

L.A. SHAW



*Make You
Keep Me*

*Make You
Keep Me*

Fight For Me Duet
Book Two

L.A. SHAW

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Make You Keep Me

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To all the dreams we never thought were possible...

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Please **CLICK OR SCAN** the image below for our **CONTENT WARNING**. This warning is a spoiler but we also know it's an extremely sensitive topic so we want to treat it as such.



PLAYLIST

Music plays an important role in our writing process...
So, please enjoy our **Make You Keep Me** playlist



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PROLOGUE



ONE MONTH LATER

My head hangs low as I walk into Lights Out. Partially from the shame of my loss three nights ago, as well as the two-day bender I've been on.

I practically begged for pain in that octagon, welcoming every hit until the ref called it. Gunnar and my new coach, Joey, were screaming my name from their corner, trying their hardest to snap me out of it, but everything just faded away. *Even the pain of her leaving.*

And as soon as the fight was over, the ache in my chest was back with a vengeance. *Until I drank myself into oblivion.*

I woke up this morning to Greyson in my face, yelling at me to get my shit together, but the pounding in my head didn't allow his words to register. When I came to, I was on the floor of the room Ford's been staying in at the clubhouse. I took a long shower and had him drop me off at Lights Out. Thankfully, he spared me another one of his speeches on the ride over.

"Nox." Gunnar's voice catches my attention, and I can tell by his stance that he won't be gifting me the same grace today. "Come in here for a minute."

He shuts the door behind us and points to the chair in front of the office manager's desk for me to sit.

Gunnar remains standing and stares at me, taking in my disheveled appearance, swollen nose, and black eyes.

"You look like shit."

"Feel like it too," I grunt back at him.

"Good...you should with how you are letting yourself fall apart," he says, grabbing two waters out of the mini fridge and tossing one to me.

I don't respond. Even though his words piss me off, I know they're the truth.

Releasing a heavy sigh, he leans against the desk. "Look, Nox, I know a little

something about what you're going through." My eyebrow cocks, as if to say, *like fuck you do*. Then he adds, "Being abandoned by someone who promised you more... But you can't let it consume you."

With a tightening chest, my head drops into my hands at the memory of her leaving me. The daily battle in my mind is all-consuming. One minute, I'm pissed as hell, and the next, I'm worried about her.

"I'm going to be blunt here because I care about you." I push my hair out of my eyes and meet his gaze.

"If you keep this shit up, you are going to lose everything you have worked so hard for. And in the process, you will become a man you can't stand, one who looks a helluva lot like that piece of shit sperm donor of yours. You know better than anyone... Nothing good comes from the bottom of a bottle."

My fingernails dig into my palms. I want to tear this room apart at the accusation...at the notion of being anything like *him*. But I know he's right. It was my first thought once I sobered up this morning.

I give Gunnar a nod, unable to form a response and knowing my words don't mean shit at this point. I need to show everyone I'm not spiraling into a complete fuckup... I need to show myself.

I stand with a new resolve. I'll never be over what Emerson did, but becoming a drunk isn't going to help either. Gunnar slaps his hand down on my shoulder assuredly. "I believe in you. You have the grit and talent to be the best. You just have to believe it too."

"Thanks for not giving up on me," I say as we walk out the door, ready to train. This is the first time I've felt an ounce of contentment in the last month.

But you know the saying... Two steps forward, one step back.

"Hey...I was looking for you." Lucian eyes me up and down, his words intended for me.

"Y'all can use the office." Gunnar digs his key back out, unlocking the door again.

"Thanks, Gun," Lucian says, and my stomach churns, knowing this

conversation more than likely has to do with Emerson.

Lucian is well aware of how out of my mind I was during those first few days. But the longer I've gone without any contact and no leads from Casen, our PI friend, the crazier I've felt. I reread the letter she left me hundreds of times. And when I found out she left one for Colton and Lucian as well, I begged them to let me see theirs. I was determined to see if there was any more information, but that got me nowhere. Everyone tells me I just have to accept her choices and try to move on.

But how am I supposed to move on when I feel like Emerson took so much of me with her when she left?

"Nox...I heard from her."

I stare at Lucian's mouth as it keeps moving, but I'm still in shock from his statement. My ears ring and my stomach bottoms out as I understand what he is saying.

"She's safe, but...she isn't coming back," he says on an exhale, trying to lessen the blow.

"That's all she said?" I feel like I'm having an out-of-body experience... Every ounce of hope is slipping from my grasp.

"Basically." He nods. "She said she would continue to let me know she was safe every so often, but she called me from a blocked number."

"Did she say anything about me?" I'm barely able to push the question past my lips.

"She said she couldn't handle talking about you, but to please tell you, Colton, and everyone else that she was sorry, she's okay, and this is for the best."

Jolting to stand, I kick the chair over in the office. I'm so fucking pissed that she's convinced herself this is for the best. She didn't even have the nerve to call me.

But honestly, I don't know if I could handle hearing her voice unless it was telling me she was coming home.

“I’m not even going to make excuses for her or offer empty words to try to make this better. I can’t imagine what you are going through...but don’t let this tank you,” Lucian pleads with me.

“Can you just give me a few minutes?”

He nods in understanding and thankfully leaves me to the inner turmoil I’ve been living in this past month, with nothing but anger and betrayal fueling the fire.

Taking deep breaths, I try to calm myself down. Part of me is relieved to know she’s okay, but the rest of me is crumbling. An inexplicable amount of pain wraps around my soul, wanting to capsize all my broken pieces. And I have to decide whether I’m going to let it.

She’s not coming back.

ONE



TWO YEARS LATER

Adrenaline pumps through my veins at the familiar sound of Limp Bizkit's "Break Stuff" streaming from my headphones. I stare out the floor-to-ceiling windows in my suite. Ignoring the mobs of people filing in, I focus my attention on the octagon.

My fight night routine always starts this way, with rock music bleeding into my ears while I picture myself targeting every weakness my opponent has and sending him home with a loss to his record.

Over the past two years, I've tried my hardest to pour my emotions into perfecting my skills. I started out with doing local tournaments and fight nights that Gunnar or Joey would enter me in. Before Snow's accident, we were both dominating western North Carolina in our weight classes for jiu-jitsu and wrestling. I was in a constant state of training, and it was the only thing holding my sanity together. After my third win at one of The Queen City Brawls in Charlotte, I officially signed with Cliff and things really took off from there. Eight months later, I was signing another contract and fighting in my first official UFC fight. It's a weird feeling when you achieve a dream that you've wanted for as long as you can remember, but you still aren't truly happy.

Happiness is a term that feels further out of my reach than any other accomplishment these days.

I look to the section I know my friends and family will be sitting in. I love fighting in North Carolina because I always have the home team advantage with the crowd. Don't get me wrong, the buzz I felt after winning my last fight in Vegas still hasn't worn off, but there's something about being on home turf.

Just like everything else she tarnished, when I look at those rows of reserved seating, I can't help but envision the blue-haired beauty sitting in that exact spot the night I won my first fight and everything that transpired after. The pang of hurt in my chest is immediately followed by anger... Anger I'll use

to my advantage in the ring tonight.

I turn around, knowing my trainer is waiting on me so we can start my warmup regimen. There are four preliminary fights before the main event between me and another up-and-coming fighter from New Jersey. My trainer Joey is setting up the mats on the far side of the room so we can spar, but I notice my manager's assistant standing by the door. It surprises me. We already fucked earlier today after weigh-ins, so it's unlike her to bother me again when she knows my routine.

“Sorry to bother you, Nox, but one of the preliminary fighters is insisting on speaking to you before the night begins.” I honestly have no clue about the lineup for tonight other than my own fight. I know how it is to want to talk to the fighters who are making a name for themselves when that's all you want to do, but I won't break my routine for anyone.

“I'll talk to them after. I need to be in the zone right now and, honestly, so do they,” I say as I walk toward Joey, not caring what her response is. She takes the hint because, seconds later, I hear the door shut.

Joey and I go over strategies once again while warming up on the mats. This may be a charity fight, but I'm using this as practice for my next contract match. By the end of the second preliminary fight, I feel completely in my element and ready for the night ahead. Gunnar comes in at the end of the third prelim fight and gives me his typical pep talk. He has been my cornerman since fight number one. He passes me one of the boujee waters he likes to drink and connects his phone to the speaker.

Just as “Knuck If You Buck” blares through our suite, I catch a glimpse of purple braids in the octagon.

I typically don't pay attention to the other fights before my own, because it takes me out of my head space, but the long lean legs and the way she throws the next southpaw punch, landing it across her opponent's jaw, has me stopping in my tracks, gaze set on her.

No—No fucking way.

I shake my head in disbelief. My thoughts from earlier must be fucking with my brain.

She wouldn't... She wouldn't just show back up and do it like this.

The next glimpse of the fighter makes my heart stop. My knees buckle as I stumble back into the wall beside me.

“What the fuck... Is that Emerson?” Gunnar’s voice sounds as stunned as I feel right now. This can’t be real.

“Gun, tell me I’m seeing things. How the fuck is she fighting in *my* octagon, and I had no fucking clue about it?”

More importantly, where the hell has she been? If she thinks she is going to just come back around with no explanation, she has another fucking thing coming to her.

“Damn, did she just knock her out?” Gunnar asks after Emerson lands another solid punch to the other chick’s face, knocking her down.

The referee calls it, and the crowd goes wild. Except for my section, where Greyson sits with his arm slung around a stunned Lottie as he looks to Smith and Ford, whose faces both appear to have the same look of disbelief. Their eyes flit between each other and the octagon, desperately trying to figure out—just like I am—what the fuck is going on and why she’s back. Ford looks as if he’s frozen in place, questioning whether he took too many edibles before he came here tonight. And my mom sits there shocked, her jaw on the floor as she stares at the girl who used to follow both her sons around incessantly. The same girl who dropped off the face of the earth one day with no true explanation.

“Ladies and gentlemen, give it up for the winner by knockout... Emily ‘The Siren’ Star.”

What the fuck is with that name?

Gunnar grabs me by the shirt, breaking my eye contact as I stand, shell-shocked.

“Nox...you have to leave that where it's at. We will figure this all out later. I promise we won't let her go anywhere without getting some answers, but for now, get this thick fucking skull of yours back into your zone.” He grabs my face, doing anything he can to make me believe his words. “I know that girl

did a number on you, but you need to take all that rage out in the octagon like you do best.”

I want to deny that she didn't do shit to me, but he remembers how I was after she left... There's no avoiding the truth.

Jerking out of his grip, my fist flies against the wall, punching straight through the sheetrock. I'd like to say that it made me feel better, but in reality, it just left more damage for me to repair. The hole may be big, but not nearly the size of the one she left inside of me when she disappeared. The sight of her here is like pouring salt on that old wound and ripping open the small pieces that have started to heal.

I feel Gunnar's and Joey's stares on me as they stay quiet, letting me work through my anger. Pacing the room, I will myself not to storm out of here, and drag her ass out of that octagon to tell me why the fuck she left me without a trace.

But fuck that... She isn't worth my time. I just may have to repeat that mantra for the rest of my life.

“Fuck it...and fuck her,” I say, stripping out of my shirt and putting on a fresh Lights Out tee in honor of the gym that made me who I am today.

I roll my neck around, trying to release some of the new tension in my body. I almost feel sorry for New Jersey, because the hatred spewing from my pores is about to be taken out on him the minute the referee signals the start of round one. The thought has me ready to warm up, needing to focus on something other than this fucked-up turn of events. I make my way over to Joey, who's already holding the tape in his hands, ready to wrap up my bleeding knuckles.

Bleeding knuckles are better than a bleeding heart.

“MIDDLE CHILD” by J. Cole booms through the speakers and the crowd goes wild as I make the trek toward the octagon. I'm laser focused on getting in there, doing what I do best, and using every bit of mental strength I have to

block her out. I embrace the pain and sadness, letting it take over, fueling me to obliterate my opponent. It works almost too damn well, causing me to black out, only to be brought to by the sound of the bell and the referee holding up my arm in victory. I chance a look at Jersey and almost wince when I see the destruction my emotions and fists have caused.

My loved ones can't hide the concern they are trying to mask behind the high of the win as they enter the ring to congratulate me. I give them all sweaty hugs, and before anyone has the opportunity to bring *her* up, I tell them the plan for the after-party my manager Cliff is throwing at his house.

Mom approaches me for one last hug before she heads back to Richmond Hills. "I FaceTimed your brother for a round. He said you were unlike anything he had ever seen." I kiss her on the forehead. My brother would have been here had this fight not been a last-minute add on my schedule the week after we moved him back to Florida for the school year. Emerson's sudden appearance makes me thankful he wasn't.

"Thanks, Ma." I give her a questioning look and, luckily, she understands without me having to ask. She shakes her head. "No, I didn't mention anything else. I thought maybe you should... Did you know?" I hear the pain in her voice. The loss of Emerson was hard and confusing for my entire family.

I close my eyes and shake my head, letting a bit of the turmoil I feel from the situation creep back in. "No, but I plan to find out exactly what's going on. Let me tell Colton once I have some answers."

My mom nods, giving me one last squeeze as she whispers, "Take it easy on her. She always loved you both so much. Maybe there is more to her story."

I choose not to respond. What could possibly have her walking away from me, the person she had told the day before just how much she loved and could never live without? On top of that, she walked away from my brother, ripping his heart out along with mine in the process.

Before I head up to shower the blood and sweat off, I turn to my three best friends. "Y'all meet me at Cliff's. I'll be there in an hour, tops." Noticing the concern on Ford's face frustrates me so much more than Greyson and Lottie. His theory of life is to mask his demons with sex, drugs, and inappropriate

jokes. The fact that he is worried about me just goes to show how fucked up I was after she left. If it wasn't for fighting, I don't know where I would have ended up.

Probably a drunk, just like my shitty sperm donor.

Gunnar throws his arm around me, guiding us out of the stadium center and back up to my suite.

“Hell of a fight, boy. I'm proud of you for focusing and letting that pent-up anger flood out with every calculated move you made tonight. That head on your shoulders...it's tougher than you think it is.”

I nod, but I'm not so sure I believe him. I've been fighting in one way or another my whole life, but it's my mind that's always been the weak part of my body. Even in this moment, I want to be riding the high of another win, but I feel myself letting every toxic trait I have spiral out of control at the fresh reminder of her abandonment and disregard for me.

A fucking letter, that was it. One flimsy piece of paper destroyed every dream we had ever created together and shattered every bit of trust and self-worth I had in the process. We both grew up in a world filled with our own demons, and on that day, she became one of mine.

A big part of me wants to burn this whole place down until I find her and demand answers, but the other part of me isn't sure I actually want them.

I walk into my suite, needing to get my bag so I can shower, re-wrap my hands, and get the fuck out of here. But all thoughts seize when my eyes fall on purple hair and golden eyes that still haunt my dreams.

My steps stutter before I gain my composure and stride right past her to my bag. Without looking in her direction, I growl, “What the fuck are you doing here, Emerson?”

“Lennox, please...”

Her voice is like a bullet straight to my soul, and my head whips to look at her. “Don't fucking call me that. Don't walk in here and act like you belong. You have ten seconds to tell me what you're doing here.”

I turn toward her fully, body stiff and gaze hard, trying my best not to take in all the little changes I notice about her.

Her slender neck bobs as she swallows hard. My demeanor's throwing her off. It's something she's never directly experienced.

"I'm here for you, Len... Nox. But what I need to talk to you about is going to take more than ten seconds."

"Nox...the driver is here to take us to Cliff's," Leslie says, walking through the door. "Oh, sorry to interrupt." She eyes Emerson curiously. "Thanks for understanding about his fight day routine. Glad you were able to talk tonight." Leslie's eyes shift to me and back to Emerson, most likely feeling the tension in the room. "You coming to the after party? I think Cliff wants you and your team there if possible."

"Yeah...*Emily*. You should come," I say, emphasizing the name she's going by. "As great as it was catching up with an old friend, I need to shower and get out of here." Tossing my bag over my shoulder, I place my hand on the small of Leslie's back, guiding her out of the room. I can feel the anger pouring off Emerson at my dismissive attitude toward her, but what the fuck does she expect?

"See you later, Siren...and nice right jab for a leftie. Whoever taught you that must be one hell of a teacher."

TWO



“So, are we going to address the big-ass elephant in the room...the one who followed us like a black cloud to this party?” Ford asks as he casually leans back, taking another drag from the hookah before passing the hose over to Lottie.

She didn’t technically follow us here...or not yet, at least. But the mood we’re all in from seeing her hasn’t been easy to shake. Especially mine, no matter how hard I try to hide it. My emotions are reeling with turbulence.

“I wonder if Lucian knows she’s in town,” Greyson questions, all our minds racing with thoughts of Emerson.

I shake my head. “No...there’s no way he would let her blindside me like that if he did.” Frankie and Lucian would both normally be here, but they went with Lucian’s girlfriend and her friends to a music festival down in South Carolina for the weekend. Something they’ve had planned for six months. I’m sure Lucian will be just as shocked as I was when he finds out she’s here.

“There has to be an explanation for all of this. Like why show back up all of the sudden?” Lottie questions. The confusion marring her pretty face is clear as day.

“Babygirl, I love you for always trying to see the best in people, but either way, this whole situation is fucked,” my broody best friend, who I can always depend on to be more of an asshole than me, says to his girl.

Greyson turns his attention in my direction and continues. “I mean, I agree, maybe there is more to her leaving, but the way she showed up tonight, knowing you would be there, without a warning in advance... That was fucking shitty.”

I nod, taking a swig of my water before I speak. “Yeah, she has a lot of fucking explaining to do. She tried earlier, but I just don’t know if I’m ready to hear it.” Letting out a ragged breath, I add, “Shit fucked me up. Seeing her... My head is all over the place.” I run my hand through my jet-black hair, the ends still damp from my shower.

I’d never be this honest with anyone besides these three. But the truth is... they already suspect what I’m saying. They know me better than anyone, plus I’m practically radiating a combination of anger and pain into the atmosphere, right along with the flavored tobacco we are puffing on.

Greyson passes me the hookah hose. Pulling on it, I will myself to calm down as I exhale the cloud of smoke.

I rest my head back against the outdoor chair I parked myself in as soon as I was able to get away from Cliff. I promised to have a meeting with him tomorrow before I head back to Richmond Hills, but I couldn’t stand the thought of talking business tonight.

The heaviness of it all weighs down on me like a ton of bricks. I wish I could just forget. Forget every moment, every conversation, every touch. But I refuse to let myself numb the pain again... I almost didn’t make it out of that black hole the last time.

“Remind me why we are smoking this flavored tobacco shit when we could be feeling much better about life right now.” I look up and smirk as Ford pulls a joint out of his pocket. “Tonight calls for The Real Deal Holyfield.”

“Why you holding out on us, Pretty Boy? Light her up.” He gives me that cheesy ass grin of his and I’m just happy weed is all he seems to be fucking with these days.

“Uncle Gunnar hooked me up before he and Rex headed back to town with your mom. Perks of being an official member of the Rebel Knights.” He brushes the shoulders off his leather cut like the dramatic fuck he is.

“Of course he did.” Greyson smiles, shaking his head. His dad and Gunnar are a lot like us... Thick as thieves. Emerson used to be a part of that, but she left it all behind in pursuit of something else...something better.

I can't help but wonder if she found it.

My eyes search for Emerson of their own accord. In the pursuit of mermaid-colored hair, my gaze lands on a head of blonde curls and a pretty smile directed at me as she makes her way over.

Leslie plops down and places a kiss on my neck as she lets out a sigh of relief. “I told Cliff, I’m officially off the clock. He’s been demanding as fuck today.”

I throw my arm over her shoulder. “Good. He needs to take a chill pill himself. I told him no business talk tonight.”

This thing between us has always been easy, but tonight my skin feels like it's crawling from the touch of her.

Leslie makes small talk with my friends. She’s only been around them a couple of times when she’s visited me in Richmond Hills. I mostly see her when I travel to Charlotte for business with Cliff or for special events.

We kind of happened a few months ago after a long night out in Charlotte when she listened to my pathetic broken heart story.

Lost in thought, I feel the hairs on the back of my neck rise. Looking up, I see Emerson walking outside with her trainer. The sight of her with another man has my stomach churning with red-hot anger. No self-control can stop me from feeling this way, especially when I see the way he looks at her. *Like she’s his.*

Leslie must notice me stiffen, and she turns to see what I’m looking at. She stares for a few beats before bringing her gaze back to mine. With sympathy laced in her voice, she asks, “Is that her?”

Is that her?

Is that her? The girl who broke you, the one who shocked you by leaving you with nothing but a letter, the only girl you ever saw a future with. The girl

who ruined you for someone like me.

Yeah, that's her...

EMERSON

The feeling of his eyes on me is overwhelming. But what did I expect...a warm, open-armed welcome home? I abandoned those I was closest to in order to save myself, all while hurting them in the process. By the looks on all their faces, they never expected me to show my face again.

Well, surprise.

The decision to come back to North Carolina wasn't an easy one. No, I've been debating this for quite some time now. It won't be easy gaining their trust back, but I hope deep down they can forgive me.

"You should be over the moon at your first official win tonight. Not over here wallowing in self-pity," my coach, Ryan, whispers in my ear, his large hand resting on my shoulder.

"I'm good, I promise." The lie slips out as easily as always. Ryan's eyebrow lifts, questioning my bullshit.

"I think I'm coming down from the adrenaline high. The exhaustion is hitting me hard." It's not a lie, per se, but it certainly isn't the only thing weighing on me.

"Do you want a ride back to the hotel?" he asks with genuine concern.

"I'm gonna hang for a bit. I'll let you know when I'm ready."

With one last squeeze of my shoulder, he walks away. Leaving me to my thoughts, and barely touched beer.

My eyes roam the room, unable to stop myself from searching for Nox. I know the feeling isn't mutual, but I'm so fucking proud of him. The way he dominates the octagon is unmatched. Even though I haven't been around to witness his career in person until tonight, I've been following it every step of the way. Cheering him on from the confines of my small, removed world.

It wasn't an easy decision to make, showing back up here without warning. I

contemplated calling him almost every day, but what I have to say deserves more than a phone call. The truth is that even if I warned him, his reaction to actually seeing me would have been the same. *Disdain seeping from his every pore.*

When the chance to come to Charlotte was dropped in my lap, it felt like fate was finally working in my favor. But I know, without a doubt, the fight ahead of me will be tougher than any opponent I could face in that octagon.

Speaking of the cage, I'm not sure if I'll ever get over how it felt to fight and gain my first official win. The way my body gracefully moved around the mat, ducking and twisting away from my opponent. *Throw your shoulder into it*, I heard Nox's voice chant in the back of my mind. The cheers from the spectators when I finally knocked her out, using every last ounce of strength not to let up. It felt incredible and well worth it. The cash I earned from tonight's fight more than covers my travel expenses, leaving enough of a cushion to help with the stack of bills piling up back home.

Home.

How I wish my home was here with all my friends, all the people who were there for me... and Nox. But no matter how much damage I caused, I had to get out of here. *You did what you had to.*

"It's like I'm seeing a ghost," Lottie says, her sudden presence surprising me as she hands me a beer.

"Yeah, I guess it would seem like that." I give her an apologetic smile.

"I would ask how you're doing, but after seeing your fight tonight...I assume you're doing alright."

"Things aren't always what they seem, Lottie. You know more than anyone the truth in that." Like the fact I would give almost anything to be celebrating tonight's wins with that small circle of friends she just parted from.

She sips her beer for a moment as she digests my words.

"You know you really fucked him up...disappearing like that. I thought he was going to tear through the entire city to find you."

I take a swig of my drink instead of giving her an explanation. Because truthfully, I'm not sure I have the right one to give. Staring out amongst the crowd, I find Nox's eyes yet again, boring into me. Observing my interaction with his best friend's girl.

Although I know I have no right to be, the sight of the blonde next to him has my heart stuttering. I've seen them around each other all night. Has he moved on? This is what I wanted, for him to find someone worthy of him. *Wasn't it?*

She bumps her shoulder into mine, breaking my concentration. "Listen...you might not be ready to talk to me yet, but just know he's not going to let you leave again without a conversation."

That causes a burst of nervous laughter to escape my chest, because where do I even begin? "Yeah, I know."

"Lottie, G was looking for you," *his* deep voice practically growls, causing goosebumps to trail over my skin.

Discreetly swallowing the lump in my throat, Lottie turns to walk away. "We will talk soon, Em."

I can feel the resentment radiating off him.

"You have some fucking nerve."

I take a steadying breath before spinning around to face him. Because I know all the hurt and anger I'll see in his eyes will devastate me.

He doesn't give me time to prepare myself before grabbing my shoulders and turning my body around.

I'm hit with an up-close and personal view of the man who's never left my thoughts. It feels like a lifetime ago that we were last in this position. His dark hair falls ever so slightly in front of his piercing green eyes as he glares down at me. Through his white t-shirt, I can see the scattering of dark ink across his chiseled chest, continuing up his throat and down his thick arms. Before I left, he had several tattoos, but now he's completely covered. A glint from a nose ring catches my attention, before I bring my eyes back to his. So much has changed about him in such little time.

We all deal with pain in different ways. But damn, he looks good.

I try my hardest to stop the tears from welling. God knows how much I've missed him.

"Do you think you can just show up here and act like nothing happened, Emerson?"

My heart aches at the use of my full name, reminding me of why I'm here. "We need to talk," I blurt out, watching as his eyes narrow in on mine.

"Oh, so now you want to talk, and I'm supposed to, what? Drop everything to listen. Fuck, Em! It's been two fucking years." The frustration in his voice is evident, and I certainly don't want to cause a scene here.

He's right, but the need to see him again was too much.

"You're right, I should have never come here. So, I'm going to head back to the hotel. But I need to talk to you before I leave Charlotte." On instinct, I go to move the long strands away from his eyes, but he catches my wrist before I realize what I'm doing.

I can feel his body vibrating through his touch. His lids flutter before shooting wide, nostrils flaring.

"I'll meet you in the lobby tomorrow at 11:45. We can talk then. But I think it's a good idea if you do what you do best and leave. No goodbyes, just dip out."

I nod and put down my beer, not saying a single word more. Walking past Ryan, I gesture toward the exit.

Feeling Lennox's eyes following my every move, I make my way to the door. I finally exhale once I'm hit with the fresh air of the outdoors.

I have less than twelve hours to think of how I will tell him the whole story. No matter what I come up with...I'm not sure he'll forgive me.

THREE



I see her before she spots me.

Emerson steps out of the elevator, her lean legs covered in ripped black jeans, paired with a Johnny Cash tee. Her style may not have changed, but so many other small things have.

I used to have every inch of her body memorized.

When her brown eyes look up and sear into mine, I do my best to take a deep breath and keep my posture neutral. All I can do is beg my bleeding heart to let go of the anger I'm harboring toward the stranger walking through the lobby in my direction. The stranger who, at one point, was the center of my happiness.

I stand from the bench I've been waiting on, right outside of the restaurant where I'm meeting Cliff.

"Nox," she greets me casually and motions back toward the bench. "Can we sit?"

"I'd rather stand." Her tone pisses me off. There is nothing simple about us or this fucked-up situation she's put us in.

"Really, Lennox, you said you were willing to give me fifteen minutes of your time today. Can't you just lose the fucking attitude and give me a chance to explain?"

"First off, don't call me that, and second...explain what?" I growl, moving

into her personal space as she backs herself into the wall behind her. “Explain how you told me you loved me and couldn’t ever imagine living without me less than twenty-four hours prior to leaving me with no real explanation?”

I slap my hands beside her head, effectively caging her in. “Or the lousy excuse of a goodbye letter you tucked into my window like a coward?” Running my fingertips through her purple hair, down the side of her face, I wrap my hand around her neck. Her pupils dilate, but my next statement throws ice on whatever fire is trying to ignite from the feeling of my skin touching hers. “But what I really want to hear you explain is why the fuck you showed back up here on my fight night when you could have come back any other day over the last two years to explain yourself.” I move closer to whisper in her ear, my lips hovering a breath away. “Sounds like a fucking asshole move, if you ask me. I guess that is your MO, though.”

“It was the only way I could afford to get here,” she whispers. Pulling away slightly, I squint my eyes, examining her, trying to decipher whether what she says is true. So many questions flit through my mind, but I don’t want to fucking care. I *can’t* care.

“Is that why you weren’t at that piece of shit foster brother of yours funeral a couple of months ago?”

It takes her a second, but this statement makes her come back to life and she finally moves to push me away.

“And I’m the dumbass who went just to see if I could catch a glimpse of you.”

I’m unsure why I share that truth. When I heard Tommy had died from a heroin overdose, my first thought was Emerson. She always hated him, but when Lucian mentioned going to show his respects to the parents, I thought maybe Emerson would feel the same.

Emerson snaps her head back to mine, probably surprised by my halfway decent comment, after all the hell I’ve been giving her.

She watches me for a moment before responding, “No, I had absolutely no desire to show up and pretend to care about him, but I did hear the news... and, actually, Nox.” She pauses, her slender throat bobbing as she nervously

swallows. “That’s part of the reason I’m back.”

“Well, how perfect is this! Emily, I just called your coach to see if you could meet with me today before you head back to New Orleans.” Cliff’s boisterous voice filters through the hotel lobby, interrupting our intense conversation and adding to my already reeling thoughts.

New Orleans? So that’s where she’s been all this time.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, we’re seated at a table by the window, looking out onto the streets of downtown Charlotte. Cliff already has his signature Bloody Mary sitting in front of him, and Emerson looks about as comfortable as a person assigned the middle seat between two strangers on a plane.

She tried to decline his offer politely and reschedule something for later today, but he was persistent, so she stepped away to make a phone call before agreeing. I couldn’t help but wonder who she was calling. Was it someone back home in New Orleans? Was it that prick coach of hers? I shouldn’t give a shit, but I hated the smile I saw on her face right before she hung up her phone. When she rejoined us, she told Cliff she didn’t have time to eat, but she could stay for a little while.

“So, I’m not sure if you could tell since you were busy winning, but besides Nox, you were a crowd favorite last night, Emily.” Her eyes flit to mine when he calls her that. “I’m always looking for new talent to sponsor, and I was told by your coach that you may be moving back to North Carolina.” Now my eyes bore into her as my stomach flips... *What the fuck are you up to, Emerson?*

Cliff continues. “I didn’t even realize you were a Carolina girl until he mentioned that.”

Emerson finally speaks up, looking hesitant. “To be honest, everything is still in the works as far as the move goes. And also...please call me Emerson.”

“No problem. Well, maybe this would be some incentive to come back. Eventually, I would like to manage you as one of my fighters, just as I’ve

done with Nox.” He nods toward me, but I’m not sure how I feel about any of this. “I would potentially help arrange your fights and make sure you are getting paid properly.” *And also make sure he’s getting paid properly* is what I want to say but, I can’t complain. The guy has made me more money than I ever thought I could in such a short time.

“All this would go through the coach and gym of your choosing. You can still use your own coaches and trainers, unless you want me to set you up with someone if they don’t plan to move to North Carolina as well.” Does he know something I don’t... Why the fuck would her coach move all the way here?

“Will you be able to guarantee me a certain number of fights if you offer me an actual contract?” Emerson asks.

“Not to sound crass, but people will want you fighting in their arenas. Your looks and nickname alone will have everyone curious. I can at least guarantee that.”

“She’s also fucking good at fighting, Cliff,” I sneer, not liking the fact he is trying to sexualize her looks.

“Of course she is,” he responds, eyeing me suspiciously before turning his attention back to Emerson. “Just like Nox... His fighting skills are top-notch. Undefeated. But he is gaining a huge following and, let’s be honest, a lot of that has to do with his looks. It’s just the world we live in.” Emerson’s eyes flit to mine, and the flutter in my chest at the thought of what she thinks of me now hits me without warning.

“But I wouldn’t be considering signing you if I didn’t think you were a talented fighter. My goal would be to get you an official contract with the UFC. Your debut last night was a great way to start, and there has already been some buzz surrounding you. But first, I would like to discuss a plan with your coach about getting you into more fights to build your portfolio. And to use as practice.”

Emerson nods, biting the inside of her lip, taking it all in. As she looks at me, she studies my face like she is trying to read my thoughts.

“Can I have the week to let you know what area I will be fighting out of? I

should know by then what my plan is.”

“Yes, yes, sure. I’ll have my office send over all my contact information,” Cliff says, sounding a little stunned. He isn’t used to people not jumping at the opportunity. Hell, even I did. “And we might be able to work out a deal, even with you in New Orleans. But we can discuss that if it comes down to it.”

Our waiter arrives at our table and, suddenly, I don’t have an appetite anymore. But I have no clue if it’s from the thought of her staying or *leaving*.

EMERSON

You'll be well taken care of if you decide to move back... I'll make sure of it.

Cliff's words repeat over and over as I take a short walk around the block. Fuck me, do I really think moving back to North Carolina is a good idea? *It's not just you who'd be moving...* But Jade's already told me that she thinks a move is necessary for them too. A new beginning for all of us.

My mind is a mess. I can't go back to my room yet. I need to get my emotions under control. If I go back now, they'll be able to see the turmoil written all over my face.

A good walk or a punching bag usually does the trick. It's always been my means of escaping when life gets to be too much, or when I need to clear my head.

It would be nice not having to work two jobs to afford living expenses. To be able to focus on my fighting career would be a dream come true. I'm no fool. I know a fighter's career isn't very long, but to be able to give it all I have while I can would be a blessing. Not many people are offered this opportunity.

Ryan would tell me I'm crazy if I declined. But am I ready to take this step? It was always my intention to come back to North Carolina when the timing was right. But I have to remember, I'll be returning to a city where no one currently wants to speak to me...especially *him*. If I didn't leave the way I did, my decision would be so much easier.

But you had to.

To say I'm more confused than when I got here would be an understatement. I came here to fight and to talk to Lennox. So far, I've only succeeded at one. But I can't leave town without doing the other. He needs to hear it from me. He deserves that.

The fact that Lennox can barely stand to look in my direction without

complete disdain makes it harder for me to form coherent sentences. I pause for a moment when I approach the hotel lobby doors. Geez, I've been so lost in thought, I'm already back.

Pulling out my phone, I check the time. I know he's up, possibly at the gym...but it's worth a shot. Lucian has always been a voice of reason.

We've been trying to maintain somewhat of a relationship ever since I left. I call every few months to check-in, never divulging too much information, not even my phone number. My goal was to keep our conversations light, and mainly focused on him.

It's always been easier that way.

His phone goes to voicemail, so I shoot him a text.

ME

Hey, wanted to catch up... I'll be in Richmond Hills this week. Wanted you to hear it from me first before anyone else. Here's my number, give me a call.

Texting him from an unblocked number is my first step in the process of repairing my burned bridges. I know damn well it will take a while for everyone to trust me again, but I'm determined. I wince in regret when I think about how I haven't reached out to Colton or Isla yet. They were my family in every sense.

It's crazy to think about how life goes on, even in your absence. I can't say I completely regret leaving because it brought my Aunt Jade and her daughter Willow into my life, and at that time, I needed her desperately. And I am happy to see that everyone from Richmond was able to move forward and better themselves.

I'm ready to go back. I've made my decision.

North Carolina will always be my home, and I hope the transition is a smooth one. They'll bombard me with questions and demand answers, ones I am finally ready to give. I just need to talk to Nox before I see any of them.

I shake off the remaining anxious feelings as I walk down the hotel hallway to my room. No sooner as I swipe the keycard am I being wrapped up in a loving embrace. My hands winding around and tightening our hold as I

breathe them in. The comfort of their embrace allows me to release a long sigh of relief, for I know everything will be okay...eventually.

FOUR



I could really use my motorcycle and the windy roads of Richmond Hills right about now. Instead, I step out onto the streets of downtown Charlotte, in desperate need of some fresh air and the ability to clear my head.

I'm all over the place after lunch and my encounter with Emerson. I know there is only one person who can truly put my mind at ease and it's none of the people currently blowing up my phone.

Word traveled fast about Emerson being here, but I can't bring myself to answer anyone's calls. The ten-digit piece of paper she left on the table feels like it's burning a hole in my pocket. Deep down, I know I need my questions answered in order to gain any semblance of closure, but the other part of me—the much weaker part of me—is scared to close that door and hear what she has to say about leaving me.

I was enough to make her want me, but not enough to make her want to stay. Hell, she didn't even have to stay... I would have gone with her. I would have done anything she asked, as long as it meant being with her.

Two blocks into my walk, a horn blares at me as I move past the crosswalk. I flip him off. "Not today, motherfucker, not today." It's a prime example of why, even though the city is always fun to visit, I don't think I could ever live in one.

I wonder what Emerson loved so much about New Orleans to keep her there.

As I approach a park, a flash of purple hair pulls my attention just like it did

in that octagon last night.

The woman turns her head slightly in my direction, and I know it's Emerson before her side profile comes into view. The heaviness I feel in my chest is suffocating with each step closer.

I see the smile on her face. It's accompanied by the loving look she used to have in her eyes when she looked at me, but right now, it's directed at a Raven-haired toddler.

Looking around as I approach, I wonder who she's with and who the kid belongs to.

Emerson spots me as I enter the gate to the park, releasing an audible gasp. The little guy turns his head, following her reaction.

The eyes that meet my own have my steps stuttering.

No.

How?

She has me so fucked up...my mind must be playing with me.

But my feet take me to him before I can even register what is happening. I think I hear Emerson call my name, but I ignore her, dropping to my knees in front of the boy.

The little boy whose face looks just like Emerson's, other than his eyes.

His curious stare is like looking into a mirror. I touch my hand to the side of his face, needing to make sure I'm not hallucinating.

He glances up to Emerson, not running from me but confused as to who I am. "Mama?" he babbles, looking to Emerson for reassurance.

Mama.

Emerson is someone's mama.

Someone who has my eyes.

I stand abruptly, reality hitting me like a crashing wave. He has to be over a

year old and pregnancy is nine months long. That means...

I stumble back, feeling like my legs are going to give out from under me any second.

“How could you? How could you keep this from me? Sonny, tell me I’m missing something. Tell me,” I plead with her, forcing my words through heavy breaths.

“Nox I... I need to explain. This is why I wanted to talk.” There’s a distressed look on her face as she rushes to say, “We need to do a DNA test.”

A DNA test. I let that statement settle into my bones, and if I thought the day she left me ripped me to shreds, this is so much worse. How could the girl I loved, the girl who took daily Polaroid pictures of me to hold her memories, who knew all my darkest demons, who I would have done absolutely anything for, move on so quickly?

I shake my head in disbelief.

“How long after?” I ask numbly, almost incapable of uttering the question. It must’ve been quick if she’s unsure of paternity.

Her attention snaps back to the little boy before answering me. “It’s okay, buddy. Come here.” She takes a few steps toward him, scooping him up, and the sight of him cuddling into her causes my chest to ache.

“This is why I wanted to talk to you in private,” she says, flicking her eyes down to him and back to me.

“What do you need for the DNA test, and how long until we get the results?” My voice reveals the fact that my self-control is hanging on by a thread, but I refuse to ever impact a child with anger the way I was.

“Three to five business days after we turn in the sample kits.” Emerson can barely look at me. At least I know she sees how fucked up this is.

“I’ll put you two up in a hotel in Richmond Hills until then,” I say, with no questions asked. She won’t run away from me this time.

“No, that’s not necessary. I can figure something out.” Her voice is stern and protective, like the mama bear she has become.

“You aren’t leaving the state,” I respond firmly, my fingernails digging into my palms as I try to rein in my emotions.

“I’m not trying to, Nox. I’ll go back to Richmond Hills, but I’ll figure out a place to stay. Thank you.”

“Have the kit delivered to my room, 4127... But there’s no doubt in my mind what those results will be.” I know the truth. One look is all it took, and I’m sure of it.

“Okay,” she whispers as she leans into her son, pressing a kiss onto the crown of his black hair. Another Monroe trait. All the men in my family have jet-black hair.

I can't resist the urge to ask the next thought that crosses my mind. The need to know is overwhelming. “What’s his name?”

For the first time since she saw me, a real smile graces Emerson’s face as she looks at her son. “Kiran.”

It fits him well. So many more questions clog my throat, and I have to force myself to pull my eyes away from him. I feel a protectiveness over him I haven’t felt since Emerson moved in next door all those years ago. But right now, I need to walk away and protect him from me.

I am breaths away from exploding.

Glancing back one last time, my feet lead me through the motions and out the gate. Golden-brown eyes that still haunt my dreams and little green ones with a touch of yellow stare back at me.

FIVE



Shit!

Shit!

Shit!

This wasn't how I wanted him to find out. *FUCK*. I close my eyes and steady my breaths as I hold on tightly to Kiran. Reaching for my phone with my free hand, I dial Jade.

“Hey, are you ready for dinner already?” she jokes upon answering.

“Lennox saw us at the park.”

Her silence on the other end of the line does nothing to ease my anxious thoughts.

Jade clears her throat. “Why don't you come back to the room.”

“Yeah, probably a good idea,” I say, taking another deep breath.

“Okay, I'll see you in a few... Try not to freak, Em. It will all be okay.”

“Thank you. Be back in a few.”

Composing myself, I gather Kiran's diaper bag and motorcycle toy he refuses to let go of and buckle him into the stroller.

I can't believe Nox saw us...

I wince slightly when I recall the pain in his expression when I asked for the DNA test. It's as if I had stabbed him directly in his heart. *You did*. What he doesn't understand is that it wasn't the time or place to have that conversation. It's not that I wasn't ready for him to see Kiran, it's just that I was supposed to tell him my side of things. Help him understand what happened.

God, how I wish things were different.

“SO WHERE ARE you going to stay in Richmond Hills?” Jade asks as I rock Kiran to sleep in my arms.

We decided to order some takeout from the diner and stay in. It was late and almost bedtime by the time I was done retelling the story to Jade and we had to get the kids to bed. When we were in the middle of eating, Cliff's office sent over an email with all of his contact information., spurring on a whole other conversation.

“I'm not sure yet...” My eyes begin to water as I stare at my beautiful baby boy.

“Listen, moving back to North Carolina was always your hope. This is what's best. It will be hard to settle back into the swing of things, but you will get there. And I promise I'll be by your side to help you.”

“You don't know how much that means to me, thank you.”

After laying Kiran down, I wrap Jade in my arms for a big hug. I don't know where I would be if I didn't have her. When I first left Richmond Valley, I was beyond lost, with no direction and no real plan. But then I made one of the best decisions and called Jade.

At the time, she had just relocated to New Orleans and was renting a small two-bedroom apartment in the heart of the city. She offered to let me stay with her and Willow and help me get my feet on the ground. To have some sense of security, knowing my world was flipped upside down when I found

out about the pregnancy.

Come to find out, Jade never really had much of a family either once she was taken away from my mother and grandmother. It was just her and her dad until she was old enough to be on her own. She had just gotten out of a pretty shitty relationship with Willow's dad right before moving to New Orleans and was in the midst of starting over when I reached out.

Considering she's only eight years older than I am, our relationship grew into more of a best-friend dynamic rather than one of an aunt and niece. Since we didn't have all those years together, we had to start from scratch. I like to think that we helped each other get through those first few months. And not just her taking me in, but opening her arms and heart freely to a stranger. We've grown a tight family unit together, and that means everything to me.

"Let's figure out a plan for this week. I'll need to work out a few more things, and then finalize packing for the move. It might take me some time for us to get up here," Jade says, rubbing my back softly.

"Are you sure you're okay with moving again? I don't want you to feel obligated."

"You know how desperately I want to get away from him. I just need to work out a few things. Are you sure you want us to tag along?"

"I wouldn't want it any other way." I smile, and it's true. They've been such an essential part of Kiran and my life that I can't picture moving away from them.

We're really doing this...

Looking over to where Kiran sleeps soundly next to Willow's cot, I exhale the breath with new resolve. This is what he needs, what he deserves. I don't want him living life, never knowing what it feels like to be surrounded by loved ones and family. Because that's what we are in Richmond. Now, to prove to them all I'm not the villain in this story.

I WAKE as the first beams of daylight reach the windows. Stretching wide, I relish the feel of the massively oversized bed, somewhat relieved yet terrified to be back in Richmond Hills.

Not long after Jade and I decided we were officially moving, Lottie came to our hotel room. Nox had gone directly to them after our encounter at the park and told them what had happened. Lottie, being the saint she is, invited us to stay at her house while we got everything figured out. She didn't ask for answers, didn't even question me. Just said she was happy to have me back, and once I'm ready to tell my story, she'll be there to listen. I was beyond grateful; I just hope the rest of the crew shares the same sentiment.

Movement, followed by a whimper in Kiran's pack-and-play, has me up and across the room. He's usually a great sleeper, but I think he prefers the comfort of his crib. Needless to say, the last few nights have been rough. The constant state of awake left me ample time to overthink every detail from the past two years.

Peering into his bed, Kiran lies awake, rubbing his eyes. "Mama," he says in a half cry.

"Good morning, my beautiful boy."

A small smile spreads across his face, and I scoop him up when his arms reach out for me. Holding him close to my chest, I release a sigh, preparing myself for the day ahead. There's no doubt in my mind it's going to be a tough one, as Lottie invited everyone over for a cookout. Everyone except for Colton, since he already left for his sophomore year at college. That's a whole other whirl of emotions I need to deal with, but we need to take this one day at a time.

According to Lottie, the crew knows I'm here with Kiran. I would never worry about them being around him, but I can't say I'm not nervous about their acceptance. And their questions. Questions I'm not prepared to answer until I can find the time to get Nox alone and talk with him. Before the damn DNA test arrives. He needs to know my why... He deserves the whole story.

A few hours later, I'm sitting at the kitchen island with Lottie as Kiran babbles on my lap, chomping on some slices of banana. Greyson officially met the little man. What a big mush he is when it comes to babies. Who

would have thought? Last night, he even helped a sleeping Kiran inside, but he's kept his distance from me, and I get it. He's as loyal as they come, and he's probably as unsure as I am about where his best friend stands.

"Does he have a favorite food?" Lottie asks as she cuts him up some more.

"He's a big eater. He'll devour just about anything I give him," I respond while putting another handful of Cheerios on the plate in front of us. Kiran's legs kick in excitement.

"Chee-o's," he cheers as his hand reaches for a fistful.

"He's beautiful, Em. I don't know if I've ever seen a baby this cute." Kiran drops his head back onto my chest and smiles, his face covered with banana bits.

"Come here, buddy, your face is a mess," I say as I wipe his cheeks. Placing Kiran on a playmat with a few toys, I head into the kitchen to clean up his breakfast.

I hear the front door open in the distance and steel myself for the impending inquisition. Pouring myself another cup of coffee, I turn around just as Frankie and Lucian walk into the open-concept kitchen and living room area. Lucian spots me first, his face brightening. He drops the delicious-smelling bakery boxes on the counter before wrapping his arms around me and squeezing me tight. We stand like that for minutes, just soaking in each other's embrace. Other than Nox, I used to shy away from this type of affection, but Kiran has changed all that. He's opened up a side of me that I never knew existed.

"I'm so happy you're here, Em," he whispers and places a gentle kiss on the top of my head. Tears prick the backs of my eyes. Here I was, expecting the worst, and he's just happy I'm here.

"Mama!" Kiran yells from where he's sitting on the floor.

"I heard you've gone and made me an uncle and didn't tell me. We will talk about that later, but for now, I'm dying to meet him." He says it like a question, his gaze imploring mine. I know he's hurt. Lucian is the only one I kept in contact with while I was gone. And yet I still didn't tell him...

“I’d love for you to. His name is Kiran...” I turn to him with pleading eyes. “I’ll tell you everything. I just haven’t had the chance to explain things to Nox.”

“After everything, he deserves to hear it first. I wouldn’t want it any other way,” Lucian responds in understanding, then heads over to where Kiran is playing.

Once he’s in front of the playmat, Lucian’s eyes jump to mine, probably recognizing Kiran’s distinct eye coloring. I nod briefly and head over to where they are huddled.

Frankie approaches us a few moments later with an armful of ingredients for mimosas. “Hey, Em,” she says, a bit of hesitancy in her tone. I get it, I truly do. This is their first time seeing me, so I’m sure it’s a bit of a shock. The others have had a few days to digest it.

After putting the champagne down, she throws one of her arms over my shoulder. “Lottie threatened me not to ask you a shit-ton of questions, and have you seen her when she’s serious? I’m not fucking with her, so I’ll leave it alone...for now. But I’m still pissed as hell for what you put us through. I’m glad you’re okay, and to see your face...and this adorable little man... Oh my goodness.” Her voice morphs into a coo when her eyes land on Lucian and Kiran on the floor. She proceeds to squat down and meet my baby boy with a shining smile on her face.

Lottie joins me as I watch Lucian and Frankie play with him. The smiles on all their faces, and the belly laughs coming from Kiran, fill my soul with a mix of happiness and regret. I wish he had this all along.

“One way or another, it’s all going to be okay,” she whispers when she notices me wiping away a stray tear, and I can only nod to keep from sobbing.

Some of my favorite people in the world are standing right here, showering my son with the love and attention he deserves. They can hate me all they want, and I will gladly live with that, as long as they never stop loving him.

SIX



Anxiety rolls over me in waves as I pull onto the long road leading from my place to Lottie and Greyson's house. I barely slept last night, knowing Emerson and Kiran were only a few acres away.

I look back at my black barn-style home and can't help but wonder if Lottie told her this was my place when they passed it yesterday. Lottie sold me a few of the acres she inherited after I signed my contract with the UFC. For now, I live in the fully equipped two-bedroom garage I designed on the property. I haven't needed more than that since it's just me—and occasionally Ford when he's looking for a break from partying with his new roommate, Ace. I also wanted to get my mom a new place before I built my own. With me moving out, and Colton being in Florida for college, my mom didn't want something big, so we found her a townhouse a couple of blocks from Lights Out in Richmond Hills.

My last fight in Sin City really put my name on the map, and before I left Charlotte yesterday, Cliff told me there was chatter about me getting a main event fight in Vegas against the standing Welterweight Champion. With that would come big money and hopefully my dream home.

I can't help but envision Emerson and Kiran at the thought.

We should have the results back from the DNA test within the next few days. Even though I'm one hundred percent sure what those results will say, there is so much uncertainty about everything else.

Ford is getting off his bike when I pull up beside him. He gives me a look of unease. “How you doing, brother?”

“Ask me in about an hour,” I grunt, my stomach in knots.

“How we playing this? Should I be a dick? Should I be nice?” Ford asks, and I let out a nervous laugh.

“Just be you, Pretty Boy. I’m sure between me and Greyson, she’ll have enough people being assholes to her.” I’m still so fucking pissed and hurt, but the possibility of her feeling unwelcomed and leaving again is just as suffocating. *Especially with Kiran.*

We head around to the backyard where all the chatter is coming from. My eyes immediately find Emerson. She is sitting on one of the lounge chairs around the pool, laughing at something Frankie is saying to her. Lola Daniels, a friend of Frankie’s and Lottie’s, sits on the other side of her with her mouth wide open at whatever dramatic story is being told.

I want to be pissed that she seems to be so easily welcomed back into the fold after the pain she caused us all, but the sight of her holding Kiran in her arms under a large beach towel floods me with a whole different type of emotion. And it takes everything in me not to go over to him. The need to look into his green eyes, the ones that look just like mine, is overwhelming.

Emerson must feel my gaze on her because she looks my way, causing Frankie to follow her line of vision.

“There’s the champ. Congrats on another win, buddy,” she says, standing up and heading in our direction. My eyes flash back to Emerson’s at Frankie’s use of the nickname she used to call me.

“What’s up, Frank? Where’s Lucian?” I ask as she comes in for a hug.

“We brought breakfast over this morning, but he had plans with Carrie’s family today.”

“Ahh, yeah, boyfriend responsibilities and shit,” I say, trying to avoid her questioning eyes, but she lingers and whispers, “You good?”

Nodding at her, she moves to embrace Ford. Even though I’m the furthest

thing from good, and I'm sure as hell everyone here knows it.

Lottie comes out of her patio door, carrying chips and dip. "Hey, boys, perfect timing. G is just about to fire up the grill."

I make my way over to their outdoor cooking area, breaking the magnetic barrier trying to pull me over to the lounge chair *she* sits on.

Greyson mutters something as he sets down the tray of uncooked burgers beside me.

"Huh?" My head snaps to him, brow furrowed.

"This is fucking weird for me, man." Greyson, who has a hard enough time being nice to people, grunts in my direction. Then he runs his hand over his face. "Shit, dude. I'm a selfish fuck. How you holding up?"

I let out a sarcastic laugh. I feel like I'm caught up in a cyclone of rage, hurt, and curiosity.

"Not really sure, G. I'm trying to hold it together...for his sake." Really, I want to go over there and demand answers.

"Nox..." Greyson's voice is almost pained. "His eyes."

I nod as my emotions threaten to choke me.

"I told y'all there is no doubt he's mine." Of course, I filled them in on the secret I found out in the park, and they were all equally shocked. I rake my hands through my hair. "I'm a fucking mess, and trying not to think about the fact that the girl I used to love has kept my son from me."

Darkness was the enemy last night. I tossed and turned for hours, so many possibilities running through my head. The conclusion I came up with is she didn't realize she was pregnant when she left, and then she started hooking up with someone else and assumed the baby was his. But what has changed now? The fight in NC? The fact there is no denying he's mine and she couldn't handle the guilt every time she looked into his eyes?

Did she miss me?

"As anyone in your shoes would be. You're holding it together well. Are you

going to talk to her?”

I shake my head. “As soon as those results confirm what I already know, I am going to demand every fucking answer I deserve.” And I’m going to spend every waking minute making up for lost time with my son.

He nods and pulls on his grilling apron. I laugh silently because, damn, I never thought I’d see the day Greyson was so...domestic.

My eyes shift back over to Emerson, and I find her walking this way. Still so fucking beautiful. Even if I don’t want to admit it, I think the purple hair is my favorite.

Fuck.

“Hey, Nox,” she says gently, and I can tell she has her guard up. But my words are caught in my throat as my eyes connect with Kiran’s.

His head is still lying against Emerson’s chest, but his eyes are open. His sweet, vulnerable expression and the way he clings to his mom have my insides aching with loss.

Loss of time, memories...love.

I reach out to rub his hair, wondering if he feels the immediate connection we have.

Emerson gives me a minute to admire him before she says, “I’m just going to change him, and we will be right back.”

She always struggled with affection, so seeing her with him...so close and adoring stirs something dormant within my soul.

“Noxy!” Ford shouts, probably watching me stare at the closed door behind them, looking as lost as I fucking feel right now. “Come play pool pong.”

After a few games, we move to the side of the pool. The warm sun feels good beating down on my arms resting up on the concrete. I reach over, pushing Ford’s chin up. “Bro, close your mouth. You look like a dog with your tongue hanging out.”

He laughs and glances back at Lola. “She’s fucking hot...and it’s not like I’m

allowed to look at the other three. Two are spoken for, and one is like my sister. Eww.” I want to say Emerson isn’t spoken for, but the primal side of me can’t seem to push that lie past my lips.

“Have y’all ever hooked up?” I ask, knowing she hangs around the clubhouse a lot.

He shakes his head. “Nah, I’m just admiring the scenery.” Winking, he nods in the direction of the house.

Emerson comes out the door, and when she sets Kiran down to walk on his own, it’s the first time I’ve truly been able to admire her new body.

It’s athletic, long and lean...like it's always been. But as my gaze trails up to her breasts, which are fuller than they used to be, my dick swells at the sight.

Fuck, she’s even sexier than every memory-filled dream I’ve had since she left.

My heart rate spikes for another reason as I notice Kiran running this way toward the water. A terrified Emerson runs behind him, calling his name.

“Hey, little buddy, come here,” I say, moving down the pool a few feet to the area he has his eyes on. He slows down and waddles his little swim trunk-covered legs in my direction, Emerson backing off as she realizes he’s coming to me.

His hands start clapping as I hold my arms out to him. I find Emerson’s stare, and she nods in approval as I move to pick him up. “You want to get in the water, my guy?”

When I dip his legs in a little bit, his eyes light up with excitement as he giggles. Each time I dip him lower, his baby babbles get louder and louder as his chunky legs move a mile a minute. I watch him in awe, staring at his perfect face. The beauty mark he has just above his lip matches Emerson’s, and my heart skips a beat.

I feel Ford and Emerson watching us. “Does he need a life jacket or something? I should have bought one for him.”

Emerson laughs and, fuck, I’ve missed that sound. She walks toward the

lounger she was sitting on, and that's when I notice a big-ass duck float behind the chairs.

"Quack, quack," he says, and pride fills me. "That's right, buddy. You are so smart... The duck says quack quack."

Beside us, Ford starts singing, "Old McDonald had a farm ei-ei-o, and on that farm, he had a duck. Ei-ei-o." Kiran whips his head toward Ford and gives him the biggest smile, like '*dude, you know my song.*'

"That's his absolute favorite song...so be careful or you'll start something you won't be able to stop, Pretty Boy," she says playfully, but Ford's eyes are still connected to Kiran's.

"Holy fuck," he says, and covers his gaping mouth. "I mean, holy duck!"

Emerson passes me the float, and that draws Kiran's attention back to his mom, who's eyeing Ford.

I place him inside his little friend.

"Ride," he babbles, and I push him to Ford in response, gaining more giggles as we pass him back and forth between us in the water.

"Okay, I'm going to go see if Lottie needs help finishing up the sides," Emerson says, biting her lip. Not in the sexy way I'm used to seeing, but with worry instead.

"I got him. I promise," I say, trying to control any edge in my tone, because I know I don't owe her anything, but I also understand she's just trying to be a good mom—something she never had.

As soon as she walks away, Ford says, "You weren't lying. There is no doubt in my mind." A sad smile crosses his face as he admires the little guy, who looks like the perfect combination of Emerson and me.

We continue entertaining Kiran but, truthfully, he's entertaining us. I could listen to him giggle and babble all day long. He's just so damn cute.

Suddenly, his happiness turns to cries, and he wipes at his eyes. "What's wrong, buddy?" I ask, scooping him out of his float, trying to provide comfort. He continues rubbing his eyes, and that's when I see the white

residue from the sunscreen Emerson likely put on him before they came outside.

I carry him over to the lounge chairs and grab a towel. “Get me a bottle of water. I think he has some sunscreen in his eye,” I say to Ford.

“It’s okay, my guy, I got you,” I whisper, gently rubbing his hair. I use the soft towel to wipe his face off so no more gets in his eye.

“Thank you,” I say to Ford’s outstretched hand holding the water bottle. “Pour some on the corner of the towel for me.”

Dabbing his eyes with the wet towel seems to soothe the burn, and he stops trying to rub at his eyes. “Does that feel better, Kiran?”

He doesn’t answer, instead he picks up the bottle of water off the chair and holds it out to Ford. “Milk,” he babbles, and Ford laughs.

“Damn, already bossing Uncle Ford around... You want some milk, huh?” Ford asks him with a chuckle.

My friend shifts his attention to me. “Should I go ask Emerson?” Before I can answer, a mischievous grin spreads across Ford’s face. “Wait, does he want milk... Or does he want *milk, milk?*” he asks, squeezing his own pec.

I laugh at his ridiculousness, but then the image of Emerson holding Kiran to her chest and feeding him runs through my mind, causing that ache to come back. I wonder if she did breastfeed. Did she have help when he was a newborn? How beautiful was she with him growing inside of her? *Damn, I missed so much...*

Anger and sadness swirl through my veins as I stand. “I’ll go ask her.”

Kiran buries his head into my chest as I stand, and the feel of his little body seeking comfort from me lifts the heavy weight that’s been lying on my chest.

“Food’s almost ready,” Greyson calls out.

“Shit, what time is it? I need to run back to my place before we eat,” I say, realizing she’s probably here.

“It’s almost two.” Greyson’s head turns from the grill for the first time, and I notice the way his hard exterior softens when he sees me holding Kiran.

“Hurry up. I’ll make sure there is still some food when you get back.”

I nod at him.

Emerson opens the sliding glass door at the same time we approach. She’s holding a bowl of potato salad in her hands and quickly sets it down when she sees us. “What happened?” She leans in close, running her hand over Kiran’s face.

Her breath blows over my chest as she talks to him, causing a stir low in my belly.

“He’s okay,” I reassure her at the same time Kiran perks up and says, “Mama, milk.”

“I think he’s hungry. But we did have a little episode of him getting some sunscreen in his eyes.”

Kiran looks up at me and runs his tiny hand over the scar right above my eye. His little touch, paired with the memory and the look in Emerson’s eyes right now, is like a gut punch.

She quickly recovers, reaching for her son, and he moves right into her waiting arms. “Let’s get you some milk, buddy. And we’re about to eat too.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t sure what he could eat.” I sound as unsure as I feel right now.

“He stopped breastfeeding right at a year old, so he’s been drinking whole milk for the last two months and he eats real food too.” I stare at her in awe, still so shook that she is a mom. And that she is here. What the fuck. My emotions are making me feel like I’m losing my mind.

“So, he’s fourteen months old... When is his birthday?” I ask, and she swallows roughly at my question.

She nods. “Yeah, almost... His birthday is June 30th.” Then she quickly changes the subject, obviously uncomfortable. But too fucking bad... I have a lot of questions, and they *will* be answered. Just not here, not in front of him.

I can't promise I will be able to control myself.

"Sorry about the sunscreen thing. Jade took our pool bag back with her on accident, and Lottie didn't have any baby sunscreen."

I'm hung up on the name she dropped. "Jade? Who's Jade?"

That has Kiran's head perking up. "JJ... Lilow?" he says, looking around like they may appear.

"No, JJ and Lilow aren't here, buddy. They will be soon," Emerson says to Kiran, and then addresses me. "Jade is my aunt. My mom's sister. Turns out, she's pretty great and nothing like the rest of my family. She has a little four-year-old named Willow."

I recall her aunt had contacted her social worker. I always wondered if they had connected. I even went to DSS and begged Debbie, her case worker, to give me Jade's info.

Part of me is glad that Emerson and Kiran have had her in their lives, but the other part of me hates her. Was she the one who encouraged Emerson to leave?

The buzzing in my pocket distracts me from my thoughts. "I need to run to my house for a few." I rub Kiran's back. "I'll be back soon, my guy."

With the force of a thousand winds, I have to pull myself away from them. I was always unexplainably drawn to Emerson. Not just by attraction, but by something so much deeper than that. And I feel it with Kiran too.

In the depths of my soul... I know he's mine.

SEVEN



The red BMW in the driveway stirs guilt inside me. I shouldn't feel this way, but I can't help it. I didn't want Leslie to just show up at the cookout, so I told her we could meet at my place. There's still so much I need to tell her. Our relationship has always been about the release we both need, but that doesn't mean I want to steamroll her into a situation she has no clue exists.

I walk through the door and am immediately greeted by a pink bikini-clad Leslie.

"Hi, babe," she says, rushing over to embrace me, and her scent is all wrong. Her lips press against my neck, and I will my cock to react like it normally does.

"Hey, you. How was the drive in?"

"Not too bad since I had this to look forward to," she says, raking her small hand over my damp swim trunks. I grab her ass cheeks, backing us up into my kitchen island.

"Oh yeah, is that right?" I tease, biting her lower lip and grinding into her as my tongue finds hers. As I trail my hand up her back, the contact with the nylon string has me picturing a gold bathing suit instead. Purple hair traveling down her spine to that ass I still want to fuck. Full breasts barely covered by the shimmering material that makes the gold around her brown eyes stand out. I moan at the daydream playing behind my eyelids.

Fuck, now I'm hard as steel. Fingernails dip into my shorts, and the sound of the Velcro detaching has my eyes flying open. The sight of Leslie dropping to her knees in front of me should drive me crazy with lust and need. But instead, I find myself backing up. *I can't do this.*

Pulling at my hair, I let out a long groan, "Fuuckkkk."

"Nox...what's wrong?" The concern in her voice makes me feel like shit, but I warned her about this. She may only know parts of me, but she knows the most damaged part. The part that will never truly love another woman.

A knock at the door breaks the tension in the room. Who the fuck is that?

Helping Leslie to her feet, I turn and head to the front door. The knock sounds once more before I swing the door open, and my eyes find an unexpected visitor. One that has my heart beating faster.

"Sonny." Letting my endearment slip, I swallow my emotions getting the best of me today. "Is everything okay?"

She shakes her head. "Nox, we need to talk." The rawness she's showing me has every wall I've built to keep her out rapidly crumbling.

I shift uncomfortably, and that's when she looks past me, finding Leslie in nothing but her bikini. Her eyes move back to me, and when they stop on my shorts, I realize the Velcro is still undone.

"Hi, Emerson," Leslie says, but doesn't come any closer. "I can give you guys some privacy."

"No." Emerson throws her hand up, and I hear the hint of pain in her voice. I want to love it, but I can't. It doesn't feel right. What she's just walked in on is making me nauseous.

She clears her throat, composing herself. "No, thank you. It can wait," Emerson says shakily as she turns to make her getaway.

Leslie speaks up again, her expression showing how uncomfortable she is. "Truly, I'll give y'all —"

Holding up my hand, I cut her off. "Nah, let her go. She's good at that," I say loud enough that I know Emerson hears it as her steps falter before she

reaches Lottie and Greyson's golf cart.

Part of me wants her to feel a sliver of the pain I felt when she left, but the other part wants to run that golf cart down and beg her to tell me everything. Every detail of Kiran, every detail of what she's been doing the last two years, every real reason why I wasn't good enough to make her stay.

I'm fucking pathetic as I stare after her driving away.

Walking back inside my place, it's eerily quiet, and dread fills me at the conversation this is going to induce.

Leslie sits at my kitchen island, sipping a beer she must have found in my fridge.

"I'm guessing she's why you couldn't even stand to look at me a few minutes ago." She says it more as a statement, like she already knows the answer. Her words aren't mean; they are just straight to the point.

"Look, Nox, I knew what I was getting into when we started this. You've always been honest with me, so I need you to continue to be."

I nod in response, because she's right. She deserves that.

"You once told me you'd always love her, but you didn't think you could ever trust her with your heart again." She tucks a piece of blonde hair behind her ear. "I know you don't trust me with your heart either, but if any part of you thinks you could repair what you had with her, I want to know." She swallows, releasing a breath.

I move to sit beside her, resting my elbow on the counter and running my hand over my face. Leaning closer, she rests her hand on my arm. "Nox... don't overthink it. If you could ever trust her again, then she's worth the fight." I lift my head to meet the eyes of the kindred soul before me, one I know has unfortunately experienced more heartache than myself.

"The look that I just witnessed on Emerson's face told me that she is very much still in love with you." No, she can't be, not after the last two years and the secrets she's been keeping. I shake my head, unable to truly believe that. But Leslie touches the side of my cheek, stopping me. "If I know one thing, it's that life's too short, and I would give anything to have another day with

my Daniel. So go after what's yours, Nox. And sure as hell don't worry about me. My heart was broken and never meant to be healed, so I promise this won't hurt for long."

Her words cause a sad smile to form on my lips.

"I will miss the benefits of this relationship, though," she says with a wink, most likely trying to lighten the mood.

We both stand, and I pull her into a hug. "Thank you." It's all I can manage to say. She already knows how I'm feeling, but I've yet to accept it.

"Maybe I should head back to Charlotte. I don't want to stir up unnecessary drama for you." I'm shaking my head before she's even finished.

"No way. Let's go eat. I'm not that much of a jackass." I chuckle, and she raises her eyebrows, as to say she begs to differ.

Leslie grabs her coverup off the back of my couch and slips it over her head. "So let me ask you this... I don't wish to hurt Emerson intentionally, but are you wanting to use this opportunity to make her a little jealous and give her a shove in the right direction?"

I consider her question. Of course, I love the thought of her being jealous, but then there is Kiran. I don't want this to get messy...especially in front of him.

"Let's just play it cool. She doesn't need to know what we are. There's more to the story that I haven't had the chance to fill you in on yet."

She looks at me curiously before I drop the bomb I'm sure she didn't see coming.

"I think I have a son, and you are about to meet him."

EIGHT



I flee Nox's place, willing my tears to stay at bay. Of course, he's seeing someone. I mean, I saw her with him at the fight in Charlotte, but I didn't think it was serious. Seeing her here, in Richmond Hills, makes me wonder if I underestimated their relationship. Is it serious? Was he able to move on that easily? *That's what you asked him to do... That's what he thinks you did too.*

UGH! And she works for fucking Cliff.

Just the thought of what I possibly interrupted has bile rising up my throat. I need to get back to the main house and chill out. *This is what you wanted...* Maybe if I keep telling myself that, I'll eventually believe it.

Schooling my emotions, I walk through the pool gate where Frankie spots me almost immediately and heads in my direction. I guess I didn't do as good of a job as I thought.

"Are you okay?" she asks, placing her arm on my shoulder and spinning me away from the crowd.

I swallow the lump in my throat. "Yeah, I went to go talk to Nox, but...he—he was busy."

"What do you mean *busy*..."

"Leslie was there, so I left." Trying to keep my response short to maintain whatever is left of my dignity, it feels like I can barely breathe.

“Oh, I didn’t realize she was coming this weekend,” Frankie says.

“I know I have no right to ask this, but I’m going to anyway. Are they serious?”

“You’re right. You really don’t have the right to ask or care...” Her stare bores into mine as she continues. “That man deserves some sliver of happiness in his life. You destroyed him, Em. I’m not sure you realize the mess you made when you left. And just when we all think he’s finally getting over you, you show back up and with a son, no less.”

My eyes fall to my feet, along with my heart. She’s right, she’s absolutely right. Fuck, what was I thinking? “But to throw you a bone, I’m not sure what they are.”

Before walking away, she places her hand on my shoulder, causing my gaze to jump to her face, which has lost all the seriousness from moments before. “Now pick your head up and come on. The food and booze are waiting.”

Letting out a shaky breath, I regain my composure and pick my heart off the ground. Kiran must spot me, because I hear a loud “Mama!” being yelled from across the pool deck.

I fake the best smile possible and head over to my baby boy. One of the only things that has given me strength and sanity over these past two years. God knows I’ll need it to get through the rest of this day.

TORTURE. Pure fucking torture. That’s what today has been. The cuddles and sweet glances she’s been giving Nox have just about fucking killed me. And to make matters even worse, Leslie is probably one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. So, I can’t hate her even if I tried—well, maybe just a little. She has what I want back...if he’ll take me.

Since it’s been such a long day, we decided to have a relaxing movie night. We’re all spread out on the pool loungers, watching *Avatar 2* on Greyson’s amazing outdoor movie setup. Kiran was really enjoying all the bright colors but still passed out on my chest about twenty minutes into the movie. I can’t

say I blame him; he's had a lot of fun in the sun.

I'm still overwhelmed by the affection everyone has shown him. As if he's already been accepted into the fold of their found family. *I wonder if Colton will feel the same.* I miss him so much it hurts. I picked up my phone to call him, just to place it back down, too many times to count. The guilt I feel when I think of him sends a twinge of pain through my chest. Once I get through this week in Richmond Hills, my next task is talking to him.

Kiran stirs in my arms, readjusting his position. Judging by the stars illuminating the sky, it's time for me to bring him inside. I don't think I'll last much longer tonight either. I have a day of training at Lights Out to prepare for, both mentally and physically. If I'm serious about my potential future in the octagon, I need to reestablish my rigorous training schedule.

Bracing his body against mine, I maneuver out of the lounge. I successfully stand without so much as waking him—that is, until a loud roar erupts from the outdoor surround speakers. Kiran's eyes shoot open as I quickly usher him inside just as he lets out a wail.

“Shh...shhh, it's okay, bub. You're okay,” I whisper to him as we climb the stairs to our room. When I lay him in his pack-and-play, he whimpers with a pout. “Mama, song.”

“Okay, lovey. Lay down.” I smile, keeping my tone soothing. Then I begin to sing our song, the song I've sung to him since the day I felt his first kicks inside of me. The memory brings tears to my eyes. I remember that day like it was yesterday. I was so lost and defeated, unsure of everything. I had just moved in with Jade and her little girl, Willow. The only thing holding me together was my determination to make a better life for the one growing inside of me. With my hands on my belly, I began to sing the song that gave me hope that our future had promise. A promise of so much more.

“*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...*” Sleep takes him over soon, but I finish it out like always. “*So please don't take my sunshine away.*”

I stand to leave, but not before covering him up with a light blanket. After turning on the monitor, I gently close the door behind me. An audible gasp escapes me when I'm met with the shadowy figure leaning against the wall.

“That’s the song you decide to sing to him,” he practically growls as he stalks toward me. My back presses up against the wall as his strong arms shoot out on either side of me.

“It—it’s our song. We sing it every night.”

“What are you playing at, Em?”

“His name means ray of light,” I blurt out. His proximity is affecting my ability to think correctly.

Nox’s arms fall as he digests my words. His chest is heaving like my own. The look in his eyes when they rise to meet mine has the tears I’ve been so careful to keep at bay begging for release. My fingers twitch with the desire to move the hair off his forehead, but I will them to stay put.

I close my eyes and attempt to gain control over my pounding heart. It’s then that I feel Nox’s forehead lean against mine, his warm breath spreading across my face. Keeping my eyes closed to not break the moment, I lift my arms and wrap them around his neck. His body shudders under my touch but doesn’t pull away. Then, ever so slowly, I feel his hands rest on my hips.

We stand like that for an unknown amount of time, both lost in the feel of each other. A lone tear slides down my cheek, and I sigh, effectively breaking the bubble we were in. Nox pulls away from me and stares down at my face, his gaze searching my own.

Releasing his own long sigh, he asks, “Why were you hiding from me? Then go and name your child something like that...something special to us.”

“I wasn’t hi —”

“Bullshit. You were. You left without a trace, no number, nothing. So, tell me, *Emily*...how is that not fucking hiding?” The malice and hurt in his tone make me wince.

There is no response I could give him that would help this situation, so I stay silent, pissing him off even further.

“Emily...why would they be calling you that?”

“It was close enough to Emerson that I would answer to it but could keep my

true identity private.” What I don’t say is that it also helped me to disassociate with the life I left in Richmond Valley.

“Why, so I couldn’t easily find you...? Because I tried. I fucking tried!” Nox’s eyes bore into mine, trying desperately to break through the walls I’ve meticulously put into place. He’s about to say something more, when the loud ringtone of my phone fills the space around us.

“Shit,” I mutter as I fumble for the device, trying to mute the sound. Nox takes a step back and allows me space to search my pockets. Once muted, I look at the screen and see Jade’s name. That’s weird. Why is she calling me this late?

“I’m sorry, I have to get this. It’s Jade...” He doesn’t even really know who she is yet. Geez, there is so much to say, and what feels like no time to do say it.

He just nods resolutely and walks away. With a shaky hand, I answer the call.

“Em!” I hear her sob, terror evident in her voice.

“Jade, what’s wrong?”

“He did it again...” she starts, and I know I’m in for a long night. So, I make my way to the stairs and sit, preparing for whatever she has in store for me.

NINE



“Y our vibe has been off this morning, Monroe,” my coach, Joey, says, looking at me curiously.

“I’m tired. It’s my first day back, and its’ early as hell... Give me a damn break,” I respond before shooting water into my mouth, trying to hide the lie. I actually am tired as fuck from another restless night of sleep, but that’s not why I’m so distracted.

Even though my bottle is halfway full, I mosey over to the refill station. It’s the easiest way for my eyes to travel inconspicuously to the other side of the room.

Emerson’s wearing a dark purple sports bra with matching spandex shorts. And I’m fucking jealous of the way they cling to her body.

My gaze travels along every inch of her, unable to stop myself as I take in her full breasts, those strong shoulders, her delicate collarbone. I still can’t believe she is here in the flesh. My cock stiffens at the thought of running my tongue along her slender neck, finding all her sensitive spots all over again. The memory of the first night I tasted her, right here in this very place...

I shake my head, willing myself not to go there.

When I finally look at her face, I’m met with a knowing smirk. That sassy look and smart mouth of hers always gave me something to look forward to. Disappointment stirs in my gut when she quickly moves her attention back to Snow.

She has my head so fucked. And on top of everything, we should get the results from the DNA test today or tomorrow. I tried calling Colton this morning, but he didn't answer. I'm sure he's partying every night this week since school officially starts up again next Monday. But I know it's only a matter of time before word makes it to Florida that Emerson is here. And damn, is she here...here and fucking sexy as hell.

Pretending to need the sustenance of my protein bar, I watch Emerson work on her takedowns for a few more minutes. Snow is working with her today, and I can't say I wasn't relieved to hear her coach would not be joining her in North Carolina.

Snow has turned into a damn good trainer. Unfortunately, he was in an accident last year, and with the injuries he had afterwards, he decided to take a step back from pursuing his own fighting career. He always liked teaching classes, and this allows him to take that skill set to the next level.

Emerson's even quicker and more precise with her jiu-jitsu moves when she's grappling than she was a few years ago. And I can tell she's even stronger too by the way she is able to throw her weight around against her opponent.

I may despise the way her coach's hands seemed to feel way too comfortable touching her body at the after party, but I'll give him credit where it's due. Emerson was always talented, but the woman I'm watching now, the woman I saw in that cage last weekend, is going to be a household name in the MMA world. *She's next level.*

I hear a throat clear, and I turn to see Joey standing beside me. "Since when do you take snack breaks in the middle of a session?"

"I told you...I'm still worn out from my fight last weekend. I normally take more time off in between." I take the last bite of my bar before tossing the wrapper into the trash.

"Yeah, I'm calling bullshit, Nox," he grunts out, and we both start walking back to the ring we were training in. "Look, I know you and the Siren have some history or some shit, but I'm going to need you to rein in your inner Prince Eric and focus. You potentially have a huge fight coming up soon."

“Prince Eric?” *What the hell is he talking about?*

He rolls his eyes like I’m the biggest idiot on earth. “Ariel’s prince...” Still lost, I just stare at him. “Christ, Nox... Like Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. Just never fucking mind.”

I laugh, shoulders shaking at the look on his face. “Okay, now I get it... Sorry, I’m not as well versed as you on my Disney princesses.”

“Just get your ass in that ring and focus for the next hour.”

I chance one last glance at Emerson and then do as he says, albeit reluctantly.

WHEN I WALK OUT of the locker room, Emerson is waiting on the bench in the hallway.

“Did they call you too?” Her eyes are full of emotion, telling me exactly who “they” is.

“I don’t know. I haven’t even looked at my phone.” Stomach tightening with nerves, I dig into the side pocket of my bag to find my cell.

“They called me. The results should be sent to our emails within the hour.” She’s having a hard time keeping eye contact with me as she fumbles with her hands.

“Good to know. You didn’t have to sit out here just to tell me that.” I know I sound like a dick, but she’s confusing as fuck.

She picks her head up, looking me in the eyes again. “I wanted to wait for you. I was hoping to look at the results together.”

That softens me, even calming me just a bit. “Okay...do you want to go to my car, so we have some privacy when it comes through?”

“I was thinking we could just go to your place so I can be closer to Kiran once we are finished. Lottie said he’s napping right now, and I told her not to wake him to come pick me up.”

“Text her and tell her I’ll bring you home,” I say and start walking to my car, assuming she will follow me.

The ten-minute ride to my place is tense. The discomfort she’s feeling from being near me is palpable. And it pisses me the fuck off.

I barely have my car in park before she’s opening the door to jump out like she can’t get away fast enough. But it’s the deep breath of air I see her gulp down once she’s out that does me in.

“You’d think I was the one who obliterated you with the way you can barely stand to be in my presence,” I say, grit in my tone as I step toward my place. I swing the door open and leave it that way as I move into my kitchen.

“I’m tired of your fucking pity party, Lennox.” She enunciates my name, clearly trying to get a rise out of me.

Spinning around, I encroach on her space, reaching above her head I slam the door shut. “There she is. I’ve been waiting for the fiery Emerson to come out and play,” I snarl in her ear.

It’s just like we were in that hotel lobby a few days ago—my tattooed hand around her neck, Emerson’s back up against my front door, and enough angry, sexual energy swirling around us to blow up the whole town.

“And what did I tell you about calling me that?” I grunt, sliding one of my knees between her legs.

Emerson licks her lips and slowly purrs my name. “Lennox.” She digs her nails into my t-shirt covered chest, raking them down to the top of my shorts.

Before I can think better of it, I’m biting her bottom lip. And it’s like she never fucking left. Instantly, she melts into me, pressing her lips into mine. “Fuck,” she moans, causing my already hard cock to jolt against her.

Our tongues fight for power, and even with all the anger behind this kiss, there is still so much there between us. So much good. Like, the severed connection we share is fusing back together. There is sorrow and pain in every brush of our lips and sweeps of our tongues, but the chemistry I remember, one unlike anything I’ve ever felt before, is still alive and well. Maybe it’s even stronger. Fuck, I’ve missed this. Missed her.

Suddenly, she's pushing me back, staring at me for a few beats before I taunt, "Can't handle it, baby?"

In true Emerson fashion, she shocks me by dropping to her knees. "Is this what your little friend was doing the other day when I interrupted?" she asks, tugging down my shorts. My dick leaks at the sight of her.

My head is so fucked; I don't even try to lie. "She was going to, but I couldn't..."

Emerson pauses with her fingertips inside the waistband of my boxers, staring up at me with what looks like hopefulness in her gaze. "Why?"

And since I'm a desperate fuck as always when it comes to her, I answer honestly. "Because I couldn't get you out of my fucking head, Sonny."

"Good," is all she says before she pulls my boxers down and lets out an audible gasp.

Rubbing her finger over the tip of my cock, precum trails around the barbell. "When did you get this?" She sticks her tongue out, smoothing it across the jewelry.

Barely able to speak, I moan, "Last summer."

With a hum, she takes me deep in her mouth, letting my piercing hit the back of her throat. I swear I could come without another touch. "Fucking hell," I groan as my eyes roll to the back of my head.

"I can't wait to feel this inside of me," she moans, releasing me from her mouth with a pop.

"Then be a good little slut and bend over that couch...ass out." Leaning over, I pick her up and lay her stomach against the back of my couch. My hard cock juts between us as I rip her clothes down her legs. She groans and flexes her back more, showing me that perfect pink pussy I've missed so much.

Tugging my cock, I'm not sure how long I'm going to hold it together. "Fuck, Sonny, you're already dripping for me."

"Let's go, Champ." She wiggles her ass back at me as I lightly stroke my hand over her inner thigh, then between her legs. "Fuck me, please. I need to

come.”

Grinding my bare cock into her, Emerson lets out a whimper. “Yes, please.”

“I won’t make you beg...yet,” I whisper, guiding my dick through her folds. She’s getting me good and wet.

“I want you bare, but I shouldn’t,” I rasp, and she quickly responds, “I have an IUD.”

Narrowing my eyes at her, I smack my slick cock against her ass and growl, “Yeah, but I have no fucking clue what you’ve been doing the past two years.”

Emerson looks back at me, gritting her teeth. “Fuck you, Lennox.”

“Oh, you’re about to, don’t worry.” I can’t help it; I spank her ass, hard. And she moans like it was a damn gift, pushing back into me.

Fuck the condom.

I fill her in one thrust, losing my breath at the feel of her wrapped around me. Emerson whimpers, but I notice a slight wince come over her face. “You good?” I hold still, my cock begging to rut in and out of her.

“Yeah, it’s just been a while,” she says, peering over her shoulder, her dark eyes boring into me. “Now fuck me like you hate me.” Her request causes the starved beast within me to take over.

“Remember you asked for it.” Pulling on her ponytail, I bring her face closer to me as I lick along her collarbone, all the way up to her ear. As I slowly fuck her with powerful thrusts, I relish the way her body responds to me.

“You feel good, Sonny.” I spank her again, knowing it will make her pussy clench around me. And it does, nice and tight, as her pretty moans ghost my lips. “This is the exact view I have been fucking my hand to for the past two years.” I practically growl the last part. “Even when I wanted to hate you...I couldn’t fucking help myself.”

She whimpers in response.

“Don’t stop, Lennox... please, please. Your piercing... Fuck, it feels so

good.” Her moans are driving me insane as I stroke in and out of her.

I shove her shirt up, running my hand up her sexy six-pack and pushing my hand into her sports bra. “These perfect tits in your little gold bikini yesterday had me hard as fuck.” Rolling my fingertips around her nipple, I tug on the rosy bud and consider flipping her around so I can have them in my mouth. But her round ass keeps me right here in place, watching my slick cock disappear inside her pussy from behind.

“You feel even better than all the memories I’ve been holding on to. I know exactly what you want.” She nods eagerly, trusting me to read her mind. *Harder, faster, rougher.* And that’s exactly what I give her. “Did anyone else fuck this pussy like I do?”

One of her hands grips the couch and the other reaches around to claw at my leg. I know she’s getting close.

“No. No one,” Emerson whimpers, detonating around me. Her unintelligible curses send me over the edge as I come deep inside of her.

I hover over her back, my hands braced on either side of her. “Feel better, Sonny?”

She turns her head from where it’s buried on top of the cushion. Biting her lip, she nods.

“Good.” I push a small strand of hair that fell from her ponytail behind her ear.

“Lennox, I want to say one thing.” Her voice draws my attention from where I’m watching my cum leak out of her pussy.

“Baby...there is a lot I’m going to need you to say in the upcoming days, but sure, go ahead.”

She swallows. “And I will explain it all. But I want you to know that no matter what the results say, I want you. I want this back, and I’m going to fight to make you keep me.”

I want her too...but can I give in so easily after everything?

TEN



The probability of Lennox Monroe being the father of Kiran Davina is greater than 99.999%.

I stare at the words and read them over and over. Even though I knew it in my heart, seeing it written this way, where no one can ever question it again, has pride washing over me.

I'm a father. Emerson and I have a child together. I turn my head from the phone sitting on my countertop to a tearful Emerson. The moment our eyes meet, the tears start pouring down her face, and she stands up abruptly.

"What have I done?" She sounds tortured, and I'm confused as fuck.

Grabbing onto her shoulder, I turn her to face me. "What do you mean?"

"I took"—she sucks in a breath, trying to get her words out through her sobs—"him from you."

"I didn't know... I didn't know," she says, shaking her head.

Her reaction has my defenses lowering and my concern for her rising. I take her hand in mine and bring her around to sit on the couch.

"It's okay, Sonny." I try wiping her tears away, but they just keep coming.

"No, it's not..." She takes several deep breaths to steady herself before she speaks again.

“Kiran is the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and I couldn’t be happier with those results. But this situation is so fucked up.” Now she’s biting her nails, anxiety written all over her face.

“Emerson, please tell me what’s going on. Actually, I think it’s time you tell me exactly what’s been going on for the last two years.”

She buries her face in her hands and starts bawling again. Now my hackles are up, and my mind races with awful possibilities I had never even considered. It’s making me lightheaded.

I pull her into my chest, pressing a kiss to the top of her head, and she melts into me. Praying that my latest thoughts are way off base, I attempt to soothe her. “Em, breathe. What’s going on, baby? Please, talk to me.”

She lifts her watery gaze to mine, crushing me in half with three words.

“I was raped.”

My blood runs cold as agony rips through my chest. Shock and turmoil take over my body at her confession. As the urge to kill splashes the forefront of my mind in red, I will myself to stay calm for her.

“It happened about a month before I left.” And that statement rocks me to my core. How didn’t I know? How did I let that happen?

“Who?” is all I manage to growl out, my fingernails digging crevices into my palms.

Emerson grabs my fists, trying to ease my tension. But I can’t let the grip go. It’s the only thing grounding me from a moment of self-destruction that wouldn’t be fair to her.

“Lennox, baby. Look at me.” My eyes meet hers, and it’s the first time I feel the wetness on my cheeks as she wipes a stray tear away.

“One thing you have to know is that there is absolutely nothing you could have done to change any of this.” She squeezes my clenched hands.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The guilt I feel is overwhelming. She's been loving me all along and I've been trying to hate her.

"You, Colton, and your mom always gave me an escape and, for that and so much more, I'm forever grateful. From the first day I met you, you were a safe harbor to me, a guiding light in the darkness, until you became my everything." More tears well in her eyes again as she searches mine.

I pull my hands away, tugging at my hair. Not even her reassuring words can calm me in this moment. "This is too much, Sonny... Who hurt you? Who took you from me?" My heart is breaking in a way it never has before, knowing that this happened to my girl when I always swore she was safe with me.

Taking my hand in hers, she whispers, "This is going to be hard, but just let me tell you everything and then you can ask anything else you want to."

I nod, interlocking our fingers.

"Do you remember that day you came back from Charlotte and Colton told you that I had taken some nasty hits at the gym?"

Bile rises up my throat as I nod again.

"Well, that was the lie I had told Colton, and it was easier to let him sell it to you. You were always so good at reading me that I was terrified you'd see right through. And I knew you would kill him and ruin every dream you ever had over me."

A memory of her telling me something very similar when I beat the shit out of Tommy after he hurt her flashes through my mind. "Tommy?" It comes out as a whisper.

When she nods, the tears in the corner of her brown eyes have me wanting to dig him up from the grave and kill him again. "I went over there to bring another load of my stuff to your room. Unfortunately, he caught me off guard, and I slipped on my bad wrist." She swallows hard, and it feels like I could crawl out of my skin at the thought of her so vulnerable. "He had the upper hand after that."

I can't sit still anymore. Jolting to stand, I pace in front of the couch.

"I'm so fucking stupid...and so sorry, Sonny. That last month you weren't yourself, but I thought you were discouraged about your injury and the possibility of not getting to fight."

She stands, coming to me. "I was furious that Tommy took that from me, but in all honesty, it was an easy out. I knew you would think that was a big factor in my downward spiral." Our eyes connect, and we each take a shaky breath.

"I was going to push through it all... Since I was staying with you every night at that point, my plan was to never go back there, and I knew he wouldn't mess with me once I was officially moved out. He wouldn't chance being caught by you or Lucian."

Thinking back to that time, that wasn't long after Lucian had moved out. That slimy fucker had been waiting on his opportunity all along.

"But then I missed my period. And I remembered..." The sadness in her eyes is back from the memory. "No condom was used."

Shivers wrack over her body, and I pull her to me. "Shhh, shhh. I'm so sorry, baby. I know nothing I say can take that pain away, but I'd give anything to."

Forceful sobs take over, wetting my shirt. Listening to what she's been through is heart wrenching and enraging enough; I don't know how she's kept this inside for so long. "I'm just so glad he's yours...and not that monster's."

I hold her tighter, rubbing her back as her arms wrap around my waist.

"Me too...me too. But I would have raised him as mine, no matter what. You have to have known that."

Leaning back slightly to look up at me, Emerson licks the salty tears off her lips. "I did know that. But I also knew my options were limited. It was either tell you the truth and you go to prison for murder, or lie to you and say he was yours, when at the time, I truly thought he wasn't...since we had been using protection. And my heart broke at the thought of you finding out he wasn't yours, which would've left you devastated. I felt like my only option

was to run or have you and everyone who would follow you spend life in prison.”

Pressing a kiss to my chest, she says, “It was the only way to protect you and Kiran. I saw no alternative, even though it almost killed me in the process.”

My hand finds its way to her hair, running through the strands as I take everything in. “When did you start to think he was mine?” I don’t want to say it, but when I look at Kiran, it’s obvious. He is the perfect combination of Emerson and me.

A small smile slips onto her face. “His eyes. My favorite shade of green.” She runs her fingertips over the scar above my eye, taking me back to that night many years ago. My eyes close at her touch.

I should have fucking killed him then.

“I spent his first birthday crying almost all day.” I give her a questioning look to elaborate.

“When he was born, his eyes were blue. And my first thought was of the ice-blue eyes that hovered over mine, forcing me to look at him. But then, sometime around his first birthday, I was rocking him in his room, and I noticed the yellow specks in his irises, and my heart stopped. I shook it off like my mind was playing tricks on me because that’s what I truly wanted. You were never far from my thoughts. Then, a few days later, when I walked in to get him out of his crib, the sunlight was shining in. His little bright smile was happy to see me, and the most beautiful green eyes were glowing as I picked him up.”

Fuck.

“I tossed and turned night after night, thinking about what to do.”

It hits me. “And then Tommy died.”

Emerson nods. “Yes, and it felt like I could finally have everything I wanted.”

To know she’s talking about me has the tension in my muscles easing.

“The day Tommy died was also the day I found out someone else had backed

out of the charity fight in North Carolina and the recruiters had their eyes on me from a few fights I had recently won in Louisiana. It was a win-win. I don't have a lot of spare money, so I knew it would get me to North Carolina and hopefully open opportunities for Kiran and me. I planned to come to Richmond Hills and confess everything while I was here."

Looking into her eyes, I see the truth there. I know she would never have left without telling me everything, even with it being so painful to relive. Another tear trails down my cheek that she catches as she reaches up to cup my face.

"Lennox, I swear I didn't know you were the main event until a few days before, and then it felt wrong to call you after all this time. I tried speaking to you that day before the fights began, but even that seemed wrong. None of it felt like the right thing to do. I didn't want to fuck with your head."

I originally wasn't on the main event ticket for the charity fight night, until a few weeks beforehand when Cliff asked me. He said it would be great practice for my future contract fights and some of his heavy-hitter donators were asking for me again this year. AKA, me fighting meant dollar signs, but I didn't mind because the proceeds went to a cause dear to my heart. *Domestic violence.*

"Seeing you was a mind-fuck, but I'm pretty sure I blacked out when I walked into that cage."

"You were amazing... I couldn't look away. Wanna know a secret?" She bites her lip as some of the sadness leaves her.

I nod, my eyes locked on hers as I hold her in my arms.

"Jade kept Kiran for me during your Vegas fight. I found a bar that was showing it near us because I couldn't afford to rent it at home. I watched every second, and I was mesmerized. Everyone in the bar was talking about you, and it was fucking surreal. I was so hot and bothered by the time I got home, I made myself come to thoughts of you. That was the first time in two years I had since the last time we were together."

My heart stutters. "What are you saying?"

"There hasn't been anyone else, Lennox..."

I hang my head in shame, hating myself for how I've treated her. She uses her knuckles to pick my chin up. "I would have never expected you to wait on me. I knew I hurt you when I left, and I understood those consequences, no matter how sick it made me."

I know she's right about that, but I hate the thought of how I fucked her after everything she's been through.

"I'm sorry for how I treated you... And back then." I swallow, almost unable to say it. "Before you left, I was probably rough after everything happened. If I'd have known..." I say, shaking my head in regret and disgust with myself.

Her hands interlock behind my neck. "No...I wanted that. That's us and that's what I need, what I crave... For you to treat me like you always have. Please, don't feel like that. I promise, baby. It was perfect."

On her tiptoes, she presses her lips to my throat, up to my cheek, all over my face, until she meets my lips. I shiver. It feels like a dream having her in my arms again. Hovering her mouth over mine, she whispers, "I've missed you so fucking much, Champ."

"Good, because I'm never letting you or him go again," I say, kissing her just as her phone starts vibrating across my kitchen island.

"It's probably Lottie. I bet Kiran is awake."

I toss her my key off the counter. "Take my jeep. I need a few minutes, but when I get myself under control, I would love to come see him. I can drive my bike up there." Her eyes find mine, laced with concern. "Sonny, this was a lot to take in...and you know me, just like you did all those years ago. Since I can't kill him, I need to take my anger out on something. Just let me process the only way I know how, and I'll meet you up there by dinnertime."

She nods in understanding. Picking up her phone, she presses a kiss to my lips before making her way to my door. I watch her every step, wanting to pull her back for another kiss. Before she leaves, she turns toward me one more time. "We are going to be okay, right?"

I give her my first genuine smile of the day. "Yes, baby. My sunshine is finally back." I wink, and she bites her lip, smiling at me with a little wave goodbye.

And with her gone, murderous thoughts take over my mind. The only thing stopping me from burning the Robbins' house to the ground is the thought of being taken away from Emerson and Kiran.

I make my way into the unfinished part of my garage, where my punching bag hangs, and hit it repeatedly until literal blood, sweat, and tears are a puddle beneath me.

ELEVEN



The relief I feel when I get into the driver's seat of Nox's car is indescribable. To know for certain who Kiran's father is will hopefully ease my reoccurring nightmares and help us all move forward. After everything, we deserve it.

Walking into the house, I spot Greyson bopping around with Kiran while some old-school Lil Wayne streams through the speakers. I smile at the fact that he's playing the radio version. Kiran's face lights up in pure delight, Greyson's sporting the same joy.

"Leave it to you to get him into hip hop."

"Gotta teach them young..." Greyson says with a laugh, turning to me.

He must notice the remnants of my earlier tears because his demeanor switches instantly. "You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, we're good," I answer with a soft smile. My eyes fall to Kiran, who's still dancing in his arms. "But I think your friend might need you."

Greyson's expression is unreadable, and I don't know if I should tell him yet or not. Everyone has been waiting anxiously for the results, but I think if I don't say something now, he may lose his shit.

Just then, Lottie strolls into the room with a cup of Cheerios in one hand and a sippy cup in the other. She stops and places everything on the coffee table when she sees me. "Everything alright?" she questions with a furrowed brow

full of concern. Geez, I must look like a mess if that's both of their immediate responses upon seeing me.

"I'm more than okay," I reply, and for the first time in a long-ass time, I mean it.

"I was just telling G that I think he might want to check up on Nox." Their gazes are set firmly on me, and I know Nox would want them to know. "He just found out he's a father," I add, as happy tears escape my eyes.

"Oh my goodness. Thank God!" Lottie squeals as Greyson stalks toward me and hands off Kiran. But not before giving him a small squeeze and a kiss on the head.

"I fucking knew it," he whispers before kissing his girl and leaving the house. I hear the wheels of the golf cart crunch along the rocky driveway within seconds.

Lottie comes to my side and gives me and Kiran a big hug. "I'm so happy... Shit, I know this isn't even about me. But I'm so happy I could cry."

"Me too...me too," I say through the tears.

Kiran begins wiggling in my arms, signaling he wants to get down. He steps over to his snacks and starts munching away.

"Come on, let's sit," she says, grabbing my hand and walking me back to the couch.

"I am just so frickin' relieved, I can't even describe it."

"I'm sure you both are... Hell, I think we all are." As I look at her, something settles within me. I need to tell her my story.

"You think you can call Frankie and Lucian..." I ask with a sigh. "It's time I tell you guys what's been going on."

"IS THIS SIZE OKAY?" Nox questions as he continues to cut up Kiran's dinner. I study his hands, noticing the wraps around his knuckles that weren't there

earlier. I divert my eyes quickly, not wanting to dampen the mood.

“You could actually leave the broccoli bigger. He likes to hold the stalks and bite into it.” I can't contain the smile on my face at how attentive he's being.

“Really? Does he even have all his teeth? Won't he choke?” he asks incredulously. The dumbfounded look on his face is adorable.

I let out a soft chuckle. “He's actually cutting some teeth as we speak, but he's surprisingly good at chewing with what he has.”

Most of our conversations have gone somewhat like this since Nox came up to the main house. It's endearing to hear him try to get to know all the ins and outs of his baby boy as quickly as possible. They've missed out on so much time together...

I know deep down, I made the right decision when I stepped away. To think what Nox—or any of the guys, for that matter—would have done had they known terrifies me. What I did kept them safe and out of trouble. Now I just need to help him get over the guilt.

With Kiran occupied with dinner and Nox, I take a step back and enjoy the sight of them.

“I would never have thought you two would be the first to have a kid. My money was always on Ford,” Lucian says as he comes to stand beside me.

I laugh into my drink. “Yeah, he would've been my first guess too.”

He was the hardest one to look in the eyes earlier. I knew he would've felt guilt-stricken just like Nox did about not knowing what was going on behind closed doors. Tommy's threats only grew once Lucian moved out. I never in a million years thought Tommy would take it as far as he did, or that I wouldn't be able to defend myself.

Emotion overcomes me, and I wipe away a stray tear. *I really have turned into a softy since having Kiran.*

“Hey, don't cry, Em,” he says, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and pulling me in close.

Stifling a snuffle, I look up at him. “I'm so sorry I kept you in the dark about

all of this. I never wanted to burden you with keeping this big of a secret from everyone. I was trying to make it easier for you to continue talking to me.”

“Shh, please don’t cry. I get it now, I do. I just wish I could have protected you.”

Wrapping my arms around his big chest, I hold on to him, absorbing his comfort. “I’ve missed you so damn much,” I say, choking back a sob.

“I’ve missed you too. All of us have.” He squeezes me a bit tighter. “I’m glad you and Kiran are here. Even when my classes start next week, I want to see you guys as much as possible.”

“Mama!!” Kiran squeals from across the room, effectively breaking the moment.

He releases me at that, but not before adding, “This mama thing sure suits you, Em. I’ve never seen you light up like this outside of the ring.”

“Thank you, he’s my everything.” I smile and walk over to where the mini dictator commands my presence.

“Hey there, bub, looks like you had a great dinner,” I say, smiling at him and Nox.

“He did great. We may have a new champ in town,” Nox tells me, beaming with pride as he gazes down at Kiran.

“Is that so?” I say as I clean up the tray as much as possible.

“Tubby...tubby!” Kiran cheers.

Nox looks at me, questioning. “Most nights after dinner, he gets a tub, and then we have some relaxing time before bed.” I give him the rundown of the evening schedule, so he can feel included.

“Tubbyyy!” Kiran squeals again.

“Okay, okay, tub time it is.” I unbuckle the strap of his seat and lift him into my arms. Looking to Nox, I ask, “Care to join? He’s hilarious in the bath.”

A smirk spreads across his face while he stands. “Of course, I do... How’s

that sound, Lil' Champ? Want me to help with your tub?" he asks Kiran while rustling his dark hair on top of his little head.

Kiran giggles and lunges out of my arms toward Nox, who grabs him on instinct with a now full-blown smile.

We wave goodnight to everyone before heading up to our room. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought G and Lottie put me up in their primary bedroom due to its sheer size and amazing ensuite. But after a quick tour of their place, I realized that almost every bedroom is this huge. It gives us plenty of privacy, especially with a teething toddler. I would feel horrible if his occasional middle-of-the-night wails woke them up.

Leaving Nox and Kiran in the bedroom, I head into the ensuite to fill the tub. Giggles fill the air by the time I head back in to grab him. That's when I find Nox playing with Kiran on the bed. Kiran's laugh fills the air once again when Nox blows raspberries onto his baby belly.

My heart melts at the two of them, their resemblance uncanny. Both with their messy raven-colored hair and unique, yellow-speckled green eyes. The older Kiran gets, and his personality develops, I wonder how much more of Lennox's traits he'll acquire.

"Sorry to break up the fun, but the bath is ready," I say as I clear the overwhelming emotion from my throat.

"Mama, tubby!"

Nox follows us inside the bathroom and watches intently as I undress Kiran and place him in the tub. Then I pour the contents of his tub toys into the water. It's crazy the number of things that are required to travel with a toddler. Between the car seat, stroller, pack-and-play, toys, supplies, and the clamp-on highchair, we were ready for anything. Jade and I were quite the sight trekking through the airport with all our bags and kids in tow.

Speaking of...I have to call her tomorrow morning and make sure she's doing alright. Lately, her asshole of an ex, who's still obsessed with her, likes to show up at the apartment unannounced and cause a big scene. *Wake the neighbors* type of scene. His behavior is certainly the driving force behind Jade wanting to relocate. Thankfully, he has no paternal ties to Willow, and

Jade can relocate wherever she wants.

As I'm deep in thought, Kiran squeezes one of his water toys and the stream comes flying and hits me in the face. I squeal in surprise as the water soaks me, making both Kiran and Nox laugh. Little bastards. Who would have thought I'd be the odd man out in this relationship?

"You think that's funny, huh, bud?" I tease Kiran as I grab another one of the toys and fill it up with water. He just continues to smile and splash around. Squirting the toy onto his stomach, he laughs harder.

"He has such a great laugh," Nox says, coming to sit beside me on the floor. "I think I could spend all day trying to get him to make that sound." Reaching into the water, he grabs a squirt toy of his own.

"Well, now you can," I whisper with a smile. Kiran wasn't what either one of us had planned for our immediate future, but I know that Lennox Monroe will be an amazing father to our little boy.

"Now I can—" He stops mid-sentence as a stream of water hits him in the face. The sounds of laughter fill the room once more as Nox wipes the water from his face with his t-shirt. The action showcases his rock-hard abs, and I can't help but stare. He's so beautiful it's difficult not to look, and why is his nose ring so fucking sexy? Shit, my core clenches at the thought of the other new piercing he has, and my eyes drift lower. My wandering gaze earns me another douse of water, but this time, Nox is the culprit.

"Heyyy," I whine and bite my lip, trying to contain my dirty thoughts.

"Sorry, Mama." Nox smirks with a wink, sending a wave of sensation to flow through me. Never have I thought that hearing a grown man call me "Mama" would do something to me, but here I am. My insides practically beg for him again. But that's what Nox does. He's the spark that sets my soul on fire. Always has and always will.

"Come on, let's get you washed up," I say, grabbing the washcloth and soap. Nox studies my every movement, memorizing each step of Kiran's bathing process.

Kiran continues to play and splash around as I wash his hair. "He really does like the tub, doesn't he?" Nox chuckles.

“He sure does. Actually, he always has. Ever since he was born, he’s enjoyed the bath.”

“Was he a good baby...? Tell me what he was like.” The look on Nox’s face causes my heart to ache.

I clear my throat as I open the drain for the water. “He was such a good baby. Always happy and smiling. Great eater and sleeper too.” Wrapping the towel around Kiran, I get him out of the tub.

“I have pictures if you want to see... I brought them with me.” He nods, but I can tell he’s questioning. “From the moment his eyes began to change, I knew he was yours. I just needed to be one hundred percent certain that my mind wasn’t playing tricks on me and showing me things I had prayed for since the beginning. But knowing we were coming here, I wanted to bring the pictures with me to show you.”

Laying a wrapped-up Kiran in the middle of the king-sized bed, I quickly search one of my bags for the box I brought with me. I then grab the lotion, diaper, and pajamas.

Handing off the keepsake box, I start getting Kiran lotioned up and dressed, waiting anxiously as Nox searches its contents.

Everything is in there, from my sonograms and growing baby bump polaroids, to my hospital bracelet and Kiran’s first steps. I’ve documented it all. A few moments into his search, Nox grabs one of the photos and lifts it. “You looked stunning with our son growing inside of you.”

My eyes well with tears, matching his as he glances up at me. I wish he had been there to see it, to rub my belly, feel those first kicks, hold my hand during the birth, and experience every first after that.

Swallowing the guilt, I let a small smile take over. “Thank you.”

“This is amazing,” he says as he continues to search through the box. Holding up another photo, he pauses. “His eyes really were bright blue.”

I nod with confirmation as he places the photo back and grabs another and laughs.

Peeking over his shoulder, I see it's one of Jade holding Kiran out and away from her, protecting her clothes from an epic diaper blowout. A toddler-sized Willow is in the background with a petrified face, mid-gag.

“That’s Jade and Willow, her daughter. She’s precious and absolutely adores Kiran.”

“I can't wait to meet them,” he says, and I know he’s being honest. Anyone or anything that has ever meant something to me has meant something to him.

“Hopefully soon.”

Snapping up the last of Kiran’s onesie, I pull him into my arms. He rubs his eyes and snuggles into my chest. Nox looks over at us and closes the box. “I’ll leave so you can put him to sleep.” Leaning over, he places a kiss on top of Kiran’s head and goes to stand.

“Please stay. He’s a pretty hard sleeper. Look through the box... I love watching your expressions.” Smiling, he nods, then opens the lid again.

Standing with Kiran, I rock him in my arms gently until his eyes grow heavy. I place him into his pack-and-play and begin to sing our song. “*You are my sunshine...*”

By the time I finish the song, Nox’s arms are around me and his head rests on my shoulder as we both peer down at a sleeping Kiran.

“He’s perfect, isn’t he?” Nox whispers.

“He is...” I say, grabbing his hand that’s around my waist and squeezing it.

“I want you both to come stay with me...at least till Jade gets here,” he says, and I spin around to look at him. “I’m serious, I’ve missed out on so much. I need you both with me.”

“It—it won’t be too much?” I ask, knowing everything has happened so quickly since I've reappeared. I don’t want to overwhelm him.

“I insist,” he says softly and places a kiss on my cheek. Stepping away, he grabs my hand and pulls me to the bed.

“Now I need you to tell me all about our boy, and these photos.” Picking up a

stack of Polaroids, he sits on the edge of the bed.

“I’d love to,” I respond. I’m not only agreeing to move into his space, but to tell him everything he wants to know about Kiran. *Our son.*

TWELVE



I sit in the middle of my floor with what feels like a million pieces of prefabricated wood surrounding me. Once I cleared my head enough to think straight yesterday, I immediately went into an Amazon deep-dive for baby items. After hearing Emerson mention Kiran hadn't been sleeping very well in his pack-and-play, I knew a crib was a necessity. I was able to find one that had the early morning delivery option, so after having breakfast with them, I rushed home, wanting to have it put together before his nap time today.

It's not looking so good at this rate.

The drill slips from my grasp, hitting the hand that's holding the screw into the wood. I wince at the pain. Even with my knuckles wrapped, they are sore from the continued beating I've been giving them. When Greyson and Ford showed up yesterday, I have no idea how long I stayed there punching the bag until they finally pulled me away. Ford cleaned my knuckles while Greyson dug through my gym bag to find my gauze and tape. After she left, I went into a state of shock, unable to wrap my head around her being attacked.

Ford was the first one to speak up, questioning my response to finding out I was a father. He didn't understand why I was acting this way. He had seen me with Kiran the day before, and this didn't make any sense to him.

So, I sat on my couch and cried, barely able to explain everything she had told me.

Over all the years, all the shit we had been through together, I have never let them see me like that. Even after Emerson left me, I was a hot fucking mess, but only my mom and Colton saw the actual tears. And yesterday, they flooded out of me. Greyson and Ford sat there listening to it all. They didn't try to appease me with empty words and tell me it was all okay because they knew it wasn't. Hell, they didn't even offer me alcohol or drugs to numb the pain...but they did offer me truth.

Both reminded me of the fact that the love of my life hadn't left me because she wanted to, but because she felt the need to protect me. It had been an act of complete selflessness that only someone who loved me unconditionally would follow through with. And now she was back, with my son, and they needed me. They need me to be the father that Emerson nor I ever had.

My best friends, my brothers...had been there for me like we always had been, but this time they reminded me of the strength I had within myself and gave me the ability to get my shit together for my son and the girl I had always loved. The girl who had been through hell and back.

I smiled at how my night turned after that. Greyson gave me a ride up to his place, where I spent the rest of my day doing domesticated dad shit, and it had been the best night I've had in a very long time.

The music playing through my phone stops, drawing my attention to the screen. Colton's name appears, and my gut churns with mixed emotions.

"There he is... I was about to bring my ass to Florida and hunt you down," I tease my baby brother.

He lets out a deep laugh. "Bet. Well, you'll have to forgive me. I was doing my good deed of the month and giving the freshmen ladies a true Florida State welcome."

Now I'm the one laughing. "Oh, I can imagine."

"Did you miss me and just want to hear my voice or what? If something was wrong, you'd send me an SOS text."

"Everything is okay, but I do have some stuff to tell you. You by yourself?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even and reassuring.

Curiosity bleeds into his tone. “Yeah, my overnight guest is gone.”

I hesitate, a little unsure of how to say all this. “Are you sitting down?”

“What the fuck, Nox? Spit it out?” His concern outweighs his curiosity, so I decide to rip the band aid off.

“Emerson’s back.”

Now I’m greeted with silence. I give him a few more seconds and still nothing. “Colt, you there.”

“Um, yeah.” He pauses before asking, “She’s really there?”

“Yeah, and there’s more.”

“Is she okay?” he blurts out, and I hear his breathing change through the phone.

Even through all his anger, her well-being was always a concern for him.

“She is. It’s a long story, but...” I swallow the lump in my throat. “Uh, you’re—you’re an uncle.”

“The fuck? Like, she had a kid?”

“Like she has a fourteen-month-old kid...and he’s mine, Colton.”

Another moment of silence.

“Hold the fuck up. Are you serious?” he questions in disbelief, and I can’t blame him. I felt the same way the first time I saw them together.

“Yes... I knew it the minute I saw him, but we also got the DNA results yesterday around lunch.” I think about Colton meeting him and know he’ll immediately see the resemblance, just like everyone else has. “He has our eyes.”

“Wh-why would she leave, then? Why did she keep this from you? That’s so fucked up.”

“That’s where it gets more complicated.” Now that I know everything, I feel extremely defensive over everyone’s judgment of Emerson. Even though less

than twenty-four hours ago, I was her worst critic.

I proceed to tell my brother everything I know about the situation. Emerson gave me permission to do so if I felt like I could handle it, and I would rather put myself through it than her having to relive the trauma all over again.

All I hear are his rapid breaths for a few seconds before he speaks, distraught. “I’m coming home this weekend.”

“You just got there, and it's almost the first day of class.”

“I need to see her...” Just like when we were younger, the pain in his voice makes my chest physically hurt. I always wanted to protect him, my mom, Emerson...but this situation has taught me, no matter how hard you try, you can’t control everything.

“I know she wants to see you too, Colt...and I want you to meet Kiran.” I can’t wait to see the look on Colton’s face when he hears his middle name.

“Okay, it’s a done deal. I’m going to buy my books tomorrow, then I’ll head out. I can drive through the night Saturday and be back Sunday to get ready for classes.”

“No, I’m not letting you do that. I’ll look at flights right now and book you something.” He hates when I try to help him out, but that’s one thing I’ve appreciated the most about earning money with my fights. My mom and Colton struggled long enough, so if it’s up to me, they never will again.

“Nox, you don’t have to do that.”

“I want to. It’s a done deal. What time can you leave tomorrow?” I ask, pulling the big brother card. It's not up for discussion. He’s working his ass off, and I want him to be able to enjoy what little bit of extra money he has.

He relents with a stubborn huff. “Any time after noon.”

“Okay, I’ll send confirmation to your email.”

“Thank you.”

After another brief moment of silence, he asks, “Nox, how are you, really?”

“Honestly, I was a fucking mess a few days ago, but now I’m happier than

I've been in a long time." I think about my night with Emerson and Kiran, replaying him burying his little head into my chest. *Yeah, pretty fucking happy.*

"My head is still fucked over what she went through, and I've tried my best not to think about how I didn't pick up on that shit. I'm also fucking pissed that needle took away my chances of torturing him. Then again, all this time apart would be for nothing, because she's right...I would have murdered him. And then I would've been in prison, unable to be there for her or my son. Well, unless Gunnar was willing to hide the body for me."

"I can't believe I didn't see through her lies that day. I should have. She was my best fucking friend." I hate the guilt in his voice, but I also resonate with it.

"Brother, you can't do that to yourself. Trust me. That's not what she needs either. I'm having to preach that to myself."

"Lennox..." Emerson's voice filters through my house.

"In here," I call out. "Alright, they're here. I'll do that flight stuff and send it to you asap."

"Okay, love you, Nox."

"Love you, Colt," I say, hanging up as Emerson walks into the room carrying Kiran.

"Down, down," Kiran demands, and he runs over toward me, plopping down in my lap. His little fingers explore the drill sitting beside me, examining the tool as I give his head of raven hair a kiss.

"I'm building you a crib, buddy," I say, pointing to the base of what I've started.

That's when I realized Emerson's been quiet, so I look in her direction. Tears well in her eyes, and I wave her over. Pulling her down into the other side of my lap, I burrow my nose into her neck, placing a kiss to her collarbone.

"Don't cry, Sonny."

She buries her face in my shoulder, muttering, "I'm sorry."

“Mama?” Kiran questions, and Emerson straightens up, giving him a reassuring smile.

“Mama’s okay, baby. Happy tears.”

That satisfies Kiran, who is up and checking out the other items that arrived. A play tent I set up in the corner and a Fisher Price basketball hoop are the only things that have been delivered so far.

“I walked in here and saw you like this and heard you say Colt’s name. It just all hit me like a freight train,” she whispers, and I place a kiss to her forehead.

“I can’t help but imagine what it would have been like to be here with you the whole time, with Colton by our side... Do you think he can forgive me?” Her golden eyes look pleading and hopeful all at once.

“Of course, Em. He loves you. Matter of fact, he’s coming home tomorrow. He wants to see you and meet Kiran.”

“Really?” she asks, eyes glossy, and I nod, smiling back at her.

The way her face lights up takes me back to a younger Emerson. A beautiful, broken girl who found solace in my fucked-up little family. She meant so much to all of us, that when she left, it felt as if someone in our family had died. And to me, it felt like someone had removed my heart from my chest cavity, and only sheer anger and pain were keeping me alive. The anger motivated me, and the pain made sure I knew there was still blood pumping through my veins. But she’s here now, and the only person I can be upset with is myself. For not seeing it, for being too wrapped up in my fighting, for not protecting her. But she’s here...more beautiful than ever and my son’s giggles make it all worth it.

I sit watching them play peek-a-boo as Kiran pops his head in and out of the tent. The love they have for one another is undeniable.

Kiran runs my way, and I pretend to let him tackle me back onto the ground, lifting him up into the air. “Kiran, the airplane, you wanna fly?”

He just laughs as I zoom him through the air above me, bringing him down and blowing raspberries on his belly every few seconds. His happiness is

contagious.

“Your tummy is growling... Are you hungry, Lil’ Champ?”

“He’s probably getting hungry. I have a few pouches, but I should go to the store and get some groceries. Do you want him to stay here with you while I do that?”

“Of course... But I actually ran out to the store and got the milk you had at Lottie and G’s, plus I picked up some fruits since those seemed like something easy for him to chew.”

“Why are you so good at this already?” I sit Kiran down, moving toward Emerson.

“Is that a complaint?” I tease and start tickling her, loving the smile spreading across her face.

“No...no, no,” she says, chuckling as she tries to catch her breath. I find her sweet spot right on her side and Kiran joins me.

“Mama, tickle.”

“Lennox...stop it, now.” She can’t stop giggling, and Kiran gets in her face, pecking slobbery kisses all over her, causing us all to laugh even more.

I finally relent and lie on my back beside her. Within a few seconds, Kiran is giving me those same slobbery kisses. His innocence and immediate love for me spreads warmth through my chest, one I’ve never known.

A gentle knock at my door breaks up our moment.

“I’m not expecting anyone. Was Lottie bringing something for you?” I ask, walking over to the window and peeking through the blinds. The car I see in the driveway gives me pause.

Shit, I didn’t have time to tell her.

Turning my body toward Emerson, she’s now perched up on her elbows. I keep my voice even, knowing this is probably going to freak her out. “It’s my mom.”

Emerson’s eyes go wide. “Does she know?”

I shake my head. “No, I wanted to tell her in person, but I was waiting for the results.”

Another louder knock sounds through the house, and Emerson finally snaps out of it and stands up. I place a kiss to the top of her head and rub my hands up and down her arms. Her emotional eyes meet mine. “I just don’t want her to hate me for keeping him from y’all.”

“Sonny, she could never hate you. Even when I was trying to, she was the only one who always said she knew you would come back. She’s going to be so excited to meet Kiran. I know it’s a lot, but I promise Isla Monroe will always love you.”

“Lennox...” She says my name like a lifeline. “I just don’t think I can relive that night for a third time in twenty-four hours.”

The despair in her voice amplifies the hatred I feel for a corpse lying six feet under. I officially understand the term *rot in hell* because envisioning him doing just that doesn’t quite satisfy my need to torture him, but it helps.

I swallow roughly before speaking. “I’ll tell my mom that I can explain things more thoroughly later. If you are comfortable with that?”

My phone rings, and it’s my mom calling. I don’t move from Emerson as I answer the phone. “Sorry, Ma, I’m coming. Give me just a second.”

“Okay, I made some pound cake and thought you could eat some since you aren’t in training camp right now.” My sweet mom always tries to make sure I have some of my favorite indulgences when I have a break from my more intensive training and dieting.

“My favorite. I’ll be right there.” I hang up just as Kiran starts to babble.

Emerson scoops him up in her arms, and he plays with a strand of her purple hair. “If this is all too much, you two can stay in here or in my room and I can get her out of here quickly.”

“No...I want to see her. I’m tired of hiding. I don’t want to blindside her, though, so at least let her know I’m here before we come out. We can tell her the rest together.” She gives me a reassuring smile. Excitement floods me at the thought of my mom meeting her grandson.

I walk quickly to my door, feeling guilty for leaving my mom standing outside. Slung open, I'm greeted by my beautiful mother's smile. "Hi, honey," she says, stepping into my place.

Grabbing the food out of her hand, I give her a peck on the cheek. "Hey, Ma."

She eyes me suspiciously. "You look different. You look...happy." I can't contain the smile spreading across my face. My mom eyes the big bag Emerson sat down on my kitchen island, her gaze wandering around the room before landing back on me.

"Oh my gosh. She's here, isn't she?" My stomach drops, assuming she means Leslie and knowing Emerson can hear her.

"Mom..." I start, but she cuts me off.

"I knew it. The minute I saw her in that ring. I never doubted she was coming back for you."

Her words shock me. *Mother's intuition.*

"Is she here now?" she asks, giddy, and then pauses, putting her hand over her mouth and speaking through her fingers. "Oh gosh, did I interrupt something?"

I let out a slight chuckle, shaking my head as a little giggle filters through the air from my guest room. We both stop in our tracks, my mom's head whipping back and forth between me and the bedroom door that suddenly opens.

My mother gasps, her gaze flitting from Kiran to me and back. I swear I see her shake her head slightly, like she thinks she is seeing things before she is moving toward them. There is no doubt she knows he is mine.

Emerson's eyes change from a deer in headlights to an emotional wreck within seconds as my mom wraps them both into a hug. I literally feel the tension leave Emerson's body with every tear that falls as my mom holds them.

Kiran reaches over, twirling my mom's hair in his fingers like he does to

Emerson, and the sight tightens my chest. She pulls her head back from their embrace and stares at him. Noticing Emerson's tears, my mom swipes her thumb across her cheek. "Shhh, shhh. It's okay," she says, pulling her into another hug. "It's okay, angel. It's okay." Emerson passes Kiran into my mom's arms, and he goes to her without hesitation.

Taking Kiran's little chubby hand in hers, she says, "You are so precious... I could just eat you up."

"Ma, meet your grandson, Kiran James..." But before I can finish, Emerson speaks up, "Monroe." Emotions overwhelm me, and my throat clogs at her words.

"I want to change it as soon as possible," Emerson says, walking across my kitchen and wrapping her arms around my middle. I melt against her.

I hear my phone ringing somewhere, but I can't take my eyes off my family. My mom has immediately taken to Kiran, and the feeling appears to be mutual.

"Gosh, I feel like I just jumped into a time machine and went back about twenty years," Mom says, the smile on her face permanent.

"He looks so much like you, but I see his pretty mama too. Especially this little beauty mark." She boops the freckle right above his lip.

Kiran points to his new room. "Tent, tent." My mom tilts her head around the door, peeking in. She looks back at me, more emotion in her eyes, before she focuses back on Kiran. "Aw, buddy, is this your room?" They disappear through the door.

Emerson looks up at me, smiling. "He loves his room already... Thank you for doing all that." With her body flush to mine, other thoughts flit through my mind. I've missed her so fucking much. I pinch her ass and bend to whisper in her ear, "Is Mama going to sleep in my room tonight if I get the crib put together?"

Her pupils dilate as her eyes snap to mine. "You gonna let me eat this pussy tonight? I didn't get to yesterday, and it's driving me fucking crazy." As I kiss her collarbone, she lets out a little whimper, rubbing her body on me.

“Did you wash the sheets?” Her nostrils flare, lips twitching, reminding me so much of the teenage version of Emerson.

“I did, like, a week ago. Never known you to be a princess... What’s the problem?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “I’m no princess, asshole. But it’s bad enough knowing you fucked her; I definitely don’t want to lay in it.”

That has me a little stunned and a lot turned on. I fucking love when she gets jealous. But my mom comes out holding a ringing phone in her hand before I can respond.

“It’s Cliff. Looks like he’s called a couple of times. May be important.”

I look at Emerson as I grab the phone. “I’ll be right back,” I say, smirking at her and walking out my back patio door.

THIRTEEN



With Nox now out of the room, a sense of unease creeps in. Isla's eyes lock with mine, and I blurt out the first thing that's been weighing on my mind. "I'm so sorry for the pain I caused your family. If I could have gone about it differently, I would have..."

As she comes closer to me, I continue. "Just want you to know, your sons mean the world to me... You mean the world to me."

A sad smile touches her lips as her hand reaches up and cups my cheek. "Emmy, you sweet thing. You're safe, that's all that matters. I trust that whatever kept you away from us is in the past, and we can all move forward as a family."

Kiran comes waddling over and latches onto my leg. "Mama, up."

"Hey, buddy, I thought you were playing in your tent." He shakes his head, and then reaches for my hand, pulling me back into *his* room. It melts my heart to know that Nox already has all this stuff set up for him.

Isla enters behind us and lets out a small gasp at the room's transformation.

A small tear slides down her cheek. "I can't believe I have a grandson."

I wrap my arms around her without overthinking it. I've grown used to physical affection, as Kiran showers me with it daily. I know this is all so new and overwhelming for her.

After a few moments, I pull away, wiping my own tears away.

“It looks great so far, doesn’t it?”

“It really does. How'd he get all this here so quickly?”

“You know your son...”

She nods in agreement, still taking in the toys and half-assembled crib. Just then, Kiran reaches for Isla's hand and walks her over to a stack of books and sits down, patting the spot beside him.

Looking at the two of them makes me so happy. It means the world to me knowing Kiran is going to grow up with such a loving family around him.

Warm arms wrap around my middle and pull me close as a light kiss brushes against my neck. “She’s in her glory, isn’t she?” he asks.

“You could say that again. I'm sure she's still in a bit of shock, but once Kiran’s little hand is in yours, everything else seems to slip away.”

“That was an interesting call,” he says, prompting Isla to look up and me to half turn so I can see his face.

“I got a main event fight in Vegas for UFC 302.”

“What!?! That’s amazing! When?” I can’t contain myself.

A smirk stretches across his face. “Your twenty-first birthday weekend.”

“No shit! You're kidding me?” I squeal with glee. I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate my birthday than in Vegas, surrounded by all our friends.

“Who are you fighting?” Isla chimes in excitedly.

“Valdez, the current Welterweight Champ.”

“Holy shit... Anthony “Buzz” Valdez! Lennox. This is huge.” The guy has built quite a reputation for himself for both his skill and his theatrics. Not to mention, his nickname stems from the colors of his fighting shorts. Colors that resemble Buzz Lightyear’s space suit. It’s something that was taken as a joke at first, but he’s maintained the colors ever since.

He's sporting a prideful grin on his face when I turn completely and hug him. "I'm so frickin' proud of you."

We're so lost in the moment that I'm startled slightly when a little arm wraps around my leg. Looking down, I see Kiran's arms around both of our calves.

Nox peers down at our boy and chuckles as he picks him up. "Hey there, Lil' Champ, did you want to join in on the celebration?"

"I have a meeting scheduled with Cliff in two weeks in Charlotte to go over my training schedule."

"I've been meaning to follow up with him and let him know my plans to stay in North Carolina."

"You should. Maybe you could get it scheduled around the same time. I could show you the Charlotte training facility and whatnot." That sounds perfect, but...

"That could work. How long would we be there for? We'd need to find someone to watch Kiran since Jad —"

"I'll watch him," Isla chimes in as she makes her way to our little huddle.

"We will have so much fun together, won't we, little man?" she says as she tickles his sides. Kiran giggles, and then lunges for her.

"Are you sure?" I question, never wanting to force her into something. Until this week, Kiran has only stayed with Jade or me, but he's adjusted so well to everyone here. I think he can sense their adoration.

"Honestly, I don't mind. I'm bored as hell, usually, and my volunteer work at the nursing home is flexible."

"That would be amazing, Isla. Thank you."

"Oh hush, no need to thank me. This is my grandson we're talking about. I will be stealing him as often as legally possible," she teases as she walks back to the books with Kiran.

"Hey, while he's occupied, why don't I help you get some of this stuff put together."

Nox pauses for a moment before smirking. “You know how to handle a hammer, Sonny?”

I slap his chest lightly, laughing. “I know a thing or two...”

He pulls me in tighter as I try to wriggle free.

“Come on, we don’t have that much time.”

He pulls me in close again, and I relent, knowing damn well I want to spend as much time as humanly possible wrapped up in him.

“We have all the time in the world now, baby,” he says, kissing me passionately.

It feels so damn good to be back.

CLOSING Kiran’s door quietly behind me, I spot a shirtless Nox sprawled along the couch in the living room. His defined chest and abs are on full display, showcasing the tattoos adorning every perfect part of him. The sight has my mouth watering. To make him even more enticing, his freshly showered hair is laying haphazardly across his forehead, bringing back memories of the boy I fell in love with.

He notices me staring and sits up immediately. “Hey, how’d he do in there? I couldn’t hear a thing.”

“Oh man, he passed out almost immediately. Guess he loves his new room.”

I step closer to where Nox is now sitting upright and straddle his lap. “Thank you for doing all this...”

“Mmm, how thankful are you?” he teases, his tongue peeking out to lick his lips.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pull him in close and kiss him. Showing him just how grateful I am. His hands grip my hips and drag me over his growing erection, eliciting a soft moan.

“Fuck, have I mentioned how much I've missed that sound, Sonny?”

He moves me over him again and, this time, I don't hold back the needy groan that escapes. With a growl into my neck, he tosses me onto the plush couch cushion beside him. Sliding off, his lips drag down to my chest as he comes to kneel in front of me.

“I need you, baby,” Nox says with his hands on the waist of my shorts. His eyes sear into mine as he eagerly waits for my approval.

I lift my hips without a word, and by the smirk on his face, I know I'm in for it. He quickly peels them off, then spreads my legs wide and kisses his way back up my thigh. My back arches in anticipation when he leans back onto his heels.

I lean up slightly and rip my tank top off my body, then lie back down.

“Damn, you're fucking beautiful. This body...” His hands trace over my now curvier body in a caress that makes me shiver. “I thought you were gorgeous before, but now—Now there are no words to describe what I feel when I look at you.”

My eyes close while his fingers trail along my exposed skin, reveling in how worshipped he makes me feel. Within moments, his mouth is on my center, making me cry out. His tongue slowly teases along my core as my hand tangles in his hair. When I pull lightly at the strands, he groans against me, taking a long, languid stroke up my entire pussy.

“Mmm, yes, Nox,” I whimper when his tongue circles my clit, flicking and swirling at a rhythm that makes me crazy with need. Staying right where I need him, he picks up the pace.

He goes feral when my whimpering pleas become louder. I've been wound so tight for what feels like forever that my building orgasm has me almost in tears.

“Oh fuck. I'm going to come,” I say as I grip his hair tighter.

“That's it, baby. Come all over my tongue.” And I do, with a deep moan. My hips grinding onto his face as I ride out the release.

In my blissed-out state, I barely register Nox picking me up and moving us into his room. When my back hits his cool sheets, I gasp but quickly recover when he begins to undress in front of me.

“You know, it’s not fair,” I say as he removes his shirt with one hand.

A sly smirk spreads across his face. “What’s not fair?”

“You... You’re frustratingly perfect. Almost too much so.”

“Is that right?” he eggs me on as his pants hit the ground and his hand tugs at his hard length.

“Look at you...” I say, licking my lips as he continues to stroke himself, taking special care around his piercing. All thoughts from earlier of anyone else in his bed go out the window, because right now *Idgaf*. I just want him. I’ll let the rest bother me later.

“You hungry for my cock, baby?” he asks as he climbs onto the bed up toward my face. I nod automatically, shifting myself closer to him.

“Open that smart mouth of yours,” he commands as he taps it with his tip. My lips part, and he slides in effortlessly.

“Now touch yourself, Sonny. I want you choking on me as you come all over your fingers.”

I moan at his filthy words while my body trembles beneath his.

“That’s it... You look so fucking gorgeous with your mouth full of me,” he praises, cupping my face lovingly as he fucks my mouth.

Nox’s head falls back when I twirl my tongue along the tip, and then flick the ball of his piercing. “Fuuck yes, baby. You don’t know how good that feels.”

My fingers pick up their pace, slippery from my wetness as his thrusts become more desperate. His hand’s firm grip on my jaw as his cock slides past my lips has my core aching to be filled. I need to have him inside of me.

Right.

Fucking.

Now.

Pausing my hand, I pull away from him. He eyes me cautiously as if he did something wrong, concern etched in his expression.

“I—I’m sorry. Was I too rough? Fuck, I was trying to take it easy on you...” I hear the turmoil in his voice. I was worried my confessions from yesterday would cause this, but he’s way off base. Not when it comes to him.

Climbing up onto my knees, I cup his cheeks, so his eyes focus on mine. I need him to understand.

“Lennox, I love every single touch of yours. Rough, soft, teasing, all of them. I savor every second your hands are on me. What we do and how we do it, is perfectly us... It's what we both need. And there will never be a day that I ask you to stop being like that with me.”

His eyes search mine, as if looking for any doubt. But he won’t find any. I live for the moments when he loses control with me. When his passion and need take over every other thought. Nox’s lips find mine, and he kisses me, deeply. His tongue swirling with mine leaves me breathless.

When we break away, I push him to lie down. “I stopped because I need you inside of me. Now.” That causes a small grin to appear on his lips.

Straddling his hips once again, I grab his length and slide down onto him in one swift motion. Our heavy breathing fills the air as I adjust to his size. His large hands grip my waist when my hips begin to move.

“Is this what you needed, baby? My cock deep inside you as you ride me?”

I moan when I feel his piercing hit the perfect spot inside of me and grind my hips in such a way that I keep him right where I need him.

“You feel so good,” I pant as my core clenches.

“You’re going to come for me again...” he says through gritted teeth, groaning low when I bounce on his lap. It’s not a question, but a command. One my body is more than happy to obey.

He takes one of my legs encasing him and lifts it in one swift move, flipping me onto my back once again. With my legs wrapped around his torso, he

thrusts inside my throbbing pussy. His hand wraps around my throat as he fucks me. Hard.

I'm lost to the overwhelming sensation of his deep, powerful strokes and his fingers tightening around my neck. It's absolute perfection.

"Play with yourself... Come with me," he breathes out, and my fingers begin circling my clit.

Thrust after thrust, I take every inch of him. Nox's gaze takes me in, his strong hands massaging my breasts, fueling me with his moans. "Fuck, Sonny, I'm going to come soon."

"Yes, please, I'm right there," I plead as the warmth of his release filling me sends me over the edge. He holds me tight, his lips meeting mine as we work each other through our pleasure.

We collapse in a heap of limbs, trying desperately to catch our breaths. Nox rolls off of me and pulls me into his side. With my head resting on his shoulder, I let my fingers roam across his chest.

"I love you, Lennox. Always have and always will. Even when I was hundreds of miles away, you were the one who had my heart." His mouth opens to speak, but I shush him with a finger to his lips, and then grab his hand in mine.

"You don't need to say it back, not yet at least. I put you through absolute hell, and you deserve the time to process all of this." His lips find the top of my head as he pulls me in closer.

"So, when you're truly ready. Like, really ready, I'm here for it. I'm all in."

We lie there in silence as my words sink in, every single one of them true. I sigh as my hand remains clenched in his. Then I feel a light squeeze.

Not once.

Not twice.

But three times.

FOURTEEN



Shifting slightly on my feet, I wait for Colton to step through the door. I chose not to go with Nox to the airport so he could have a few minutes with his brother to catch up...and so I could prepare myself.

I'm beyond nervous about seeing Colton. My disappearing affected him just as deeply as it had Nox, and I don't know if I'm ready for the ass-chewing he's about to dish out. That's the thing with Colton and I, we always promised to be brutally honest with each other. And for the entirety of that last month, before I left, I broke that promise.

The crunching of the gravel driveway has me gnawing on my lip. Thank goodness Kiran is sleeping right now. I'd be too distracted to focus.

I steady myself for Colton's scowl, but that is not what I get when he opens the door. Instead, I'm being rushed and wrapped up in my best friend's loving embrace.

"Fuck, Em, I've missed you so damn much," he says into my hair, and the dam breaks. Tears stream down my face as my body shakes with each sob.

"I'm so sorry, Colton..." I say through tears.

"Shh, shh. It's okay, Emmy. Nox explained everything. I'm sorry I didn't know things had gotten that bad there..." he says, gently stroking my head as I hug him tighter. "What kind of best friend doesn't realize—" I cut him off when I feel the tension radiate through his body.

“You stop that right now.” Leaning back so I can see his face, my fingers wipe away his tears.

“This is in no way on you. I never want you to feel the burden of what happened... No one could have prevented it.”

He shakes his head in disagreement, but remains wordless. “Colton, please listen to me.”

I force his eyes on me again. “It’s okay to be mad, but not at yourself. Holding on to that anger will do nothing. Let his soul rot in Hell, where it belongs. He doesn’t deserve another thought.”

Colton closes his eyes and hugs me tighter. My hand instinctively cups the back of his head and holds him close. Peeking over his shoulder, I find Nox’s gaze.

This, this right here, is exactly what I’ve been missing. My best friend and my soulmate, both back in my life. And this time, it’s forever.

It's weird to think of forever. It's never something I truly believed in before. But having Kiran and experiencing life without Nox by my side, I realized it’s something I always craved, but was too scared to want.

A soft whimper sounds over the monitor and breaks the moment. Colton pulls away, rubbing his face dry.

Nox clears his throat, no doubt affected by the emotions flowing through the room.

“I’ll get him. You guys take another minute.”

Colton stares at me and studies my face. “I’m happy you’re back... We all are.” His hands still grip my arms firmly, as if he’s afraid I’ll disappear again.

“Love you, Colt, and I promise I’m not going anywhere.” I give him another tight squeeze and press a kiss on his cheek.

“Now let’s go meet your nephew, Kiran James,” I say, grabbing his hand and tugging him along.

Colton pauses, and when I turn to see the expression on his face, my heart

melts.

“You—you gave him my middle name?”

“Even when I was far away, you all were with me,” I say, a small tilt to my lips.

He brings our joined hands together and kisses the back of mine. “You too, Em...you too.”

KIRAN’S GIGGLES fill the air as he’s chased around by his uncle. “Tin!” he squeals as he gets lifted into the air above Colton’s head.

He’s a big fan of his Uncle “Tin,” just like I knew he would be. They’re like two peas in a pod. One hasn’t strayed too far from the other from the moment Colton walked through his bedroom door.

Isla is in her glory, having us all at her house tonight. She’s making us baked spaghetti, and I couldn’t be more excited to eat her delicious food.

Nox and I are sitting on the patio while we watch them with big smiles on our faces. It feels so good to be able to enjoy this... This *family* time. Not sure if I’ll ever get used to that, the fact that I have a *family*. And when Jade arrives, we will be adding two more to our tight-knit circle. Everyone is going to love her and Willow. I can’t wait for them to get here.

Dinner is fantastic, as always, and I don’t know if I can move after gorging myself on a full second helping.

“I’m going to regret that second plate tomorrow at training,” I moan, as we all sit around the dinner table. That earns me a collective chuckle from the group.

“How long have you been back at training?” Colton asks, shoving what I think might be the contents of his third plate into his mouth.

“After I had Kiran, my doctor cleared me for physical activity, and I found a local MMA gym. It was a decent spot, nothing like Lights Out, of course, but

it served its purpose.”

“I'm sure Gunnar will be proud to hear that.” Nox smirks.

“So, did you just train, or did you work there too?” Colton asks.

“Both, actually. I trained and also taught some classes... I'll have to see if I can do something similar up here. I got my GED while I was down there and took online courses for a personal training certification.”

I can see Nox beaming with pride in my peripheral, and I smile back. I am proud of what I've accomplished from the shit hand I was dealt in life. But I think becoming a mother, my dedication to the gym, and going to a support group after Tommy's attack helped me move forward from my past. I've had my days, and the occasional nightmares, but I am a survivor. And I have been my whole life.

“That's amazing, Em. I'm sure you'll find something here too,” Colton chimes in.

“Oh, yes. I'm sure Lights Out would love to have you there. You would be an amazing addition to the gym. Also, having female personal trainers on their roster is something Gunnar has always talked about,” Isla boasts.

Nox eyes her suspiciously, and I can see a faint blush creep onto her cheeks. Hmm, I'll have to dig into that a little more another time.

Isla's phone rings at the same time I excuse myself to the bathroom. Kiran's happy sitting on Nox's lap, so I figure it's the perfect opportunity.

When I return to the table, the boys are in a heated discussion with a worried-looking Isla.

“I swear if that fu—frickin' man doesn't sign, I'm going to find out exactly what dark hole he's hiding in and force his hand to the paper,” Nox growls through gritted teeth.

“He hasn't signed yet? I thought this was done a while ago...” Colton asks.

I sit down at the table and try to place the bits and pieces together. Looking to Isla, she releases a heavy, defeated sigh. “He hasn't. Your father refuses to sign the divorce papers.”

“It's been two fu—frickin' years,” Colton snarls.

“I know, trust me. I don't know what else to do at this point. He doesn't show up at his scheduled meetings, or just simply refuses. Thankfully, he doesn't know my new address; otherwise, I'm sure he'd be showing up here like he used to at the valley house.”

“That's ridiculous... How can he just not sign?” I say, bewildered. “Can you have him served?”

“I have. Twice now, and he still doesn't show up to the court mandate. I have an upcoming meeting with my lawyer to see what else can be done...”

“Wow, Ma, I'm sorry. I didn't realize,” Colton says, and I can see the distress taking over his face.

“Oh, hush, don't you be sorry. I didn't want to stress you about things that didn't need stressing. Enough was going on,” Isla says, standing from her spot at the table. But I know what she means. He was already stressed out about me leaving, so she didn't want to pile more onto him.

Let go of the guilt, Em.

“Enough about this... I think Mickey's Ice Cream is calling our name for dessert. What do you say?” She effectively changes the subject.

“I haven't had that in years... I wonder if it's still as good as I remember.”

“It sure as hell is. Why don't we all walk there? It's not too far,” Colton says, as he piles some plates into his hands to help clear the table.

“How about you two go? I'll stay with Kiran and help Ma clean up,” Nox suggests.

“You sure?” I ask.

“Yeah, just pick me up a cup of Cookie Monster.” He smiles as he sets Kiran down near his toys. “Does he like vanilla or chocolate, Mama?”

I don't think I'm going to get over him calling me that any time soon. Especially with that husky voice of his—he knows damn well it does something to me.

“I’ll get him a swirl. I don’t think he has a preference yet.”

Nox comes to stand beside me, pulling me in for a hug and a quick kiss.

“Cookie Monster, eh?” I tease him. “I didn’t realize you were still a kid.”

“First of all, that flavor is legit. And second of all...” He grinds his seemingly always half-erect cock onto me. “There is nothing kiddish about me, Sonny. I thought I proved that to you last night.”

A shiver runs through me at the memory. He has cherished every single inch of me these last few nights, and my body has been deliciously sore ever since.

“Hmm, nothing is ringing a bell... I must have forgotten,” I bait him, quirking an eyebrow. His eyes darken, and a determined expression sets his jaw. I love getting a rise out of him, and the way he will make me pay later.

“You’re in for it, babe,” he says, grabbing my ass with both hands and squeezing.

“Looking forward to it —”

“Will you two stop? Every time I turn around, you two are all over each other,” Colton teases, cringing as he emerges from the kitchen.

“You ready?” Turning to see he has his shoes on, Nox’s hands release their grip, and I immediately miss his touch. He nods and turns toward the door.

Saying a quick goodbye to them all, we head out into the warm summer night. The walk reminds me of all the memories Colton and I shared growing up. Our late-night adventures, our up-all-night sleepovers, the ability to talk to him about anything and everything... But he’s no longer that boy I grew up with. No, Colton James Monroe has turned into a beast of a man. He’s almost the size of Nox, believe it or not. He’s wearing his hair a bit longer these days, reaching just below his ears with his baseball hat on. But his eyes are just as I remember, sweet and loving.

I reach for his hand, needing to feel that closeness once again. His hand closes around mine, and I sigh, leaning my head against his shoulder.

“How’s school going?”

“It’s going…” I smack his arm at his non-answer.

“It’s alright. I’m kind of at a loss with picking a major… I think I want to go into Sports Medicine.”

“That’s great! So, then what’s the problem?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m having a blast there, but I’ve been tossing up the idea of transferring to Mountain Ridge. They have an amazing Sports Medicine program, and they’re one of the best D1 schools on the East Coast, so I’d have a shitload of hands-on fieldwork if I went there too.”

My eyes widen at his confession.

“Yeah, I haven’t told anyone yet. It’s just, at the time, I thought I wanted to get away from this place.”

“I’m sorry.” I squeeze his hand tighter.

Colton immediately starts shaking his head at my apology. “It’s not your fault. I needed to get out on my own and live a little. But now that I have, I’m ready to come back and be closer to my family. Plus, it’s hot as fuck there, like *all* the time.”

“Well, whatever you decide, I’ll support you.”

“Thanks, Emmy,” he says with a smile, and I smile a wholehearted one back. I’ve missed him so, so much.

We’re almost to the line of ice cream shop, when my steps come to a screeching halt. I stand there, frozen on the spot, as Colton eyes me with concern.

“You, okay? Looks like you’ve seen a ghost,” he asks as my eyes stay fixed on the familiar faces in the distance.

I nod, but look for a nearby bench to sit and compose myself. “Em, talk to me. You’re scaring me.”

Closing my eyes, I take some calming breaths. When I open them, I feel Colton’s hands on mine and his face directly in front of me.

“I’m alright. Shit, I’m sorry… It’s just—I just saw the Robbins in line and

needed a minute.” His hands twitch ever so slightly at that.

“We can head back if you want. We don’t need to go to Mickey’s. I’m sure everyone will understand,” he says, trying to ease the acid brewing in my stomach.

“No, I’m okay.” I go to stand, feeling my resolve click back into place. But within two steps, I’m brought face to face with Roger and Michelle Robbins.

“Emerson,” she says with a sneer, as we narrowly avoid bumping into each other. “I guess you’re alive.”

I school my features. I will not let this woman get to me. “Hello, Michelle. Hi, Roger.”

“Didn’t realize you were back in town,” Roger says in his monotone drawl.

“Yup,” I respond curtly.

“Hm... I would have expected to see you at Tommy’s funeral if you were. After all, he was your brother.”

Her words have me swallowing down the lump in my throat at the mention of his name. She really believed that her son was an angel...even after all this time.

Unable to hold it in any longer, I scoff. “The fact that you think I would have ever shown up to that abusive piece of shit’s funeral further proves how delusional you truly are.”

She huffs at me, and her hand flies to her chest as if my words wound her. Good, they should. Colton stands by my side for support, and knowing he’s there gives me the strength I need to speak my piece.

“How dare you,” she says as Roger glances around to see who’s watching our exchange.

I let out a deranged laugh. “No, how dare *you*. How dare you to allow your son to repeatedly put his hands on me and do nothing about it. You saw the bruises! How dare you allow him to break into my room and invade my personal space whenever he wanted.”

“I never knew —”

“Bullshit! You knew... You saw me replacing my locks on more than one occasion. What did you think was going on? Why do you think I stopped coming to dinner...stopped staying at the house.”

“I thought you were some hussy who didn’t care about the family that had taken you in, that cared for you.” Michelle’s venom triggers an unhinged side of my brain, and I let it all out.

“Are you fucking kidding me! Family? FAMILY?!? What fucking *family*. I was a paycheck to you, and you know it. You didn’t give a fuck about me or my well-being. As long as you could still collect on me, everything was sunshine and rainbows. Happy to live in your own little fictitious world where your son wasn’t a drug-addicted rapist.”

Michelle audibly gasps at the truth but schools her features. My body radiates with anger and determination to finish this out. “Your son was a horrible excuse for a human being. He took away my dignity, and my strength, leaving me vulnerable and broken. To the point where I needed to leave this town and find myself again. I’m glad he’s dead, knowing he won’t be able to put anyone else through what I lived through. I should press charges on you both for allowing what you did under your roof.”

Roger scoffs, and my narrowed gaze flits his way. “And you... You should be ashamed of yourself, being a man of the law. All these years, you knew what was going on in the house just next door to you, and you did *nothing*. Allowing that family to live through hell, year after year, and not once did you step up. You are just as guilty as the man who laid his hands on them by remaining silent.”

He just stares blankly after that, and Michelle’s eyes bore into mine, like she has more to say. She opens her mouth to speak, then shuts it, then does it again.

“I have nothing more to say to you two.” Colton’s arm wraps around my shoulders and holds me close. Placing a small kiss on the top of my head helps my racing heart to calm down.

The Robbins stand there, staring at us for a second before Colton tells them to

“Fuck off.”

“Come on, Em, let’s go,” he says, directing me away from them, and I follow without hesitation. Hearing their footsteps scurry away behind us has me finally breathing normally again.

After a few moments of silence, I finally speak up. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asks incredulously, brow furrowed.

I take a moment to gather the right words. “For being by my side for that. It felt—it felt good to get that out. Like the ending of a book that should have been finished a long time ago.”

“I’m proud of you, Emmy.” Turning me to face him, I can see that statement shining in his eyes. “I’m so fucking proud of you. For everything you went through and how you’ve come out the other end. I’m in awe. I know I’ve said this a hundred times already...but I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t see what was happening, and I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t tell me.”

Releasing a sigh, I cup his cheeks. “I knew Nox would have killed Tommy for laying his hands on me again if he found out. So, I kept it in, trying to keep you all safe. It’s not that I didn’t want you to know. Trust me, I wanted to tell you. I just didn’t want you to have to keep that secret for me.”

His eyes close while his arms embrace me, and I continue. “I love you, Colton. I thank my lucky stars that I had you and your family all those years.”

“Love you too. But I still feel like I should kick your ass or something for putting me through hell,” he teases, trying to hide the sound of a light snuffle.

“I’d like to see you try. Although, you have gotten huge, I must say.” I laugh through the tears I swipe away.

“I think I could take you.” He wiggles his eyebrows and bumps my shoulder as we resume walking to Mickey’s.

I can’t believe that just happened, and on a public street, nonetheless. It brings me peace knowing I said what I had to say to them. I release a final cathartic sigh, letting all remaining thoughts of Tommy and his family out along with it.

It's my turn to live the life I *want*, not the one dealt to me.

FIFTEEN



“Are we going to the Asheboro Zoo?” I shake my head at Emerson’s third guess of where I’m taking her and Kiran today.

“No, we aren’t going that far, but that’s a good idea for another family outing.”

I never thought I would get so much joy out of planning a day trip somewhere. But the thought of being with my family and the excitement on Kiran’s face when he experiences everything for the first time is addicting.

I have lived, ate, and breathed training for the past two years but, for the first time, I find myself dreading the dedication that training camp takes and the time away from them. I’m even more thankful now that I chose to stay in Richmond Hills and train with my local coaches instead of moving to Charlotte like Cliff had originally offered to me.

“Ugh, I give up.” Emerson lets out a little huff, falling back into the passenger seat.

I chuckle, giving her thigh a squeeze. “Just sit your pretty little mermaid head back and enjoy the view.” We are riding through the Blue Ridge Parkway on one of my favorite scenic routes.

Emerson smiles and checks on Kiran, who is sleeping in the back seat, before turning her head to admire the scenery.

“Willow is obsessed with elephants. Maybe once they are here, we can plan

that zoo trip and include them.”

“Sounds like a plan.” And it truly does, but I can’t say Jade’s arrival in a little over a week doesn’t scare me slightly. Originally, Emerson and Kiran were going to stay at my place until Jade moved here, but now, I can’t imagine them not being under my roof. They are my family, and I have already missed out on so much.

“Are you excited for Charlotte?” Emerson asks me, steering me away from those thoughts.

“I’m excited for a weekend with you in a hotel room,” I say, raising my eyebrows suggestively, causing her to backhand my arm.

Emerson giggles as she looks out the window for a few more moments, and I notice her leg start to bounce as she seems to be overthinking something.

“Are you worried about leaving Kiran? I could always ask my mom to come with us and keep him there.”

She shakes her head. “No, no. I trust her. I know he will be in good hands.” I hear her swallow roughly. “It’s not that. It’s just...” She pauses before blurting out, “Are you going to see Leslie this weekend? Like, is she expecting you? I heard she lives in Charlotte and that’s typically when you would see each other.”

Fuck...I had forgotten about her comment regarding Leslie in my house a few days ago.

“No, she isn’t expecting to see me... Well, not in that way.” I grab her hand in mine, pulling it into my lap. “As you know, she works for Cliff, so we are both likely to see her.”

Her hand stiffens, so I softly stroke my thumb over hers. “Would it help if you knew the deal with Leslie and me? It’s likely not quite what you think.”

My eyes shift to hers before looking back toward the road, and I see her close her own before responding, “I’ll probably hate myself for this later, but yes, please. I need to know.” Nodding, I lift her hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to each finger before I dive in.

“I had met her a few times after she started working for Cliff. I think I noticed her because she had the same sadness in her eyes that I carried around with me.” She squeezes my hand at that, knowing the cause of my pain. “One night, I went out with a few guys who fight locally for Cliff’s organization, and they invited Leslie. I was shocked when they told me who her husband was.”

“She has a husband?” Emerson gasps, trying to recoil her hand, but I hold it steady.

I shake my head vehemently. “No, no. She’s a widow.” Emerson lets out another gasp.

“Her husband had been an up-and-coming fighter when we were a little younger. Do you ever remember me mentioning Daniel Tate from Shelby, North Carolina?”

“Yes, of course. We used to watch him on the Ultimate Fighter,” Emerson responds, and I smile at the memory. I’m pretty sure everyone in the state of North Carolina who liked MMA was cheering on the local boy when he was on the UFC reality TV show.

“Oh my gosh... I remember how tragic his death was. He was her husband?” Emerson asks, sympathy and astonishment bleeding into her voice.

I nod, keeping my eyes on the road as I make the final turn toward our destination. “Yes, so that night, after many drinks, we bonded over our broken hearts.” Sadness tries to creep in at the thought of how low I was back then from losing her. “Both of us were very honest with the other that there would be no love involved.”

“Shit,” Emerson breathes out. “How the hell could I be mad at that? More than anything, it breaks my heart.”

“I get it, though. If the roles were reversed, I would have knocked him out and thrown him in the pool at Greyson’s that day.” I chuckle, but know it’s the truth. Just the image of her coach touching her that night at Cliff’s after the fight has my blood boiling.

“And to set the record straight, since you mentioned it the other night. After the cookout at G and Lottie’s, Leslie did spend the night, but she took the

guest room. Before I moved things out for the crib, I had a bed in there for Ford.”

“Why?” she whispers, wanting the reassurance that it was because of her.

“Because I had spent the day staring at the love of my life and my son. And she knew it too. Knew it the minute she saw me watching you at Cliff’s house after the fight.”

Emerson leans across the center console of my Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT. Kissing under my ear, she whispers, “Good answer, Champ.” Then she reaches her hand between my legs, squeezing my already hardening cock with a lick up my neck.

“I still fucking hate the fact she had you inside of her...” She rubs her hand over my pants, finding the tip of my pierced cock. “I hate that she felt this before I did. That anyone other than me felt it.”

My head falls back against the headrest, keeping my eyes focused on the road. “You are lucky our son is in this car, or I’d make you choke on my cock.” I chance a glance at her. That plush bottom lip between her teeth does nothing to calm my rock-hard dick. “I may not trust myself to drive and get sucked by you, but don’t think I won’t pull this car over and find a deserted back road to bend you over this seat on—while shoving your face into the leather so you don’t wake him.”

The way she squeezes my cock again tells me she may want exactly that. But apparently, Kiran’s cock-block radar is already intact because, just as my eyes start searching for the right turn-off, his cries filter through the car.

Emerson groans and kisses my neck, “Later, baby,” before she reaches her arm into his car seat to soothe him.

And I smile at how perfect my life feels. *Blue balls and all.*

KIRAN’S ARMS flail to get down as soon as he sees the little goats walking around on the sidewalks. He runs toward them, surprisedly scaring me more than the animals, as I chase behind him.

Emerson hands him the ice cream cone filled with the food we bought on our way into the petting zoo. “Hold this, buddy, see if he’s hungry,” she says while helping him so it doesn’t all end up on the ground.

I snap a few pictures of them. The happiness on both of their faces is the most priceless thing I’ve ever experienced in my life.

“Goat...goat!” Kiran says, learning what I assume will be his new favorite word, replacing “Duck.” My guy loves animals, which is one of the reasons I knew Tweetsie Railroad would be the perfect date to take them on.

“Daddy, we may have to buy some more food.” Emerson giggles, holding up the small piece of cake cone left.

But I’m stuck in place. That’s the first time she’s referred to me as “Daddy,” and it hits me hard. Like the best punch to the gut I’ve ever taken. Concern etches across Emerson’s face, most likely at the emotion in my eyes. Until a big smile takes over my expression once again. Face brightening, she picks up Kiran and moves toward me. I wrap them both in an embrace, kissing the tops of their heads.

Kiran’s handsome green eyes look up at me as he touches my cheek. “Daddy loves you, Lil’ Champ. Forever.” I’ve never loved anyone faster and deeper than I do him.

I’m sure I immediately loved my mom as a newborn, but of course I don’t remember that. My dad was someone who didn’t deserve the affection I did have for him. I didn’t always understand the emotions I felt for my brother as a kid. Maturity allowed me to grasp the depths of adoration I truly have for him. Even my love for Emerson took time to recognize. Now I know it started the very first second I laid eyes on her. I didn’t understand the intensity and magnetism I felt toward her until years later. But with Kiran, it’s all at once, lay down my life for his, never want to know an existence without him in it, immediate type of love.

We buy not one but five more cones of food for the animals, and he loves every second of it. I finally bribe him with riding the train to convince him to leave the petting zoo area.

“I know bribery is supposedly not the correct parenting technique, but hey...

I'm new at this thing," I say, and Emerson giggles.

"Shit. Ya gotta do what ya gotta do."

Kiran lays his head against my shoulder as I carry him down the hill.

"We will start the strict parenting tactics in a few years."

Emerson smirks at my empty promises and intertwines her fingers in mine, tracing her thumb over the tattoo on my hand.

"I love all the tattoos and new piercings..." Licking her lips, she says, "Some more than others," causing me to let out a deep laugh.

"But damn, you got a lot in a two-year time frame."

I don't want to make her feel bad, but I answer honestly. "At the time, I used it to numb the other emotions I was feeling. It was a pain I could control when I felt like I couldn't get a grip on the turmoil going on inside me."

Her eyes fill with remorse, and I don't go into details about the alcohol I almost drowned myself in that first month after she left. Instead, I decide to tell her a funny story involving her favorite new piece of jewelry I'm sporting.

"But the Prince Albert was actually Ford's fault."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" She laughs as we approach the chair lift. Once we are safely on, Kiran still in my arms, Emerson asks, "So tell me more..."

"I don't remember everything. I just know Ford basically bet me one night at the tattoo shop that I wouldn't do it, and I challenged him because I figured he would back out since you can't have sex after for several months."

"Oh, really? I never thought of that."

I nod. "Yep, but that fucker went through with it... He even one-upped me and got an entire ladder. So, of course, I couldn't back out at that point."

She rolls her eyes playfully. "Was it awful?"

"Put it this way, I didn't want to have gone through it for nothing, which is

exactly why I still have it.”

“Well, I guess I have to thank Pretty Boy for the accessory.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “He would love that way too much.”

We both take a second to admire the beautiful view as we come down the mountain on the lift. “We will have to come back in the fall when the leaves change,” I say as she snaps a shot with her phone.

“I like that idea. Plus, we are either going to have to buy him a goat or make this a monthly trip.” Kiran’s little head perks up at the mention of a goat.

Once we have our stroller, we walk the short distance toward the line to board the train.

“Were you not worried about the piercing messing up your sex life?” Emerson asks minutes after I thought we had moved on from that conversation.

“No.” I shake my head. “I couldn’t bring myself to take that step with anyone else. It felt wrong. To be honest, it never felt right, but I convinced myself I had to move on, or I was going to die alone holding on to the memory of a ghost.”

She looks away, and I stop us before we get in line. “Sonny, I’m not saying this to hurt you. I just want you to know it’s always been you. It always will be you. I finally feel whole again.” I pull her into me, searing my lips into hers. “You and Kiran were my missing pieces. I had a lot of cloudy days over the past two years, but things are a whole hell of a lot brighter already,” I say, kissing her one more time. A soft smile lifts her lips as she whispers “I love you” against my mouth.

Our little bubble is broken as the train rolls up toward the station, letting out a loud whistle into the summer air.

Kiran leans up in his seat, amazed by the steam and all the sounds. This locomotive used to run from North Carolina to Tennessee years ago. I haven’t been here in years, but it was a fond memory from my childhood the few times my mom was able to save up and bring Colton and I here.

“Dada, choo choo,” Kiran says, looking up at me and pointing toward the train. I hear Emerson gasp beside me, and that’s when it hits me what he just called me.

“Dada, ride!” I crouch down beside his stroller, placing a kiss to his head. A tear I didn’t even realize I had shed drops into his raven-colored hair. “Yeah, my guy, Dada and Mama are going to take you on the train.”

A simple sentence fills me with so much pride it's hard to even explain. These small moments I’ve dreamed of since being a young boy, fantasizing about a day when I had my own family and all they would ever know from me was steadfast love and loyalty.

The last two years have felt like living in hell at times, but this makes up for every second of it.

SIXTEEN



“Our flight lands at twelve-thirty on the first, and the moving truck should get there around nine the next morning,” Jade says through my phone.

“I’m so frickin’ excited to have you guys here. I know you’re going to love it.”

I’ve been on a high all day. Spending the day at the petting zoo with my family was amazing. Hearing Kiran call Nox “Dada” for the first time was beyond anything I think my heart could handle. The glistening pride in Nox’s expression had me holding back tears. And now to hear that Jade will be here soon has my cup overflowing with happiness.

“I’m excited to get there. The townhouse floorplan you sent looks perfect. What a great find.”

“It really is, and it’s so close to everything,” I say.

Nox and I had been scouring the internet for days, trying to find a place for when Jade and Willow arrive. We were lucky enough to hear that Isla’s complex had a unit that was recently vacated and will be available at the end of September.

“We’ve missed not having you around,” she says, and it makes me pause.

Originally, I intended to move in with Jade once she arrived in Richmond Hills, but now I’m not sure that’s what I want anymore. Looking for places for Jade and me to move just felt wrong. Why would I want to move away

from Nox again...

“Your silence is scaring me... What’s up?”

I haven’t brought this tidbit of information to Jade yet, and I feel guilty about it knowing she’s basically moving to NC for me.

“I’ve been thinking...”

“Always love when conversations start like that. Spit it out,” she teases.

“I think I want to stay with Nox,” I blurt out as fast as I can, bracing myself for her response.

“And you didn’t think I figured this out already?” she says, like it’s obvious.

“What?” I must sound dumbfounded.

“Come on, Em. You’ve literally been over the moon since the results came back. I knew you wouldn’t want to move away from him again.”

“Do you think it’s too soon? Too fast?”

“From what you’ve told me about him, you two were basically living together before everything happened. And now that you have a son together, do you think his possessive ass will let you out of his sight?”

I laugh at her accuracy of a man she’s never met but knows so much about already. The man who owns my heart and soul.

“I don’t think he will, although he hasn’t outwardly said it yet. I just know he’s missed out on so much...”

“There’s no doubt in my mind he wants you there. He built Kiran a bedroom in a matter of twenty-four hours of finding out he had a son.”

Smiling at that, I get up off the bed and head to my closet, putting her call on speaker. I need to find something to wear for the surprise date I planned tonight. I asked Isla to watch Kiran so we could have a proper night out, just Nox and me.

“I’ll bring it up soon. You’re right, I know deep down he doesn’t want me to leave either. You’re not mad? I’m the one who convinced you to move with

me.”

“I am not mad. I'm happy for you, and you did not convince me to move. It was something we both discussed and agreed on. I need to get away from here anyway.”

“Well, I'm sorry it's not under the same pretenses as when we first talked about it. But I'm happy you'll be in North Carolina with me, and away from that fuckhead. Did he find out about the move yet?”

“No, thank God. I haven't heard from him in a few days.” I can hear the heavy breath she releases. If I'm stressed for her, I can only imagine how she's feeling.

“You sure know how to pick them. Who would have known your pussy is that magical you turn a seemingly normal man into a deranged stalker after only a year,” I try to tease.

Her laughter filters over the speaker as I pull out a skirt to wear. “Please, don't remind me. I swear I'm going celibate after this last shitshow of a relationship.”

“Yeah, okay. We'll see about that.”

“I'm serious, Em. Mark my words...”

“Mmmhmm, I know you better than you think. But I have to go finish getting ready.”

“Okay, love, let me know how it goes.”

Saying our goodbyes, I end the call, heading into the bathroom to freshen up. Isla should be here soon, and I still want to surprise Nox with our plans before she gets here. I'm eager to see his confused expression when he notices I've changed out of my normal clothes and am now all done up. While double-checking my appearance in the mirror, I hear a soft rap of knuckles on the bathroom door.

“Damn, Sonny, you look fucking delectable. Where you going?”

I swat at him when he gets closer, disappointed I'm going to have to ruin the surprise.

“Well...” I say as my fingers walk up his chest. “I planned a night out for us. Your mom is going to be here in a few.”

His eyes go wide in disbelief. “Really?”

Biting my lower lip, I nod. His hand goes to my hip as the other slowly rises to my mouth, his thumb releasing my bite as he cups my cheek.

“Where we going, Mama?” he asks in that husky tone of his, short-circuiting any logical train of thought as I stare up at his gorgeous face.

“It’s a surprise, so I’m not telling,” I tease. I’m not willing to let go of my secret just yet.

“Baby, you know I’ll follow you anywhere. Just tell me what I need to be wearing.” With a smirk, he pulls me in for a kiss. God, I love the feel of his lips on mine. The way his body possessively envelops me as he devours my mouth is something I don’t think I could ever live without again.

Finally breaking apart for air, I swiftly step out of his hold. “Somewhere nice, so dress up,” I say as I leave the bathroom in search of a pair of shoes.

Normally, I’m not one for high heels, but tonight, my tight black skirt paired with an off-the-shoulder bodysuit is begging for a sexy heel.

Nox is washed up and changed by the time I’m ready to leave the bedroom. Damn men and their ability to look hot as fuck with barely any effort.

We walk into the living room where I’m expecting to find Kiran in his playpen but find Isla dancing around with him instead.

I eye Nox suspiciously.

“She got here earlier than expected... That’s when I came in to see what you were up to,” he says, trying to contain his grin.

“So, my surprise was ruined before you even asked about it.”

His lips wrap around his teeth to stop himself from laughing. But the gleam of mischief in his eyes has me joining him.

I’ll get him back later.

“STILL CAN'T GET over the size of that steak. It was delicious,” Nox says, still reminiscing of the cowboy ribeye he devoured at dinner.

I surprised him with dinner reservations at Tellers. It's a steakhouse about an hour away that has always been on his radar, but when we were younger, it was way out of our price range. It's one of those boujee-type places you go only for anniversaries and special occasions, or if you're a millionaire.

My man enjoys a good steak dinner, and I knew this was something he'd thoroughly enjoy. They're known for their massive, dry-aged cowboy ribeye. The thing basically looks like something off Fred Flintstone's dinner table.

With my winnings from the fight in Charlotte, I had enough of a cushion of cash saved and wanted to do something special. The look of surprise on his face when we pulled up was priceless, and worth every penny.

“I'm glad you loved it.” I smile and squeeze his hand as our eyes turn to the screen in front of us.

The other part of my surprise date was a drive-in movie. There's one not too far from where we had dinner, so I thought it was the perfect way to end our night. To top it off, they were showing the new *Guardians of the Galaxy* movie.

I'm too distracted by the sight of him to pay much attention to the movie. The glint in his eye as he watches the action on the screen. The way his lips quirk into a smile. The way his tattoo-covered Adam's apple bobs when he laughs. Everything about him turns me on, and he's all mine. Well, *ours*, and that fact turns me on even more.

“Don't think I can't feel you staring at me, Sonny.” He side-eyes me with a smirk.

“Wasn't trying to hide it, Champ. And let's be honest, you parked in the back for a reason,” I quip as a devious plan takes form in my head.

He chuckles, then focuses on the screen again and the sound streams through the car speakers.

Slipping off my heels, I climb my way over to his seat and lift up my skirt so I can straddle his lap. His hands instinctively bracket my hips. Without a word, I lick my way up his neck to his ear, where I pause to whisper, “You’re so fucking sexy.”

Nox lets out a low growl and rearranges himself in the seat, pushing it back to allow us more room. I kiss along the column of his neck as I feel his cock harden beneath me.

“I’m so wet from staring at you all night. Knowing how good it’ll feel when you slowly sink deep inside of me later.” Sucking on the sensitive spot behind his ear, I grind down on him.

“Fuucck,” he groans and juts his hips upward.

“Mmm... I can feel how hard you are under me... Do you want this pussy, baby? Because she’s aching for you.” I know my teasing is getting to him. I’m pushing him to the brink, and I relish every second of him breaking.

I roll and grind my hips again and again, losing myself to the sensation of his jeans rubbing against my sensitive core.

One of his hands abandons my hips and dips between us, dragging along my soaked sex. I shudder with relief. When his touch leaves me, so does a stubborn whimper. But a moment later, that hand is at my mouth as he shoves two fingers past my lips.

“Suck,” he commands, and I twirl my tongue before sucking them hard. Tasting myself on his fingers makes me even more needy for him.

He thrusts his hips up against me as I continue to drag myself over him. I’m unable to stop the impending orgasm even if I tried. *Fuck, this is so hot.*

I whimper when his other hand glides my core across his zipper. I’m so fucking close, but I can’t speak the words with Nox’s fingers still in my mouth.

“If I would have known how desperate you were for my cock...” he growls and forcefully thrusts his hips again. The way we grind into each other has my release ripping through me. My body’s overtaken by tingling pleasure as I moan around his fingers, saliva now dripping down my chin.

“That’s my good girl...” he says with pride, then pulls out of my mouth, dragging his wet hand down to my neck and latching on to pull me in for a deep kiss. One I swear triggers another wave of sensation to ripple across my skin.

Lifting me ever so slightly, he undoes his pants and shoves them down.

“Now you’re going to ride me, Sonny. Make me come deep inside this greedy pussy of yours.”

A shiver racks through my body and I do as I'm told.

Fuck the movie.

I have front-row seats to the best thing in town.

SEVENTEEN



“Want to hook up your phone and play some music?” Nox asks as we start our ninety-minute drive to Charlotte.

“Sure.” Plugging the cord in, I accept Apple car play and select the Spotify app.

“What are you in the mood for?” I ask as I scroll through my playlist on the screen.

Quickly, I try to swipe up on his Jeep’s touchscreen, completely forgetting about the one named after him.

“Wait, wait... Did my Sonny girl have a whole album dedicated to me?” he asks in a mocking tone with a cocky smirk on his sexy fucking face.

I roll my eyes, not responding.

He reaches out to tap it, and I try to stop him. I’m not ashamed, but these songs were the equivalent of my therapy when I left him.

“Just one song... I want to see the vibe.” I nod, giving in to him and “Capsize” by FRENSHIP and Emily Warren bleeds through the speakers.

We both sit there, listening intently, and I think about how true these lyrics felt to me just months ago. I hated that it took me so long to realize my feelings for him back then, and I beat myself up about not telling him enough. There were times the pain of leaving him tried to capsize me, leaving me to drown at the bottom of the deepest part of the ocean in my emotions.

But then my little ray of sunshine would always pull me from the wreckage. Kiran gave me something to live for.

Nox reaches for my hand. “I may have doubted a lot, even my worth at times, but I never doubted if you loved me before you left.” He pulls my hand to his lips, kissing my fingertips. “I was just mad at you for not realizing how much that love meant, but you have to leave your guilt in the past. There is absolutely no room for it here between us. Especially after what you went through.” We come to a stoplight, and he takes the time to look me in the eyes. “You are a survivor, baby. Nothing can take you down. Remember that.”

I lean up to kiss him, and the next song on the playlist filters through.

The car behind us beeps, but Lennox takes a second to raise his eyebrows at me as “Middle Child” by J. Cole plays.

“I told you I watched your fight in Vegas. When I heard it come on as you walked out to the octagon, I immediately added it.”

A smile takes over his face as he focuses on the curvy mountain highway, continuing our drive.

“Speaking of fights. I was a little stunned at the charity night in Charlotte, but I do remember how good you looked out there. I can tell you’ve been training hard. How did all that go down with you finding a new gym?”

Pride fills me at his compliment. I worked so fucking hard after having Kiran, and it was tough to get back into it.

“Just like everything else I loved, I gave up fighting when I ran.” I pull my lips in between my teeth, taking a deep breath through my nose. Those days were dark. “But after I had Kiran, at my postpartum appointment, they cleared me physically. Mentally, though, I was really struggling. So, the doctor suggested a hobby or something that was just for myself.”

I remember the surprise on the doctor’s face when I told him I had been really into MMA before getting pregnant. But he had also been happy to hear it, saying that letting off those endorphins would be a game changer.

“At that point, I was living with Jade, so I found the closest gym to her. It

took some time for them to take me seriously, since I was out of shape after having our little man. But once I was able to prove I did, in fact, know what the fuck I was doing, they accepted me into the fold. You saw my coach, Ryan, in Charlotte, but his dad is actually the one who runs the gym. I ended up telling him I was a single mom, and he offered me some part time work there too.”

Without Jack taking a chance on me, and Jade’s help with Kiran, I would never have been able to accomplish the things I did, and I am forever grateful.

“Even more than work, he gave me purpose without even realizing it. I started teaching self-defense classes to women two nights a week.”

“That’s so awesome, Sonny.” Squeezing my hand, he glances over at me, probably hearing the change in my tone.

My mind unfortunately goes to a place I hate. Letting out a sarcastic laugh, I say, “Yeah, I still can’t help having moments when I’m pissed at myself for letting Tommy’s scrawny ass get the upper hand on me, even with all my training.”

“No...” Nox says sternly before I interrupt him.

“It’s true. If he hadn’t of caught me so off guard, none of this shit we went through would’ve ever happened.”

“Don’t do that.” Pulling over to one of the lookout spots off the highway, Nox puts his car in park, facing out toward the mountains. We both take in the beautiful view for a few moments before he speaks.

“I told you, guilt has no room here. From you or me.” He rubs his hand over his face. “Trust me, I’m struggling with it too. But there is only one person to blame for that night. And lucky for him, he’s already dead.”

Nox unbuckles his seatbelt, turning to face me. “You just said you found purpose in those self-defense classes, so hold on to that fact. It’s pretty damn amazing that you persevered and found a way to empower other woman by giving them tools to protect themselves. Even if your classes helped save one woman, that’s a huge difference you made.”

I swallow, his words drawing tears into my eyes at the thought. I know he's right. Teaching those classes helped me heal in a way I'm not sure anything else could have, but some days my self-doubt creeps in, no matter how hard I try to keep it at bay.

“And I know you're meeting with Gunnar this week. I'm sure you will go over all that. But make sure to tell him that's something you are really interested in doing. Snow teaches those classes, and with him getting into coaching more seriously, he probably won't have as much time for some of the classes he leads.”

That excites me, and as we pull back onto the road after a passionate make-out session, everything feels like it's falling into place. The old Emerson would've been terrified for the other shoe to drop, scared of the good coming her way, but Emerson 2.0 knows she deserves every bit of it.

I'M WATCHING on as Nox trains with a jiu-jitsu coach who travels around teaching techniques to the U.S. Military. We each have individual meetings with Cliff tomorrow, but when Nox found out Coach Thompson was going to be here this weekend, he jumped at the opportunity to take a class under him.

Fuck, he's so sexy. Sweat drips off Nox's inky black hair, sliding down his chest where his Gi has opened slightly. The woven cotton material is extremely durable and made specifically for rolling. Nox's black belt adorns his waist. The accomplishment doesn't surprise me because I've seen his floor work in the octagon, but I make a mental note to ask him when he officially moved up from a purple belt.

Over the past two years, Nox has mastered the art of being both aggressive and graceful with his movements. I never doubted he would accomplish what he set out to, but watching him now, with the type of precision he exhibits, it is obvious he is going to be one of the best to ever go pro.

I see it in the way the guest coach watches his moves with appreciation. He's a beast, unstoppable. Even as elite of a fighter as Valdez is, there is no question in my mind that Nox will dominate the octagon in January.

When he takes a water break, his eyes find mine in the viewing area, where I'm leaning against the balcony. Licking his lips, he shoots me a wink, causing my pussy to clench, and even though I had him only hours ago, I can't wait to let him use my body to unwind some of his adrenaline.

Nox

“Yeah, I’m back here in Charlotte today. So surreal. I’m meeting with Cliff tomorrow to discuss him managing my fights in the future.” I walk out of the locker room and hear Emerson on the phone in the small hallway beside the water fountains. Standing perched against the wall, I wait for her to finish her conversation.

“Thank you. It really is awesome. I owe you and your dad so much for all you did for me. I truly could never repay you guys.” It hits me that she’s most likely talking to her coach, and I can’t help the jealousy that stirs low in my gut.

“Kiran is great. He’s adjusting so well to North Carolina.” She pauses again, and hearing her talk about my son to another man has me wondering how often he was around him. I’m glad she had people in her corner, which is the only thing keeping the crazy green monster at bay.

“We miss you guys too.” And with that, I can’t take any more, so I walk toward her, making my presence known. She looks up, giving me a wide smile until she notices the rigidity having taken over my body. “I promise... we will stay in touch. Take care, Ryan.”

When I grab her hand, she doesn’t fight me. We don’t speak as we walk the two blocks to our hotel room. I stepped out of that locker room excited to get her back to our room and make love to her, but now I’m internally begging myself not to fuck her so hard she knows exactly who she belongs to. *Who she always has.*

My insecurities threaten to take over. *Get it the fuck together, Nox.*

The second the heavy hotel door shuts behind us, she speaks. Like she’s already read my mind. “Are you fucking serious right now, Lennox?”

I pace in front of the large window. “Just give me a minute. I know I’m being unreasonable but... Fuck!”

Sitting down on the bed, I pull the edges of my hair, trying to calm my racing heart.

She's here... She didn't want to leave. He's your son, no one else's. They want you. They want to be with you. She left to save you.

Emerson takes pity on me, kneeling in front of where I sit. Reaching up, she rubs her thumb across the faint scar above my eyebrow, her soft touch allowing the tension in my body to relax a bit.

“Baby, he is nothing more than a friend. He doesn't even know anything past the surface about me. But you can't expect people who have been rooting for me not to check in, especially the ones who helped train me.”

I take a deep breath, looking into her golden specks. “I know, I'm being ridiculous. You just can't imagine how many nights I laid awake, wondering if someone else made you happier than I did... If someone else made you want to stay.”

Realizing how fucking pathetic I sound, I close my eyes, shaking my head. “Even now that I realize it wasn't like that, it's just hard to imagine you and Kiran with this guy. I saw the way he was looking at you, the slight touches at the after-party.”

“I get it... I really do. And I'll be honest, he did ask me out a few times, but he was always very respectful when I declined.” She leans back on her haunches. “Lennox...how the fuck do you think I felt watching you with Leslie at that same party?”

I grab her chin, staring at her beautiful face and knowing she's exactly right. “I know. Shit, I can't imagine. I was ready to knock his teeth in. I may have been there with her, and even been fucking livid at you, but when I looked at you, all I saw was *mine*... My Sonny. And I hated that he felt comfortable enough to touch you.”

Emerson straightens up, still on her knees, but bringing herself closer to my eye level. “Champ, the only man I've ever truly wanted is sitting right here in front of me.” She leans in, biting my lip before she licks it to soothe the pain, making my chest rumble. “Even on the nights I was desperate for you, hundreds of miles away, I knew no other cock would make me feel the way

yours did. No other arms would make me feel as safe as yours did. No other eyes would make me feel as wanted. You always made me feel different in the best way.”

Her vulnerability is like a balm to soothe my anxious thoughts. “Having you back, it feels too good to be true. I know you’re staying, but that little nagging voice in the back of my head just needs to shut up and believe it too.”

“You have nothing to worry about... I’m not going anywhere. I would beg you to keep me, even if you asked me to leave.” And with that, she presses her lips to mine. Our intense connection only grows with every stroke of our tongues.

My hands smooth up her back and pull her closer to me, reveling in the feel of her body pressing against mine. Unable to get enough of her, I rip the t-shirt she’s wearing over her head. Emerson’s lips find mine again as every nerve ending in my body lights on fire. Thankful she isn’t wearing a sports bra today, I undo the clasp on her bra.

Emerson leans back, letting the fabric fall to the ground. “Fuck,” I hiss, cock twitching. The sight of her will never get old.

Smiling, she reaches for my pants. “I’ve been wet all day, watching you dominate out there. You going to give me a taste?” The way she squirms, rubbing her thighs together, lets me know exactly how badly she wants it.

I help her pull my shorts down and my engorged cock springs free. “Suck me, Sonny,” I command, and she does just that in the next second. Taking me into her mouth, she pulls me in deep, my piercing sliding across her tongue. The way she gags around me has me growing even harder.

She eagerly gags over and over again, trying to breathe through her nose and take me deeper. “Fuck yes, my girl loves to choke on my cock. Don’t you?” Emerson does it again, her eyes watering with each attempt, and the lust shining in her gaze almost sends me over.

I pull out of her mouth and stand, watching her lips form a pout, like I’m taking away her favorite toy. My attention falls upon the floor-length mirror in the corner of the room, and I instantly know what I want to do. Emerson’s

eyes follow me as I walk over, push the footstool to the side, and sit down on the chair beside the mirror.

“Crawl,” I order, and she doesn’t hesitate, moving on all fours across the room to me. Looking like the purple-haired siren she is.

“That’s right, baby. Now take off those panties and show me your pretty pink pussy,” I say, stroking my cock as I watch her every move. Emerson’s tongue touches my cock right above where my hand rests lazily. She licks in tandem with my strokes, and it’s the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.

Then she stands, shimmying out of what remains of her clothes, and I suck in a breath. I may have had this woman more times than I can count since she’s been back home, but I can never get enough of her.

I give her a come-hither motion with my finger. Once she’s back in between my legs, I turn her body around, so her ass is in front of my face. “Bend,” I command, pushing down on her back. “Hands on the stool.” Trailing my finger down her ass, I find her dripping slit. “So fucking wet for me.” I press one finger into her drenched center.

“Fuck yes, Lennox,” Emerson moans out, and I glide in and out of her. Bending my head, I grasp onto her hips, unable to hold off another second from tasting her.

“The sweetest fucking pussy,” I groan into her as I lick all the way up to her puckered hole. She moans and writhes from where she’s slumped over, not able to get enough. I tug on her purple ponytail, directing where I want her to look. “Sonny, open your eyes. Watch us... Look how beautiful you are when you break for me.” I glance back, my eyes meeting hers in the mirror. Her brown orbs are blown out, face flushed, and lips parted... Hot as fuck. “Look at that perfect cunt... She tastes as good as she looks,” I say before moving my head between her legs again. Knowing she’s watching me spurs me on. Her words become unintelligible as I push my tongue into her, and I feel her insides clench.

My cock is throbbing, so ready for release, begging for attention. I reach my free hand back and give myself a few tugs. Emerson must notice because, in a husky tone, she says, “That’s sexy. Keep stroking yourself, Champ.”

When I move my tongue to her clit, my nose buried in her pussy lips, she screams my name within seconds, coming so hard I can still see her sex pulsing as I lean back. I press my fingers back inside of her, but another tug of my cock has me spilling over the ledge. “Fuck, I’m coming,” I moan out as I spurt hot cum all over her ass. Her eyes stay glued to my pulsing cock, and my sticky seed all over her, seemingly in awe.

“Fucking hell, Lennox,” she moans again, not taking her eyes away from the mirror, and that’s when I notice her hand circling her clit. My fingers are still pressed inside of her, and I start moving them again. Emerson grinds back into me, chasing another orgasm, her juices coating my fingers. With a raspy scream, she convulses as she comes, and my dick is already perking up for round two.

Her body falls against the footstool in front of us. I pick her up in my arms, kissing along her collarbone. “Let’s get you in the shower, baby.”

“That mirror did me in...” she says, burrowing herself into my neck. “Promise to fuck me in front of it later?” Before I can respond, she continues. “Better yet, can you get us one for our bedroom at home?”

Our bedroom at home... Home. Me, Emerson, Kiran.

“I’ll get you anything you want, Sonny. If it wasn’t obvious already, I love you so fucking much, it hurts.” My declaration has her humming, wrapping her arms around my neck and kissing me fiercely.

“I love you, Lennox Monroe,” she whispers, and I crave to hear it a million times over.

“Also, please tell me that means you and Kiran are officially going to move in with me.”

She smiles up at me, eyes locking onto mine. “I’m pretty sure it was official from the first night we stayed... We’re not going anywhere.”

EIGHTEEN



I pull out of the gym, tired as fuck, but showered and ready to spend time with everyone at the Rebel Knights cookout. Like always, I'm one of the last to leave. Greyson and Ford joined me for a workout today before my sessions with Joey. I couldn't be more thankful for Lights Out. It saved me as a teenager, and it allows me to train in an environment I love, surrounded by my people. Even Lottie drags Frankie up here once a week for a kickboxing class. It may not be often, but Lucian still shows up to workout when he wants a break from the busy campus gym at Mountain Ridge. And with Emerson back, it feels like a second home to me now more than ever.

The only person missing is Colton. But I'm so proud of him for pursuing his dreams in Florida.

Picking up the phone, I give my brother a call. We've both been busy and only exchanged a few texts this week, so it's about time we catch up a bit.

"Hey, big brother," he says, and I can hear the smile in his tone.

"What's up, Colt?"

"I actually just found out I get to shadow a senior in the sports medicine program next Saturday for the football game. I'm pretty hyped about that." I'm glad he is starting to narrow down what he wants to do, only because I know it was a big stressor for him his freshmen year. I think deep down he knows we weren't the type of kids who were raised to just go to college and get a degree. We understand money doesn't grow on trees, and if you go to college, you need to come out with something to show for it. There's never

been a doubt in my mind that he will be successful, but he hasn't always been so convinced.

"Hell yeah, sounds like a good opportunity. That may help you make a decision about your major."

"Yeah, I think so too. What are you up to? And why don't I hear my two favorite people in the background?" I smirk at his teasing, thinking about how cool it was seeing him connect instantly with Kiran the same way I did.

"I just finished training, so I'm meeting them over at the Rebel Knights Clubhouse. It's the fall family cookout."

"Damn," he says, and I know he genuinely hates missing out on this stuff. "Man, times like these are when transferring to Mountain Ridge really sounds like the best choice."

I stay quiet because, of course, I would want him closer, but I also want him to do whatever is best for him and his future.

"Especially with my little guy needing his Uncle Tin around."

I chuckle at that. "Just see what you think after your shadow. You have some time to make those decisions."

"True." He pauses and, somehow, I can feel his heavy thoughts before he asks, "How's Mom?"

"She's okay. Honestly, she seems really happy these days." And it's true. I know Kiran has a lot to do with that but even before Emerson came back, Mom has had an extra glow about her for the last year or so. I guess that's what moving out of the house that held so many of your demons will do for you.

"Has he signed the papers yet.?" he asks as I turn onto the street that dead ends into the clubhouse property.

"No, unfortunately. But I convinced her to let me go with her to the next lawyer appointment. I'm going to make sure one way or another she is free of that asshole for good." I can't imagine what she must feel with him still lingering over her head.

“Good. Well, let me know. I hate that shit for her.” *Me too.* And the thought of him ever bothering her again, or coming around my family, has my stomach sinking to the pits of hell, right where he should be.

“I will,” I say, pulling into the already packed compound. “I just got here, so let me call you back later.”

“FaceTime me so I can see everyone.” I smile. Not many twenty-year-olds would be worried about that on a Saturday night. But when you grow up the way we did, you learn early that the family who shows up for you, whether it’s blood or not, should always be a priority.

“Bet. Love you, Colt.”

EMERSON

The incessant bouncing of Jade's legs in my peripheral has my eyes leaving the road and snapping to her. "Are you all set?" I ask, then peek in the rearview at Willow and Kiran. I'm grateful to finally have a car of my own. One Nox surprised me with just this week. The old me would have been hesitant to accept such a big gift, but the new me knows it sets Nox's mind at ease knowing Kiran and I are in a high safety-rated SUV.

She realizes what she is doing a few seconds later and places her hands in her lap, effectively stopping the shaking.

"Shit, sorry. Gah, I'm just nervous," she says, stumbling over her words.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, remember that guy I've told you about, the one from when I was in high school?"

"Yeah...the one who started the trend of you dating complete and utter assholes?"

She chuckles but doesn't deny the fact. "Well, he used to be in the Rebel Knights... He got kicked out not long after we broke up."

"Oh, damn."

"They have nothing to do with Stevie anymore, but I have a feeling I'm going to run into people."

"I get it...the possibility of seeing people you once knew. Makes things a bit weird." Shit, I basically just relived that entire scenario not too long ago.

Her hand reaches for mine and gives it a gentle squeeze.

"Sorry, I guess with the move and all, my brain is on overdrive."

She's not wrong; we have been working nonstop since she got here last week. Between sorting my things and unpacking their stuff, we're absolutely

exhausted. To celebrate our hard work, we're going to the Rebel Knights clubhouse for their annual fall family cookout.

To think I'll finally get to introduce Jade to everyone tonight brings a smile to my face. I'm sure by the number of times I've told stories of growing up, she probably feels like she knows them already.

"Enough about my messed-up past. Tell me about Charlotte and your appointment with Cliff. We've been so busy I forgot to ask."

A large grin spreads across my face as I recall my meeting. "Long story short, he's going to discuss a plan for me with Gunnar. Since Cliff and him work closely with Lennox, he figured that would be an easy solution once I told him I would be living permanently in North Carolina." Thinking back has me giddy all over again. "Even though, apparently, Lennox had already told him that me and our son were now living with him. Which made for an interesting conversation."

Jade laughs. "I bet he didn't see that twist of events coming."

I chuckle, shaking my head at the memory of how stunned he still seemed after his meeting with Nox. "He wants me to fight in as many tournaments as possible to help get my name out there in the local circuit. Then, come spring, he wants me to do the Queen City Brawl there in Charlotte. It all sounds like a good plan, and my friend Corbin Snow agreed to be my one-on-one coach. So I'm really excited to see how it goes."

"It seems like he has quite the path laid out for you. Are you disappointed there wasn't a contract?"

"Actually, not really. I know I haven't earned my way yet. I'm still too new in the circuit to be at that level. And, if I'm being honest, I don't think I would be able to dedicate the time needed for training camps, etc., if I were to get to the UFC at this stage in life. Kiran is so young; it would be really hard."

"Em, you know that I'll be more than happy to help however I can. You could totally make it work if that's what you wanted."

"Appreciate that, and you know damn well I will take you up on that. But for now, taking this route allows me to train, work at the gym, and be there for

Lennox and Kiran. I can't think of anything I would want more."

"I'm happy for you, and judging by the look on your face, you are too."

I can't contain the smile on my face. "I am, really, truly am."

Pulling up to the clubhouse, it appears that the party is already in full swing. Nox had a late training session, so he's going to meet us here.

Kiran and Willow walk ahead as Jade and I make our way to the main house to drop off the snacks and dessert we made. Peering over to her, she seems a bit rigid, but I'm hoping after a beer, she'll start to feel a bit better.

While inside the kitchen, I introduce Jade to Nana Rex and Isla, who are busy getting the food trays set up. We tried to offer some assistance but were immediately shooed away—not before Kiran was showered in kisses. Willow got her fair share of hugs and treats snuck to her by them as well.

"Would you girls mind running these out to Gunnar and Smith. They're at the grill," Isla asks, handing over two cold beers.

"Sure thing... Lennox here yet?"

"Yeah, got here just a few moments before you... I believe he's in the shop looking at the boys' new toys." She laughs, rolling her eyes.

Exiting the back door, we spot Smith and Gunnar across the way and head over. They're hanging with a few of the older guys I'm not too familiar with, but we approach anyway.

"We have a special delivery for the chefs," I say, handing each of them a beer.

"Ah, thank you," Smith says, and Gunnar smiles as he takes a hefty gulp.

"Oh, guys, this is Jade. My aunt."

They both look at Jade, then at each other, then back to Jade. "Jade, as in Stevie's Jade?"

I can feel her body tense at the mention of her ex. *Shit*. Guess they did recognize her. I set a squirming Kiran on the ground and place a hand on her back for support.

She smiles politely. “Yes, that’s me...and you both know that shit is long over.”

They both chuckle. “True, that guy was a real piece of work. I'm surprised you put up with him for as long as you did,” Smith jokes.

“Still ask myself the same question.”

“Well, you look great. Haven’t aged a bit. It’s good to see you,” Gunnar says.

“Thank you ... Oh, and this is my daughter, Willow.” She holds up Willow’s hand, who then gives a big smile and waves at the guys.

Smith squats down to her level, bringing Kiran into their little circle and patting him on the head. “You’re going to have so much fun tonight. The boys installed a playset just for you guys. It’s right over near that big ol’ tree,” he says, pointing to the large oak tree.

My heart swells at the thought of the guys putting in a new playset for the kids. Nox had mentioned they used to play at the clubhouse a lot when they were younger, but the area had since fallen into disarray. There was no longer a need to upkeep it...until now.

Willow’s eyes are bright, and she turns back to her mom. “Can we play?” she asks, practically jumping in excitement.

“Of course, I’ll bring you guys,” Jade says and excuses herself from the group.

“Smells delicious, can't wait to eat,” I say, about to go off to find Nox, when warm hands circle my waist.

I lean into his hold. “Hey, baby,” he mumbles into my hair as he places a kiss on top of my head.

“Where is everyone?” I ask as I spin to face him.

“We were all in the shop checking out the bike Ford’s been working on. Where’re Jade and the kids?”

“She took the kids over to the playset. You didn’t tell me they were redoing it,” I say, swatting at his chest playfully.

“It was all Gunnar and Ford’s idea. Something about wanting the kids to have a spot to play when they visit. To be honest, I think Ford was more excited about it than anyone. You know he’s taking this uncle role very seriously.”

Grinning, I lift up on my toes and kiss him. “Well, it was very thoughtful of them.”

I wrap my hands around his shoulders, pulling him in close, being extra careful of the massive new tattoo spanning his back. He surprised me the other day with a gorgeous siren design etched into his skin. He already has plans for what he wants to add to it for Kiran.

“Come on, I want to go see my boy before I drag you off somewhere.” Taking my hand in his, we follow the sounds of little screeches and giggles.

As we make our way across the yard, Ford spots us and jogs over. “Speak of the devil... Heard you redid the playset for the kids,” I say, releasing Nox’s hand and giving Ford a quick hug.

“Don’t mention it. I was happy to do something special for my boy,” he says with pride.

A low grumble comes from Nox’s direction. “He’s not *your* boy.”

“Whatever you say.” He winks.

“Come on, you two, let’s go see what they’re all up to,” I say as Nox and Ford push each other around while trailing behind me.

Spotting Jade, she looks like a deer in headlights as she watches our group from afar. I wonder if their mention of Steve was too much for her.

The guys leave me and head to the playset while I carefully approach Jade. Grabbing her by the arm, I walk us to where we can get a bit of privacy.

“Are you alright? I’m sorry they brought him up,” I say softly, concern etched in my voice.

She shakes her head. “No, no, that’s not it.” She swallows hard, then continues. “You know how you had Willow sleep over last weekend because I was meeting with Jenny for some drinks.”

I nod, silently asking her to continue. “Well, we had a few too many, and I broke my celibacy vow.”

“Oh, stop. You really thought you were going to stay true to that?” I laugh, trying to laugh off her seriousness. Only, it doesn’t work. She looks even more stressed.

“Mmmm, I was an asshole and left in the middle of the night, didn’t leave my number or anything...”

“Jade...what are you getting at?”

She juts her chin in the direction of where Nox and Ford are messing around with the kids.

“That’s him...”

“You slept with Ford?” The words escape me, louder than I anticipated, and I quickly cover my mouth.

“He was out drinking too... We got along so well. I'm not sure if he even remembers.”

“Okay...but are you sure?” I peek behind me to Ford, who’s blatantly watching Jade, and there is no doubt in my mind it was him. And by the looks of it, she wasn’t easy to forget.

She nods, swallowing roughly. “I couldn’t forget that face if I tried.” And I can’t wrap my head around this.

“Want to know what the worst part is?” She continues, dragging her hands down her face. “He’s Steve’s nephew, and I knew it before I decided to sleep with him. I—I just didn’t realize he was a brother.”

“Ohhh, shit,” I whisper, more to myself than her, but she hears me anyway and scoffs.

“You could say that again.”

Nox

“Higher, higher,” Willow shouts as I push her on the swing.

I look over to Ford, who’s sporting the same confused look he’s had ever since I explained who Willow is. Kiran’s “Push” chants finally get his attention again, and he gives the baby swing a gentle push.

Ford eyes the girls as they walk toward Frankie and Lola, whispering something under his breath I can’t make out.

I knew bringing Emerson’s aunt here was going to create some sort of cock fight. Let’s just say, good genetics run in that family. But I didn’t expect Ford, the lady’s man of the group, to be knocked speechless.

Then a thought hits me. “Did you take something...? Why are you so out of it?” I ask, eyes narrowing at how weird he’s acting.

The accusation snaps his attention to me. “No... Fu—No, I didn’t. It’s just...”

“Uncle Nox... Can I get down?” Willow innocently interrupts. “Of course.” I pull on the chains to stop the swing, letting her get off.

She runs past an approaching Greyson and climbs the ladder to the slide.

“What’s his problem?” Greyson asks, eyeing Ford, who now looks like someone just ran over his Harley.

“We are currently trying to work through that, but he apparently lost his ability to speak over my girl’s aunt,” I say with a chuckle, moving over to push Kiran. He’s about three pushes away from passing out in the swing.

Greyson turns his head to where all the ladies are congregated, fawning over Lottie.

“Yeah, I just heard my dad and Gunnar talking about how she used to be Stevie’s girl... Hard to imagine her giving that shitbag the time of day.”

“Come again?” Ford asks, his head tilted toward Greyson like he just said the most bizarre thing.

“I said”—Greyson’s brow furrows at Ford’s demeanor—“Jade and your uncle used to be a thing.”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Ford mutters, running his hand over his face. “Of course...because that motherfucker has to ruin everything for me.” The pain laced in his tone is so unusual. It’s a side of him he normally doesn’t show.

“Oh, fuck,” Greyson says, eyes widening. “Tell me she isn’t.”

“The fuck?” I whisper and eye Kiran, who is officially passed out.

“The one fucking time...” Ford’s being way too cryptic.

“She’s the one who fucked-and-ducked you, isn’t she?” Greyson asks, his face a mixture of amusement and pity.

I’m shook, my head rearing back at this news. “Are you serious? You and Jade?”

Ford won’t look at me, but Greyson speaks up again. “Yep, and he’s been torn up over her leaving in the middle of the night and not knowing her name.”

That shocks me even more. He normally couldn’t care less.

“Since when did you start gossiping like a preteen?” Ford sneers at Greyson, and I’m honestly still too stunned to respond. Ford and Jade. Jade and Stevie. *Who the fuck knew?*

“Since you whined to me the whole time, I was working on your bike the day after.”

A loud whistle sounds through the backyard of the clubhouse. We all know that means this conversation is over for now.

It’s time to eat.

WE SIT at one of the long tables, surrounded by many of our loved ones. The kind of contentment and peace I feel in this moment is one I'm not sure I ever have. Kiran is asleep in my arms while Emerson eats and laughs at something Lucian's girlfriend, Claire, is telling her.

We got to meet her last week when we visited Lucian at Mountain Ridge. She's a nice chick and seems to be a good fit for Lucian. Even though Emerson and I both always thought he would end up with Frankie, that ship seemed to have sailed...or maybe just docked for the time being.

"Nox, I made my pasta salad just for you. Make sure you get two helpings," Nana Rex calls out from her spot beside Smith at the head of the table.

"I already hid the bowl," I say, teasing, because I know the guys would fight me over that.

Only a couple more weeks before I start my fight prep nutrition plan, and I am taking full advantage of all my favorites.

Smith Rexwood, aka Rex to many people at this table, stands up, his beer raised in the air.

"I'd like to make a toast..." he says, directing his attention to where Lottie and Greyson sit. And I think back to the FaceTime we received last night... Bright smiles, sex-hair, and one flashy new piece of jewelry.

"Congrats to my son on his engagement. I'm beyond happy for you both." Greyson wraps his arm around Lottie, pulling her in close and pressing a kiss to her head. "I must have done something right when I was raising you if you convinced a girl like Lottie to marry your ass." Everyone laughs, but I see the emotion build in his eyes before he continues. "And Lottie, you are already such a big part of our family, I can't wait for it to be official." He pauses for a moment, trying to keep his composure. "Your mom is shining down on you, and I know she is more than proud of her beautiful girl."

I slide my hand to Emerson's under the table and squeeze it three times. Lottie and Greyson's journey wasn't always the easiest either, but there is no doubt they were destined for each other.

And I couldn't be happier for my best friend, knowing exactly what that feeling is like. I can't wait for the day when Emerson takes on my last name.

NINETEEN



I'm exhausted from today's training sessions. Joey is working me toward fight camp that I'll start at the end of October, in preparation for my title fight in December. Along with our one-on-one striking practice, he had me take the Muay Thai class that Snow teaches.

I'm pretty sure Joey is going to ban me from taking any more of Snow's classes now that he is officially Emerson's coach. Let's just say, I was distracted as fuck by how flexible Emerson has become with her high kicks.

Pride filled me when Snow had her demonstrate the push-kick technique on him. She used the distance she created between them to land a powerful blow. My baby is a badass. I knew it the moment I saw her trying to fight that tree. The memory has me smiling as I come out of the sauna.

"Nox... Nox." I hear Gunnar from somewhere in the locker room. "Nox, you in here?" The panic in his voice has my hackles raising.

"I'm here," I say, rounding the corner to find a frantic-looking Gunnar, holding his phone to his ear.

"We have to go. I'll drive. Come on." Pressing his phone to his ear, he yells, "Fuck, she won't answer!"

"What the fuck is going on?" Dread fills me, my mind racing with thoughts of where Emerson and Kiran are right now.

"It's your mom," he answers me shakily as I run behind him, trying to catch

up with him physically and mentally on what is happening right now.

It's your mom. Ice takes over my veins, threatening to freeze me in my tracks.

“Kiran,” I push past my lips as we reach his truck. Of course, I’m worried about my mom, but the fact she has my son right now has me almost incapable of forming a coherent thought, other than getting to them.

“What?” he asks, cranking up the ignition.

“Kiran is with her. Tell me what’s going on.”

Gunnar flies out of the parking lot. “She sent me an SOS text.” I’m trying to process his words when he asks, “Did she say if they were going anywhere?” He appears to be heading to her house.

“To my knowledge, they were staying there. She was watching Kiran while Em went to do some girlie shit with Jade and Willow after her class. Mom knew I was coming around this time to get him. SOS was all she sent?”

I reach into my pockets in search of my phone, and that’s when I realize I ran out of there in nothing but the shorts I had on. “Fuck, I don’t have my phone.”

Gunnar pulls his out. “Rex... Get to Isla’s, now. No cops...and drive the Tahoe. May need you to roll in quietly.” I can’t hear what is said on the other end, but I know how seamlessly he and Greyson’s dad function, so I’m not surprised there aren’t a lot of questions asked from his odd request.

We pull into my mom’s townhouse, and the sight of the old green pickup truck parked across the street sends a furious shiver through me, followed by overwhelming fear.

“If he’s touched either of them...I’ll kill him. I swear I’ll kill him and not think twice about it,” I say vehemently, and I mean it.

Gunnar eyes the truck as he pulls his pistol from the center console. As he checks the chamber, I’m jumping out of the truck before I can even think about it. *My son... My mom.* They’re all that matter right now.

I hear Gunnar calling my name, but I’m rushing through the front door before he can stop me.

A rage like nothing I've ever felt overtakes me at the scene I walk into. My mom sitting at her kitchen table, holding pressure on her bleeding nose with one hand and clutching my baby boy with her other. My piece of shit father sits across from them, twirling a phone on the table with a pistol beside his other hand.

Today is the day Jeffrey Monroe is going to die.

My son's eyes find me as I enter the room. "Dada," he cries, and I run to him, examining him from head to toe. "He's okay, Lennox... He's okay, honey. You take him, and y'all get out of here," my mom says sternly.

The visceral voice I had hoped to never hear again interrupts us. "There's my boy. Not who I was expecting, but glad you are here too. By the way, thanks for telling me I had a grandson."

If my son wasn't in this room, I would lunge for him without pause, and choke him with my bare hands but, instead, I take in a steadying breath and sneer. "What do you want?"

"I want my wife back." *Over my dead fucking body.*

"So, you think breaking her nose and threatening her in front of my son is the way to make that happen." Rage fills me to the point my vision blurs. My son's safety is the only thing keeping me from attacking him.

"That was an accident after she confirmed my assumptions were true."

I have no clue what he's talking about, but there's no way my mom's injury was an accident. Just like none of the ones she tried to cover up when I was a little boy.

I notice his eyes fall behind me, and he speaks again. "There he is. The man I've been looking for."

I turn toward Gunnar, confused about what this is all about. "How long have you been fucking my wife?" Jeff asks, and I blink several times at his accusation, as my mom's eyes look past me, pleading with Gunnar. The concern in his expression that mixes with rage when he sees how badly she's hurt solidifies that my father's comment is most likely true.

Not sure how I missed this development, but that explains a lot.

“You’ve always had your eye on her, even when we were younger. She finally let you into that tight snatch.”

“Enough,” Gunnar demands, with more force than I’ve ever heard from him. “Isla, darlin’, take Kiran into your room and wait for me or Nox.”

“She doesn’t obey you. I’m her husband. Remember?”

“Not for long, motherfucker... You will sign those papers,” Gunnar growls as I pass Kiran to my mom. His cries as they walk away almost do me in.

“No, I won’t...” His voice raises. “She’s mine.”

The unstable shake in his voice and the gun within his reach have me rushing him, ready to have him out of our lives for good. Zoned in on the man who created every one of my childhood demons, I faintly register Gunnar shouting my name. I can tell the scumbag’s been drinking. His reflexes are too slow, and my hand is around his throat before he can even reach for his gun.

“Touch that pistol, and I’ll put a bullet in your skull,” Gunnar’s voice booms from beside me as he holds his own gun to my father’s head.

I pick Jeff up by the throat and slam him back down into the chair, breaking the legs and sending him flying to the floor.

My fist whips his face to the side. “Didn’t I warn you? All those years ago,” I say in between punches. “Why couldn’t you just stay away?”

Even as I ask, I know why.

“You fucking piece of shit. I couldn’t protect them from you when I was younger...” I move my hand back to his throat, wanting to see the struggle in his eyes. Men like him...men like Tommy don’t deserve to walk around on this earth. “But I will never, and I mean *never*, let you expose my son to your low-life abuse again.”

Squeezing his throat. I feel Gunnar’s hand on my shoulder, but I continue spitting in his face. “You don’t want to sign the papers, that’s fine. She can’t be married to a dead man anyway.”

Suddenly, I feel two strong bodies pulling me off. I struggle against them, wanting to end this now...so close to ending this forever.

“Nox... Nox...” Gunnar pleads, and I finally snap out of it.

Smith Rexwood stands beside him, gun pointed at my father’s limp body. He crouches down, feeling for a pulse. Rex nods to Gunnar. “It’s faint, but there.”

“Lennox...you have too many good things going right now. Please,” Gunnar begs. With a pistol still in one of his hands, he encases my face with the other. His eyes plead with mine, the eyes of a man who cares about me more than my own blood ever did. “You got yours. But let us finish what you started. No questions asked, we won’t involve anyone we don’t trust.”

I take several deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart. “Lennox, I care about your mom...a lot. I care about you too. You have my word he will be taken care of. Please, just go back there and check on your family. Rex will pull his Tahoe into the garage, and we will handle him.”

A million scenarios run through my head, but Kiran’s cries for me from the back room are what finally have me giving in.

I nod sharply and place the pistol in his outstretched hand. Looking back at the scumbag on the floor, I kick him one more time for good measure, and the way he barely responds tells me he is hurt badly.

The lack of remorse I have in this moment should concern me, but then I remind myself of all the things he has done over the years.

When I wrap my son up in my arms a few moments later, I am even more thankful for the opportunity I was given to be his father. To break the cycle of abuse and neglect. To show him nothing but love and guidance.

Once I know things are clear, I help my mom clean herself up and take her and Kiran back to my place for the evening. She falls asleep with him wrapped up in her arms, and I hope that after today she can rest better every night, knowing she won’t have to deal with him ever again.

Emerson walks in the front door a couple of hours later, none the wiser to the traumatic afternoon we experienced because it wasn’t something I wanted to

tell her over the phone.

But the minute she sees my face and notices my mom with Kiran snuggled up on the couch, she knows something isn't right. Emerson rushes to me, and I tell her every fucked-up thing that went down. The trauma I hope our son won't remember and will never have to witness again.

Angry energy wafts off of her, seemingly ready to call Gunnar up and let her finish him off herself. But instead, she holds me, knowing I need her. Emerson's presence alone already soothing my anxious mind.

My Sonny... Like the sunshine that finally peeks through the sky on a cloudy day.

TWENTY

E  *merson*

TWO MONTHS LATER

“Great session today, Em. I can really see a difference,” Snow says, wiping the sweat off his face as we gather our stuff from the nearby bench.

“Thanks, I can feel it.” I beam a megawatt smile at him, proud of my progress over the last few weeks.

“Are we still on for Monday?” Snow asks as we stop in front of the men’s locker room.

“Yes, I would greatly appreciate your help. I didn’t realize the ‘take your friend to class day’ would be such a big hit. There will be over twenty-five people attending.” Even though I was a bit overwhelmed by the response we received by opening this class up to non-members, it’s an amazing feeling knowing we can possibly make a difference in these ladies' lives. I personally think every woman out there should take at least one self-defense class in their life.

He chuckles. “Of course, happy to help... See ya then.”

“Night, Snow, thanks again,” I say over my shoulder and head into the showers, before grabbing Kiran at the kids center.

The kids center is just another addition the boys have incorporated to make our lives easier. Nox had suggested converting one of the barely used back rooms into a play center to allow parents to come work out and not have to worry about childcare. It's been a great addition to Lights Out, especially with my teaching and his training schedule.

Walking into the room, I hear Kiran squeal and run my way. Yes, we officially have a runner on our hands. I scoop up my baby boy and smile at him as his bright green eyes sparkle. He looks so much like Nox, I can barely stand it at times.

Even more so now that the boys took him for his first haircut. He has the

cutest dapper hairstyle. I think the cut was more Ford's doing, considering Nox prefers his hair in a sexy but messy style. And Ford sports a more polished but edgy look.

"You ready to go see Lala?" I ask him, knowing he is always excited to see Isla. His legs bounce in my arms with delight.

I'm dropping him off at Isla's for a sleepover so Nox and I can have our date night. It's something Isla insisted we do every month to take time for ourselves, but I think it's more so that she can steal our little man.

Tonight, I'm meeting Nox back at the gym when he gets out of his training camp, which isn't till later on, so I'll be having dinner with Isla and Kiran.

As soon as I step into Isla's house, I can smell the delicious aroma of dinner wafting through the place. I follow my nose to the kitchen, where I find a massive hulk of a man hovering behind her at the stove. Politely, I clear my throat, so they are made aware of my presence. The sound has Gunnar jumping away from Isla as if they are school-aged kids being caught behind the bleachers. Isla turns her head and grins at him as a slight blush creeps up her cheeks. A warm, loving gaze takes over her face.

Their relationship was a welcomed revelation, and I couldn't think of anyone more equipped to be hers than him. Nox and Colton, although surprised at first, were both happy for their mom. I think we're all just glad that Isla finally has someone who will cherish her and treat her like the queen she is. She deserves to be loved unconditionally by someone besides her sons, and Gunnar is just the man to do it.

"Lala," Kiran yells and runs over to hug her leg.

"There's my boy!" she beams, leaning down to pick him up. "You wanna help Lala finish up dinner?"

"I do it?" Kiran asks, reaching for the spoon. She hands him his wooden spoon and the two of them finish up dinner as Gunnar and I set the table.

"How'd tonight's session go with Snow?" he asks, setting the plates down.

"Good. I thought that with the increase in my training sessions, my wrist would be bothering me, but it feels great. Strong, even."

“Great, I'm glad to hear that. Cliff and I have our feelers out for the tournament in January... You up for it?”

“I'm so fucking ready.”

He laughs at my eagerness. “Don't tell Nox, but I think you might be one of my favorites.”

“Like he doesn't know that already.” That earns me another chuckle, and I grin. Feeling blessed to have so many people to love and call my family feels like a dream come true.

Nox

The locker room is always eerily quiet this late at night. Joey demanded I take an ice bath before heading home, but I've been here all day, and I get Emerson completely to myself tonight, so that ice bath is going to have to wait. I'll deal with my soreness tomorrow.

A noise somewhere in the hall stops my thoughts, and I listen for it again as I tuck my towel in around my waist. A select few of us have the after-hours code to the door, but no one else was signed up to use the gym again tonight.

Satisfied when I don't hear anything else, I head out to the locker area where I left my bag sitting out on the bench. My brow furrows when I notice something black and white on top of my bag. Examining it closer, a smirk takes over my face.

Someone else is in here...and she's about to get her ass spanked. I remain quiet as my cock grows at the image on the polaroid she left for me. She's in her sports bra, but it's pulled up to right under her nipples, showcasing the bottom half of her perfect breasts.

I look around, wondering where she's hiding, and that's when I see a trail of polaroids scattered on the floor, heading toward the steam room. Each one's sexier and more revealing than the last. Steam rolls out of the door, blocking my view of the last picture. I bend to pick it up and see it's one of Emerson sitting on the bench inside the room with her finger buried deep inside her pretty pussy.

My cock juts at the sight, and I swing the door open. Almost unable to see her through the steam, I husk, "Is your finger still inside my pussy, baby?"

"Why don't you come find out, Champ?"

Fuck, I'm obsessed with this woman.

Dropping my towel, I move toward her. When I'm finally standing before her, the seductive smile on her lips lights my insides on fire. She's so damn

beautiful.

“You know, several years ago, you told me you wouldn’t fuck me for the first time in a locker room...” I smile at her recalling the memory. It was the first night we took things further. “Well, you got your wish back then, so now you are going to fulfill mine?”

I like the sound of that.

“Beg me...” I command, even though there is no way I’m walking out of here without my cock drenched in her cum.

Emerson stands up, reaching for me, and she immediately starts stroking with just the right amount of pressure. Her hungry mouth meets my lips, taking control of the kiss. The way her tongue tangles with mine and her fist twists around my cock, I’m practically ready to beg her myself.

“Lennox...I need you.” She squats down in front of me, licking my shaft, never taking her eyes off me. Mine roll back into my head, and I’m yanking her up and into my arms, scared I’ll empty myself down her throat. I back us up against the wall and my throbbing dick nudges her entrance.

“Fuck yes...please,” she whimpers, and I let just the tip enter her. Swirling my hips around, I dip in slightly and pull back out. Teasing us both. It's erotic fucking torture, and I can tell by her darkened eyes and soaked pussy that she’s loving it.

My thumb finds her clit, applying light pressure, and her head falls to the wall behind her as she writhes under me. “Oh, fuck...keep doing that.” She moans and groans, grinding into me. With one hand holding us in place, I let the other go to her breasts, raking my fingers all over her. I can’t get enough of her...ever. Bending down, I lick across her nipple, and she lets out the sweetest whimper. Unable to stand it anymore, my cock fills her completely in one thrust.

I barely feel the way her nails dig into my back as she chases her euphoria, her release making her scream almost instantly. Wrapping my hand around Emerson’s neck, I hold her just the way she likes. When our eyes meet, the combination of chemistry and love that flows between us feels like the most powerful thing on the planet.

Earth-shattering.

All-consuming and combusting into flawless sexual energy.

As her pussy squeezes my cock with another orgasm, I come deep inside of her with a roar. But I don't move. I just stare. Thinking about how far we've come and all the battles we've endured since the last time we were together in this very locker room. One thing has never changed...

"Sonny, I love you with all my heart."

I can feel Emerson's smile where her head rests against my chest, both of us catching our breath.

She brings her eyes back up to mine, her hand cupping my jaw. "Our situation may not have always been ideal, especially the way each of us grew up, but I have no doubt that we were meant to find each other. You have always been my saving grace, Lennox Monroe."

I press a long kiss to her swollen lips and carry her toward the showers. I don't know if it's the sex-induced haze, the nostalgia of the locker room, or the polaroids, but we both seem to be in our feelings tonight.

"I hope our destiny is infinite...because even if I get to keep you for this life and the next, it still won't be enough."

With a smirk, she shakes her head. "If our son has an ounce of his daddy's swoon, we are in trouble when he's older."

I chuckle, brushing my lips against hers. "Speaking of our son, when you going to let me put another in you?"

She cocks her eyebrow at me as I stand her up in the shower. "Slow your roll there, Champ. We have dreams to chase first."

I smile, checking her water to make sure it's warm enough for her. Of course, I want more babies, but first I want her to get to see where her fighting career could go, and then we can discuss the rest. Plus, I kinda like us being able to spoil Kiran with all the attention right now.

"Chasing dreams, orgasms, and a toddler. Sounds like a damn good life to me," I tease.

“Fuck off, you goob.” She laughs at me as I watch her rinse off, and the sight of her body has me ready to get her home pronto. “But no, really... Go order us some food. I’m excited to pig out and pass out.”

I salute her. “Whatever you say, boss lady,” I snark back at her.

“Thank you, baaabyyy!” she calls out, but not before I swat her ass, earning me a yelp.

I smile to myself, because this is a damn good life. Not a day will go by that Emerson and Kiran don’t know how loved, cherished, and wanted they are.

EPILOGUE

Commentator 1: I haven't been this excited for a fight in a while. Earlier this year when Lennox Monroe fought in the prelims of the Holms, Bueno Silva event, I knew we'd be seeing him on a Main Card soon.

He has that extra grit that's going to take him a long way. Nox proved time and time again that night that he knew how to use his southpaw stance to his advantage.

Commentator 2: I agree. The talent this young man exhibits is of the greats. I'm interested to see how he does against a seasoned vet like Buzz tonight.

I see Monroe's girlfriend sitting front row and center, surrounded by a big crowd.

Some of you may not know this, but she's a fighter as well. From the small amount they've shared about themselves, they grew up neighbors, with her in the foster home next door. They both got into MMA as an outlet and look how that turned out.

Commentator 1: I'm getting rags to riches vibes, and I'm here for it.

Commentator 2: Me too.

With Lennox competing in his first title fight tonight and Emerson, "The Siren," as some call her, taking names right now in the Carolinas, I think there is a lot more in store for these two.

Commentator 1: She's undefeated right now, correct??

Commentator 2: Yes... she has to be close to a deal of her own. I wouldn't be surprised if, within the year, we weren't sitting here talking about her.

Commentator 1: The lights are dimming... Let's get this thing started.

Commentator 1: Holy Shit! He just knocked him out. Lennox Monroe just knocked out Buzz Valdez.

Commentator 2: That was insane.

Ladies and gentlemen, you heard it here first, Lennox Monroe, the undisputed UFC Welterweight Champion of the world.

Commentator 1: Two minutes into the final round. I honestly thought we were going to a judge's decision after the fifth round. What a freaking fight!

Commentator 2: This is exactly the type of fight you crave as an MMA fan. This would've been a tough battle to judge because both fighters brought everything they had into that octagon tonight, but Lennox Monroe proved himself and made sure there was no question about who the winner was.

Commentator 1: Again, ladies and gentlemen, winner by knockout at just over two minutes into round two, taking home the Welterweight title is Lennox Monroe of North Carolina! Remember that name, because you are going to be seeing a lot more of him.

EMERSON

My body vibrates with the cheers of the crowd as I stand there in a complete daze.

He won... He won! Nox is the new UFC Welterweight Champion.

Frankie grabs onto my shoulders and screams in delight as we jump up and down in celebration. Greyson's and Lottie's cheers pierce through the air as Ford and Lucian chant his name. Smith might be the loudest out of our group, and I can't help but laugh at how ridiculous he sounds. Grabbing onto Colton, I hug him tightly. "He fucking did it!" he screams over the crowd. Isla joins in on our group hug, her eyes tearing up as she smiles wide.

I'm surrounded by everyone we love, and the overwhelming excitement radiating off them has tears of joy streaming down my face. I peer up at the sky box where I know Jade, Willow, and Kiran sit, and even though I can't see their faces, I know they are celebrating Nox's success right along with us.

We look up to the ring where Nox stands with a belt around his waist and hands up in victory. He spins around to the adoring fans chanting his name, his sweaty body showcasing his hot as fuck siren tattoo. I smile, knowing that he always has a piece of me with him.

Gunnar and Joey jump up from their corner seats and meet Nox in an embrace over the cage. A few of the guys Cliff hired to assist with Nox are right behind them, celebrating the big win.

His eyes dodge all the commotion in the octagon, searching out the front row. They lock onto mine, and when I mouth, *I love you*, he says it right back. *I'm so proud of you*, I say again, and his eyes sparkle with emotion I can feel every ounce of.

Moments later, I'm allowed up to the octagon, and I practically knock Nox over when I finally reach him. Cupping his cheeks, I smash my mouth onto his. His arms lock around my middle as he lifts me and twirls. The crowd chants his name, and you can feel the electricity over his win throughout the

arena. I never thought I'd be one of those girls, but his hold on me and the amount of attention we're receiving have me giddy and giggling.

To say the after-party celebration is absolutely insane is an understatement. We're partying our asses off, not only for his kick-ass performance, but for my twenty-first birthday. We opted for a bar scene as opposed to the sexy burlesque club Colton was begging to check out.

I'm wrapped up in Nox's arms like I have been since we got here. He's been nothing but a tease tonight, desperate to work off the excess adrenaline he has coursing through his body. But we're trying our hardest to last as long as possible with our friends. Knowing Isla has Kiran and Willow sleeping in her hotel room ensures I'll at least have all night to worship the man in front of me, bandages and all.

We make our way back to the VIP booth Cliff secured, where everyone has been floating in and out all night. Ford is pouring a round of shots as our group circles around him. Jade may be avoiding him, but the vultures hovering just outside of our section sure aren't.

Emotions overtake me again as I look at all the smiling faces surrounding us. *Our* family, *our* people. The ones who have been there since the beginning and will be there till the end.

I feel Nox's breath on my neck, and I lean into him. "I can't wait to rip this dress off your body and devour you," he practically growls, and I shiver.

"We need to last a little bit longer. I feel like we just got here," I say, looking around at all the people who traveled here to support him.

"I'll stay as long as you want, Mama. But just know, you're mine when we get back to the room." I look into his green eyes full of sexy promises, gently wiping my thumb over his eyebrow. He has a small gash beside the old scar from all those years ago. My heart thuds at the reminder of that teenage boy and the scars he's overcome since then...and all the ones he's helped me overcome as well.

"Always," I whisper and find his lips waiting for mine over my shoulder, as his strong hands pull me closer.

This is exactly what I need, forever and always.

THE END

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading Make You Keep Me. It means the world to us to have your support.

Reviews are everything to us authors. So, if you enjoyed reading, please consider leaving a review!

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We have so much in store for our readers...

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SNEAK PEEK

Continue reading for a sneak peek at Lottie and Greyson's love story, *Make You Love Me*.

MAKE YOU LOVE ME

My Love,

Where do I begin?

I want you to know that you mean the absolute world to me. Filling even my saddest days with rays of sun. The way you hold me just right and know exactly what my body and mind need whenever you are near.

I can't believe it has been over 2 years and you still evoke butterflies every time I see you. I sometimes think I can feel your loving gaze even when you're not around.

Thank you for loving me even through my ups and downs and let's be real, there have been more downs than ups lately. You have stayed by my side through the endless doctor appointments and treatments. Always smiling and making me

feel beautiful and loved.

Even at my lowest, you empower me to be strong. You are my rock, which I am eternally thankful for.

But what about you and your life? I need to know that you will be okay even when I am no longer around. Living the life of a normal 18-year-old guy, with a future filled with endless possibilities.

Before you argue, I want you to know I have put some serious thought into this, and this is what I want for you.

I want you to be happy.

I want you to have a loving family filled with gorgeous, smiling children and the life you always dreamed about. Owning your own shop, designing, and seeing your sketches come to life.

I won't be able to give you those things, of that, I am sure. You deserve the world because that is what you gave me every day, selflessly.

You have touched my soul with your love, and I will always be grateful. I don't think I would have made it through this past year without you.

This is probably the hardest thing I have

ever had to do. To tell the man I love with all my heart and soul that this is the end...

I know this will come as a shock, but I'm leaving town. By the time you read this, I will already be gone. Don't come looking for me... it's better this way.

Just know I've gone to live out the rest of my time, however long that may be, with a heart filled with your love.

I want you to wake up every day and feel my love surround you, even if I am not there.

You will get past this and find a girl who will love you for the amazing man you are. Because you deserve that. You deserve everything. I'm just sorry it couldn't be with me.

I'm doing this because I love you and I hope you never forget that.

Love Always,
Your Everything 

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Shout out to my best girl for entertaining herself when I needed to fit in some writing and for inspiring me to be the best version of myself. I love you both forever and ever.

Thank you to my book bestie now co-author for riding this wild roller coaster with me and being the other part of my brain. Let's keep making magic together, babe! -A

I want to thank my husband for dealing with my many late nights filled with writing and half-watched shows. Thank you for encouraging and supporting this crazy dream of mine.

Thank you to my two little ladies for understanding that "I need just a few more minutes" really means "until I get this scene finished." You two are the reason I'm shooting for the stars. I want to make you proud.

Eeep! My other half, thank you for doing this with me. We make one kick-ass team and I'm so proud of what we've accomplished so far. Let's show em' what we're made of! xox – L

We also want to thank those closest to us for their support and love throughout this dream of ours.

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Thank you to our ARC/Street team. We appreciate each and every one of you for taking the time to give us honest reviews and promote our book. Reviews help authors more than people realize and we are so appreciative.

We especially love our street team group chats... when it pops off in there, it's the best. You babes are so fun and your encouragement has been the best part of our busy days in the writing cave.

TL Swan, not only would we not have met because of your readers' group, but we also wouldn't have been encouraged to be authors. Thank you to Tee and the fellow cygnets for all the advice and constant motivation to go for it!! We love having the group for a listening ear or some sound advice.

Last but certainly not least, we want to shout out to our Book Obsessed Babes community...

Each of you inspires us to continue this crazy journey.

Thank you all for being a part of something that we cherish. We're truly grateful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A New Yorker and a Southern Belle.
Two Book Obsessed Babes that became lifelong best friends over their love for a good romance novel.

When they're not writing, they're devouring a good book or spending time with their family and friends.

Total opposites in some ways and exactly the same in others, making them a dynamic author duo.

LET'S KEEP IN TOUCH... FOLLOW OUR SOCIALS



ALSO BY L.A. SHAW

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- #0.5 [Make You Miss Me](#) (Trent & Ashley)
- #1 [Make You Love Me](#) (Greyson & Lottie)
- #2 [Make You Want Me](#) (Nox & Emerson- Book 1)
- #3 [Make You Keep Me](#) (Nox & Emerson- Book 2)

Reckless Hearts Series

- #1 [Reckless Abandon](#) (Sloan & Wesley)
- #2 [Reckless Impulse](#) (Eli & Quinn)
- #3 [Reckless Hearts Book 3](#) (Ava & Parker)

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