. A little bit naïve because you grew up surrounded by the best people anyone would gladly call family and friends. That's one of the many things that is endearing about you." He finishes his statement with a long blow of smoke.

"Don't fill her mind with your bullshit," Jamey is quick to intervene, seating his ass next to me on the sand. "Don't listen to Rock, he's known as The Jinxer."

I chuckle. "What am I known as?"

"My sister!" he hijacks Rock's smoke, tucks it between his lips and exhales. "That's all they need to know." He eyes Rock.

"You know I'm almost eighteen, right?"

"So!?" he pulls a wry smile. "I will always watch over you, Len." He puts his fist in front of me, smiling widely and waiting for me to fist-bump him. "Opinions are great but they can sabotage someone's path and own state of mind. It makes you think that this is the 'correct' answer and it denies you the freedom of exploration."

"Such a poet, my love," Rock says in a sarcastic tone while rubbing his chest.

Flipping him the bird, "Fuck off, Rock," Jamey winks at me.

These days, people effortlessly forget others. Sliding individuals from left

to right or vice versa and continuing with their lives like nothing ever happened.

How?

Am I a dysfunctional woman in our generation?

My mind won't let me forget. Plain and simple. I can't swipe it away like they never existed in the first place.

One moment you're here, the next you're gone. All those insignificant moments become a beloved memory.

A few days ago I saw a post about a young man, probably my age, who lost his life in a motorcycle accident. Every time I see those kinds of posts it makes me sad and tears start flowing. I mourn them too. Because they meant something to someone. They existed. They left their mark somewhere. And now it's like they never even walked these streets.

Maybe I am naïve. Maybe I am young. Maybe my weakness is that I care, even for people that I've never even met. One thing is certain, I deserve to be acknowledged and not ignored.

Scar's paw taps on my phone as if egging me on to do what? I'm not sure.

"What do you suggest," I thread my fingers through his fur and snatch my phone in my other hand.

His meow turns to chatter as if he is telling me what he meant.

I wish I understood him instead of staring at my black screen, contemplating my every move before I do something stupid—again.

Sitting next to Jamey, he tucks me to the side of his frame, putting his arm around my shoulders.

I lean my head on his chest and sign.

"What's wrong?" his voice full of compassion. "Are you carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders?"

“I can’t figure it out,” annoyed with myself I add, “The sketch for your tattoo.”

“You will.” He replies calmly, pulling me to look at him as he stretches his benevolent smile at me. “You still have plenty of time. You’d know what to do when the time comes.” He always knows how to placate my irritation.

I stare at our opened chat on my phone, and no words filter in.

Why wouldn’t I have some fun? Experience life.

I worked damn hard lately and I’ve earned some I don’t give a fuck time.

After I finish eating my delicious ‘gourmet’ food, I do a little caper and Scar scratches his paw on my hand as part of our chirography.

Skipping outside the four grades of the back porch, I gaze at the hefty palm tree in the yard—it has been eyeing me all summer.

I have some spray paint in my van.

Running to get it, I jump in excitement as an idea flashes before my eyes.

The skies are colored in gold and magenta hues and so is the trunk of this tree as I spray it with strokes of vibrant colors to match the sunset I’ve witnessed every day I spent here.

My toes are buried in the sand, music playing aloud as I inhale the freedom into my lungs.

This is exactly what I needed; a piece of paradise.

I let go as I unleash it all.

Lennon

Dean got back today, and the first place he came to was his shop. I told him he could take the day off and rest but he insisted. I wish I could punch this excitement of having him back out of me and maintain my distance—like I promised myself I would.

I'm trying to decipher whether he plans another trip, in that case, me and Scar would have the best time of our lives. But he is being so. Cryptic. It's antagonizing.

What a blast of a week I had after I sprayed that tree and finally put it all to rest. It was a much-needed reflection and it allowed me to channel my creativity and depict the story in my head out in the open. Freeing me of all the frustration I bottled inside.

Since the second he arrived, it felt like he taunted and teased me countless, and yet, it could all be in my head.

He was not joking when he said we are swamped with clients. I worked nonstop in the past month, and October is going to be the busiest month I've had yet.

My name is in the spotlight. Locals walk in and ask for me. My social media is blowing up with messages. My art grew to something I only dreamt about when I was younger.

There are moments when it feels surreal.

“I’ve seen all your posts when I was away, it’s good to see who your competition is.” Dean rakes his fingers through his hair. “I’ve been checking your account to see how your art is coming along.”

My side grazes the front of his black sweatsuit as I tilt my face up to meet the thunderstorm roll in his eyes. A storm that renders me in place and equally empowers me.

His accustomed handsomeness deflects my thoughts while my heart’s racing. Clit throbbing. I’m freaking dazed. So much for not letting him affect me.

The wire crossing between us is electrifying, zinging us both every time we touch by accident or just stare at each other.

I’ve been using my toys for eight agonizing weeks and it doesn’t help diminish the inferno that rages within me.

I flash a tiny smirk, “You mean, stalking my work...”

He mirrors my expression. “A little.”

“Didn’t know you possess this type of tendency,” my treacherous legs are weak but I won’t let him get to me.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.” He pushes his pelvis farther into me. “Bunny.”

Bunny?

He hasn’t called me that since it accidentally burst out of his mouth on the Ferris wheel.

I don’t understand it. He didn’t act like that for weeks upon weeks.

What's the sudden change of heart?

I search between his piercing gaze, "How was your trip?"

"Are you changing the subject?" he bites the edge of his mouth, seeming amused.

Furrowing my brows, I reply, "Are you? Mister Expert."

"My trip was good." Jaw ticking, he brushes his fingers on my hand. "But looking at you through the cameras was better."

My eyebrows rise on their own, "It sounds like *you are* a stalker."

"You knew I was looking through the cameras."

"I assumed you would occasionally," I pronounce every syllable.

"Not when I have a precious girl in my house."

Why hearing him calling me a precious girl in his deep raspy tone is infuriating and panties melting?

"I had Scar, I'm pretty sure he would scratch anyone who dares to hurt me. Besides, he was the only one who stayed."

"Oh, so you're angry I left?" he says in a light tone, humorous even, but his attentive stare tells me he's serious.

I was.

Mostly disappointed.

And I had to leave it behind me.

"No. I'm happy for you." A jolt of acceptance climbs up my body. "It seems like you're at peace."

"I am."

"Good." I go to retrieve my bag since we are done for today.

He scrolls through his phone as he clears his desk. "I'm posting your last design and tagging you in my account, it's gorgeous."

Our eyes keep encountering from across the room and *his* slash through my

cornea, washing my tides with his brilliant ocean.

The door of the shop opens and a lady about Dean's age saunters in. Her classy look with a tad hippy vibe makes me grin.

She fixes the gingery bandana wrapped around her brown coiled hair that is tucked upward. Rocking those knee-vintage boots and the long-sleeved, tight emerald dress showcasing her toned lean figure.

“Dean!” Her vibrant voice booms in our vacant shop.

“Beth, it's good seeing you.” He doesn't even turn from his desk when he replies to her in a knowing tone.

Seems like they know each other.

“I just came here to check in with you. Are we still up this afternoon?” Those words suck the oxygen from my lungs along with one perpetual skip of my heartbeat.

He doesn't owe me anything. He is an adult and he can be with whomever he wants. It still doesn't hurt less.

I deserve to be wanted. And chased. And cherished. And if he is not my address I will find my address in someone else.

“Of course.” The immediate response causes my stomach to whisk and my first instinct is to clear my voice which gets Beth's attention.

“Oh, you're the girl everyone keeps talking about.” She nods at him, “He says your work is amazing.” She rests her hands on her hips—nothing less than a strong woman—the definition of confidence.

Fetching my things in my backpack, “It's a great opportunity and I'm gaining a lot of experience thanks to Dean.” I answer fast, wanting to get out of here as soon as possible.

The countless metal bracelets on her hand jingle as she moves toward me.

“You should come too. We're having a friend's gathering. All married

couples but this one is evermore single.” She clicks her heel boot on the floor, feigning annoyance toward Dean.

Married.

Dean nods in agreement. “Yes, come. I’m sure Scar would love to see you.” His genuine enthusiasm turns into mocking sarcasm.

This is another invitation that keeps messing with my head but I can’t pass an opportunity to spend more time with my new best friend.

She closes our gap and starts to comb my locks. “And my husband is gracing us with his skilled barbecue expertise so you’re in the luck.” Turning her face over Dean, she raises her voice again, “Why aren’t you feeding this baby? Do you need me to kick his ass?” She says humorously.

Her energy is motherly-like.

I like her.

“The last thing I’ll ever do.” He comments in a strict offended tone.

“I know.” She softens. “He’s one of the good ones,” Beth whispers, only I hear her words.

“Well then, I’m glad we sorted this out. I’m going to see you two later so... bye for now.”

She hugs me, waves at Dean, and strides out of the shop.

Came in like a hurricane and left like one as well.

I’m relieved to hear he’s not dating anyone. It still doesn’t change the fact our relationship is strictly business.

I shouldn’t care.

Santa Monica was wonderful, I keep replaying it like a dear memory I can’t get out of my head, no matter how hard I try. I thought our kiss was incredible. Feverish. The good kind.

“Lenny.” He calls my name but what could be so important now when I’m

completely zoned out?

It lasted for so long that I forgot the world existed around me and the way he held me so close to his body made me feel so safe. So cared for.

Stop deluding yourself.

A brief moment that is history now is going to be forgotten in the future when I meet someone else.

I'm thinking about giving myself a deadline. Start dating in six months from now. Put myself out there.

"Lenny." This time his voice is closer and more urgent.

I rotate my face from my bag to find him looming over me.

His countenance cauterizes my muscle memory, penetrating the walls I'm trying to compound.

"I hate this distance." He cranes his neck to the ceiling, grunting. "I-I want —"

A few seconds of silence permeate the space.

"I'm sorry."

Crinkling my nose, I reply, "For what?"

"For being so indecisive and leading you on," he tilts his head down to meet my gaze and pierces me with his intensity.

"You didn't say a word to me for two months, and you want to keep it strictly business—I respected that," I say intently.

He sighs. "I had a lot to think about. This isn't easy for me, Lenny. This whole situation is complex and I needed to treat it carefully for both of our sakes."

"Look I get it, I'm just some random girl that's fun to be around. It didn't mean anything." I turn to grab my bag but his hand stops me as he pulls me flush against him.

“That’s not true,” he gazes at me through wounded eyes as if I said something inaccurate. “So you are angry?”

“What do you think?”

“That you’re being stubborn right now.”

“I just want to go to Bette and have a good nap, I’ll drop by your place to see Scar and then I’ll go.”

His warm breath fan my face, “Why are you running from me?”

“I’m not running.”

“I’m pretty qualified to know when someone does and you are.”

“Dean.” The assertiveness in my tone of voice resounds.

“Lennon.”

I grind my teeth. “What has gotten into you?”

Another moment of silence stretches under great tension like a tight rope rips in two.

“You, bunny.”

“If I’m a joke to you then I don’t want no part of it.” I try to haul out of his hold while I continue to pelt my words at him. “I understand why you battle with yourself. I’m young. We work together. You have your past. I’ve got mine. And you travel so no commitment policy. Maybe you’re looking for something casual and obviously, it’s not going to work with an employee.”

He stands there like a mighty tower made by the gods, his feet spread firmly in place, inaudible, while I try to twist out of his grasp.

“Are you done?” his complacent demeanor boils the blood in my veins.

I look him dead in the eyes like we’re at war and flinching is out of the question. “I’m not done,” in a steely tone, I add, “I shouldn’t have had those conversations with you. Everything was a mistake.” I scowl.

Nodding his chin up, “No it wasn’t.”

His eyes are brighter than I remembered, skimming over my facial features in a slow pursuit. The angles of his face sharpen to the point I can cut myself against him.

Why does he have to be so beautiful?

Shoving his chest, “We made a mistake once in the heat of the moment but I’m old enough to understand this is not going to work. Now let. Me. Go.”

“No.” He fastens his arms around me. “You said your peace now it’s my turn.”

I hate him for this, fueling my body as he does. My heart is beating frantically within my ribcage as the feel of his rises and falls. My cheeks probably changed color to fifty shades of tomato up until now, and the heat my body projects can easily start a fire.

“My childhood wasn’t pretty. My past relationships made me question everything. I avoided you out of fear.”

My eyebrows knit, “Fear of what?”

“Getting hurt again. Being rejected again. Giving my all and it would still be wasted. You accused me of ignoring you. I didn’t ignore anything. I fought against every urge my body manifested around you.”

“Then why hide, why did you run away from me the first chance you got? Why didn’t you talk to me? I thought I always showed you that you can speak your mind.”

“I had to give us space,” His eyes have never been more emotional than this but his voice remains sharp and soft, “Do you think you know everything about me?”

“I never claimed to know everything about you.”

“You are so free and open about your life, I envy that.” He cracks his knuckles behind my back, “I achieved so much but inside I want to scream so

loud for all those moments that made me cold and calculated about love.”

“You can tell me.” I press my hands to his chest. “Scream with me.”

“I can’t.” His facial features articulate emotions like a cannon. “Have you ever watched a barrel of a gun aimed at your head while death played a cruel game of balance scale?”

“No, I haven’t.” The wrench already twists my stomach, “But I know something about a cruel game.”

He scratches his neck, eyes roving all over my face. “I survived things a kid shouldn’t have had to deal with. Only to watch someone else pull the trigger after you gave them a shot, willingly. One bullet and it was enough to shatter me. Metaphorically speaking.”

I knew he had a rough childhood based on tabloids and articles, and the famous broadcasted breakup he had years ago from a woman who took advantage of him. But it was his story and it wasn’t my place to pry in someone else’s life sans their knowledge, consent, and veracity.

His features soften. “I denied you and ignored what we shared and it was wrong of me because I didn’t want to make a mistake with you.” Our eyes bore into one another, “I didn’t know if I should peruse you. And I thought you’re too young to want me.” He cups my cheeks. “With each day that goes by all I want is to be around you.”

“Dean, I’m not a toy you pull out to play with when it fits and then shove into some deep drawer and ignore its existence when you feel like it.” I take a deep breath. “I have feelings too.” I’ve waited so long to spill those words.

His eyes stray from mine for a split second to check my bunny tattoo—the fondness he has for it makes me shiver.

Swallowing hard, his eyes flick to mine and he laughs.

“Are you laughing at me?”

He stops, but his smile is still tucked in place, “Never.”

I scowl, “That is so much bullshi—”

His mouth merges with mine, and his hand presses my neck gently to deepen the kiss while his other hand hangs around my jaw, slipping slowly to grip my throat.

My treacherous pussy is wet.

All my unfinished words dissolve on his tongue as he glides it along mine, round upon round.

Slightly pulling back, he moves his delicious lips, “I have never felt more like myself than I have when I was with you.”

Dean

The half-lidded eyes looking at me irradiate lustfulness, fueling my desire to devour the little bunny sitting before me.

Every spark of her essence lights up when I touch her.

Her cheeks turn pink as I wrap my hand around her throat and shove my hips into her belly. She lets out a soft gasp. Her nails dig into my back. My forehead is sealed against hers, letting her know in all ways possible what she does to me and how much I want her.

“Dean, please.”

The coconut scent on her skin clashes with my nostrils, and my teeth graze my lip. “Please what, bunny?”

“Mmm.”

My thumb stretches her bottom lip, “I need to hear you say it.” My tone is demanding yet soft.

“Touch me.” Her tender voice cloaks me.

“How bad do you want me to touch you?” I lightly squeeze her throat once and a desperate gasp leaves her.

“I can’t stand it anymore. I want you everywhere.” All I see is a green light and a decisive yes echoes in my ear.

“Fuck,” I mumble as I seal my mouth to hers.

The salty taste on our lips hungers me for more. She gapes her mouth and my tongue meets hers. If I could I would be fucking her mouth for hours but instead, I savagely attack her.

Opting between pleasure and pain, I kiss her tenderly, then bite down her heart-shaped lips. I stick my tongue out and she licks it a few times, then sucks it in her mouth.

“I want more.” She confidently demands.

I look around us, grabbing a plastic wrap and swathing it around the tattooing bed we left open behind us.

The playlist we’ve been hearing all day plays softly in the background.

Thankfully, where we ink is a section without a transparent window.

“On the bed, now.” I commend while I go to lock the shop’s door.

Sneaking a glance at her, those sexy legs quickly hop on the bed.

“This is not going to be our first time. Not with a deadline. Because if we’re late, Beth, will chop my head off.” I announce. “Are you sure you want this, bunny? Once I have you, I’m planning to fuck you in every way possible.”

“More than anything.”

I acted like a fucking idiot and wasted months watching her on my phone. I couldn’t bear the thought of her leaving the shop because of my actions, although I wouldn’t have blamed her if she had.

Perhaps, it was the right move for both of us.

For me.

When I kiss her it charges up my entire existence. It never felt this consuming, aching, cauterizing, and soothing all at the same time.

I thought she was too young for me—a small part of me still does—but the way she stares at me with so much affection and endearment is a line I'm willing to finally cross.

Our magnetizing attraction which I constantly fuck up due to my incapability to let someone in has never been extinguished even after I left her. When I get attached to someone they have the power to shatter me because when I love, I love with all my heart, and I don't know any other way.

No one is going to take advantage of me anymore, I won't let them. And I won't let myself run away from what I want either.

As if on cue, my phone rings in my pocket. I would normally ignore it but it's Beth's ringtone and I set it that way in case of an emergency.

I extract it quickly, show Lenny the screen, and answer. There's no judgment in her eyes. Not an ounce. She even smiles.

As her usual self, Beth orders, "You better be home when I get there!"

That woman is impossible. She's like my older sister but if I'll tell her that, shoes will fly toward me for hinting she's old.

"We'll be home soon, don't worry."

"Oh, you're still with Lenny." She quiets. "Then, take your time but don't be late." She hangs up with the same determination she had when she called.

Lenny laughs. "She's an interesting individual."

"Yeah, she is." I shove at her shoulder gently, "Where were we?"

She leans backward on her elbows.

I skim my fingers underneath the hem of her shirt, over her belly, and I tickle her flesh. I exude as much fun as I can as if this is a one-time thing for us. *It won't be.* I knew it from the get-go, hence why, I was hesitant about insinuating anything to Lenny.

The tremors of her responsive body make me groan.

I graze the waistband of her jean shorts, waiting for her silent approval and when I get a nod, I pull her shorts along with her underwear and chuck them on the nearby couch where her bag rests.

Her pink glistening cunt is exposed to me under the dimmed lights of the shop. Beggings to be treated the way she deserves.

“Already soaked for me.” Another groan escapes my throat on an itch. My cock jerks in my sweats as I spread Lenny’s legs wider.

I climb behind her, pulling her back to my front.

“What’s that?” I rub my thumb over her piercing, grinning behind her ear to the delighting surprise.

“My vertical hood piercing.” She answers as if we’re in an interrogation.

I press it harder. “You’re a wild thing, aren’t you?”

Her delicate moan whips at my ear and infects my body.

“I-I was mostly curious.”

“What did you find out?” I taunt her, taking away her fun.

She grunts in disapproval. “It heightens my orgasms, but I haven’t tried it with someone else.”

“Let’s experiment, shall we?”

Nodding, she begs, “Please.”

Fuck.

If she’ll continue this I will shove my cock so far up her ass she’ll sing for hours.

I yank her hair gently but with enough force to earn a yelp from those succulent lips. “You like the things you told me in our online conversations?”

I use my other hand to grab her jaw and tilt her face at me.

Those gorgeous eyes sparkle with desire. “Yes, Daddy.”

Did I just die from all the blood she drains and sends to my cock? Or did she just call me, Daddy?

Urgency directs me to wound her hair in my hand and tug it a little harder than before. “What did you call me?”

Slightly hesitant than a minute ago but the wicked smirk does come to the surface once she realizes my cock grinds into her through the suffocating sweats I wear. “Daddy.”

My eyes are glued to hers. I muster the deepest sound I can utter and whisper the words. “You want to be Daddy’s good bunny or Daddy’s. Little. Slut?”

“Both.”

“Mmm,” I growl into her ear.

The amount of flames I restore in my chest can dust an entire forest to its ashes. I examine my bracelets, pulling the elastic black rubber band. “This will be our improvised cuffs,” I push the band onto her linked palms.

It’s not hard and she can get out of it if she wants to but I don’t think she’d want to. I like to witness this side of her. *It’s kinky*. For some, it’s enough to have the feeling of restraint and lack of control to turn them on and excite their bodies.

“That feels good?” a lewd grin crosses my face. *Of course it does*.

“That feels sublime.” She feels my erection. *Everything* that this woman does to me.

“Ahh,” she moans to the friction of our bodies, dry-humping her backside against my cock. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Tsk. Tsk. Tsk.” I pause. “You’ve been taunting me through the cameras for months. Wearing those shorts that expose the tattoo on your luscious thigh which leads to the part of you I crave the most. Dancing around my

house with those high-knee socks. And your taut nipples are visible through your tops in case you didn't know which I'm sure was the motive."

In her defense all valid reasons for me to pleasure her to the extant. But I want to make her work for it. Have proper foreplay and some fun.

"I can say the same." Of course, it's not in her nature to back down when she can pitch a well-deserved comeback.

I bite my bottom lip.

The things I will do to her flash like a sequence in my mind of us doing it everywhere.

Tasting each other and pleasuring our mandatory needs.

"Let's hear your smart mouth talking after you paint my fingers with your cum." Right as I finish that line, I let loose of her face and rub my thumb against her clit, drawing round shapes to gather more arousal while she gifts me with her eliciting sounds.

Continuously, I lube two fingers in her slit. "Beg for me to slide my fingers inside you."

"Mmm, p-please Daddy." She shatters.

"You can do better."

Staining the wrapper with her drenched cunt, she takes a shaky breath, "Finger me."

I don't. I flick her piercing instead and her sound increases. So is my cock width.

I'd be teasing her for hours if I could. "Does it turn you on knowing you turn me on?"

"Y-Yes." She rests her head on my chest.

My hands work on different sections of her body, caressing and kneading before my palm cups her center. "Such a good, bunny."

She straightens her head and presses her lips to my neck, licking a spot, rolling her tongue, sucking, and kissing.

A deadly combo.

I groan at the pleasant feeling of her coating me with her saliva. “You better leave your mark.”

While she’s at it, I drag my fingers to her opening and slip two inside.

“Fuck, you feel so good. So slick. So tight.” I stretch her, studying the movements she likes. Pumping in and out and curling the tips every few thrusts to get a reaction from her. To see what she likes.

“Yes...” Panting heavily, she bites down my neck and now I know she will leave her mark for sure.

This bunny has sharp teeth.

The relentless rhythm of my fingers causes her to clench her walls so tightly.

Lenny starts quivering, gasping gentle moans into the air, and I inhale every single one of them.

I grip her throat, forcing her to look at me.

“You want to come?” I push my digits up to my inked knuckles, sink my teeth in her neck, and suck the spot over and over again.

“D-Daddy, I n-need to c-come.” The sloppy sounds of our contact fill the space. “Harder.”

I squeeze her throat with my firm grip, “You don’t tell me what to do, bunny. You enjoy what I give you.”

The need to watch her suffer in need is atrocious but we don’t have time. Pumping faster and brushing her clit, I make sure to flick the piercing too. “Come on my fingers like a good bunny.”

She quivers under my touch, pulsing around my fingers, and releases her

juices hard. Her crescendo is the final note in her ride of pleasure.

I pull away from her and suck my fingers clean.

She stares at me with hunger in her eyes and if it weren't for the meetup at my house, I would have taken her right here, right now.

"You're absolutely breathtaking when you shake and moan." I spin her toward me, cup her cheeks, and kiss her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

I hope she doesn't regret this.

Me.

"High." Her big bright smile crosses her face. "It's better than drugs."

"Are you doing drugs?" Now I feel like a dad interrogating and scolding his child on the matter.

"No!" she shoves my shoulder playfully, "I tried a joint twice but that's it."

"It better be." I let the calm yet authoritative tone set the mood as I lift my eyebrow. Not because I intend to lecture or control her life. She's a grown woman and she can decide for herself what's good for her.

I'm not developing a possessive dick attitude because I hate those assholes who think they can tell a woman what to do. Unless it's sexually oriented and consensual then yes. This is strictly work-related. I can't have someone who's high show up to work and ink our clients.

"Dean, I'll never do that on the job or generally. I wouldn't jeopardize my position or our clients and I wouldn't do that to you and your reputation." Her palms rub mine as I continue to hold her face.

I calmly reply, "Thank you for being understanding."

I help her get off the bed, and grab her clothes, kneeling as she shoves her Converse through the loops of her underwear and her pants.

I strap her bag to each shoulder.

She gives me a sweet peck on the lips, "I'll see you in your house." But

before she goes, she takes my baseball hat and waltzes out the door.

I fix my straining cock.

I can't fucking believe that just happened.

I'm about to grab the keys from my desk when I notice her notebook is on the small table by the couch. I make a mental note to retrieve it for her when we get to my house.

In the meantime, I browse swiftly through the pages and examine her outstanding sketches. I flip a few blank pages, thinking there's nothing else but on the last page, there's a drawing with a dedication.

For Jamey.

I close it, turn the lights off, and lock the shop.

Dean

She left a permanent mark in my backyard.

I run my eyes over the details. Not those of the tree.

My black ball cap is flicked backward on top of her pink hair. She lifts the hem of her pink-powdered hoodie to shove another seashell she collected into the pocket of her jean shorts. But it's the long white socks with palm trees and a van that knock me down once again.

“How was your shower?” I ask as she enters the house from outside.

“Marvelous.” She jumps me from behind, washing me with her coconut scent while I make a salad—my duty for the evening.

Her hands roam over the dips and cuts of my muscles.

Rolling the hoodie sleeves up to her elbows. “Do you need help?” She immediately offers her service.

I chop the last tomato on the cutting board, “Not really. I'm almost done.”

“Then, I can make lemonade.” Always finding ways to do something which ultimately makes all the difference.

“That would be great.”

An hour later, my friends are gathered in the backyard. I introduce her to Danny and his wife Mia. Next Beth, “And her handsome husband is Tony who operates the grill.” I point at him right as he peels off the barbecue tarp.

“It’s nice to meet all of you.” Lenny hugs them and falls into conversation with Mia, Tony, and Danny.

“Of course I do, it’s California, and you’re a fool if you don’t. The waters are magnificent and the waves are sick if you know the right spots.” Immersed in her conversation, I leave her to it.

I knew those four would hit it off.

“If you’re looking for us we’ll be surfing.”

I salute my hand to the side where they can see, “Have fun.”

Heading inside the house to bring the lemonade Lenny made, Beth walks behind me. If there’s one thing I know about my childhood friend, she’s on my tail about Lennon and she’s going to be extremely verbal about it too. I, on the other hand, am not so happy about this upcoming consultation.

Skipping on the ball of her feet, “So...?” she tries to catch up to me but in two long strides I’m inside.

“So... what?” I retort without glancing at her, browsing the kitchen utensils and picking up the salad tongs.

She wags her index finger at me. “You and Lenny...”

I stretch my neck, “None of your business, Beth.” I reply in a lovely tone, rounding the island.

“Are you keeping yourself busy on purpose?” she halts. “Stop!”

Spinning on my flip-flops, a moment of an old Western film is crossing between us. Annoyed, I shove the bowl of salad into her hands. “I’m not.”

“I know you and I know that you know that I know you.”

Not even one muscle in my face moves when I’m projecting my stone-cold

expression. “Are you done with your assessment?”

She grunts. “Stubborn as a bull,” she murmurs under her breath. “I love you, Dean. But there are days that all I want to do is shake you out of it.”

“I love you too, Beth.”

Slowly her features soften. “You run away from relationships like it’s the plague because the one time you permitted yourself to do that, she took advantage of you just to get ahead with her career. It’s been ten years, move on!”

“You know that I tried dating with other women and all they saw was my name, my money. They were completely blind to my soul and what I needed.” I tap my fingers on my chest.

“There are other women out there, who aren’t like that. You’ve been different for the past two months when we Facetimed. Your smile is different, your posture looks different, and you even walk differently.”

“Are you sure you don’t need to change your contact prescription?” I joke, yet I get her point. Everything she says is true. I can argue till tomorrow. The bottom line is that I wanted her and I was scared.

“See!” She squeezes my shoulder, “You joke.”

My hand crosses my chest as I feign offense. “Hey!” I did allow myself to be goofy and talk dirty with Lenny since our first online conversations.

“You know what I mean. You used to be before your heart was broken and kept everyone at a distance.”

Beth saw me at the bottom of the bottle. I used to stay at her parents’ house and spend many sleepovers there while my house was a shit show.

Then again after my breakup, she was once again my cornerstone alongside Danny.

When they got married, I hoped we would stay in touch, losing them

would've been devastating.

They are my family.

In the end, I'm the one who disappears for long periods. Running from this reality. Escaping what I want most.

A family of my own.

Something I was deprived of.

I'm still the luckiest man to have people I can call family in so many places. I never thought that this would be my life after the morbid beginning I had, but it is, and it is time to put it all to rest.

"Yeah, I get it."

"You're less stiff and more relaxed. Thanks to her." Beth fortifies her argument and adds another layer of clarification to my recent conclusions.

She grimaces, making one of her weird, silly faces.

I screw my eyebrows, nodding sideways, "You're so weird."

"I'm making those faces for Daisy."

It's been a while since I've seen her little girl.

"Don't waste this once in a lifetime. Give her a chance. Give yourself a chance." She pats my shoulder, "You deserve to have it." As she waltzes out of the kitchen, I'm left to simmer with these thoughts for a moment before I stride to grab my board and head to the ocean where the other guys surf.

Paving my way through the water, Lenny already rides a wave and Danny and Mia are on her tail, trying to keep up.

She paddles toward me, "Think you can keep up, old man."

Oh, she wants to play that game.

I pull her off the board and into my front, my finger digs into her underwear and I start to play with her piercing.

"Dean!" she whisper-shouts my name only to me.

“What happened to, Daddy?”

“People are around, and your friends. OM—”

I tickle that cute little piercing multiple times, “They’re far from us.” When she bites her lip as a reaction to the pleasure I inflict on her body I know it’s a reward I will never get enough of.

I push two fingers inside her tight walls and feel her clench around me. “Such a good little slut, letting Daddy finger fuck her when there’s audience.” The deep undertone of my voice echoes in her ear.

She moans back into my ear. “It’s so hot today.”

“I bet it is.” I pump my fingers faster, “Unless you want my friends to catch us you better come for me and be very quiet.” I observe her expressions and I can tell she enjoys this. Her tiny soft moans are making me impossibly hard but I will restrain myself.

“I’m going to come, Daddy.” Her tiny voice registers.

I increase my speed, “Good girl, come for Daddy.”

Her lips part, eyes half closed, and she squeezes my fingers inside her, washing me with her orgasm. I pull quickly from her at the exact time Danny and Mia approach us.

“Guys the waves are insane today, let’s go for another round,” Mia shouts, signaling us where to go.

The waves are pretty insane.

I wink at Lenny, “We’re coming.” In more ways than others but that’s our little secret.

These days are some of my favorites.

Pink by Aerosmith is playing, all thanks to Beth and her subtle deeds. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins. Hanging with my friends is always

a blast. They're a bunch of laid-back kind of people with the best of intentions.

I high-five Lenny's hand which is already in the air waiting for me to seal the deal.

After we had fun in the ocean, we ate the divine barbeque and now we watch the others continue to play on the beach as we guzzle down lemonade from the exertion we just had.

Beth and Mia try to catch the ball while Tony and Danny are throwing it high between them on purpose. My predicament is both of these women are about to tackle them to the ground in seconds.

I already laugh just thinking about it.

The fairy LEDS circle the palm tree in my backyard casting magenta light on Lenny's swinging frame.

The sun is gone but warm colors are still covering the skies

I lean back on the chair. "Are you having fun?"

"Absolutely. It's been a while since I've had this much fun. Thank you for inviting me. Your friends are the best. So welcoming." She speaks a mile a minute again.

"I love having you here. And the fact you're getting along with my friends is a sweet bonus." The grin still covers my lower face as I bite down my lip, taking her in.

Her hand is reaching out to mine, skimming back and forth in soothing circles, and tickling every nerve in my system.

Like an unwelcomed rain, Beth shows up, her get-lost vibe reflects in a definitive look she throws at me and I know it's my cue to scurry away while she has girls chat with Lenny.

I strip my gaze over to Lenny, "Good luck."

Taking a few beers from the cooler, I head toward the beach where Tony and Danny are having a conversation and sit on the sand next to them as I hand each a bottle.

“What did my wife tell you?” Tony questions, “I know she poked you because the damn hole is still digging into your chest.” He jokes.

“You know Beth and her unfiltered mouth.”

He cackles, “All too well, brother.”

“She told me I should give myself a chance at love.”

He sighs. “My Beth. She loves you very much, and I know that you already know that but I want you to know that she thinks about you every day.” Lord, sometimes they even sound the same.

I can see the hesitation in his eyes.

“She’s worried that you’ll end up alone—”

“Like my mother did with alcohol and drugs.” My thumb traces the rim of the bottle but it doesn’t even appeal to me. “That’s not who I am.”

“Of course, we know that. And we’re not going anywhere despite your ongoing efforts. Beth is right,” he runs his hand through his hair, “That woman is always right, give yourself a chance. You’re both adults and working together in a tattoo shop is not the end of the fucking world. No need to call HR on your ass.”

I puff a half-suppressed laugh, “It’s not that.”

“If you end up hating each other she can tattoo anywhere she’d like, that girl is crazy good.” Danny enters the conversation.

Just the thought of her leaving pisses me off, “She’s not going anywhere.” I cross my arms over my chest. “She needs to stay. I have so much more to show her.”

Tony’s chill expression always reminds me of Johnny Depp with long hair.

“Okay, Daddy.” He teases.

I’m starting to think it’s tattooed on my forehead.

I give him a stern look as I try to swallow the lump forming in my throat. Did I butt-dial Beth accidentally while we were in the shop?

“The kinks nowadays. So many women are into those things, they read all about it in books. I tell you the best thing that has ever happened to me and Beth. Thank god my wife likes to read so many of those dirty books because I’m all for it.” He declares to the sky. “Excuse me, spicy books and smut is how they call them.”

Danny questions, “Really?”

Tony nods in confirmation.

Danny’s fingernails clink against his bottle, “I should try it with Mia.”

Tony continues to explain but I’m half listening and half watching Lenny talk to the girls.

“I buy her gift cards and gift her books from the wishlist she puts on my nightstand every month. It turns her on that I buy her what she wants and surprises her during that month. I get all excited just from the look of contentment on her face. And don’t even get me started on how it contributed to our sex life.”

The girls are conversing about god knows what, Lenny looks stunning as always. But when Beth picks up her phone her face fills with dread.

She sprints to gather her belongings and I call Tony immediately to tell him something is wrong.

Panic is reflected in her eyes as her hands clutch to Tony’s embrace. “The babysitter called, Daisy doesn’t stop crying, and she sounds panicked so we better get going.”

He soothes her gently, “It’s okay, babe.”

“It’s early I know. I’m sorry.” Beth apologizes.

It’s almost eight-thirty. I’ve been waiting hours for the chance to have Lenny in my arms again. I give her a dismissive wave, “No, don’t be.” I know it’s their time to have some fun away from their demanding jobs and duties.

“We took a ride with Danny and Mia so I’m sorry to be such a party pooper.”

“You’re not. It’s okay, Beth. I’m tired anyway.”

“Yeah, Grandpa needs to sleep.” Danny is in his usual jokester mode as the others collect their stuff.

Lenny hugs them goodbye. “It was lovely meeting you all. I hope to see you again.” A proud molecule spread throughout my body, seeing her like this with them.

“Bye, guys.” They exit the front door and once again it’s just Lenny and me.

“I couldn’t wait for them to leave. It’s such an awful thing to say.” Having them here stands in my way of getting what I want. What I need.

Lennon Quinn.

The girl who turns my world upside down and doesn’t spend much time talking after she pulls me in for a long kiss.

Tasting those pouty lips numerous times wouldn’t suppress the craving of having her against me time and time again.

The sourness of the lemonade coats every stroke of our tongues.

Lenny takes a step back to get rid of her hoodie. The white bikini she wore the first time she was here does a bad job disguising her pebbled nipples. She shimmies her jean shorts down her legs.

I rest my form on the beach chair, losing my shirt in the process.

“Come to Daddy.” I tap on my lap.

She obliges in seconds, attaching her figure to my solid front.

Lennon

Harboring me between his arms, he showers the length of my neck with kisses, licking, and nipping at my flesh carefully.

I wanted him for so long that this moment feels surreal.

He spreads his marks all over my sun-kissed skin.

Claiming dots as his own.

The shell of my ear is being viciously attacked as he grazes his teeth and soothes the spot with a calming lick, all while fondling my breast and applying pressure against my hardened nipple on the outer part of my bikini.

“Yes...” Subtle moans break out in the darkened vicinity as the chilly breeze caresses my face.

The direct neon light is like a spotlight that enables someone to watch us, and all that crosses my mind is fuck it. Let’s put on a show for the shadows.

He murmurs to my neck, “On your fours.”

I fix myself around him, pressing my palms and knees to the white surface of the chair.

He licks a line down my spine, igniting my nerves.

His fingers play with the thin straps on either side of my bikini. He pauses to slither his hand down my thigh and closer to my center.

The anticipation is maddening.

Arousal sways in my underwear.

Unhurriedly, he unties the knot but stops to swipe his hand on my pussy, teasingly.

“Your bikini is completely soaked,” he growls.

A shaky breath fleets my throat.

I want him to get rid of the fucking piece of fabric that denies me his touch.

He frees one side of my hip and kneads it.

“Please,” I moan softly.

I wait.

Not so patiently but I do.

My heart rate is spiking to highs I’ve never experienced.

It’s thrilling.

The silence itches at my skin and the breaking waves on the horizon taunt me as my clit pounds to the sound they’re composing as they clash.

I want him to bang me like a whore, utter unspeakable words as he shoves his cock in me farther. Harder. And louder.

Taint me.

His fingers start to roam along my legs, titillating the spots he encounters, and increasing the flames threatening to erupt. He continues to caress my ankles and drags a line along the soles of my feet before he follows the same trail back up to the delicate spot behind my knee.

I coo.

The tenderness he maintains casts me under a fervid spell.

He’s taking his time, using this simple touch ceaselessly. He’s like a ball of

heat under me, emitting the ocean scent of him.

He seizes my exposed butt cheek and in mere seconds his delicate touch turns to a hard spank.

SMACK.

SMACK.

“You love to be spanked don’t you?”

My walls clench around nothing and my cheek is on fire.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Good girl.”

Dean rotates the headrest down, adjusting himself underneath me as I peek between my legs, and through my eyelashes I catch the grin plastered across his face.

Then he unties the second knot and the fabric falls onto his stomach. The sight of my drenched center prompts his nostrils to flare and his teeth to bite down his luscious lip.

“Sit on my face, bunny.”

I slide backward, line my legs around his face, and drop on his mouth.

A big chunk of oxygen enters my lungs.

His tongue tickles my vertical lips. Then he uses the tip of his tongue to stimulate my clit. The electrical wire it creates sends shock waves throughout my system.

“Ahh,” I moan.

He teases me with small movements. Not even trying anything drastic and I’m ready to explode like dynamite.

His hands fondle my butt cheeks, kneading into my skin and holding them with a vice grip.

Then, he starts swiping up my slit, back down, and up to suck my clit hard.

He uses the method several times, and little tremors bring me to the brink of an upcoming orgasm.

I tremble like a delicate flower but he holds me firmly between his hands, sucking my clit with great intent.

I gasp, trying to collect air while I'm spreading moans like water.

He kisses my clit piercing and flicks it with his tongue all over the place. It's so fucking amazing. The friction of the metal against my clit tingles and elicits a divine sensation.

Abruptly he stops, sinking his teeth into my butt cheek and I whimper again. Every scrape is exceptional—my rose-tinted flesh begs for more.

I buck down, wanting to feel him everywhere.

He lifts my hips a bit, heaving rapidly, "Bunny you taste so sweet, now, bend a little."

Curving my spine, a brutal gasp echoes out of me when he dives right back to annihilate my pussy and rail it with his mouth. Altering between clit suction, licking my arousal, and plunging his tongue to my entrance.

He is a master suction as well, vacuuming my soul out of my pussy.

My face levels the bulge tenting his boardshorts, begging to be let out.

Saliva gathers in my mouth, and I wet my lips.

I stabilize my trembling form on one hand—expertly—I untangle the laces. With no hesitation, he lifts his hips to help me push it down enough to do what I need to do.

I earn a breathy groan around my pussy as his erect cock springs free.

He doesn't stop nor do I.

I just want to do this for him, relieve the tension he carries like a loaded gun.

My need to satisfy him overrides everything else.

Pearly beads of pre-cum spill from his bulbous cockhead. I smear it down his veiny length, stroke him a few times, and lick his salty tip. In return, I'm rewarded with the vibrations of his groans around me again.

Gradually, I take his cock in my mouth, swirling my tongue around his ridge.

A guttural groan rumbles from his chest, "Mmm."

I suck him lightly while I massage his balls, savoring his taste.

Keeping the tempo measured, I opt my pace as I swallow him in my throat. Taking a deep breath through my nostrils to allow my throat to accommodate his size. I bob my head around his cock.

Tears well in my eyes as I gag around him yet I relax myself, taking a second to catch my breath and resuming to suck him.

Dean bucks his hips up and pumps two deep strokes in my throat. "Fuck," the muffled sound around my clit is causing my walls to clench around emptiness again.

He blows cool air on my clit and I can't hold *my* muffled moans.

Giving and receiving is such a sublime feeling.

The stimulation of his fingers strumming lightly over my perineum is the end game for me.

I do the same for him over the sensitive speck of skin.

Sliding his fingers in my drenching pussy to gather lube, gently, he stretches my tight asshole and pushes the tip of his pointer inside.

I hollow my cheeks and suck him ferociously, working my hand along his length. Our rhythm aligns, creating a chain reaction. I can't control my moans, he groans and our genitals vibrate in unison as the aphrodisiac sensation hits us vigorously.

I squeeze his thigh, signaling to him I'm going to come—hoping he will

receive the message. And in return, he squeezes my hip.

Tremor after magnetizing tremor crosses my body as he continues savoring my orgasm. So hard. So powerful.

Long jets of hot cum fill my mouth and I savor each one.

He releases me, and leisurely, I spin to meet his gorgeous smile while I drape my body to either side of him.

A deep desire is reflected in his enthralling blue eyes.

“We’re not done.” In his throaty tone, he claims.

I straddle his hips as he picks us up and carries us a few feet away.

A cozy feeling jolts through me when he lays me down on the sand and climbs on top of me. His black hair sits in a perfect wave to the side while a few wisps fall tenderly to his forehead.

My heart leaps in my chest.

I drool at his sculpted abs as I trail my fingers along them.

His body is like a dome, caging me within its regions and keeping me safe yet trapped underneath him.

Our eyes lock.

He grabs my hands, drags them over my head, and pins them in place. A wild flash of hunger washes over his features. “What is your fantasy?”

My knees go weak. My eyes are half-massed. And the knot in my stomach somersaults.

“I-I...” am stuttering.

Do I ask him to reenact my depraved desires?

There are so many things I want to do, I don’t even know where to start.

And what if it’s not what he wants?

I don’t want him to be disgusted by me or look at me differently.

“Bunny,” he hisses softly.

I focus my attention back on him.

“Just tell me what you want, and we’ll learn from there.” It’s like he can hear my inner monologues.

“I want you to say filthy words to me. Don’t hold back. Degrade me. Use my body.” I spew.

No words are being spoken. His gaze simulates a honed arrow of need he jabs at my chest. And the destruction is taking my entire body captive.

I have never seen a man quite like him, so gorgeous. There are plenty, I know that but Dean is just... indefinable.

His expression softly changes, “If you don’t like what I say or do use your safeword.”

I hurry to reply, “I don’t have a safeword.”

“Bette.”

I feel a pang in my heart as I nod in acceptance.

“I haven’t been with anyone for a long time, last time I checked, I’m clean. Are you sure, Lenny?”

I’ve never been more certain. I grab his cock gently, he throbs in my hold.

I want to feel him without his restraints. Stroking him a few times, I rub his tip.

“Oh...” He nods his head sideways.

“Yes, I have an IUD and I’m clean too.”

With no warning, he swats my hand away and shoves two fingers inside me. “That’s right little slut, show me how loud you can be.”

“OM—“

His fingers roll in a ‘come here’ pattern while his thumb rubs my clit in circles and my piercing... oh my.

I’m highly aroused, dripping as he pumps harder and faster.

An extremely thin wire that stretches from head to toe is about to be snapped and throw me into a fierce orgasm.

He growls, pumping rapidly, "What did I say?"

I shudder, and a scream evaporates into thin air, "Daddy."

My insides blossom.

He grabs my neck, holding me in place, and shoving his fingers in my mouth.

"Mmm." I taste so sweet.

A half grin decorates his face. His pupils sway in desire.

With his swollen cock in hand he clouts me on my clit a couple of times.

Little slapping sounds echo between our naked bodies.

I moan, needing that friction again.

And he delivers with another strike on my oversensitive clit.

More.

He slaps me again and again. Sensing my need. Observing my pleasure. The orgasm builds inside me, and my leaking pussy wants every delicious hit.

The sound of his cock thrashing against my clit pushes me to the cusp of another frenzied orgasm.

He does it several more times.

My moans are a theme song he composes with each minute that goes by.

Flipping us smoothly, we swap places and I position myself above him.

His palms grip my hips, "Ride me like the whore you are."

Taking his cock in my hand, I rub him against my slickness, guide him to my entrance and sink.

He fills me to the brim.

"Ugh, fuck." Dean groans.

Tipping my neck back, he wraps his hand around my neck and squeezes once.

I gasp out a moan.

The sand sticks everywhere, an accomplice of our desires.

His fingers roam over my thighs, skimming upward, tickling below my breasts. The goosebumps he awakes with his touch make my belly tighten.

Back and forth, I curve my spine and push my hips against him. Stimulating my clit on his pelvis and getting deeper with each roll. This position is so intense that I feel him tearing through me as he delves deeper.

His eyes whirl with lust, and his chest is rising and falling fast.

My slick arousal makes it easier to spin on his cock, that move alone tingles the deepest part of me.

“You’re such a filthy whore,” he draws lines and circles on my back, generating small orgasms to rise to the surface of our connection. “Fuck me harder, whore. Show me what your cunt is worth.”

I’m quick to bite, “Beg me louder, Daddy.”

“Don’t fucking test me.”

I can hear him grinding his teeth.

I increase my pace, rolling my hips and bouncing hard on his cock. A growl rumbles in his chest—his sounds are the sexiest things I have ever heard.

Balls deep inside me, I grind my piercing against him and moan. I squeeze my breasts tightly and lock my hand around my throat.

The tension coils in my stomach and heats my body.

“Damn,” he croaks. “Hands behind your back.”

I do as he says and he wraps his large palm around my wrists, cuffing me as I keep descending on his thick cock.

Even with me on top, he still wants to let me know he’s in charge.

I continue to ride him.

“Yes...” I mutter.

My legs start writhing from the titillation of our friction as I power through the rolls of my hips.

“You started something you can’t finish, bunny?” he groans.

“No, I want *you*,” I rise a little and drop on his cock again, “To finish *me*.”

He let go of my arms and I spin on his cock again to face him.

In mere seconds, he flips us again and through gritted teeth, he comments, “Careful what you wish for little slut.”

I blush which I’m sure he can’t tell since it’s pitch black and the only source of light is the LEDS nearby. Yet, he can feel the burn in them when his fingers slide across my cheek and cling to my jaw.

“I will destroy your holes one by one.” Finishing his sentiment, he pins both of my hands to the sand, links, and secures them with one hand.

These moments are what make a journey worth it. The collection of stories and memories along the way is what is important. Laughing as we look back and not regretting what we didn’t do. Chasing smiles, places, and feelings that’s what lives are about. If you don’t put yourself out there what is the point of living at all?

“Look at me and don’t lose that eye contact until you see stars and come on my cock.”

I softly whisper, “Yes, daddy.”

He pushes a little bit. Then a little more.

I want to feel all of him and he teases me. Withholding this pleasure. I want to bite him. Lick him. Kiss him. Tear his skin apart with my nails and soothe him later.

The holdups are maddening to the point I’m willing to flick my fingers

around my clit and make myself come with him watching.

“Are you flustered?” He rubs his stubble on my cheek, then my chin.
“Craving Daddy’s cock.”

I spit in my tremulous voice, “I need to feel you deep inside me.”

He slightly withdraws and inserts himself inch by tormenting inch. Deeper. Deeper. And deeper until he’s fully buried in my core, tingling my toes.

I arch my back as he sits, holding my hips in the air and ramming deep inside me. The vigorous thrusts of his cock are freeing. Liberating.

We moan in ecstasy.

Thrust upon thrust he destroys me, and all else fades.

Dean pushes my hips to the ground and grinds on top of me until he’s in my face, grazing his stubble against me again and it prickles my skin—I can’t contain my excitement so I just smile widely.

“You have no idea what you do to me, how savage you make me,” he says breathlessly. Still attacking my center, he places my legs on his shoulders.
“You’re doing so well. So beautiful.”

He measures his thrusts, teasing me, pushing in and withdrawing painfully slow.

Grabbing me by the throat to pull me closer, his lips crash against mine, fogging my vision as my eyes roll in place and my body spasm around his pulsating cock.

The orgasm shudders throughout my body.

He rolls his hips perfectly, hitting my sweet spot with each thrust.

I surf the waves of pleasure like I do when I’m on water. High by the currents that are flooding me.

A scream so loud comes from my chest.

He shoots his cum within me while his eyes roll back and then focus on me

once again.

Kissing my lips softly, he pulls out of me and rises to his full impressive height to put his pants back on.

Dean

“Are you ready to dive right back?” I ask her dilated pupils.

She takes my offered hand and I pull her to stand before me.

I’m swimming in a dopamine pool as the desire to have her again only grows.

I sprinkle kisses on her nose and cheeks.

Grabbing her underwear, I hiss into her ear, “Spread those gorgeous thighs.”

She teeters, holding my shoulder blades for support while I strap the piece of fabric around her hips.

I grip her thighs to lift her off the sand and she straddles my waist and grinds on my cock, searching for that lost contact.

A curious question contorts her face but she doesn’t verbalize it. She just kisses the tip of my nose instead.

“We’re going to the ocean,” I say as I carry us to the stagnant waters. “Good girls come for their Daddy all night long.”

She shivers in my hands, her cute post-orgasmic expression is tacked in place.

The beach is nearly vacant around our area since I'm placed in the corner—on purpose—I get some privacy.

The ocean slightly curves, creating a piece of illusion that resembles a private island.

A veil of dark clouds cast her big ocean eyes, "It's freezing."

"Then I'll have to keep you warm and comfy." I give her my best genuine smile before I cross the waters until they reach our chests.

"Shit!" Lenny shrieks. "Freaking freezing."

In her defense it is, but the fire that courses through my veins beats these infinite fluids.

The moonlight beams on her tanned skin and the starlight embellishes indigo skies.

I splash some water onto her face to get the sand off and she gasps from the cold.

An adorable sullen pout settles on her face, "You're going to pay for this," she says in a low tone.

A peal of laughter forces its way out but I kick it in. "Or I could clamp my teeth around your clit and watch you detonate on my tongue ten times in a row." I wrap my palm around her throat, hypnotized by the effect it has on her. "I could also wash your filthy mouth with my cum like the cum slut you are."

And that sulkiness hastily turns into a pleased smile.

I squeeze, "I'll pay you with orgasms, bunny."

Her nipples are hard peaks, I untie the knot around her back and rip the caging bikini top off of her skin.

With no instruction she links her hands in front of me, knowing what I'm about to do.

I tie the bra around her hands, binding them firmly. Once I'm satisfied, I shove my head through the gap and place her arms around my neck.

Her needy kisses do nothing to ease the ferocious need in me.

I kiss the tattooed line on her chest, above her right breast—the one I memorized the first time she spent here—*Find your ocean, and let it wash your tides.*

I just want to drown in her. Explore the depth of her reef. The currents of her tide. The taste of her shore. Experience her any way I can.

I denied myself critical, essential things over the years because I didn't want to feel hopeless again like I did when I was a teen, running from home.

Pulling my cock out, I remove her underwear to the side. In one thrust, I'm inside her walls again, high by the same sensation I had minutes ago. Taking by her endless beauty and the calmness she instills in me.

Her eyes gaze back at me, illuminating the spell we are under while I thrust deep inside her. Sucking her puckered nipples in my mouth, I clamp my teeth around them, one at a time.

She begs.

She moans.

She curses.

She breaks.

And to each note, I fuck her harder. Enter her deeper. Getting to the parts of her no other man will get the chance to reach. Today she is my bunny. Mine and only mine and with every plunge it will be engraved deep inside her.

Tomorrow it would be her choice.

She can have anyone she wants, she can go anywhere in the world, yet, she

chose to give in to me. There's nothing else for me to do other than embrace it, and bring her fantasies to life.

“Oh my—” she moans.

Her fingernails create dents in my flesh, scratching vertical lines as she drags them along my neck and upper back. The pain awakens me and satisfies a need I didn't know I had.

She can't contain her loud moans when I growl into her ear. A Tingly sensation rolls down my spine and surges through my cock, making my muscles tighten and clench up.

“Take a deep breath.” I urge.

She nods as if understanding and agreeing to what I'm about to do. We both inhale deeply, our eyes transfixed on one other, and with one pull we're underwater.

The silence envelops me. All the voices are mute. The waters swallow us into their depths and instead of searching the surface to collect air, we follow them willingly, succumbing to their peacefulness.

Her lips press to mine.

We can't see anything but I can feel her wrapped around me. I thrust into her, feeling her walls clench around my cock, and her fingers brush through my hair.

In our world, the calmness of the water evacuates all the dread I bottle up inside me. She trusts me, leaning against me, rolling her tongue on mine, and sliding on my cock.

When it becomes too much I yank us above the water.

We take a long breath before we submerge again.

Ramming my cock continuously, our mouths crash. My fingers climb up her sensitive flesh and grip her throat. When she bites my lips, I ascend the

surface.

I take a moment to remove the droplets of water off her eyelashes and caress her temple. Lenny is the epitome of beauty to me.

My cock jerks in her warm waterfall as it flows into the ocean.

I release my cum and let the cramping and convulsion consume us while this never-ending orgasm ensues. Stemming from the depths of our cores. We shiver in unison as the cold tides smash into our overheated bodies.

I extract us out and take us inside the house. “I want more of you.”

Turning on the heater in my room. I play with the faucet until the water is warm, and only then, I wash our naked bodies quickly before I haul her to the balcony.

Each one of her legs is spread to her sides, tied to the fabric strap of our robes, and straight into the U-shaped steel I mounted to the walls on each side of the balcony.

Keeping her open just for me.

Like I planned in my fantasies, hoping someone would agree to do this with me.

The tension rises as I prowl behind her. Taking a few steps, I pause. The proximity of our fully naked bodies cauterizes my skin. Every bit of friction is making my cock twitch.

I move in the other direction and pause again. The rapid intake of her breath becomes audible with each movement I make.

As the silence around us increases, we're immensely trapped in this scene, and the ocean sound is a far ballad in the distance.

“Hands behind your back, bunny.” I tether them with a pink ribbon strap I got her as a gift while I was away in case this would happen when I get back.

I hoped it would happen.

Her small breasts are naked at my display, perked and ready to be clamped. I cup them in my palms and pinch her taut nipples. She moans and I know that needy gaze all too well.

The need to ignite her and set her soul ablaze, leave marks on her flesh and push her to the headspace no drug will ever accomplish is growing fast.

I swing my hand and crash her ass with a resonating smack. Her flesh wiggles in my palms and I bite down each cheek.

“Ahh.” The sting produces a whimper from her lips. “I need you to fuck me.”

I rub the blush and land another strike on her ass.

SMACK.

SMACK.

SMACK.

SMACK.

I move to the other cheek while she continues to moan and gasp.

SMACK.

SMACK.

SMACK.

SMACK.

Planting my erection against her backside, I wrap my hand around her throat. “Hush, little bunny,” I squeeze her delicate pillar a little harder, “Daddy’s in charge.”

She leans on the railings, watching the tides while I make her cunt overflow.

Crouching down on my knees, leveling her wetness, I stick my tongue out and slide it along her slit.

A shattered moan erupts from her mouth and washes all over me. “D-

Dean.” Her body writhes.

“What did you call me?” I yank her hair backward.

“I’m sorry, Daddy.”

I provoke her, “Such a needy cunt.”

Watching her soul levitate until she’s passed out from exertion is a fucking goal.

My palms are firmly planted on her butt cheeks, separating them. Another swipe with my tongue from her slit to her crack is making her shudder again.

Agile movements in my peripheral distract me for a split second, when a small shape jumps on the rail top and a tail is wagging I know it’s Scar.

Little fucker likes to watch.

She’s mine now, voyeur, watch me claim her all you want.

Taking my time, I continue to lick her swollen lips, her clit, and her holes. Even though she’s not vocalizing it I can hear the rapid vents that go through her head right now.

The satisfaction is consuming, I bite my lips at the sweet taste of her. And I eat her like a dying man feasting on his last meal. Her juices flood my mouth, stamping her delectable taste and scent on me as I suck her clit and drive two fingers inside her tight cunt.

The slurping sounds increase.

She takes a deep inhale, “Ahh!” she shatters, coming hard on my tongue.

Lubing her ass with her arousal exudes more desperate gasps and moans. I apply a tad of pressure, slipping the tip of my thumb inside. “Bend a little and open up for Daddy.”

My thumb slowly glides inside her asshole, I massage her, stretching her taut hole to fit me. I’m going to have all her holes tonight and pour my cum inside her.

I rise to my height, tilting her head by the jaw to meet my soft expression. Her smile is like a thousand suns, it warms everything I am and burns everything I'm not. I pull her hips backward, positioning her body in the middle of the balcony and placing myself in front of her. I free her legs from the restraints.

“Drop on your knees.”

Complying quickly, hand in mine, she descends until her knees meet the floor. She opens her lips and I direct my cock inside.

“That’s a good little slut, shut the fuck up and take it.” She sucks my cockhead with the right pressure. “I want you to pretend you’re trying to get away from these restraints while I shove my cock down your throat.”

Mouth stuffed, her eyes stare back at me, blinking once.

I feel her relax for me—extracting my groans as every inch slides over her warm tongue to the back of her throat and then she starts to wriggle a bit.

Her gag sounds are like music to my ears and the vibration of her moans is ecstasy.

I fist her hair and tug. “I’m gonna shoot my cum inside your mouth, you thirsty whore.” Thrusting in and out of her mouth, her drool licks from the corners of her lips as I continue to slam my swollen cock inside her for a long minute.

I brush her hair softly before I tug it again, push my cock deep inside and withdraw agonizingly slow.

Her unrelenting movements pleasure me in ways I never thought possible but there’s one place my cum hasn’t spilled from.

Yet.

Pulling out of her, I caress her face and round her. In one swift motion, I’m on my knees, holding her tied hands and bending her back, allowing my cock

to access her ass.

I slide myself along her drenched cunt and push inside her asshole.

She takes me so well—I take a moment to dip forward and kiss a few spots on her back, worshipping every part of her.

My lips are pressed to her ear, “You’re going to wait patiently until I’m deep inside you, and only then, you’ll scream Daddy for me while I’m releasing my cum inside you.”

I let another inch slip in. A little bit more. I rub her ass in soothing circles and slide all of me inside her.

She moans, “You’re huge.”

Groaning, I withdraw and thrust again.

Nonstop.

Slow in the beginning and then I slam her harder—the way she likes it.

Heavily panting.

The world around us shuts down, and the neighbors can go to hell for all I care while the slapping sounds of my balls against her pelvis resonate.

My hand squeezes her cuffed ones, I need to hear her voice. First, to know she’s okay. Second, it brings me absolute pleasure.

She cries out a moan when I pull her back to collide with me. My fingers dab on her thigh, slowly, slithering lower to the inner side of her thigh, grazing her piercing, and toying with her.

She succumbs to me and the pleasure I give her. I’m not going to do anything drastic, not until she fully trusts me. I’ll restrain myself a thousand times before I tie someone else and have my way with them.

It stems from awareness. A deviation could be a fun experience to explore. Lenny expressed it countless times in our online conversations. It’s much

more satisfying to watch someone come undone by you when they give you their all. And she does.

Hauling us back up, I shove her front to the balcony and drill inside her.

She turns her face backward, her eyes not stripping from mine, and with every thrust our moans merge.

“My cock is going to nail you to the fucking balcony if you’ll make Daddy come deep in your ass.” I gasp out the words.

Lenny can’t control her unyielding screams.

I plow into the depths of her.

She feels like paradise.

Smack tunes permeate the air as her ass gets a few delicious welts.

She screams, “Daddy.”

Her walls convulse around me and take me into a turbulence of orgasms.

“Come hard on Daddy’s cock little cum slut.” The pressure heightens, I come hard, and she drains my last spurts of cum within her.

I continue to draw circles around her clit as she keeps coming on my cock.

“Such a good bunny.” I press harder. “Who’s your Daddy?”

“You.” She purrs.

“That’s right.”

Lennon

We had sex all night.

Woke up every couple of hours to kiss and lick each other. Touch softly. Moan. Grind our bodies against one another. Cuddle.

It was the best night of my life, even with him calling me a slut and a whore half of it. The way he made me scream... I have never reached those notes before.

Dean made sure I will get the best aftercare on this planet and I sure needed it after he railed my pussy.

I didn't expect anything when I applied for the job. Dean was looking for a new artist and I thought it would be a remarkable experience to work with an ink master like him.

A tiny piece of me wanted to do it for my brother, Jamey. But now I'm nervous and a little bit afraid of what tomorrow brings when the bubble will burst and we'll have to face reality.

"Are you feeling alright?" Dean asks as he uncovers my frame from the blue duvet on his king-sized bed.

He goes to lock the balcony doors and veers the matching blue curtains to seal the view.

“Better than alright! On top of the gigantic wave.” I blurt the truth. “You’re time recovery is outstanding considering you’re an old man,” I add to tease him.

“You did not just say that,” he starts tickling me and I giggle endlessly. “Come on, I made you a bath. Your beautiful cunt needs to rest.”

As I enter the bathroom, the aromatic scent of vanilla lingers in the air. The shimmering light from the candles cast a warm tint on the white marble walls.

I drop one leg into the bathtub, half of it filled with warm water, and Dean helps me get fully inside as he holds my hand and guides my wobbly legs all the way down.

He climbs behind me, puts me between his legs and I lean my head against his chest.

“I have something for you,” reaching for the shelf next to him, he takes a container and puts it in front of me.

Three ice cream flavors waiting to be devoured and two spoons plunged inside.

His voice envelops me, “I thought you’d want something cold and sweet.”

“This is perfect.” My heart fills with so much joy that I can’t push it down and I burst into tears. Maybe it’s my emotional state after the amazing night we shared. Maybe it’s this feeling of being in his care, in his loving arms. Even if love isn’t a part of it right now. I think someone can show warmth and kindness and protectiveness and affection toward another person without the labels.

We all strive for that.

The levels differ but we all need that in our lives.

He wipes my tiny tears, “Bunny...”

Sugar is the ultimate cure for any emotional state.

I glide the spoon across the container, creating a tiny ball of three flavors, and take a bite. “Mmm.” Cookies n’ cream explode in my mouth, after that salted caramel and then pistachio.

I make another ball on my spoon and give Dean a taste of this palatable ice cream. From his chin angle, I stare at him as he drags it slowly.

A sigh rushes to break free from my lungs.

He caresses the side of my thighs, dragging soothing lines up and down and anew.

I’m so glad to be here with him.

Halloween is coming soon, although, the festivities already started. Since the shop is going to work in a specific structure; longer hours and special offers for some awesome freestyle designs all at the same price.

Which I’m super excited about.

I have scheduled a break for this week as part of my annual trip.

We slept throughout the day. It’s nearly midnight. I’m already fully clothed. I had two hours to organize some food and drinks for the road. The only thing left is to invite Dean Walker to join me.

“Why are you wearing clothes when you can wear nakedness so fucking well?”

His voice travels in the air and before I spin, he clasps his hand around my stomach and removes my hair to spread kisses on the pillar of my neck. Dedicating long minutes to sucking and grazing a spot until I can feel a scarlet mark forming on my flesh.

“My marks look gorgeous on you.”

I turn my head to him.

“So beautiful,” he stares at it with admiration and darts his eyes to pierce through mine with the same expression.

A gut-wrenching feeling gnaws at me. I don’t want him to regret this and run away.

“If you’d keep looking at me like that I might have to fuck you sooner than expected.”

“No time!” I reply as I shift on the soles of my shoes to stand in front of him.

His brows furrow.

Determined to share this with the man who is generous, patient, and protective of me, “We’re going on a hike.” I explain.

A wicked curl tugs at the corner of his mouth. “Really?”

“Yes! Sex in my van is a necessity. It’s not big but we can handle it.” I wave my hands around to emphasize my stance.

He looks away, over to the swan sink of the kitchen. “I don’t want to know how many times you had sex in your van.”

I take his ticking jaw in my palm and tilt his face back to me. “Zero.”

He swallows under my touch, staring into my eyes, “Where?”

“Yosemite,” I answer, biting my lips as I wait for a reaction.

He grins widely. “I’m down,” he dips to kiss my lips.

“Take some clothes, we’re going to stay there for a few days. Perks of having a house on four wheels.” I add. “Long hours ahead of us so get ready.” I subtly push him toward the stairs.

“Oh, bunny. I’ll make you come every hour. You’ll count every second while you get your release with your feet on the gas.” If I wasn’t wet, I most certainly am now which is completely a lie, I was soaked even before that remark.

He gives me a quick kiss again and climbs up the stairs, skipping two grades at a time.



I put the nozzle in Bette's tank fuel, waiting for it to hit the mark.

Dean eats the distance between us in long strides, coming out of the convenience store with two sandwiches in hand, snacks, and a water bottle.

Waving the food, he says, "Good enough for breakfast." He chucks it to the passenger seat. "If it won't be, I can always eat you again and again."

Hovering above me, his palm pushes my back until our fronts collide. He grips my neck with his other hand and honors me with a long, coochie-twitching kiss.

"You better take off those pants and underwear when you drive because I made you a promise and I intend to keep it." He whispers to my mouth in his masterful deep tone.

He nods as a signal for me to get inside while he finishes locking Bettie's tank.

I quickly shove my pants and underwear down as he props himself in the passenger seat. Exiting the gas station, I enter the highway.

"Eyes on the road, bunny." His fingers skid down my inner thigh and onto my soaked pussy while I tightly grip the wheel for dear life.

It's early morning, and there aren't many cars on the road yet still enough to have an audience. "People can see us."

"So?" the resolution spills from his voice.

I take a ragged breath as he presses his thumb to my clit. "You're distracting me and I might crash into that semitrailer in front of us."

"Let them watch how I make you come, slut." He circles my clit once, "And if you stop me again we'll switch and you'll suck my cock in front of everyone." His voice turns soft and caressing. "Be a good bunny and take it."

I glance at him for a split second, his silence is titillating when he strums on my piercing.

"I will, Daddy."

"Ocean stripes." He refers to the tiny stretch marks I have on the junction of my thigh and pelvis. "I want to take a Polaroid of you like that."

I wonder if he'd notice Scar's one on the windshield—I bet he would be thrilled about that.

"You have my permission."

Dean

We navigate through the valleys and creeks.

Lenny nearly fell on her ass at the waterfall area a few times and I had to clutch her to me—all hours of the day. I don't mind binding her to me if it's for the greater good.

She's a great hiker but a clumsy one which is oddly weird due to the fact she surfs like a pro and has insane balance skills.

She looks distracted for some reason.

There is still something off about her presence. It's like she's here but her mind is a million miles away, wandering on its own.

The wilderness encompasses us as we track back to the trails we climbed on earlier, the same ones orchestrating the view of the sequoia trees in the valleys.

“Will you give me a tattoo when we get back?” Lenny asks as she carefully walks before me.

“Of course! I'd love to.”

The chirping birds gyrating around the open skies—they have the best viewpoint of this evergreen picturesque.

It is day three of our trip and every day I share a little bit more about my past with her. The images I saw as a kid, the things I had been through, and the moments I carry with me.

Leaves crunch underneath the soles of my hiking boots. The sun wavers on the horizon. Sheen sweat glistens on my forehead as we make our way back to Bette.

Lenny surprised me by inviting Mia and Danny and they have an organized caravan that helps in the showering and unloading department. It was sweet of her to include my friends. Beth couldn't come because her daughter, Daisy, was sick.

"I missed this. It's been a millennium since we went on a trip together." Danny mentions somewhere behind us.

"Well, I have another surprise," Lenny giggles sweetly and I clutch my palms to her arms and kiss her forehead before I bite her nose lightly and kiss it too.

"What is it?"

"It's us you bastard," Beth's voice booms in the open parking lot space.

My lips part and turn into a smirk. "What?! I thought Daisy—"

She holds her hand in the air, stopping me from rambling on. "She's fine, needed a couple of days to recover," she looks over to her husband Tony who wraps his arm around her shoulder.

"And now she visits her grandparents." He finishes with a wink.

Lenny is quick to say, "We're happy you're here."

"Look at that! The gang is back on the road," Danny's cheerful voice echoes as he puts his arms around Mia and pulls her in for a kiss.

“I came here to have sex with my husband. I don’t know about you, but a four-year-old is a full-time job.” Beth clarifies quickly, “Right honey?! Get in the car.”

“Damn Beth, always the Rottweiler,” Denny comments with a sly grin.

“I don’t have time to bark. I need to get down to business.”

Subtle as always.

We say our goodbyes for the time being as we return to our vehicles. Danny and Mia permit us to shower first so we do it together to cut time even though it’s a tiny box, we manage to make it work.



Our bodies are draped on the bed in the compact space of her small van. The thin metal shelters us from the outdoors. The density forces us to clamp into each other and I love every minute of it. Being this close for three days made us somewhat more intimate.

I kiss the abundance of scars littering her legs, paying extra attention to the scab decorating her knee. “Finally, I can fuck you properly and not finger you in the valley.”

I lick her wound while I stare into the ocean I’m getting lost in as each day goes by, making my way to her lips and crashing our mouths for long moments.

We cuddle, the space is charged in her energy. The pink and yellow sheets, the blue curtains—colorful like her. Necklaces of seashells she collects hang from the ceiling.

A picture of Scar is taped to her windshield... *wait what?*

Scar.

The fucker.

Always one step ahead of me.

She plucks a grape and tosses it into her mouth. I gulp down the pineapple juice she got us while I trace every part of her.

“I need to tell you something,” Lenny says.

Nothing good ever came from those words.

Acid covers my mouth.

I can't read her expression and my muscles clench.

My shoulders are akin to rocks, weighing me down as I wet my lips and swallow hard.

“What is it?” I manage to say calmly in my low tone as I straighten up.

This could be anything—another thought, another story, another fantasy.

She extracts her notebook from her bag and places it on her legs. “My brother, Jamey, wanted you to tattoo him,” she immediately goes to the final page, “I sketched what he wanted.”

A vibrant jellyfish.

It's the same drawing I saw in the shop when she forgot her notebook.

For Jamey.

“He told me about you and I followed your social media for several years before I came here.” She confesses. “He was a huge fan of your work and he had an appointment at your shop but he died a week before.”

Her finger trails over the different lines and shapes crossing the page.

“I come here every year to visit him.” She chokes on her words, “It makes me feel closer to him in a way, watching everything he witnessed hours before he passed.” A slippery tear falls down her cheek before more follow.

“This is where he died,” she rubs circles around her neck trying to soothe herself and I immediately blanket her and press her against me. “I thought he would like to meet you here.”

“Lenny.” The lump grows in my throat.

My eyes akin to hers, brimming with tears.

Her soft hands clutch onto me as she continues sobbing, “He was my ray of sunshine.” She sniffles, and sheds more tears, “Losing him was the hardest thing I had gone through.” She snivels and a shuddered cry erupts from her chest, lamenting the death of her brother.

I hold her for long minutes, letting her unpack it all. I fight the urge not to cry myself but hearing her pain and sorrow breaks me and a string of tears free me from the weight I carried.

Her dearest memory is her brother. Her love for him warms my heart. He supported her every step of the way. The last thing he left on this earth was this van and it became her refuge. Her home. A part of him she could lean on.

I can’t imagine what it’s like to lose someone you love and adore in a tragic accident. It’s inconceivable. Going on a trip, celebrating with your friends, being young and reckless only to be killed by some madman.

It fills me with sadness. It boils my blood. And brings wrath to the energy around me.

Timing is everything.

One day before or the day after and things could’ve been different, but who knows? We can’t change the past. We can’t change actions or time frames.

We can't decide or know when things will happen or not. We wish to, but life doesn't work that way.

It doesn't have a script written down, as much as we want to believe there is, there isn't. Real-life twists can be beautiful, blissful, humorous, life-changing, tormenting, unpredictable, and brutal.

This is life.

We live one day at a time.

Meeting Lennon and hearing her story brought light into my own in more ways than one.

She outshines everything but she forced me to face my demons and win them once and for all. Not all of them will go away and surely not fast but some disappeared or went silent. Maybe it's me who changed my perspective and finally, after all those years truly made peace with the past.

I can't change it, and even if I could, I wouldn't have changed a damn thing.

The world is a broken place that is beyond repair. It doesn't matter how creatively people try to paint their beautiful reality endless spots are tainting their image. Whether they see it or not.

Knowing the snake has venom wouldn't save you from it, nor would you run away.

That's why I'm always watching over those who matter to me the most.

"Jamey, you have the best sister in the world and it's an honor to know you both."

She pulls back to look at me, "I'm sorry, all the things you've been through as a kid... I shouldn't have—"

"Bunny," I cut her off, "There's no competition who has the sadder story. We all carry rocky pasts and heavy moments we had to bear. Burdens.

Difficult times.” I caress her wet cheeks, “I will never compare us. Our stories are different, they make us who we are, and when they merge, they create the most beautiful ending.”

She lifts her chin higher to gaze at me and presses her swollen lips to mine for a long, delicate kiss.

We swap breaths and inhale each other while tiny diamonds cascade down her cheeks.

“Dean,” her silky voice echoes.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

I stare in confusion, “For what?”

“For everything you did for me.”

“I would do it all over again if I could go back.” I grin. “Did he pass away this week?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

She brushes my stubble, “It’s not your fault. Jamey told me that nothing is certain and then he showed me it wasn’t.” She takes my hand and puts it on her chest. “Beth told me what happened in the past.” Her heart is ticking so fucking fast. “I’m not here for your job or your money or fame or whatever materialistic thing there is. I’m here for you.”

I stare at her, utterly speechless. The level of comprehension and acceptance in her words, on her countenance, and in her aura is my peaceful ambiance.

Rubbing her tender belly, I kiss her until we fall asleep.

Lennon

“S ince you let me ink you blindly. I’m letting you do the same.” I declare as I fix myself on the tattoo chair at Dean’s shop. “I trust you to pick something suiting and not an alien dick.” I titter.

He winks, holding his hand against his heart, “Thank you for exhibiting such a vote of confidence in me.” His eyebrow curves higher, “You sure? I excel in those.”

His goofy self has poured out lately. I like watching him drop his guard down. Steadily, he allows himself to be free. Free of the burdens of the past. The shackles he carried. The events he replays in his head.

“Want to make it ten times better and pleasurable?” a glimmer of mischief twinkles in his eyes.

Assessing his movements, I don’t dare to blink as he goes to his desk and draws out a white box.

“I bought you a present and I’m going to use it while I ink you, your thoughts?” he hands me the small square box.

I lift the cover off and stare at the new little toy; a mint shade, egg-like shaped about the size of my palm-ish.

Good thing I wore my lacy black panties today.

“I thought it’d be fun to try together. It has a magnet in the middle so it won’t slip and I’ll have the remote that controls it. Think you can handle it?” the distinct dare in his voice is enough to make me buckle up for the challenge.

I answer sweetly yet determinedly, “Yes, Daddy. I can handle it.”

He plants a kiss on my forehead and takes the vibrator from me.

“Thank you for the gift.”

He peels the oval magnet out of the box. I help by taking my purple sweats off and he stops me from taking my panties away as well. Slipping his hand inside my underwear, he slides his fingers along my arousal, lapping a few times around my throbbing clit.

His eyes are stuck on mine the whole time. The wicked smirk tugs higher.

Feeling my fluids coat his fingers, he smears it along my pussy. I bite my lip but can’t contain a moan when all it wants is to slip out.

Next thing, he slides the vibrator within the fabric, cupping it and attaching it to my heated center. The silky smooth silicone feathers me while he adjusts the ergonomic shape. Once he’s satisfied with the position and the angle of the top surface, he pulls his hand out.

“You’re welcome, bunny.” I adjust in my seat as I get used to the feel of my new toy.

Tasting the waters, he pushes the on-button, and the mint oval remote commends the vibrator to start. The gentle pulses hit my nerves and I lean against the backrest, enjoying the intense sensation around my piercing.

“Mmm.”

Placing my hand on the arm pad, the stimulation calms my entire being, and I gradually close my eyes.

“It’s going to take a while,” Dean informs me and I hear him setting everything and getting ready. “Stop me when you need to come.” The sound of the machine overpowers the quiet engine of the vibrator.

Carving his art onto my skin makes me a fervid mess as he switches patterns in the remote of the vibrator. With every trudging second, I’m losing my goddamn mind to this intense experience I’m participating in.

Clenching my palms, my nails dig into my skin, leaving rainbow-shaped marks.

“Are you okay?” Dean glances at me before he draws another line on my forearm.

“I just need a minute to get used to it.”

“I’m giving you rounds of ten minutes with breaks in between but you’re going to come a lot.” The smugness oozes from his face as he draws another line on my skin.

I inhale a shaky breath as I relax and prepare for the forthcoming climax. The sensation climbs all over my body. Leaving me numb in different areas and paralyzed in the seat. I stretch my head back and the erotic rhythm scratches all of my itching parts.

I bite down my lips as moans crawl out of my throat.

“Dean, stop!” He does and I burst in flames of potent pleasure. My eyelids shut down. The orgasm washes all over me. I take small breaths, parting my mouth to allow oxygen to enter my airways.

Calmed, I open my eyes to see Dean’s gaze, gawking at me, lost in me.

Clearing his voice, “I’m proud of you, bunny.”

I beam as he proceeds to work on my ink. “I don’t want to see it until you

finish.” I do just that, embracing the darkness.

“As you wish.”

About thirty minutes later. The vibrator springs back to life not before he removes the machine just in case I’d pounce.

Once again the mix is making my insides buzz.

Keeping myself from peeking is freaking hard since I’m dying to see what he’s tattooing. But I made a promise and I intend to keep it.

Something between us shifted when we got back from Yosemite, a week ago. A trip can bond two people over a shared experience but it’s the way I opened up to him and brought him to be with me at an important time that put us in a vulnerable position.

It brought the most beautiful, enchanting colors out of us both. He held me when I needed him to. He listened when I needed to unburden my soul. He was protective, affectionate, and respectful. And he shared pieces of his past with me.

Even the sex was out of this world.

He bruises my skin and my pussy tingles. The conflict is real and it’s breaking my brain to pieces. I don’t know if I want to punch someone or climax hard again. The stimulation increases when the intensity of the device ascends.

“You have no idea how badly I want to shove my hard cock inside your wet cunt. Feel your soft walls and drive in and out of you while I play with your piercing.” A shiver skitter along my skin. “You will take everything I have to give you like a little slut and scream like a good bunny.”

My breathing quickens and my vision blackens as a wave crashes into me, washing me off the shore and spitting me out into the depths of the ocean.

“Come again.” He commends, “Give me another orgasm, slut.”

“Stop!”

My eyes feel heavy and everything blurs as another orgasm ripples through me.

Dean makes me come four more times before he grabs the side of my face to kiss my lips, and somnolent hours are threatening to take me under their spell.

He hands me a bottle of water to gulp down. “Get some sleep.”

“Wake me with the toy,” I yawn.

“I will.” He gets back to business and I fall asleep in seconds.

A sweet feathering sensation on my clit wakes me up. I rub my eyes with my free hand. “How long did I sleep?” I look away.

“Two hours. You needed it. I had my vice grip on your arm so don’t worry it looks beautiful.” The satisfaction is evident in his tone. “But damn you sleep like a rock.”

He resumes inking my flesh.

The device format is different and it massages my pussy so well that I’m immersed in the vibrating currents.

“Yes, so good.” I moan the words.

“Tell me what it feels like?” Dean requests in his deep husky voice.

Goosebumps crawl all over my body.

I gasp, “It raptures me. Fulfilling my fantasies.”

“What else?”

“Yes. Y-yes. Rejuvenating.” I have no idea what I’m saying as the climax splashes my walls. I come hard, taken by the never-ending release.

Dean stops the vibrator and I descend back to earth.

His fingers caress my leg as they climb up slowly, “Watching you come undone like this is my rebirth.”

I flick my eyes to focus on him, needing to capture the tenderness he mirrors.

“I thought I moved on from my past a long time ago. I mourned my family and found a new family here and there. I didn’t realize it still had a hold on me until you came along.” He continues to slide his hand on my other leg. “Thank you for being patient with me. I know it wasn’t easy. And I knew I hurt you when I didn’t confide in you. You were right, you always gave me space to figure things out and be who I am. I hope you’ll see how much I appreciate you when I finish your tattoo.”

I nod, sighing as I rest my head back. The ceiling gets blurred as I get lost in my cloudy state. High on endorphins and Dean Walker.

The man I’m falling in love with.

Maybe I’m already in love. I don’t know. Who really knows anything?

An hour later he lets me know we’re done and my nerves burst into flames.

“Ready to encounter your new friend?” he asks, rearranging the stuff back.

With no hesitation, I answer, “Yes.” I know my smile is reaching to my ears when I shake a little from side to side—I can’t contain my excitement anymore.

“Go ahead. It’s all yours.”

I take a deep breath and tilt my head down to my forearm.

Various colors strike me and it takes me a few seconds to realize that I’m staring at the sketch I made for my brother. But Dean changed some elements to make it suitable for me.

Tears glide down my face. “D-Dean,” I choke on his name.

It’s perfect.

I can’t believe he did this for me and my brother.

“The van wasn’t the only thing he left you,” he wipes my tears away, “He

left you endless memories and the story he dreamt to imprint on his skin.”

I look at him through teary eyes.

“Beside all the memories you collected together. Now you have another part of him.” He finishes, and quickly kisses my salty lips.

“It’s everything.” I sniffle. The black outlines and the sprayed areas are perfect. The pink, blue, purple, and yellow hues mesh beautifully and create this mesmerizing jellyfish. Jamey was jellyfish-obsessed. Patches of the ocean peek between green seaweeds and seashells, creating the shape of a van.

He made it so delicate to fit me.

“He would’ve loved it.”

“His might have looked different but I would’ve gotten it right for him too.” I interlace our fingers and kiss his neck—inhaling his aromatic scent into my lungs.

He released me from the invisible chains I carried for years.

Epilogue

Nine months later

The concept of falling in love always seemed like a bit of a stretch to me. Can someone love a person for the rest of their lives? Only this one individual amongst the seven seas. They sure can appreciate the efforts but will they maintain the same flames holding them captive?

When I was younger and burned by it, I lost my ability to fully comprehend the loose definition and terminology of love. Or anything related to the matter. I was delirious of my toxicity. Feeding myself poison about not wanting to become my parents when in reality, I had the same addictions and issues not as unhealthy as theirs but not far off the scale of self-suppressing.

But then I watched my friends fall in love, starting families and bringing children into the world, surrounded by it all, I fell in love with the feeling again. It was real. True. And healthy. It wasn't far-fetched. I could grasp that forsaken dream and hope that one day I would call a woman my significant other.

I couldn't predict it would be pink hair, tattoos, and an adventurous personality but she is everything to me.

She is love.

My love.

She silences the demons surrounding me, and I want to be as close to her as possible. Never away.

I don't have the urge to pack a bag and seek a getaway.

I just want to be with Lenny.

My aquatic creature.

Frustrated with the little fur stealing my woman's attention all the time, I cross the front porch leading to our garage. The harsh rays of July scorch our backs as Lenny follows my trail.

"Damn cat," I grunt.

"Watch your mouth he's part of the family now." She loves him like a child and I love her so fucking much for it. Her emotional intelligence is endless.

I swear, the mocking faces he makes when he looks at me sometimes as if he enjoys the fact she has to share her time between us is infuriating.

Well technically... he did hit on her first, the *little fucker*.

I twitch the side of my mouth and shake my head sideways.

Her relationship with the cat pisses me off on more than one occasion, although, I like the fucker; he's a dirty bastard who's watching us all the time and I like the audience—didn't know exhibitionism was my thing but I guess it is.

"Stop being so jealous of him," Lenny reprimands me. "He chose you as his owner a long time ago."

I'll reprimand her ass for that later.

Trying to swerve her attention back to me, I smack her ass, pull her by the neck into a kiss, and run my hands down her ass—squeezing her against me.

"What do you say?" I slant my head toward the garage and she follows.

“Umm, I think our new brand is going to kick ass! Those pink and turquoise hues are dreamy, I’m ready to go on the road.” Sticking to my side, she cloaks her hands around my abdomen and rear.

We stare at our parked van.

“It’s me and you, bunny.”

Lenny finally felt like she could part ways with her brother’s van. She’s not leaving him but simply moving on. He will forever be in her heart and we will visit him every year to keep his memory alive.

Her tradition is ours now.

And Bette is in good hands, I made sure of it.

We bought a bigger van to travel like the two adrenaline junkies we are, seeking adventures at every corner like a necessity. It’s also part of our new tattooing brand on the road.

My house will always be our haven when we decide to come back home.

Lenny never thought her tattoos would be demanded all over the US. With a little of my help and boost, she got once in a lifetime opportunity to live the life she sought-after. And I plan to show her every day all the amazing things she’s capable of.

Our first stop is in Las Vegas, mainly because I want her to meet my father’s family. They’re good people and I go to visit them every year to hear more stories about him and keep *his* memory alive in my head. As much as I can. I didn’t know him but through his family, I’m getting the chance to at least feel closer to him.

“I got you something,” I pull back slightly. “I just went by a cute shop with all kinds of accessories and colorful shirt designs but one thing caught my eye.”

“What?” she knits her brows together and those ocean eyes will forever

make my pulse lively.

“This.” I open my clenched palm and inside there’s a delicate thin silver ring with pink bunny ears in the front and a rounded tail in the back. “It reminded me of you.”

“Dean,” she wraps her hands around my neck. “I love you.” I would never get tired of hearing those words.

I push the ring onto her middle finger. “As suspected,” I veer my gaze at her, “Perfect match.”

“*You* are my perfect match.” She corrects.

Our lips touch and this heavenly kiss is the type of sensation I engrave to my heart. “I love you, bunny.”

She pauses, studying my expression. “How much?”

I chuckle, “Like the sand on the beach, the stars in the sky as deep as the ocean and as loud as your screams when you come for me.” I let my cocky knowing grin show as I tuck her to my chest and kiss her hard with all the love that resides within me.

“Is it possible to fall in love with a person time and time again?” I ask her.

“Is it possible to come for the same person time and time again?”

I grab her plumped ass and squeeze until a moan slips past her mouth. “Bad. Little. Bunny.”

“I have a present for you too.” Lenny beams, her eyes shining in mischief.

I gaze down at her chest since I can feel her pulse dashing to the roof.

“Me naked and cuffed to the balcony railings while you spank me and stab your cock inside me until I cream around you.”

She is a ballad song, traveling through space and time—forever young, enchanting, and fucking mine. One day, I’m going to marry her, but until that day comes I intend to give her everything she wants.

“But before we go... race you to the beach!” she announces, stripping her hands from my embrace, grabbing her board, and running away.

Damn! She's been doing this a lot lately. I should've learned by now that she likes to do it just to keep me on the edge of my seat.

I toss my shirt on the ground, grab my board, and sprint to catch up with her.

We paddle on our surfboards, I know I'm supposed to focus on the waves the ocean builds on the horizon but I can't stop looking at Lenny.

The way she glows when she's here is the best view in the entire world.

A phenomenal portrait.

The water caresses my legs as I change position and drape my legs to each side of the board.

She turns to look at me, “What are you doing?”

“I think I'm gonna watch today.”

“Absolutely not, you're coming with me because this wave is ours.” She grins from ear to ear. “Or I'm going back to snuggle with Scar, your choice.”

Ugh. She's always bringing up, Scar.

I gesture dramatically with my hand. “After you, lead the way.”

Those boxes I unpack and pack again belong to the past. Finally, I can wave them goodbye and open new boxes for new memories.

The small narrowed hallway of the house I grew up in separated between Tessa's world and mine. That insignificant thing is becoming an analogy for me and my past. Me and my demons. Me and my battles. Me and my closure.

I chose to stay away from that world whereas she chose to drown in.

The world is here for the taking. Life is not a fair game and the more you study it, the less you understand it. Our past never defines us or others, only we define ourselves.

Sometimes it's hard to let go of someone you lost who holds a special place in your heart but remembering them in all their beautiful moments and the precious memories they left behind will never truly be gone.

When people are gone the only things we can do for them is to keep their stories alive and love them.

Jamey, my father, we carry them with us no matter where we go or what we do.

They gave us a greater gift, one that ultimately brought us together and that is they were the people who guided us to be who we are today without knowing.

With loss comes a lot of love, reflection, anger, self-exploration, and the will to go out there and live.

When I went to find my father's family, I found myself. I built my tiny empire. I created the chance to meet Lenny.

When Lenny went after her brother's footsteps, she found herself. She found me. She created her future.

Without them, who knows if we would've met?

I don't know what the future holds but I hope Lenny and I can embark on a new journey together and see where it takes us.

The wave forces its way toward us, we paddle and quickly stand on the board as we catch it and ride it down.

One move is designed of many variables that connect copious dots into one outcome.

More waves ripple in the distance, but right now, all I do is tackle Lenny by jumping from my board, "Duck!"

"What?" She screams, "Dean!"

Catching her in my arms, I throw us both into the waters.

She spits the water she collected in her mouth on my face like a cannonball, my eyes clenched shut until she's done and her laugh engulfs me and warms every beat of my heart.

"You are very cheeky lately." She fixes her bikini.

"I'm happy."

"I'm happy that you're happy," she replies wholeheartedly, "If you're in such a good mood, can I ink you again?"

I chuckle, "Anytime." I pull her flush against me, and water sways at our sides. "Every day, every hour, every minute, every second—I want you to ink me, bunny."

Lenny told me the lighthouse on my hand symbolizes my home; my haven; my work.

It's not.

It's *her*.

I will cross oceans just to reunite with the beaming lights she left for me, so I can find my way back home.

Extra

Jamey's note

*“ **W**hen mom and dad told me I’m going to have a baby sister, I was the happiest kid in the whole wide world.*

My love for you is so big. I can’t measure it. I can’t explain it in words. This love simply exists. And it’s forever yours.

I know that someday in the faraway future, you’re going to find someone who will see all the amazing things I see in you. And he will cherish you for it and give you the world just to see you smile every day. Don’t settle for anything less.

In the meantime, I bought you this notebook for your drawings. You’ll do amazing things someday.

Happy eighteenth birthday, Len.

PS. Always remember... No one is her chain.

Love Jamey.”

The end.

Don’t forget, our story is never really over.

About the Author

Spicy. Kinky. Romance & Dark Romance Author

Writing different tropes and sexy characters with tattoos 100% of the time.

I'm a chaotic writer in all my glory. I love to explore different tropes and weave my way through them. I'm a sucker for love stories with all kinds of lust, desire, passion, heartbreak & heartache, darkness & healing.

I plan to write many more books soon so stay tuned...