

The background of the entire image is a close-up, soft-focus photograph of several pink roses. The petals are in various shades of pink, from light to deep magenta, and are slightly out of focus, creating a romantic and intimate atmosphere.

THE
SPACE
BETWEEN
YOUR
HEART
& MINE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MELISSA TOPPEN

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Chapter One

Kaia



“Thank you for stepping up while I was away. I know it couldn’t have been easy starting a new job and then immediately being thrust into someone else’s caseload.” Aspen smiles gently, the way one might smile at a child.

I’ve only just met her as this is her first day back to work following maternity leave, and while I’ve heard from other coworkers that she’s super nice, I wasn’t entirely convinced they weren’t just saying that because, well, what the hell else would they say? That she’s a nightmare? Wouldn’t really put the new person at ease, now, would it? But sitting here with her now, I see exactly what they meant. There’s a softness to her, a kindness I could sense the instant I walked into her office.

“It was no problem, really.” I shift in my chair, crossing and uncrossing my legs at the ankle, trying to find a comfortable position.

“Well, I’m grateful just the same. I wish I could have briefed you beforehand, but alas, babies choose when they want to come into this world—even if it is nearly a full month too early.” She chuckles softly.

“That they do.” I’m quick to agree, not that I have any personal experience in the matter.

“Do you have any children of your own?”

“Me?” I shake my head. “No. Truth be told, I’m not sure I want kids.” The words are out before I can stop myself from oversharing—which I tend to do when I’m nervous.

Thankfully, I’m able to stop myself there rather than also admitting I’m not convinced I’m cut out to be a mom. I mean, I love children, obviously. I wouldn’t have become a child abuse counselor if I didn’t. But being responsible for another human life... I don’t know, seems like way too much pressure if you ask me.

“So you’re single?” There’s something curious behind her expression. I know that look all too well. It says, *I have a cousin who would be perfect for you*. Thanks, but no, thanks.

“I am.” The words feel foreign on my lips. Probably because I’m not used to saying them. I think it might be the first time someone has asked me that question since everything happened. And while I know it would probably break Blake’s heart to hear me say it, it’s not untrue—even though he’s convinced himself otherwise.

When I ended things shortly after my mother got sick, calling off our engagement only two short months after agreeing to marry him, he was so sure I would come back. When I told him I was leaving California after Mom passed, he was adamant it wouldn’t stick. But here I am, slowly trying to rebuild some semblance of a life for myself, and as much as he believes one day I’ll realize what I let go and come running back, I just don’t see that happening.

It’s strange how one minute you think a person is your forever, and the next, he’s someone you’re not even sure you loved to begin with. I mean, I loved him. No, I *love* him. Just not in the way I once thought I did.

“But then again, I just recently moved here,” I finally add. “I’m still finding my footing and dating isn’t something I’m interested in at the moment.” I try to make my point without outright saying I don’t have any desire to be set up with someone.

“I get that.” She nods, relaxing back into her chair. “You moved from California, right?”

“Yes.”

“Any reason why you chose D.C.? Do you have family here?”

“An aunt,” I confirm. “After my mom died...” I swallow back the knot that threatens to hold my throat hostage. It’s been nearly six months, and I swear tears still bite the backs of my eyes anytime I say the words out loud. “I just wanted a fresh start,” I finally finish.

“My mom died, too.” She surprises me by saying. “I mean, I was young, too young to really remember her. Anyway, it’s not the same. But I *am* sorry for your loss. And if anyone understands moving away in search of a fresh start, it’s me.” She pauses for a brief moment before continuing. “So you said your aunt lives here?”

“She does. After I sold my mom’s house, I decided to move here and stay with her while I figure out my next move.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, we’re happy to have you. And from what I’ve heard, you’ve adjusted amazingly. Theresa even said Bella requested to see you again, and for her that’s huge.”

“Unfortunately, I’ve dealt with a lot of cases like hers in my previous job, and while every case is unique, the damage left behind seems to be universal.”

I’m relieved to be back on the work train, having been derailed so easily into my personal life. To be fair, Aspen has this way about her. Something that makes you *want* to tell her everything. And if she kept asking questions, she’d probably know my entire life story in a matter of ten minutes.

“I suppose that’s true.” She thinks over my words for a brief moment, twirling a piece of strawberry-blond hair around her finger.

I wish I could say I’m old enough not to feel insecure about myself when in the company of beautiful people, but I’d be lying if I said Aspen didn’t make me feel a little bit like an ugly duckling. She’s pretty in an almost understated way, but there’s no denying her beauty.

I don’t have to wonder if her husband is equally attractive... He is. She has a picture of them together on her desk, and until I actually walked in and saw her, I was half convinced the photo was snipped out of some magazine or, at the very least, photoshopped.

“So”—I clear my throat, forcing myself back to the matter at hand—“how would you like to handle this transition?”

“Well, the last thing I want to do is disrupt any progress that’s been made. If it’s okay with you, Theresa and I thought maybe I could sit in with you over the next few weeks, reacclimate myself to the children. I’d rather not make yet another change. I don’t have to tell you consistency is key. They need to know they can count on us to be here for them. We can decide from there how to divvy the caseload. Since I’m only returning part-time, you will likely retain a good number of the patients you’re currently working with.”

“That sounds good to me.” This is probably the best approach, regardless if it makes me slightly uncomfortable.

I just hate being judged, and if someone is in the room with me, dissecting everything I say, then I’m definitely going to feel that way, even if it’s not their intent.

“If you could send me this week’s appointments when you have time, I’ll let you know which ones I think will be a good idea to start with.”

“Okay.” I nod, because really, what else can I do? Say no, I’d rather not, get up, and stomp off?

I mean, it has nothing to do with Aspen, but I’m just now getting my footing, and having to work around another person is not an ideal situation for me. Then again, at the end of the day, it’s not about me but the children we work with.

“Perfect. That was all I needed. I appreciate you taking time out of your day to meet with me.” She stands and I do the same.

“No problem at all.” I give her a slight nod before quickly exiting her office and entering mine, which sits directly next to hers.

Glancing up at the clock on the back wall, I decide I have just enough time to grab a quick bite to eat if I hurry. After slipping on my coat and grabbing my purse from behind my desk, I head down the hall toward the reception area.

Pulling my cell from my bag to scroll through my emails, I make sure I didn’t miss anything in the chaos of the day, only half paying attention to where I’m going.

That’s my first mistake.

I’m a pretty clumsy person by nature, always knocking into stuff, tripping, and my absolute favorite—insert sarcasm—stubbing my toes on literally everything. And all that when I’m actually paying attention. When distracted, I might as well be a walking catastrophe waiting to happen. You’d think I would have learned my lesson by now, or at least, that’s the first thought that hits me when I round the corner and run directly into what feels like a wall. A surprised grunt bursts past my lips as I lose grip of my purse, sending the contents of it careening across the floor in every direction.

I watch it happen in slow motion, powerless to move fast enough to stop it. Glancing up from the mess my belongings created, I get my first real look at what, or rather *who*, I ran into. Not a wall *technically*, but a man built almost like one.

Broad shoulders, bicep muscles easily visible underneath a long-sleeved shirt that does nothing to hide the definition of his chest or abs—though I’d bet that was intentional if I had to guess. You don’t have a body like that and not go out of your way to show it off.

I’m almost afraid to look at his face, and when I finally do, my jaw goes slack.

Messy blond hair pushed haphazardly away from his forehead. The same color hair dusts a strong jawline, just long enough to be called a beard. It complements his defined cheekbones and full lips, which are currently quirked in an amused smile that has my gaze lifting fully to meet his. Thick lashes rim brilliant green eyes, making him even more attractive than I thought he was just seconds prior.

For a brief moment, my mind goes completely blank, like the sight of him alone has rendered me speechless. Me, a person who always has something to say, can't think of a single word.

"Sorry about that." When he speaks, the sound reverberates through me, rich and husky, like velvet against my eardrums. "Let me help you with this."

Before I've even processed his movements, he's crouched down, picking up the contents of my purse that I had momentarily forgotten about.

"You don't have to do that." My brain finally snaps from its haze as he picks up a tampon.

"It's the least I can do." He drops the tampon and a tube of ChapStick back into the bag without so much as batting an eye. "I was texting and walking. Someone should write me a ticket."

It takes me longer than it should to realize he's attempting to be funny.

"Because we all know texting and walking is against the law." I fail to contain the smile that tugs at my lips. "Perhaps a night in the slammer would be a more fitting punishment."

He stuffs the last of my belongings into my purse but makes no attempt to stand up right away.

"Would you be there too?"

When I glance at him again, I find his gaze already on me, and he's much closer this time, given our positioning. So close, in fact, that I can see the little specks of yellow that pepper his otherwise very green eyes.

"Because *that* would make for an *interesting* sleepover," he quickly adds.

His eyes crinkle in the corners when he grins, giving him an undeniable boyish charm that's impossible not to notice.

I don't have time to even formulate words before a familiar voice enters the conversation.

"Is everything all right out here?"

Both of our heads lift just in time for Aspen to fully enter the lobby.

"Everything is fine, Pen." He stands, offering me a hand, which I quickly refuse as I straighten, draping my purse back over my forearm. "Midday

collision. Nothing insurance won't cover." He offers me a wink and a smirk, like we're sharing some kind of inside joke.

"What are you doing here, Rem?"

"I was in the area. Thought I'd stop by and see if I could take you to lunch."

"You were in the area." She gives him a disbelieving look.

"Okay, fine, I wasn't exactly *in* the area."

"Did Sutton call you?"

"Because I need my brother to call me and tell me that my best friend is having major baby withdrawal and is likely in need of a distraction. We both know distractions are my specialty."

Best friend... So not only is her husband a Greek god, but apparently, so is her best friend, which curiously, I've just learned is also her husband's brother. Given how ridiculously good-looking they both are, it kind of makes sense that they're related. The kind of company this girl seems to keep is mind-boggling.

Suddenly feeling like I've overstayed my welcome, I begin to turn, but Aspen's voice stops me mid-motion.

"Kaia, would you like to join Remi and me? I mean, he ran you over in the hallway. The least he can do is buy you lunch." She smiles, the action as natural as breathing.

I briefly wonder what that must be like, to smile and laugh and feel something other than your grief. I wish I could say I remember that sensation, a time when things felt good. It's been so long. I'm not sure I'd recognize it if it hit me in the face.

"Remi?" I say aloud, though I don't actually mean to.

"Remington." His grin is so infuriatingly cute I think I might curl up and die right here on the spot. "But my friends call me Remi. And since we're friends now"—his smile widens—"you can call me Remi, too."

I feel glued to the spot, like my feet don't actually remember how to move. Paralyzed by his gaze, it takes way longer than it should to get my body to cooperate.

"Okay, well..." I finally say as I take a step backward, not sure how to exit this conversation gracefully.

"And she's not wrong," he quickly interjects before I can make a run for it. "It really is the least I can do. Treat you to lunch, I mean." His stark green eyes are almost too beautiful to stare directly into. It's kind of like looking at

the sun—no matter how much you wish you could stare at it for hours, you can never last more than a few seconds. I'm quick to blink away, turning my attention instead to Aspen.

"Actually, I'm good. I have an appointment soon, so I'm just going to run down the street for a quick sandwich."

"You sure?" It's him who asks, but I still direct my answer toward Aspen.

"Another time, maybe."

With that, I spin on my heel and exit the building so fast you'd think the damn thing had just burst into flames. In a lot of ways, it kind of felt like it had.

It's not like I haven't seen good-looking men before. They're a dime a dozen in California. The man I was supposed to marry being one of them. But I'd be lying if I said I've ever met anyone quite *that* attractive. Think Liam Hemsworth meets Matthew McConaughey, but younger and way hotter, which, up until two minutes ago, I didn't know could exist.

I do my best to shake off the thought, but I won't lie and say it doesn't linger for far longer than it should. I replay our brief interaction on repeat for nearly the entire remainder of the day, not entirely sure why.

Then again, that's not completely true. I kind of know why, and it has nothing to do with how incredibly drop-dead gorgeous he is, though that certainly doesn't hurt.

It's more about me than it is him.

I've been having a really hard time with my mom's passing, and in that short moment of only a few seconds, I forgot. I forgot about the past year of my life when I gave up everything to take care of my mom. I forgot about the pain of her passing that seems to never end, lingering just beneath the surface. For one small snippet of time, I was just Kaia again. Just Kaia... But for as good as it felt, it only made the guilt I feel now that much heavier to carry.

Because now all I want to do is go home and call my mom and tell her all about this ridiculously hot guy I quite literally ran into. I can already hear her laugh, the way she would demand every detail and dissect every facial expression he made. Then she'd ask me if I was going to try and track him down and ask him on a proper date, to which I would have responded, not a chance. Guys who look like that don't stay in the same *place* for too long, if you know what I mean.

It's just after six when I make it back to my aunt's house. She's in the kitchen, stirring a pot of what appears to be pasta sauce when I enter.

With her back to me, I can almost pretend she's my mom for a brief moment.

They're the same short, petite build. Same dark-colored hair. Same brown eyes. Very similar facial features. They're actually twins. Not identical, but close enough that if you saw them side by side, you'd do a double take.

It's one of the reasons I came here. She makes me feel closer to my mom like no one else can. I think in a way, she feels the same about me. Both of us finding parts of her in each other. I look more like my dad than my mom, having his blond hair and blue eyes, but my height, my petite build, my personality, all of that came from my mom.

It's hard to think about the fact that at just twenty-seven years old, I've already lost both of my parents. My dad died in a car accident when I was only three, so I don't remember much about him. But growing up, my mom told so many stories that I feel like I knew him. Not having him around was hard sometimes, but losing my mom, there aren't words to describe how difficult that's been.

She was everything to me. Growing up, it was me and her against the world. She was my best friend. My confidante. The person I would call if I was happy, sad, or just didn't feel well and needed the comfort only a mother can give.

If you've ever lost a parent, you know my pain, like losing a part of yourself. If you haven't, one day you will. And when that day comes, you'll understand me perfectly.

"How was work?" My aunt offers me a smile that accentuates the fine lines around her mouth that you can't see otherwise. For being fifty-eight, she wears it very well.

"It was okay." I blow out a slow puff of air.

"Uh-oh. What's that for?" She gives me a pointed look.

"A girl can breathe, can she not?" I nudge her shoulder with mine. "What are you making?" I lean over the pot, catching a whiff of tomatoes and herbs.

"Bolognese sauce. Will you taste it and make sure it's not missing anything?" She pulls a spoon from the utensils drawer before handing it to me.

Dipping the spoon into the sauce, I blow on it gently before sliding it past my lips. Like everything my aunt Yiya makes, it's delicious, and if my facial

expression doesn't give it away, the little noise of delight I make definitely does. Not that my reaction should surprise her. She *is* a retired chef, after all.

I've only been here for a few weeks and my waist is already expanding from all the food she keeps around the house. Like honestly, who can walk by a plate of homemade danishes and not take one? Or my kryptonite, donuts. And my aunt makes the best yeast donuts I've ever had.

"It's amazing," I tell her, placing the spoon in the sink. "You know, you don't have to feed me a home-cooked meal *every* night. I'm starting to think you're trying to fatten me up."

"I enjoy having someone to cook for again." She gives me a soft smile, one that reminds me so much of my mom it's borderline painful—and yet I'm desperate for any trace of her that I cling to it like a lifeline. "And I don't cook *every* night."

Yiya—whose real name is actually Myra, but since I couldn't properly pronounce it as a child, became Yiya—never had children of her own and her husband, who was basically her whole world for twenty-plus years, passed four years before Mom.

"Besides, you could stand to gain a few pounds. You're too skinny," she quickly adds.

I don't bother arguing, mainly because she's right. I spent an entire year caring for my mother as cancer stole her from me piece by piece. She was my priority, and some days I would crawl into bed at the end of the day and realize I hadn't eaten but was too tired to get up and grab something. I think the only time I ate real food in that entire year was when Yiya would visit.

"What are you making anyway?"

"Spaghetti Bolognese. It was..."

"Uncle Nick's favorite." I remember aloud.

"It was." She turns her attention back to the sauce. "So you don't think it's missing anything?"

"Not a single thing, but I'm guessing you already knew that." I nudge her again. "Is there anything I can help with?"

"I'm almost finished. Why don't you go freshen up, and I'll let you know when it's ready."

"Is that your way of telling me I stink?" I huff, laughing when she leans in and takes a big sniff.

"Actually, you smell quite lovely." She gives me a cheeky smile. "But those clothes don't seem all that comfortable." She gestures to my black dress

pants and cream-colored blouse. “And don’t try to deny that you can’t wait to let that hair down.” She tugs on the end of my low pony.

She knows me too well. I hate anything that isn’t pajama-like in both fit and material, and absolutely loathe wearing my hair up because it makes my scalp hurt. I still wear it up more often than not when I’m working because it feels more professional.

I know I work with children, but in a lot of ways, I work with their parents too. And when they look at me, I want them to see the picture-perfect image of someone who has their stuff together. Just because that’s not true, doesn’t mean I shouldn’t make it believable. And maybe, just a little bit, sometimes I need to believe it too.

“I’ll change after dinner,” I tell her, not wanting to change just yet because me and the tub have a date later. Bubbles and wine will also be attending.

“Well, in that case, you could set the table.” She gestures to the vicinity of the small, round table positioned in the corner of the eat-in kitchen.

“I can do that.” I turn, opening the cabinet to my left before pulling out a couple of plates.

“Did that woman come back today? The one you were telling me about that just had a baby?”

“Aspen.” I nod, setting the plates on the table. “She did.”

“And how was she?”

“Really nice, actually.”

“Well, that’s good. I told you that you had nothing to worry about.”

“She’s very pretty too,” I continue, taking silverware and napkins to the table next. “Like really pretty. And her husband...” I make a low noise in the back of my throat. “And don’t even get me started on his brother.”

“Do I want to know how you know all this?” A smile she’s trying to hide tugs at the corner of her mouth. “About the husband and brother, that is.”

“Well, I’ve only seen pictures of the husband, but his brother...” The memory of his face, so close to mine I may have forgotten how to breathe for a moment, comes rushing to the surface, and with it, a wave of something else. Something I refuse to let myself even begin to entertain.

“He’s *that* good-looking?” She reads my expression perfectly.

“Painfully so.” I let myself admit because honestly, if I can’t talk to Yiya about this stuff, who can I talk to?

I basically fell off the face of the earth when my mom got sick, and in addition to ending my relationship with Blake, I severely neglected what few friendships I had. Then I moved to the different side of the country without telling any of them, and well, I haven't gone out of my way to make new friends since I've been here. So yeah, Yiya is what I've got.

"You like him..." It's not a question.

"I don't even know him. He's good-looking, Yiya, that's it."

"So wait, why was the brother of the husband at your office anyway?"

"Because apparently, he's best friends with his brother's wife. Which is a little weird if you ask me. I can't wrap my head around what that dynamic must be like." I shake my head.

"You know, your uncle Nick and your mother were very good friends before he and I ever met." She feels the need to remind me.

"I know, Yiya. You and Mom have told me the story a million times. Mom and Nick were besties, and then he met you, and boom, game over."

"Well, that's not entirely how it happened." She laughs, adding freshly cooked pasta to the sauce in front of her. "So he stopped by to see her?" She urges me to continue.

"To take her to lunch. He said he knew she'd be worrying about the kids and he wanted to distract her."

"That seems oddly sweet."

"It does," I admit.

"Did you speak to him?"

"I ran into him. Quite literally rammed into his chest. Spilled my purse all over the floor and everything. It was... Well, it was typical Kaia." I snort. "He helped me clean it up, though. And he was so good about it. Infuriatingly charming, that one."

"Sounds like he made quite the impression."

"Stop right there, Yiya." I tug open the refrigerator and pull out a carton of milk. My aunt insists we drink milk with every meal, citing that it's good for your bones and digestion, though I'm not sure I agree with the second part. Those who are sensitive to lactose might see it differently.

"What?" She gives me that innocent look of hers. The one that says *I have no idea what you're talking about* in her best Southern accent. Not that she has an accent or anything, considering she and my mother were born and raised in Maryland. But for some reason, when she looks at me that way, I hear, or rather see, a Southern accent.

“You know what. I already told you I’m not interested in dating anyone. Not after everything with Blake and Mom and just all of it. Besides, if you saw this man, you’d know he is way out of my league. And I mean, so far out of my league that we’re not even playing the same game.”

“If you think that, then you need to take a closer look in the mirror.”

“Yiya.” I audibly groan, pouring milk into the two glasses on the counter in front of me.

“I’m serious, Kaia. You obviously have no idea how beautiful you are. Any man would be lucky to have you.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. I’ve got an ex-fiancé who might disagree with you on that. I dragged that man face down through the mud, only to turn around and abandon him. I’m guessing right about now he doesn’t feel all that lucky that he had me.”

“Well, I never liked that shithead anyway, so what he thinks doesn’t count.” She lifts her shoulder in a half-shrug.

I bark out a laugh, able to count on one hand the number of times I’ve heard my aunt curse.

“Mom didn’t either,” I admit. “I think that’s one of the reasons I was so quick to end things when she got sick. She always worried about me and I didn’t want her to have to worry about anything but getting better.”

Only she never did, I think but don’t say.

“She felt like he was trying to change you.”

“Not like it did him much good. We both know I can’t be anyone other than exactly who I am.”

When I was younger, that wasn’t the case. I was desperate to fit in, desperate to be one of those girls all the cute boys in high school wanted. But try as I might, no matter which way I contorted, I could never quite fit myself into that box.

As I’ve gotten older, I’m a lot less apologetic about who I am. Doesn’t mean I’m not self-conscious sometimes, or that I don’t second-guess every other thing that comes out of my mouth. But I’ve come to accept that it’s not my job to convince someone to like me. Either they will or they won’t.

“And why should you be?” Yiya asks.

“I shouldn’t.”

“Exactly.” She clucks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “So back to this hot guy you ran into...”

“I already told you, Yiya...”

“I know. I know. But no one said you had to date him...” When she lifts her brows at me suggestively, I can’t hold in the laughter that bubbles out of my throat.

“Yiya!” I bark, both shocked and wildly amused.

“What? Is it so wrong for a woman to admit she has needs that only another person can fully meet?”

“Should I be concerned about you?” Humor laces my words.

“I’m quite content actually.”

“Yiya!” I squeal. “Are you sleeping with someone?” I ask, not entirely sure I want to know the answer but also weirdly curious.

I mean, she does leave the house at strange intervals and always seems super chipper when she returns... I can’t believe I hadn’t even considered what she might be out doing.

“My dear Kaia. A woman never sleeps and tells.”

I’m pretty certain my jaw is on the freaking floor right now.

“Who is he? How long has this been going on?”

She simply shakes her head at me.

“You have to give me something!” I insist.

“I do not.” She laughs lightly. “Besides, we’re talking about you, not me.” After setting the pot of pasta on a pot holder in the center of the table, she drops down onto her chair. “Now sit down and tell me everything. And don’t you dare leave out a single morsel.”

Rolling my eyes, I can’t help but laugh as I take the seat across from her. And then I do just that. Recounting every single detail from the moment I turned the corner and ran right into Remi, to when I practically ran out of the building just a couple short minutes later.

Funny how the briefest of moments can have the biggest of impacts.

And boy, did he have an impact. So much so that when I fall asleep later that night, I do so thinking of messy blond hair and brilliant green eyes.

Chapter Two

Remi



“You know, you can’t just keep showing up here like this,” Aspen scolds as I step into her office, dropping down into one of the chairs opposite her desk.

“Says who?” I grin, stretching my legs out in front of myself.

“Did you get fired or something?”

“Of course not.”

“Then how is it that you’re able to drive over forty minutes from the city every day during work hours? I know your boss is lenient, but I’m sure he has his limits.”

“Nah, he doesn’t give a shit what I do as long as my work gets done on time.” I shrug.

What I don’t say is that with her and Sutton living in the suburbs and my mom and dad buying a place just a couple of blocks from them, I’m feeling a little lonely in the city by myself, so most evenings I spend working just to keep myself busy, which in turn, buys me extra time during the day. I also don’t say that I miss spending every day with her. That I miss our evening movie nights and being able to just show up at her door at any hour of the day for no other reason than I feel like it. But she and Sutton have their own lives now. A family. And even if I am a part of that, it’s only a small part. But saying any of that would only make her feel guilty, and that’s the last thing I want, even if it is the truth.

But that’s also not the *only* reason I’ve found myself making the trip here for the last couple of days...

“Rem...” She gives me that look of hers, the one that says *I know what you’re doing*. “I’m fine. I told you that yesterday, and the day before yesterday, and the day before that. The kids are with Memaw and Pop-pop

and are getting spoiled absolutely rotten. There is nothing for me to worry about.”

“And yet, you’re still worried. Because that’s who you are, Pen.”

“Your mom and dad gave up their retirement to move here and play babysitter. The least I can do is trust them.”

“One, they came here because playing babysitter to their grandchildren is the most satisfying form of retirement ever, and you know it. And I’m not saying you don’t trust my parents. You’re right; they’re spoiling the hell out of those kids. But they are *your* kids, and I know how hard it is for you to leave them.”

“Yeah. It has been hard. But it’s also been wonderful. My work here, Rem, it makes a difference. It’s important. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t. And you know all of that, too. So why don’t you do us both a favor and admit why you really keep coming back... Maybe because you’re hoping to have another run-in with a certain pretty blonde.” She smirks, able to read me so fucking well.

“Am I that obvious?” I bark out a laugh.

“Only to me because I *know* you.” The corners of her mouth tip up. “If you’re interested, just ask her out. I’ve never known you to have trouble talking to women.”

“She works with you. I don’t want to make it weird.”

“You showing up here every day *is* making it weird. And based on what she told me, she’s not interested in dating anyone right now, so I think you’re wasting your time.”

“That’s what everyone says until they meet someone worth dating,” I point out, knowing I’ve used that excuse myself a time or two.

“Is that right?” She chuckles.

“It is,” I state matter-of-factly.

“Well, if you’re so sure of yourself, why don’t you just ask her out already?”

“What if she says no?”

“Remington Jonathan Barnett. Are you actually nervous about being rejected? Put this in the record book, folks.” She spreads her arms wide. “For the first time in history, the playboy of all playboys is too scared to ask out a woman he’s clearly attracted to.”

“Ha. Ha,” I deadpan. “Mock me all you want. It’s not going to stop me from asking for your help.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Pen!” I whine dramatically.

“I am not asking out a coworker for you. I already told you she was single. That’s as far as I go.”

“You said she’s new in town.” An idea hits me. “I’m sure she probably hasn’t had time to make any friends, what with a new job and all. Why don’t you invite her out for drinks after work? And then maybe I’ll just coincidentally happen into the same bar at the same time.”

“Because I’m breastfeeding and can’t drink,” she reminds me. “Not to mention, that’s way too obvious.”

“So drink water.” I refuse to be deterred.

“Because that’s not weird. *Hey, do you wanna have drinks? Just kidding, I’m gonna have a water.*”

“Come on. You’re always complaining that you don’t have any girlfriends. She’s around your age.”

“Technically, she’s two years younger than me.” She needlessly points out because two years is *such* a big difference.

“Pen...” I pout out my lower lip in true Remi fashion.

“She really made an impression on you, didn’t she?” She leans back in her chair, regarding me for a long moment.

Okay, so yeah, I’ve pretty much been able to think of fuck all else since she literally ran into me the other day, but who can blame me? The woman is a knockout. And not in the fake way a lot of women are these days, where they wear so much makeup you can’t even tell what they really look like underneath it. But in a simple, elegant, beautiful kind of way.

Not to mention, she was witty as hell, not missing a single beat when I spouted off some bullshit about being issued a ticket for texting and walking. Which, by the way, I regretted the second that shit came out of my mouth. But instead of making me feel like an idiot, she jumped right in and played along.

I’d be lying if I said the whole thing didn’t leave me feeling a bit of a certain way.

I can’t even remember the last time a woman actually made me feel anything outside of the obvious... Well, that’s not entirely true. Once upon a time, the woman in front of me had me tied up in knots. But that was a long, long time ago, and so much has happened since then that it all feels like a lifetime ago. Somewhere along the way, I found peace with her choice, and

now, hell, I can't imagine a world where she and my brother aren't together. Not to mention, a world without my two favorite humans on the planet. My niece and nephew.

She is who she's always been—my best friend. We've been through a lot in our almost twenty years of friendship, and while there are moments I regret, there's not a single thing I would change, no matter how painful some things might have been.

"Maybe a little," I finally speak after a long moment. "Is it weird that I'm kind of intimidated by her?"

"You?" She snorts. "I haven't known you to be intimidated by anyone a day in your life."

"First time for everything, I guess." I shrug.

"You're not alone, though," she quietly admits. "She *is* kind of intimidating. I don't know what it is. She's just so pretty and put together. When she walked into this office my first day back, she made me feel like a frumpy lumpkin."

"A frumpy what?" My shoulders vibrate with silent laughter.

"Lumpkin."

"Pen, what the fuck is a lumpkin?" I raise a fist to my mouth to hide my smile.

"Oh, shut up." She picks up a pen off her desk and throws it at me. It hits the arm of the chair instead and then bounces to the floor.

"You have shit aim," I tease.

"Maybe I missed on purpose. A warning shot, if you will."

"Uh-huh." I grin. "So you'll help me then?"

"Remi."

"Pleeeeeaaaasssseeeee," I draw out, batting my eyelashes at her dramatically.

"Fine," she grumbles, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Really?" I smile, leaning forward in my chair, having not actually expected her to agree.

Truth be told, I came here hoping to find an opportunity to speak to Kaia again, but since she hasn't come out of her office a single time I've been here since that first day, and it's not like I can just barge in there considering this *is* her place of employment, I'm calling an audible.

"Really. But so help me, Remi, if you fuck her and then break her heart, I will come to your house and suffocate you while you sleep..."

“Damn, that got dark.” I chuckle. “Having kids has made you weirdly homicidal.”

“I’m serious. I have to work with this girl.”

“Understood. If I fuck her and decide that’s all I wanted, I’ll ease out gently.”

“I should have known this was all about getting laid.” She shakes her head at me, a soft strand of strawberry-blond hair falling loose from her ponytail.

“If all I wanted was to get laid, I’d go to a bar and pick up the first semi-attractive woman who approached me and fuck her in the bathroom.”

“That’s a visual I didn’t need, thank you.” She shakes her head a second time. “Then what is this about, really?”

“Call me curious.” I shrug. “I felt like we had a bit of a connection, and I just want to see if I read it right or if it was fleeting.”

“I swear to God, Remi. You better not make me regret this.” She pushes to a stand.

“Are you doing it now?” I jump to my feet.

“No, right now I’m walking you to the front door because I actually have work to do. Then, when I’m able, I’m going to call my husband and make sure he can be home to get the kids. And if he can’t, then you’re going to have to wait until a day when he can. And if, and that’s a big if, she agrees to go out for a drink, you’re not going to show up because that’s lame. I will talk to her and maybe lay some groundwork. The rest is on you.”

“I’ll take what I can get.” I follow her out of her office and into the lobby.

“Now go to work, and don’t come back here again unless I’ve invited you.”

“Damn, Pen, when did you become so cutthroat?” I tease.

“I love you. I’ll call you later.” She practically shoves me out the front door.

“I don’t feel loved!” I call after her as the door closes between us, watching her blow me a kiss through the glass. “Keep your kisses,” I grumble to myself as I step toward the curb, unknowingly cutting off the path of someone else.

I realize it a second too late, unable to avoid the collision.

“Shit, I’m sorry.” I’m quick to apologize, the rest of what I was about to say dying on my lips when I look down and realize *who* I’ve just run into...

Again. “Well. Well...” I smile. “This seems to be becoming a bit of a habit of yours.”

Her big blue eyes find mine in an instant, and like the other day, she doesn’t miss a beat.

“Perhaps it’s becoming a habit of yours, considering *you* just ran into me.” She squares her shoulders like maybe she’s mad about this fact, but there isn’t a hint of anger in her voice.

“Fair.” I grin. “Let me make it up to you.”

“And how do you intend to do that? As you can see, I already have lunch.” She draws my attention to the plastic bag clutched in her hand.

Today, she’s wearing a pencil skirt and a soft pink top that’s barely visible beneath the oversized winter coat that practically swallows her petite frame. Her hair is pulled up the same as the other day, not a single strand out of place. And her nose and cheeks are slightly red from the cold.

“Dinner then?”

“I’m busy.” She’s quick to answer.

“But I didn’t say when,” I object.

“I’m busy then, too.” When she smiles this time, it damn near drops me to the fucking ground. Damn it, if she isn’t even more beautiful today.

“Careful. I’m starting to get the impression you *don’t* want to go out with me.”

“Then you’re more perceptive than I thought.” She pats my chest as she steps past me, grinning from ear to ear. “Have a good afternoon, *Remi*.”

I’ve barely processed how fucking good my name sounds coming off her lips when she quickly disappears inside.

It takes a hell of a lot of willpower not to spin on my heel and follow after her, but not wanting to seem more desperate than I probably already do, I refrain. Pen said she would talk to her, and if there’s anyone I trust to make a good impression for me, it’s Aspen.

Besides, unless I’m completely delusional, I get the impression that Kaia is finding as much enjoyment out of this little game we seem to be playing as I am.

And if there’s one thing I know for certain, it’s that eventually, every game has to have a winner, and I, ladies and gentlemen, am already planning my victory lap.



“Please tell me you didn’t actually involve my wife in some scheme to try and sleep with one of her coworkers” are the first words out of my brother’s mouth when I press the phone to my ear.

“Of course I didn’t. Who would tell you such a thing?” I gasp dramatically.

“Remi.”

“Okay, fine. I may have asked her to put in a good word for me, but that’s all, I swear.”

“You do realize that just because Aspen is incapable of telling you no, doesn’t mean you need to capitalize on it every chance you get.”

“One, she’s told me no plenty of times over the years. And two, I would never take advantage of her, and screw you for insinuating that I would.” I huff. “Now, tell me, did they go out after work?” My tone changes in an instant.

“I had to work late, so she didn’t ask her today.”

“So when?”

“I called you to tell you to stop including my wife in your harebrained schemes, not to gab like we’re fourteen-year-old girls,” he scolds. “She has a lot on her plate right now, and the last thing she needs is to be doing stupid favors for you. She’s already away from the kids more than she wants to be, and now she has to give up an evening with them to do something she doesn’t even want to do.”

“Well, when you put it like that...” Guilt is an ugly bitch, especially when she walks in half-cocked and smacks you right across the face. “I’ll tell her I changed my mind.”

“No, you won’t because then she’ll know I intervened. She’s going to do this for you because you asked her to. I’m asking you to make sure it’s the last time you ask. If you truly need her, Rem, you know she’ll be there, as will I. But this... this kind of shit you can handle on your own.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” I blow out a puff of air. “We still on for dinner this Saturday?” I ask in lieu of continuing this conversation.

“It’s your birthday, Rem. We wouldn’t miss it. You only turn thirty once.”

“Fuck, how am I already so old?” Honestly, it’s hard to wrap my head around. Thirty. Something about that number doesn’t sit well with me.

I guess maybe because I thought that by thirty, I would have settled down, maybe even started a family, and here I am, living like I’m still a twenty-one-year-old bachelor. Don’t get me wrong, I thoroughly enjoyed my twenties, but I’m ready for something different. I’m ready for something more...

“Whatever you do, don’t say that in front of Aspen on Saturday. You know she’s turning thirty in a couple months as well. Call her old and she might stick a fork in the back of your hand.”

“She has grown quite violent as of late.” I chuckle.

“Hormones,” we both say in unison.

“It’s not all bad, though...” Something about the tone of his voice tells me I don’t want to know what he’s about to say next.

“No offense, bro, but I don’t think I wanna know,” I’m quick to cut in. His laughter fills the line seconds later.

“All right, I’m pulling into my driveway now, so I’m hanging up.”

“Kiss my babies for me.”

“I’ll kiss *my* babies for you,” he corrects. “See you Saturday.”

“Yeah, see ya.”

I drop my phone onto the nightstand next to me as soon as the line goes dead. Before you ask, yes, I’m lying in bed at seven o’clock in the evening. I wasn’t joking when I said I was lonely and, well, bored.

There’s fuck all to do around here. I mean, sure, I could go out for drinks with some of my guy friends who still live in the city, but I don’t really feel up to their shenanigans as of late. Remember what I said about living like I’m still twenty-one? Yeah, well, these guys *act* like they still are.

I could call Lindsay, Sarah, or hell, even Chelsea, but not even more normal hookups sound all that inviting. You can only stick your cock in someone you barely like so many times before even that becomes a bore.

So I do what any self-respecting, almost thirty-year-old man would do in my situation. I decide to internet stalk the woman I can’t seem to stop thinking about. And by self-respecting, I actually mean pathetic as hell. But internet stalking is not without its uses. It allows you a window into someone else’s life without ever having to talk to them. Though it’s hard to know if

what you're seeing is the real person or the person they've curated specifically for social media.

Kaia, however, turns out to be none of those things. Mainly because, after a rather extensive search, I can't seem to find a single fucking thing on her. No social media accounts. Nothing.

It tells me two things.

One, she's clearly a private person or, at the very least, doesn't care to post pictures of herself all over the internet, which doesn't surprise me having met her. And two, if I want to unravel the mystery that is Kaia Sharp, I'm going to have to do it the old-fashioned way, with a fuck load of charm.

I guess it's a good thing I like a challenge. Because something tells me this woman isn't going to make it easy on me. Truthfully, I'd be disappointed if she did.

Chapter Three

Kaia



“Hey.” I look up to see Aspen leaning against the doorframe of my office, a file folder tucked against her chest.

“Hi.” I shift in my chair. “Did you need something?” I ask, gesturing to the folder, assuming it’s a case file.

“Oh no, this is nothing.” She moves farther into the room, taking a seat in one of the chairs across the desk from me. “I wanted to see if you were busy this evening.”

“I... Um... Why?” I don’t try to hide that her question confuses me.

“Well, you’re new here, and truth be told, I don’t have a lot of friends outside of Remi...” The mention of his name causes my heart to kick against my ribcage as if reminding me the bitch is still in there beating, even though sometimes it doesn’t feel like it anymore. “I was hoping maybe we could go out after work, have a drink. Well, I mean, I can’t drink, but you can,” she rambles. “It’s totally fine if you don’t want to. I know it’s super last-minute.”

While my first instinct is to immediately say no, I know I can’t keep hiding away from life. Eventually, I’m going to have to just bite the bullet and get back out there to start living it again. Besides, we work together, and it certainly doesn’t hurt to have people you can lean on, especially in a job like this. It also doesn’t hurt that she *is* best friends with a certain someone that I can’t deny I’m rather curious about.

“Actually, I’d like that,” I cut in before she can keep going.

“Really?” She seems surprised.

“Like you said, I’m new here, and honestly, if I don’t find some friends soon, I’m worried my aunt is going to start dragging me to bingo night just to get me out of the house.” Not a completely false statement either.

At this, she smiles.

“Okay, great. So after work, say six?”

“Six works.”

“I’ll meet you in the lobby? There’s this great little pub down the street. It’s family-owned, and they have the absolute best drink menu.”

“Sounds great.”

“Awesome.” She hesitates before pushing to a stand. “So I guess I’ll see you then.”

“Yep.” I nod, strangely nervous and yet also kind of excited.

I can’t remember the last time I went out for drinks.

“Awesome,” she repeats a second time before exiting my office.



“So how do you like D.C. so far? You said you moved here...” Aspen leaves the question open, waiting for me to fill in the gap.

“Almost three months ago.” I lift the straw to my lips, taking a small sip of the fruity cocktail that I can’t remember the name of.

When the bartender asked me what I wanted, I told him to pick for me. I’m not a big drinker, outside of the occasional glass of wine, but I know I like fruity things, so I figured that would be a safe bet, and I was right. It really is delicious, though based on how much alcohol I can taste, I will most definitely only be having the one.

“And you said you live with your aunt?”

“Yes, Yiya.”

“Yiya?” She arches a brow, taking a drink of her water.

I felt weird ordering a cocktail when she can’t drink but did it anyway because I was hoping it would help me relax. So far, it seems to be somewhat working. I certainly don’t feel nearly as anxious as I did walking into this place a few minutes ago.

“Myra.” I smile. “I couldn’t properly pronounce her name when I was little. I would try to say Myra and I guess it always came out as Yiya and it just kinda stuck.”

“I know how that goes. My son can’t say ketchup to save his life. To him, it’s chebutt. So now, everyone in my house calls ketchup chebutt.” Her entire face lights up as she speaks of her son.

“He’s two, right?”

“Yes. And Gracie is three months old.”

“You’ve got your hands full,” I needlessly point out.

“That’s an understatement.” She snorts. “But I love every second of it. I never thought I wanted to be a mom, but now... Now I can’t imagine my life without them.”

“And your husband, is he a good dad?”

“The best. And I do mean the absolute best. You always hear women complain that everything gets put on them. Getting up in the middle of the night. Diaper changes. All the fun stuff, you know. But Sutton, he’s the first to do it all. When we first brought Rand home, I practically had to force him to hand him over so I could feed him. He was just so in love from the instant they put him in his arms. And with Gracie... My goodness, that girl already has him so wrapped around her little finger... He’s not going to stand a chance when she gets older. And don’t even get me started on Remi.”

The mention of his name has my heart instantly thundering against my ribs, which seems to be the theme of the day.

“What about him?” I try not to sound too eager, though if I’m honest, a big part of the reason I accepted her invitation was for this very reason, to learn more about Remi.

“He’s as bad as Sutton when it comes to the kids, maybe even worse. Who knew that two tiny little humans could have such power over grown men. And Sutton’s parents.” She blows out a breath.

“It must be amazing to know that your children are surrounded by so much love.”

“More than I could ever articulate with words. Growing up, I didn’t have that for myself. I think part of the reason I never wanted kids was because I was terrified of them having even a semblance of the childhood I had. But I know now that will never be the case.” Unshed tears well behind her eyes. “Sorry, my hormones are still all over the place.” She swipes at her cheeks, though no actual tears have fallen.

Even though I want to pry because I’m a curious person by nature, I can see it’s not a topic one might discuss with someone they barely know.

“Don’t apologize,” I say instead. “I feel like I cry at the drop of a hat,” I admit. “Though, mine aren’t happy tears.”

Why I felt the need to clarify that, I don’t know.

“I’m sorry. I can’t imagine what you must be going through. I mean, I didn’t know my own mother, but my mother-in-law has always been like a mom to me, and I can’t imagine if something ever happened to her.”

“I didn’t think it would be this hard, you know? I’m a grown woman, not a child. I should have better control of my emotions. And while I know it’s normal to be sad, it’s been months and I still feel the pain like it was yesterday.”

I have no idea why I’m telling her any of this. Maybe because it feels good just to admit it out loud to someone who didn’t know my mom or the life I had before she got sick.

“I want to say it gets easier.” Aspen’s voice is soft. “I mean, I don’t have any direct experience with that kind of loss, but I have been through some things in my life that I wasn’t sure at the time I had the strength to survive. I think that little by little, you’ll find your way again. If nothing else, because it’s what your mom would want for you. Given how you talk about her, I can’t imagine she’d want anything less.”

I take a long drink of my cocktail to keep myself from speaking. Mainly because I’m terrified if I open my mouth, if I let myself say the words that hang on my tongue like cement, I’ll dissolve into a puddle of tears, and that’s the last thing I want to do in front of a practical stranger.

But it also doesn’t change the truth behind her words. My mom wouldn’t want this for me. She wouldn’t want me living in my grief the way I have been these past few months. It would likely break her heart to see me this way. No, not likely; it *would* break her heart.

It’s strange because I’ve known this all along, but hearing Aspen say it somehow makes it more real.

“Sorry, I took that to a dark place.” I let out a humorless laugh, taking another drink. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay.” Aspen nods, understanding in her eyes. “Do you like D.C.?” She repeats part of her earlier question that I realize I never actually answered.

“It’s cold.” I snort, some of the tension in my shoulders starting to ease.

“That it is.” She smiles. “Have you ventured downtown yet?”

“I have not. Though I’ve been meaning to for a while.”

Not untrue. I’ve just never quite gotten the motivation to do it.

“It’s nice. A lot of traffic, but other than that, I really love it there. Sometimes I miss living there. There was always so much to do.”

“You lived there?”

“With Remi. Well, not exactly with Remi. Actually, that’s not true either.” She smiles to herself.

“Okay, I think I’m going to need an explanation on that.” I laugh, thankful for the distraction she just dropped right into my lap.

“So, a little backstory. Remi and I have been best friends since we were thirteen years old. We were inseparable through high school and college, and even shared an apartment for a couple of years after we graduated. Eventually, I did get my own place, but because it was right around the corner from Remi’s, in a lot of ways, it still felt like we lived together.”

“So you two have never...” I give her a look she should understand.

“No.” She shakes her head. “Remi is one of the absolute best people on this planet, but my heart... It belongs to someone else.”

“His brother.” It doesn’t take a genius to figure out who she’s talking about. “So were you two always a thing or was that something that developed later in life?”

“Now that’s a story for another time.” She laughs.

“Okay, now I’m really curious,” I admit, finishing off the last of my drink. Warmth kisses my skin as the effects of the alcohol seem to fully take hold.

“Let’s just say the road we took to get where we are today was definitely not a smooth, straight path. I basically fell head over heels for him the first time I met him, and he spent the next three years barely acknowledging my existence. Then, one night, at a high school party, he did more than just notice me. But if I thought I was going to get my happily ever after that night, I couldn’t have been more wrong.”

“Let me guess, the next day he acted like it never even happened?”

“How did you know?”

“I had a similar experience with one Zeke Maverick. Super popular guy at my school, never glanced my way until one night, at a beach bonfire, he did. And I was the stupid girl who believed him when he said he’d been crushing on me for months but was too afraid to ask me out. My inexperience with both boys and alcohol did not help matters, and the next day, after he took my virginity, when I passed him in the halls, he acted like he didn’t even know me.”

“Guys are assholes.”

“That they are,” I agree with a smile. “But at least you eventually ended up with your happy ending.”

“I did.” She pulls her lower lip through her teeth. “I mean, it’s hard for me to even think about *that* Sutton. He’s about as close to perfect as someone can get now. It’s hard to remember how, once upon a time, he broke my heart into a million tiny pieces.”

“How did that happen anyway? You and Sutton ending up together.”

“Long story short, I went home with Remi for his parents’ vow renewal a few years ago. Sutton had too much to drink at the reception and ended up kissing me. And well, things sort of escalated from there.”

“So how did Remi feel about you seeing his brother?”

“He actually didn’t know. At least, not for a while. He wasn’t happy when he found out. I think he was more hurt that I lied to him than anything else. We never keep things from each other, and there I was, keeping the motherload of secrets from him. He and Sutton weren’t close back then, but he still felt betrayed by him too. Eventually, we all found common ground, and now, well, now we’re like one big happy, albeit a little unconventional, family.”

“He seems to really care about you. I mean, if him showing up at the office every day didn’t already give that away.” I push my empty glass to the edge of the bar before signaling the bartender for a water.

“He’s overprotective and worries about me, it’s true. But I don’t think he’s coming there just for me.” She gives me a look that instantly knocks me off guard. “Between us girls, I think he has a little crush on you.”

A high-pitched laugh bubbles from my throat, the kind of sound you can’t help but make when someone tells you something so preposterous that laughing is the only warranted reaction.

“I’m sorry, did they put something in that water?” I make a show of leaning forward to look inside her glass.

“I’m serious.”

“Somehow, I highly doubt that *he* has a crush on *me*. I mean, do men like him even have crushes? He seems more like a *bend you over the sink and leave you with your panties still around your ankles* kind of guy.”

To this, she laughs. And I mean, truly laughs. Her head drops back as the action shakes her entire body.

“I take it I hit the nail on the head.” I can’t stop the spread of my own smile, not with her infectious laughter dancing around me.

“You pretty much summed up the first fifteen years of his dating life,” she admits, humor still lacing her words. “But Remi’s changed a lot over the

last few years. I will say this. I never thought I'd see the day when a woman made him nervous." She gives me a pointed look.

"Me?" I croak, not sure how the hell I could make anyone nervous, least of all someone like him, a man who oozes confidence from his very pores.

Aspen nods slowly.

"Please don't tell him I told you any of this. But since it's just us girls, I don't see the harm in passing along the information. I know you said you're not interested in dating right now, but Remi is a pretty incredible person to have in your life, even if it's just as a friend."

"No offense, but I can't wrap my head around how any woman could be friends with a man like that and not end up tangled in his sheets at some point."

"He's infuriatingly charming, I'll give you that. But unlike a lot of guys who look like Remi, he's a good one. You have my word on that."

"He might be, to you. You've been his friend for over half of his life. But to the rest of us... Are you sure he's a good guy? Because from where I'm sitting, the only thing I see when I look at him is trouble."

She seems to consider my words.

"I guess I can see that. I've been known to be a bit biased where the Barnett brothers are concerned. Will you do me a favor, though? Will you at least get to know him a little before you judge him too harshly?"

"I'm not sure that's the best idea. I don't have the emotional capacity to deal with men right now. Especially not one that looks like him."

"He is pretty handsome," she agrees.

"That's putting it mildly." I snort, taking a long drink.

"I have an idea. Why don't you come out with us on Saturday? We're going downtown for dinner and drinks. You could finally get to see some of the city, and it would be a way for us to get to know each other better and get you out of the house. You did say something about your aunt and bingo earlier." She reminds me with a smile.

"I did say that, didn't I?"

I think over her invitation, honestly hesitant to agree to anything at this point.

While I'm excited about the prospect of building some new friendships, I'm not sure Remi should be one of them. I mean, yes, he's ridiculously attractive, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't overwhelmingly curious. But at

the same time, I meant what I said about not having the emotional capacity right now.

“Tell you what. Give me your number and I’ll text you the details. If you decide to come, great. If not, that’s okay too. Absolutely no pressure. I’m the designated driver for the evening, obviously...” She gestures to her chest. “So if you choose to come, you can ride with me and Sutton if you want.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I hope you come. I’m almost always the only girl anytime we do anything, and it would be nice to have another female in the mix.”

“Where are you going again?” I ask, deciding maybe having all the details wouldn’t be such a bad thing... just in case.

It’s not like she’s trying to set me up. She just wants me to come out with her and maybe get to know Remi a little better in the process. Is that such a bad thing?

I’m not sure why I feel like I have to make excuses to myself why it’s okay for me to go. It should *just* be okay. I should be able to accept an invitation to go out and not feel guilty. But even though I broke things off with Blake long ago, I still feel a twinge in my stomach at the thought of potentially getting involved with another man in any capacity. I haven’t so much as flirted with a man since we ended things, and while I know we’re over, it weirdly still feels like a betrayal. Guess that’s what happens when you’re an extremely loyal person. Just because we’re not together, it doesn’t erase the five years that we were.

“It’s a really popular spot downtown called Happy’s. Very laid-back. Good music. Great food. Even better drinks.”

“So it’s like a bar and grill?”

“Kind of. There’s a bar and grill-type restaurant in the front of the building, and then in the back, they have a huge billiards room with arcade games, and they host live bands on Friday and Saturday nights. Trust me, if you want to experience D.C. nightlife, Happy’s is the place to start.”

“I thought for sure my first trip downtown would be to see museums or monuments, but I do love a good arcade.”

I went from being positive the answer was no to basically saying yes in less than a minute. I blame the small buzz of alcohol in my veins, but deep down I think I know I’m just ready. I’m ready to get back out there. To make friends and start living my life again.

People die. Relationships end. Things change. And yet, the world keeps on turning just the same.

“So you’ll come?” She’s smiling at me now; the kind of smile I don’t think I could say no to if I tried.

“Send me the details.”

“Yes!” she squeals, grabbing her cell phone out of her purse that’s sitting on the bar.

After giving her my number, she types out a quick message and hits send. I feel my own phone vibrate from inside my bag but don’t bother taking it out, figuring I’ll just look at it later.

“I sent you my address as well as the address where we will be going in case you decide you want to drive yourself. Where does your aunt live?”

“She lives over on Anderson.”

“What part?”

“Um, just past the market on 48.”

“Seriously? I live two streets over from there, on Dover. We’re practically neighbors. You could walk to my house if you wanted.”

“I’d probably get lost. I basically only know how to get to the office, the gas station, and the grocery store, and even then, I’ve gotten turned around a few times. Thank goodness for GPS.”

“You should have seen me when we first moved here. I could navigate the city no problem, but plopping me down in the suburbs and it took me forever to learn my way around town.” She glances down at the phone still in her hand. “Crap, is that the time?”

“Do you need to leave?”

“Yeah. Sutton came home early to be with the kids, but I still want to be home in time to have dinner with them.”

“Of course. I totally understand.” I slide off my stool just seconds after she does.

“I had a lot of fun. Thank you for agreeing to come with me. I don’t get to do things like this, well, ever.” She chuckles, adjusting her bag on her shoulder.

“Me neither... Obviously.”

“I’m off work tomorrow, but hopefully, I will see you Saturday, and if not, maybe we can do this again very soon.”

“I’d like that.”

“You want me to walk out with you?” She hesitates when I still haven’t moved.

“Actually, I’m gonna run to the bathroom first. You go ahead.”

“Okay, I’ll see ya later.”

“Yeah, see ya.”

I watch her exit the restaurant a few moments later, but instead of going to the bathroom like I said I would, I reclaim my seat. My aunt already said she would be late getting home tonight, claiming she had something with the ladies, though I’m starting to wonder if *ladies* is code for something else given our conversation the other day. And since sitting at home doesn’t hold much appeal, I decide to order another drink. Because honestly, what the hell else better do I have to do?

Chapter Four

Remi



“Happy birthday!” Aspen throws her arms around my neck, hugging me so tight she damn near cuts off the circulation of air through my windpipe.

“Thanks, Pen.” I wait until she releases me. “Though, I can’t say I feel all that happy about saying goodbye to my twenties.”

“Don’t you dare start saying how thirty is old. Remember, I’m not too far off from that number myself, and I can’t be held liable for what will happen to you if you call me old.” She gives me a warning glare.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” I grin, taking a moment to actually look at her.

Aspen has always been beautiful, but having kids has made her even more so. Maybe because now her beauty isn’t marred by her pain but elevated by her happiness. And my God, does she seem happy. So much so that I’m almost convinced she’s going to start shooting rainbows out of her ass.

“You like?” she asks, gesturing to her silver dress that hits her just above the knee.

“You look amazing, as always.” I take her hand, kissing the back of it as I bow. Purposely being overly dramatic with the action. It’s kind of our thing.

“Hands off my woman, brother.” Sutton slides in next to his wife, looking equally dapper in his black suit and silver tie, his dark hair pushed back away from his freshly shaven face.

Together, they do look like fucking royalty. And while I couldn’t be happier for what they have found with each other, a part of me can’t help but feel a little envious. Not of them together, but of the relationship they share. If there were a picture for the perfect couple, these two would be the shining stars.

“Relax. I couldn’t steal her from you if I tried.” My smile widens. “And I did try.” I wink at Aspen.

I couldn’t have made a joke like that five years ago, but today, all the shit the three of us went through, fuck, you gotta find humor in it. I look back at that time in my life with so much regret, yet, I wouldn’t change it even if I could. Because seeing Aspen this happy, it was worth it.

“Ha. Ha,” Sutton deadpans, not finding my joke quite as funny as I do.

“Oh, relax, brother. You know I’m just busting your balls.” I clasp his shoulder, giving him a rough shake. “Now tell me, what did you get me for my birthday?” I give him a cheeky grin.

“Not me, her.” He glances toward Aspen, who avoids my gaze when I look at her.

“Pen?” I try to meet her eyes, but she looks to one side and then the other before looking straight up at the ceiling, like she knows I’ll be able to read her perfectly but doesn’t want to give anything away.

“Hey, sorry.” My gaze slices to the left when I hear a voice I’m pretty sure I’d recognize anywhere, even though I’ve only heard it a couple of times. “There was a line for the bathroom,” Kaia speaks directly to Aspen, giving me a brief opportunity to take her in.

She’s wearing a red, strapless dress that sits mid-thigh and clings to her body like a second fucking skin, showing off every dip and curve. I have to resist the urge to bite down on my knuckles to keep the groan of appreciation that builds in my throat from spilling past my lips.

She has her hair down today, flowing to the middle of her back in soft curls. Curls I suddenly feel desperate to tangle my fingers in.

Her makeup is soft and natural, but her lips, lips I’m envisioning wrapped around my cock, yeah, those things are painted the same shade as her dress—devil red. I’ve never been more prepared to walk into the fires of hell than I am at this very moment.

Fuck me...

I don’t know what the hell is wrong with me. Beautiful women are no stranger to me, and yet, something about this particular woman has me prepared to drop to my knees and beg for any scraps she might be willing to give.

I can’t explain it, but ever since she ran into me that day, I’ve done little else outside of fantasizing about sinking balls deep inside of her. I can’t say I’ve ever felt such an immediate and intense attraction to another person.

“Remi, you remember Kaia, right?” Aspen is the first to speak, and thank fuck for it because I’m fairly certain I was about to say something completely inappropriate. You know, typical Remi shit.

“I do.” I nod. “It’s nice to see you again, Kaia.” The corner of my mouth quirks in a smile.

“I hope it’s okay that I invited her,” Pen quickly adds, a knowing glimmer in her eyes.

“Of course. The more the merrier. Glad you could make it, Kaia.” I force myself to act natural, as if she were any other person.

“I appreciate the invite.” She glances at Aspen and then back at me. “Happy birthday, by the way.”

“Thank you.” I have to resist the urge to say that this birthday just got a hell of a lot better and instead turn back to my brother and his wife. “Should we get a table and grab a bite to eat before everyone gets here?”

“Before everyone gets here?” Kaia asks, looking once again at Aspen first and then at me.

“We usually have dinner, just us, and then the party starts after.” Pen is quick to explain.

“Oh, okay. So then, it’s just the four of us?” When she looks at Aspen this time, there’s no mistaking the accusatory glare she gives her.

It would appear as though Aspen left out a few key details when she invited her.

“Is that a problem?” I ask, finding humor in her reaction.

“Nope, no problem at all.” She squares her shoulders, forcing an easy smile to her lips. “Aspen said the food here is amazing. I’m excited to try it.”

“I’m afraid she might have sold you a little too hard on that one,” Sutton interjects, earning him a smack to the stomach from his wife.

“Don’t listen to him, Kaia.” Aspen crinkles her nose at my brother. “You’ll find my husband does not have a very good palate.”

“And by not a good palate, you mean I don’t like to eat things that are triple battered and then deep fried to the point that my tongue feels greasy after eating them.” He snorts out a laugh.

“Exactly.” She nods matter-of-factly. “Shall we?” Her gaze slides to me.

“After you.” I hold out my arm, gesturing for them to go ahead of me. And no, I don’t do that so I can get a look at the back of Kaia’s dress, or rather, what the back of her dress accentuates.

Oh, who the fuck am I kidding? That's exactly why I do it, and I'm not even a little sorry for it either. If anything, I'm disappointed once we're seated because I was rather enjoying the spectacular view.

Sliding into the circular booth, I could almost kiss Aspen for making Sutton take the end, which puts her and Kaia in the middle and me next to Kaia on the other end.

Have I mentioned lately how amazing my best friend is?

"Does anyone have any suggestions?" Kaia asks no one in particular, holding the menu the hostess placed on the table up in front of herself.

"The burgers are fantastic." Aspen is the first to answer. "But Remi will tell you to order the spicy mac and cheese, but unless you want to have heartburn for the next year, do not listen to him."

"She's overexaggerating," I tell her with a dramatic eye roll.

"Oh no, I'm not. He talked me into trying it the last time we were here. Insisted that it wasn't that spicy and that I would love it. Yeah, no. It was fine going down but not so fun a couple of hours later when it felt like my esophagus was on fire."

"To be fair, you were pregnant at the time," I remind her.

"Just no." Aspen shakes her head, her strawberry-blond hair brushing her shoulders as she does.

"Don't worry," Sutton interjects, speaking directly to Kaia. "You'll get used to them." He gestures between the two of us.

"Will I?" She bites down on her bottom lip, looking equal parts amused and terrified.

"Probably not." My brother chuckles, earning him another smack from Aspen. "You are more violent tonight than usual." He leans in close to Aspen's ear. "Perhaps you should save your aggression for later."

"You realize we can hear you, right?" I scrub my hands down my face. "Talk about not getting used to something," I tell Kaia, hitching my thumb toward Aspen and Sutton. "Trust me, a few hours with these two and you'll wanna puke."

"Hey!" Aspen gives me an angry grimace, but it does nothing to hide the humor in her eyes.

"I mean, I love you guys so much." I make a heart with my hands.

"What are you, a fourteen-year-old girl?" Sutton barks out a laugh.

"Takes one to know one," I fire back immaturity.

"And now we're in kindergarten," Aspen chimes in.

“So, Kaia, how do you like working at Linder Hope?” Sutton asks, completely redirecting the conversation.

“I like it. It’s different from the last counseling office I worked for, but that’s not a bad thing. And everyone has been really welcoming.”

“Kaia moved here from California,” Aspen announces, though I’m pretty sure everyone already knows as much.

“Where in California?” my brother asks.

“Huntington Beach.”

“You must miss the beach. I’ve been there a couple of times and it’s beautiful. There’s just something about West Coast beaches.”

“It’s beautiful, that’s true. But truth be told, I’m not much of a water person. I mean, I loved walking on the beach sometimes, but that was about the extent of it for me. It was my mom who loved the ocean.”

I know from what little Aspen has told me about Kaia that she recently lost her mother. But if I didn’t already know this, I would know it now, seeing the emotion that the mere mention of her mom brings to the surface.

I can’t even imagine. Truthfully, I can’t. My mom is a fucking gem, and a world without her would be a dark fucking place to be in.

“Now the people... That I don’t miss.” She quickly continues. “There’s just way too many of them everywhere.”

“Well, I’m not sure you came to the right place if your goal was to escape people.” I feel the need to point out.

“But I don’t live in the city,” she reminds me.

“I didn’t mind living in the city,” Aspen cuts in. “But I love living in the suburbs so much more. It’s just so peaceful.”

“Hey, guys.” All of our heads turn in unison toward the waitress who stops at the end of the table, recognition flaring in my gut as I take in her dark hair and equally dark eyes.

Well, fuck...

“Remi.” She gives me that look. You know the one. The one that says, *you never called, you piece of shit*. To be fair, she’s not wrong. Though, in my defense, I never said I would.

“Cheyenne.” I tip my chin in hello. “I didn’t know you were working here now.”

“Maybe you would if you ever called.”

And there it is.

“Can we order drinks?” Aspen interjects, a half-assed attempt to rescue me.

“Sure.” Cheyenne pulls out a pad of paper and a pen, clicking the end of it several times in quick succession.

“Water for me,” Aspen says sweetly with a smile.

“I’ll take a scotch on the rocks.” Sutton relaxes back into the booth.

“Chardonnay, please.” Kaia is the next to order.

“Let me guess.” Cheyenne doesn’t give me a chance to speak. “You want a dark draft and a shot of something sweet. That’s what you like, isn’t it? Dark and sweet...”

Definitely not talking about drinks anymore...

“Well, it’s my birthday,” I say, hoping maybe she’ll find it in her heart not to blow up my entire night because she clearly can’t handle a casual fuck. Hell, it’s been at least two months. I must be better than I thought if she’s still this pissed. “So I think I’m going to celebrate with a Happy Time.”

I’ve always wanted to order one of those, having seen it on the menu every time I come. It’s some kind of mixed drink that comes in a huge fishbowl with tons of fruit and shit. Not a manly drink in the least, but it looks fucking killer and I’m of the *fuck it* mindset at the moment.

“Of course you are,” she grumbles, scribbling the order onto the pad of paper in her hands. “Any appetizers?” she asks the table.

“Not yet.” It’s Aspen who answers.

Without another word, Cheyenne spins around and all but stomps away.

“Clearly, you made an impression on that girl. And from the looks of it, not a very good one,” Kaia says, her cheeks heating when she realizes she said the words out loud.

“She doesn’t like me very much, obviously,” I agree.

“Should we even ask why?” Sutton chimes in. “Or am I to assume I already know.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong if that’s what you’re implying.”

“You never do.”

I swear I could throat punch my fucking brother right now.

“It’s not my fault that she has feelings for me that I don’t reciprocate. Because that’s never happened to you.” I take a shot right back at him.

“Can we not.” Pen looks between me and Sutton.

“Sorry, babe.” Sutton kisses the side of her head, causing her to melt into his side.

“So, Kaia, do you have any asshole siblings that like to bust your balls?” I ask, stretching out my legs underneath the table.

“I wish. I’m an only child. My dad died when I was little, and my mom never remarried, so... it’s just me.”

“Sometimes I wish I were so lucky,” I grumble, turning my head to give Sutton a cheeky grin. “Just kidding.”

“Is it just the two of you or do you have other siblings?”

“Just us.”

“And you’re how old?” She looks between the two of us.

“That old fart over there is thirty-two.” I hitch my thumb toward Sutton. “And today is actually my thirtieth birthday, so yeah.”

“Thirty. That’s a big one.”

“Ugh, don’t say that,” Aspen groans.

“She’s right behind me,” I tell Kaia. “What about you?”

“I’ll be twenty-eight in April.”

“Aries or Taurus?”

“Aries.”

“The fire sign.”

“That’s right.”

“Aspen used to be obsessed with zodiac signs.” I feel the need to explain.

“And here we are.” Cheyenne reappears carrying a tray of drinks. She passes out the glasses, resting the tray on the edge of the table to get mine as she needs two hands to pick the damn thing up. “And one Happy Time.” She reaches across the table to set it in front of me, purposely sloshing some of the liquid into my lap as she does. Or at least, it feels intentional.

“Are you ready to order?” She doesn’t acknowledge the action and neither do I. I simply grab a napkin and do my best to dry the crotch of my pants that now feel kind of like I pissed myself.

“Can you give us a few more minutes?” Aspen asks, drawing Cheyenne’s glare away from me.

Unfortunately, if I was hoping that this was my shot to make a good impression with Kaia, I think it’s safe to say that ship has sailed. So far all I’ve accomplished is letting her see me bicker with my brother like a fucking child and have a less-than-desirable interaction with our waitress, who I just happened to have slept with not that long ago. Which she has made painfully obvious to *everyone*.

“Sure.”

I blow out a slow sigh once she's gone.
Happy fucking birthday to me...

Chapter Five

Kaia



“Well, fuck.” Remi drops his pool cue onto the table with an audible groan after not one but four of his buddies who joined us shortly after we finished dinner beat him.

He’s lost his tie and his button-down is now half open, revealing the fitted white tee underneath. Even intoxicated, he’s still the most attractive man I’ve ever seen. Which, in my experience, isn’t always the case. Alcohol does something to people.

“I think maybe no more pool for you,” Aspen tells Remi from her spot next to me.

“What? No way! I’m just getting warmed up,” he tells her, cracking his knuckles as his gaze slides to me. “What do you say, Kaia? Wanna play?”

“Because you haven’t been beaten enough tonight?” I cross my arms in front of myself.

“She’s got you there, Rem.” One of the guys who just beat him chuckles, clapping him on the shoulder.

“You guys wound me.” He flattens his palm against his chest as his gaze once again slides to me, making me feel weirdly off-kilter. “Come on, one game. It is my birthday, after all.” He pouts out his lower lip in a way that makes it impossible to contain my smile of amusement.

“I think I’m just gonna hang here with Aspen,” I tell him, mainly because I’ve had a bit much to drink myself and think my safest bet is to stay put.

It’s been a very long time since I’ve been this intoxicated. And while no, I’m not stumbling drunk by any means, I still don’t fully trust what might come out of my mouth if I’m forced to interact with him directly.

“No, go. I’m good here,” Aspen tells me, leaning further against her husband, who’s standing behind her backless stool, his arms draped around

her shoulders.

Remember when I said how good-looking Sutton was in the picture on Aspen's desk? Yeah, well, take that and multiply it by a hundred because he's even better looking in person, which I didn't know was possible. And while he and Remi have some familiar characteristics, they also look completely different at the same time.

Sutton has dark hair and blue eyes and is clean-shaven and very well put together. Remi has dirty-blond hair and green eyes and has that just-rolled-out-of-bed look, even in a suit. Their build is similar, both equally tall and muscular. I think it's safe to say they come from quite the gene pool.

The differences don't stop with their appearances, though. Where Sutton is more serious and reserved, Remi is boisterous and loud, not the least bit concerned if every person in the building can hear him.

"Maybe you should play him, babe," Sutton tells Aspen. "He could use a win."

"Is that your way of saying I'm bad at pool?" She gives him a shocked look over her shoulder.

"Never." He smiles at her like she is the beginning and the end of his whole world and the action is almost painful to watch because I know deep down that it's unlikely I'll ever find someone who looks at me the way Sutton looks at Aspen.

I don't think I've ever met a couple like them before. Like opposite sides of a magnet, they're drawn together in a way I can't say I've ever witnessed. It's hard to be in their presence and not feel envious of what they have.

My mind briefly wanders to Blake, a ping of something unfamiliar hitting me square in the chest. It's hard to see two people so in love and not wonder *what if*. Though, what Blake and I shared was not even a whisper of what Aspen and Sutton clearly do. That much is painfully obvious.

"Aspen's too easy." Remi laughs at the wild look she gives him. "No offense, Pen. You know I love you. I need someone who's going to give me a challenge. Please..." He juts his lip out even further in my direction.

"I never took you for a beggar, Rem," another guy says, dropping down on a stool at the round bar table next to ours.

So many people have been stopping in to wish him a happy birthday since we got here that I haven't managed to remember the name of a single person I've met. Then again, not all of them told me their names to begin with, and I've been too focused on one man in particular to really care enough to ask.

I think it's safe to say this night is not at all what I was prepared for. I should have been tipped off when Aspen sent me a picture of the dress she was wearing so I would have an idea of what to wear myself. Who wears a sequined silver minidress to a casual dinner? Especially to a place like Happy's, which I did research a little. While upscale, it's still very much on the casual side, especially the back bar and billiards area. If I were coming here on my own, I'd have dressed in jeans and a casual top. But not wanting to feel out of place, I played along, picking the only dress I had that seemed even remotely fitting based on what she was wearing, which just so happens to be the dress I wore to my engagement party many moons ago, but we're not going to talk about that right now.

I didn't actually find out it was Remi's birthday until we were walking inside. Which is why I panicked and quickly excused myself to the bathroom because I definitely needed a minute to prepare myself.

"How about Skee-Ball?" I suggest instead when Remi continues to stare at me unblinking.

Not that I'm any better at Skee-Ball than I am at pool, but at least with Skee-Ball, we'll be far enough away from the rest of the group that I won't feel like they're dissecting my every move.

"You're on." He's quick to agree with a wide grin.

I tug at the end of my dress as I stand, feeling no less uncomfortable than I did when I first put it on. Hell, the only reason I bought the damn thing to begin with is because Blake insisted that our wedding colors be red and gold like his favorite football team, the 49ers. I don't love red personally, but it made him happy, and that was enough for me.

Had my mom not gotten sick, I'd probably be married to him right now, which is honestly kind of crazy to think about.

Remi waits until I join him next to the pool table before wrapping his large hand around mine. The contact instantly makes me feel dizzy, or maybe it's the alcohol, but I don't have a lot of time to really think about it before he's tugging me through the packed room toward the back wall that's lined with at least twenty Skee-Ball machines.

All I know is that when he releases my fingers, my hand instantly feels cold without his warmth.

"I'm really glad you came tonight," he tells me, fishing out a few tokens from the front pocket of his pants before dropping them into two side-by-side machines.

“Me too.” I let myself admit because really, I am.

It didn’t start out that great. And by not great, I mean I felt like I was sitting in a fishbowl, everyone looking at me and tapping on the glass every few minutes when I went too still. I guess that’s what happens when you’re the new girl out with a group of people who have known each other their whole lives.

And then, of course, there was the fact that our waitress spent the entire dinner glaring at Remi and making backhanded comments, like we all didn’t know what she was talking about. It’s not like I didn’t know he was *that* type of guy, but having it confirmed in such dramatic fashion, well, it was a bit disheartening, I’ll admit.

Not that I had any ideas about where tonight might go. I didn’t. But it still stung a little to know that he really is just like all the other good-looking a-holes in this world who feel like it’s their right to fuck and discard women as they please.

“Sorry I didn’t get you a birthday present,” I quickly say to fill the space. “To be fair, I didn’t know it was your birthday until we got here.”

“Well, if you want to get me a present, I can think of a few things I want for my birthday that I didn’t get.” When he smiles at me this time, I’m fairly certain I forget how to breathe.

“I’m not...” I shake my head. “One of *those* girls,” I say, feeling almost silly for insinuating he wants to fuck me. Look at him. He can do much better than me; of that, I have no doubt. Hell, our waitress was proof of that.

His smile widens, his shoulders shaking in silent laughter. Leaning in close, I stand so still you’d think I was a fucking statue when his cheek brushes against mine.

His scent hits me next, expensive cologne and something else... Something so intoxicatingly his own that I damn near groan as it fills my senses.

I’ve barely recovered when his voice tickles my ear.

“I’d be disappointed if you were.” His words are barely above a whisper, but it feels like he’s speaking full volume, the sound vibrating through my whole body.

Get a grip, Kaia, I mentally scold myself.

“Then, what is it that you want?” I ask, cursing the slight shake of my voice.

He draws back just enough that he can look at me but still so close that our noses almost touch.

“A date.”

“A date?” I arch a brow in confusion.

“Go on a date with me.”

I gape at him openly, sure I’m hearing him wrong.

“Are you drunk?” I blurt the first thing that comes out.

“A little.” He grins. “But that’s not why I’m asking.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Go on a date with me,” he repeats a second time.

“Why?” I croak, my heart jackhammering inside of my chest so hard that I swear there is no way he doesn’t hear it colliding with my ribs.

“Because I want you to.” His eyes trace every single inch of my face in a way that makes me want to turn away, only I can’t seem to make my head move. It’s like my entire body is in some sort of trance, bewitched by nothing more than his nearness.

“You don’t strike me as the kind of man who dates.” It takes every ounce of strength I have to keep my voice from breaking.

“You strike me as the kind of woman who could change that.” His next words quite literally cause my knees to shake beneath my weight. “What do you say? Will you go on a date with me, Kaia?” The way he says my name, like velvet on his tongue, has more than just my knees trembling.

“I don’t know...” I’m hesitant to agree, and not because I don’t want to—trust me, I do—but because he honestly scares the shit out of me.

I barely know him, and yet, standing here like this, he makes me feel more in one look than Blake made me feel in the entire course of our relationship, and that is more than a little terrifying. Because if I already feel this strongly, how am I going to feel after going on an actual date with the man?

“I get that maybe tonight didn’t shed me in the best light, but if you give me a chance, I think you’ll be surprised by how good of a guy I actually am.”

“Of course *you* would say that.”

“Don’t believe me, then talk to Aspen. Does she strike you as the kind of person who would mislead or lie to you?”

“No, but I can’t say I really know her all that well,” I remind him.

“Go on a date with me.” When he asks this time, he steps so close that his chest presses against mine, his hand sliding around my back as his fingers

splay against my spine.

The buzz of alcohol feels like nothing compared to the intense hum that takes over my entire body.

“Okay.”

I don’t even realize I’ve said the word until his smile triples in size, taking over every available inch of his incredibly handsome face.

My God, is this man a sight to behold.

“I have one more request.” He makes no attempt to drop his hold on me, not that I’m trying to make him either.

“What’s that?” The shake of my voice is so heavy, there’s not a chance in hell he doesn’t hear it.

“I wouldn’t say no to a birthday kiss.” I feel his smile, even though I can no longer see it when he dips slightly and slides his nose against mine.

Despite the fact that we’re in a crowded room surrounded by people, I suddenly feel like we’re the only two in the room.

I know I shouldn’t, that getting involved with a man like Remi is the last thing I need. But at the same time, I think maybe a man like Remi is exactly what I need. Someone fun and sexy, who isn’t looking for love but to have a good time. I *am* still young enough that it’s okay to want something like that, aren’t I? To want to remember what it’s like to just act on how I feel and not overthink every single move I make?

My brain is still considering every possibility when my body makes the decision for me. I don’t even realize I’ve moved until I feel the warmth of his lips pressed to mine. It’s soft, nothing more than a peck, but it doesn’t make the inferno that overtakes my body any less overwhelming.

I feel that kiss everywhere...

And I do mean, *everywhere*.

“How was that?” I ask, pulling back.

“The best birthday present I could have received.”

This makes me smile, despite my best effort not to.

“Good. Now, what do you say we play our game?”

He stares back at me for another long moment, like he’s not sure he wants to let go, and weirdly, I know the feeling. I think I could stare into his incredible green eyes for hours, losing myself in their staggering beauty.

I let out a slow breath when he releases me, equal parts relieved and disappointed.

“Now, just because you gave me an epic birthday present, doesn’t mean I’m going to take it easy on you,” he warns.

“I’d be disappointed if you did,” I repeat his earlier sentiment, leaning down to grab one of the brown balls from the slot.

We fall into easy banter as we roll our balls up the ramp, teasing and gloating in a way that feels like we’ve known each other for far longer than we have.

I win the first round, and Remi insists on a rematch.

He wins the second, so of course, we have to play a third.

“Yes!” I squeal in delight when I sink my last ball into the fifty slot, putting me ten points over Remi in our final match. “That’s what you get!” I laugh, the sound dying on my tongue when I turn to find Remi watching me, an intense look on his face. “What?” I’m quick to ask, suddenly self-conscious of my behavior.

“Has anyone ever told you how incredibly beautiful you are?” he asks, not an ounce of humor in his voice.

“I…”

“There you two are.” We turn our heads in unison to see Aspen and Sutton approaching. “I don’t know how I never noticed how many Skee-Ball machines this place has.” Her gaze darts between the two of us. “So, who won?”

“I did.” I smile, knocking my arm into Remi’s.

“Only because I took it easy on her,” he spouts off.

“Bullshit.” I shake my head with a laugh, throwing him a glaring side-eye.

“Sounds like you two had fun, at least.” When I look back at Aspen, she’s smiling at me in that soft way she does.

“We did,” I admit, realizing just how true that statement is.

Fun... I can’t remember the last time I had actual fun.

The last time I let myself just be.

The last time I smiled until my face hurt or laughed like I wasn’t dying on the inside.

The last time I kissed someone...

“I’m glad.” She’s looking at Remi when she says it. “I don’t mean to be a party pooper, but I think we’re going to head out,” she tells him.

“What? Already?” He visibly pouts, something I’m learning he does often when things don’t go his way, though it’s weirdly endearing, I’ll admit.

“I promised your parents we’d be home by midnight and it’s already after eleven,” she tells him apologetically. “Is that okay with you?” she asks me.

“Yeah, I’m good whenever you guys are.” I’m quick to agree, though leaving is about the last thing I want to do right now. To the point that if Remi asked me to stay, I probably would.

He looks at me for a long moment and then back at Aspen and his brother. “At least let me walk you guys out.”

“You don’t need to do that.” It’s Sutton who speaks. “You have friends still here. Stay, enjoy your night.”

“You’ll text me when you get home safely?”

“We will.” Aspen leans in, giving Remi a long hug. “Happy birthday, Rem.”

“Thank you, Pen, for everything.” They share a long look.

“Always.” She smiles up at him.

“Happy birthday, brother.” Sutton extends his hand to Remi as Aspen steps back.

“Thanks for coming.” They shake hands.

“Don’t get too drunk,” he tells him.

“I’ll see what I can do.” He snorts, turning toward me. “I’ll call you?” He phrases it like a question.

“Not sure how, considering you don’t have my number.”

“Says who?” He takes my hand and kisses the back of my knuckles. “It’s been an absolute fucking pleasure, Ms. Sharp.” His eyes crinkle in the corners as he smiles.

“Okay, maybe we should go before he makes a bigger ass of himself than he probably already has.” Sutton chuckles, dropping his arm around Aspen’s shoulder as they turn.

“Hey, I heard that,” Remi calls after his brother, his gaze drifting back to me after a brief moment.

“Bye, Remi.” I give him a little wave before turning, each step I take away from him feeling heavier than the last, like my body rejects the very idea of leaving him.

The car ride home is quiet, Sutton and Aspen speaking softly in the front seat while I watch the city drift farther and farther away.

I try not to let myself think too much about what happened tonight. About the things he said. About the kiss that, try as I may, I can’t bring myself to

regret. But Remi is the absolute only thing I think about the entire drive home.

Hell, I'm still thinking about him thirty minutes later when I unlock the front door of my aunt's house and push my way inside.

A part of me wishes she were still up so I could tell her everything that happened tonight, but the other part of me is glad she isn't because I know she would see right through me and make me face things I still haven't fully accepted.

Like how I feel completely upside down over a man I hardly know. Or how, for the first time since Mom died, I don't feel cemented to the ground in guilt.

I don't have much time to overthink why that is because I've no more than stepped over the threshold when my phone pings with an incoming text message.

I damn near drop my bag trying to dig it out, not able to think of a single person who would text me this late except for one... And when I have my phone in my hand, seeing an unknown number on the screen, I know one thing to be true above all else.

I am in some serious trouble.



“So Remi tells me you two are going out Friday night.” Aspen appears in my doorway just as I'm closing out of my email, preparing to leave for the day.

I was hoping maybe I could avoid this conversation altogether, considering she only works today this week, but clearly, that didn't pan out for me. Not that I'm embarrassed about my upcoming date or anything. I'm not. It's just... Well, it's weird. Because she's Remi's best friend, I don't know what I can or cannot say to her.

Like I don't think I could tell her that I'm actually kind of terrified to be alone with him. Or that I've thought about backing out every second since I agreed. And not because I don't like him, but because I do.

Truth be told, I've honestly been waiting for him to back out, considering he hasn't texted me again since Saturday night. We left it at agreeing to dinner on Friday and I haven't heard from him since. I was kind of thinking

maybe he was having second thoughts and just didn't know how to tell me. He was drunk when he asked me, and well, I wasn't exactly sober when I agreed.

"It's just dinner." I do my best to downplay it.

If he told Aspen, then I doubt he has plans to back out. You don't go around announcing things you have no intention of doing. At least, not in my experience.

So, then, I guess we are actually doing this. Then again, it's just dinner, nothing to get too worked up about. But something tells me with a man like Remi, it's never *just* something. Not that he expects more from me, per se. At least, I hope he doesn't. I'm not the kind of girl who sleeps with someone on their first date. Not that I've really had many first dates. In fact, I guess I've only officially had one, and that was Blake. But I didn't sleep with him that night, and I have no intention of sleeping with Remi either. At least not yet... My insides warm at the thought.

So yeah, he said some things on Saturday when he was drunk that had me all tangled in knots. And yes, I've replayed those words like a broken record on repeat every day since. But that doesn't mean all logical thought just goes out the window either. I've always prided myself on having a good head on my shoulders, and I have no intention of letting that change.

"Sure it is." She gives me a knowing smile like she can see right through me. It's unnerving, and I briefly wonder if I'm more transparent than I realize. "I knew you two would hit it off." Her smile widens further, like she couldn't be more happy about this fact.

"He's rather charming, I'll admit."

"That he is." She's quick to agree. "You've made quite the impression on him."

"Did he say something to you?" I try to keep my tone neutral, but I'm not sure how successful I am.

I don't know why, but the thought of him talking about me to someone else sends a wave of excitement spreading through my limbs. That's not true. I know exactly why.

"He's actually been pretty tight-lipped about the whole thing."

"Then how do you know?" I feel silly for even asking the question. This entire conversation feels juvenile at best.

"Because Remi isn't tight-lipped about anything. He tells me everything, even when I don't want to know. So when I pressed him after he said you had

agreed to have dinner with him, and all he did was smile so wide his face was at risk of splitting apart, it told me everything I needed to know.”

“Which is what?”

“That he really likes you.”

“He doesn’t even know me,” I disagree, trying to temper my excitement with a strong dose of reality.

“And you don’t know him, but that doesn’t mean you don’t like him,” she says matter-of-factly. “I know Remi can come on kind of strong sometimes, but I promise you, there isn’t a person on this planet with a better heart than his.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Is it weird that I feel guilty?” I’m almost embarrassed to ask the question, but at the same time, I don’t have anyone else to ask outside of my aunt, and I already know she’s just going to tell me what she thinks I want to hear. But Aspen, she’s shot me pretty straight up to this point.

“Are you talking about your mom?” Her voice softens. Not able to fully explain it in words, I simply nod. “I think that when we move on, no matter what we’re moving on from, there is a level of guilt that we feel, sure.”

I want to tell her it’s not *just* my mom, but Blake feels like a conversation I’m not ready to have yet. At least not with Aspen.

It just feels wrong to be this excited and attracted to another man when I know he’s in California, waiting for me to call him and say I’m ready to come home. I never doubted his love for me, and I have zero doubts that he truly is holding out hope that I’ll come back. Which is why it feels like such a betrayal.

But I don’t want to go back.

It may not be over for him, but it was over for me a long time ago. It just took losing my mom to see that what we had wasn’t enough, no matter how badly I wished it were.

“It is okay to move on, though,” Aspen continues. “One day at a time. Hell, one minute at a time if that’s what you need. Just don’t let your grief stop you from chasing happiness. Your mom would have wanted that for you—happiness.”

“I know.” I nod slowly, wishing I could articulate with words the pain, regret, and guilt that make me feel like there’s a permanent boulder sitting on my shoulders.

I know it's a normal part of the grieving process. I just wish knowing it made the weight easier to carry.

But Saturday, with Remi, it was nowhere to be found. I felt lighter than I had in months, hell, maybe even years. So light that had he not been holding me when we kissed, I might have been at risk of floating away. And as much as my pain restrains me, I'm desperate to chase relief just the same.

And Remi is that in spades. Like a soothing balm to the gaping wound that is my heart. And for no other reason than for who he is. His smile. His laugh. The way he looked at me that night. I've thought of very little else over the last three days.

"Do you know where you guys are going yet?" I'm grateful for the change in subject, even though I'm the one who brought up the previous.

"No idea. He said he'd pick me up at seven, though now that I'm thinking about it, he doesn't even have my address." I think aloud.

"Actually..." She gives me an apologetic smile. "Sorry, it just kind of came up at Sunday dinner. I was telling him how I couldn't believe you lived so close."

"Sunday dinner? Saturday wasn't enough for you guys?"

"We all get together every Sunday for dinner. Well, most Sundays. Me, Sutton, the kids, Remi, Summer, and Randel. It's the one day of the week that we all sit down and catch up on everything."

I don't ask who Summer and Randel are, assuming they're Sutton and Remi's parents.

"That's really nice that you do that."

"It is. They used to do it when the guys were teenagers. It was the only time Summer and Randel could get them in the same room, and when Sutton and I had kids, we took over the tradition." She smiles to herself. "Speaking of Remi's parents, you should have seen how excited they were when Remi said he was going on a date."

"Wait, he told his parents?" I'm pretty certain every ounce of color drains from my face. At least, that's how it feels.

"He kind of told everyone at Sunday dinner. Guess maybe I should have led with that instead of saying he just told me." She gives me an apologetic smile. "But don't worry, it's not like we had some big conversation about you. Like I said, Remi is being tight-lipped about the whole thing."

"So he didn't tell you what happened on Saturday?"

“Something happened on Saturday?” Her smile turns mischievous, like I’ve just given her a nugget of information she didn’t have before. “I knew it. I could tell something was going on with you two when Sutton and I found you at the Skee-Ball machine.” She moves farther into the office, dropping down into the chair across from me. “Remi may not have told me, but that doesn’t mean you can’t.” She sets her purse in her lap. “I mean, you don’t have to tell me anything, but if you want to...”

“It’s kind of embarrassing,” I admit, feeling like I shouldn’t but also that I might explode if I don’t.

Remi isn’t the only one being tight-lipped. I pretty much told my aunt nothing outside of the fact that the hot guy I nearly took out in the lobby of my office asked me on a date. Sharing anything else felt too personal, and in truth, I didn’t want to get her hopes up, or my own for that matter.

“He, um... He asked for a birthday kiss.” My cheeks heat with my admission. It’s so silly, but something about Remi makes me feel more like a sixteen-year-old girl rather than a grown-ass adult.

“Of course he did.” She chuckles. “Leave it to Remi to use his birthday as an excuse to get a pretty woman to kiss him.”

“He also said some things...” I trail off, not sure how much I should say. “This stays between us, right? Like you’re not going to turn around and tell Remi everything I say?”

“I would never.” She shakes her head adamantly. “He may be my best friend, but I like to think you and I are friends too. I would never betray something told to me in confidence.”

So, despite my better judgment, I fill her in on pretty much every detail from Saturday night. The way he touched me, the things he said, how he texted me the instant I walked into my front door and continued to do so for two hours after. By the time I’m done, she’s smiling so big the action takes over her entire face.

“Can I just say, and this may be premature, but I think you two would make an amazing couple. I have never met anyone who’s been able to match Remi. Usually women are so agreeable to him. I’m not overexaggerating when I say that he can get women to do basically anything he wants, and they just go along with it. But Remi doesn’t need someone who bends to his will. He needs someone who challenges him. Someone who isn’t afraid to be herself. You’re not a yes woman. You’re not afraid to tell him no. The only other woman in his life who does that is me.”

“Well, we haven’t even had our first date yet, so yeah, let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” I feel the need to temper her expectations, along with my own.

“I know. You’ll have to forgive my excitement. It’s just... Well, Remi’s not exactly the dating type.”

“That’s not very reassuring,” I point out.

“No, I just mean, he hasn’t been in the past, not that he isn’t now.”

“I agree with what you said earlier. I think this entire conversation is premature.” Hell, if this keeps going, she’s going to be planning our wedding and we haven’t even had our first date.

“You’re right. Of course you’re right. Sorry, I tend to get a little carried away. I’d blame the hormones.” She giggles, the sound soft and melodic.

“But that’s not entirely true.”

“It’s okay. I get it. He’s your best friend and you want him to be happy.”

“I really do. And I don’t mean to put any pressure on you. If you come out of your date feeling like he’s not someone you can see yourself having another date with, I won’t be upset at all, I promise.”

“I appreciate that,” I admit, my thoughts also going in that direction. Like maybe this is a bad idea because how freaking awkward is work going to be if this ends badly?

The fact that this thought isn’t enough to make me pick up my phone and text him that I’ve changed my mind tells me everything I need to know. No matter how nervous, scared, or guilty I feel, none of it is enough to trump the excitement churning in my gut.

“Well, I guess I should get home.” Aspen stands. “I’m off until next Monday, but if you want to talk, about anything, you have my number. As much as I love being with my children, I appreciate adult conversation more than I can say.”

“Thank you. I don’t have any friends here, so that means a lot.”

“Well, you do now. So if you need me, I’m here.” She pulls her bag up onto her shoulder and turns toward the door.

“Hey, Aspen,” I call after her just as she steps into the hallway. I wait until she turns back toward me before finishing my thought. “What does one wear to dinner?”

“With Remi...” She thinks about it for a brief moment. “I’d go with jeans and a nice top. He may have been dressed up Saturday, but that’s because it was a special occasion. It’s unlikely he’ll pick you up in anything nicer than jeans.”

“Thank you.” I blow out a slow sigh of relief, grateful that I don’t have to repeat last weekend’s outfit. Not that I didn’t feel sexy. I did. But I was also super uncomfortable for most of the night.

“Anytime.” She gives me a small wave before disappearing down the hallway.

Chapter Six

Remi



“You must be Remi.” An older, petite, dark-haired woman stands in the doorway of Kaia’s home, smiling up at me.

“That’s me.” I grin, rocking back on my heels. I knew Kaia lived with her aunt. I just didn’t expect that it would be her aunt who would answer the door.

Suddenly, I feel like a teenager, having to meet the ‘parents’ before taking out the daughter. Not that I ever did that, but I’ve seen it in movies enough that I know what it would feel like. Just like this...

“I’m Kaia’s aunt, Myra.” She extends a small hand to me, which I take, turning on the Remi charm as I lift it and kiss the back of her knuckles instead of shaking it like I’m sure she intended.

“It’s nice to meet you, Myra.”

She smiles sheepishly back at me as I release her fingers and straighten, shifting the bouquet of flowers I’m holding to my other hand.

“You’re even more handsome than I imagined,” she says, more to herself than to me, not giving me a chance to respond before she quickly continues. “Kaia will be ready in a moment. Please”—she steps to the side—“come on in.”

“Thank you.” I step past her into the foyer of a clean, if not a little outdated, one-story home.

This whole situation feels completely foreign to me. The flowers. The meeting her aunt. The anxiously waiting for her to be ready. I feel like maybe I skipped a step in my youth.

The flowers were Aspen’s idea. She got into my head this morning about showing up empty-handed, and while I know a lot of women appreciate gestures like this, Kaia doesn’t strike me as the type who does. Though, Pen

insisted that every woman loves receiving flowers, even if she says she doesn't.

Kind of wished I had just gone with my gut and nixed the flowers, though it's a little late to turn back now.

I've purposely avoided texting Kaia all week outside of just confirming we were still on for today. Don't misunderstand; I wanted to text her. Fuck, I wanted to text her about as much as I wanted my next breath, but I also didn't want to come on too strong.

I know, I know. It's a first for me, but what I can say; I think I really fucking like this girl. Which up until the day I met her, I wasn't sure was possible.

Don't get me wrong, there've been plenty of women I've been attracted to but never one who made me *feel* something other than physical attraction. Well, not since Aspen, but that is a whole other can of worms that I will absolutely not let myself open. Not because I still have feelings for her or anything. I'm honestly not sure I even truly understand the extent of those feelings to begin with, but because it's part of a past that I let go of long ago, and there is no reason to squash a bug that's already dead.

She's happy with Sutton, and I'm happy for them. In the end, I feel like Aspen ended up exactly where she belonged. Sure, I didn't always feel so accepting of her and my brother's relationship, but as I said, it was a long time ago and any feelings I did have are long gone.

But even still, I often found myself wondering if I'd ever feel that again. Something more than lust. Something *real*. And then Kaia ran into me that day and everything fucking changed. I don't know how to explain it. It wasn't love at first sight or anything like that, but there was definitely an attraction there outside of the obvious physical one. I felt it the instant she opened her mouth with a witty comment to my stupid texting and walking, write me a ticket comment. Probably why I've been so fucking twisted up about her ever since because she made me *feel* something after so long of believing that maybe I never would. That what I felt for Aspen was all I was ever going to get in this life.

Following Myra into a living area with cream walls and brown leather furniture, I take a seat on the edge of the couch when she gestures for me to sit. Still clutching the flowers like a fucking tool bag, I clear my throat, prepared to say whatever stupid shit I come up with on the fly, only she cuts in before I ever have a chance to.

“So, Remi, why don’t you tell me a little about yourself while we wait.”

“Well, there’s really not that much to tell. I live alone. I work at Pulse Marketing, a marketing firm downtown. I love old movies and hanging out with my friends,” I spout off the first thing that comes to my head.

“Are you from the D.C. area?”

“No, I actually moved here with my best friend for college.”

“Aspen?” She guesses, and I realize very quickly that Kaia has at least told her a little bit about me already. The thought has a smile touching my lips.

“Yes. We’re originally from Ohio.”

“My sister moved to California for college and ended up staying there, but I could never get myself to leave. This place always felt too much like home to me.” She crosses her legs at the ankles. “Has Kaia told you about her?”

It takes longer than it should for me to realize she’s talking about the sister she just mentioned.

“Not really, no.” This feels like a very strange conversation to be having after just meeting someone, and yet Myra seems completely at ease.

She gives me a soft smile as she pushes to a stand. I watch her cross the room and take a picture off a shelf that sits on the far wall.

“She died earlier this year. Losing her has been hard, but it’s been even harder on Kaia. She and her mom were very close, and when she got sick, Kaia gave up everything to take care of her.” I take the picture she extends to me, noticing immediately that the smiling woman staring back at me from the photograph looks damn near identical to the one standing in front of me, give or take a few years.

My gaze then drifts to the other person in the photograph. A younger version of Kaia, smiling back at the camera so wide the action takes over her entire face. I’ve always believed you can tell a lot from a picture, and this one paints a story of a beautiful young woman not yet burdened by the weight of what life would cast upon her.

I suddenly realize there’s a point to Myra telling me all this.

“She tries to act like she’s okay, and some days she is, but she’s still dealing with a lot.” She takes the picture back and returns it to its spot on the shelf. “So you’ll forgive me for being blunt, Remi, but I need to know your intentions are good.” The look she gives me when she turns back toward me makes it very clear what she’s referring to. “And that you’re not going to hurt

her, because I don't think she can take another disappointment or heartbreak so soon after losing her mom."

"I can assure you that I would never intentionally hurt Kaia or anyone for that matter." I smile to hide my discomfort. "My intentions for being here are genuine. I like your niece, a lot, and I'm excited to get to know her better." I don't try to charm her or feed her some line. Something tells me she wouldn't fall for it even if I did. The truth isn't that hard to tell in this situation because I mean every word.

I was drawn to Kaia the first time I met her. I guess maybe infatuated would be the better word. But it wasn't until she showed up at my birthday party, looking like a fucking goddess, that things really changed. The way she smiled. The way she laughed. The way her cheeks heated when I pulled her close, her body tense against mine. The way my entire body seemed to come to life when her soft lips touched mine. Even through the haze of alcohol, there was no denying the truth. She already had me by the balls, and fuck if I wouldn't drop to my knees and beg for any morsel she'd be willing to give.

Aspen once told me that one day I would meet someone who would bring me to my knees and I'd never even know what hit me. I thought she was full of shit at the time. I couldn't imagine anyone but her who could wield such power over me. But it turns out, she was right. I've spent a whopping one evening with the woman and I'm already puddy in her hands.

"That's all I needed to hear." Myra smiles, seeming to release the tension in the room in one simple gesture. "I'll just go see if Kaia is about ready, then." Seconds later, she disappears from the room, leaving me sitting awkwardly alone, not really sure what the fuck to do.

Maybe there's a reason I never did shit like this in high school. Every social event, I went with Aspen. Every group outing, I went with Aspen. And even though I was hooking up with girls and stuff, I never once asked someone on a date that I can recall.

To be fair, when I asked Kaia, I wasn't exactly expecting any of this. I thought she'd answer the door, I'd hand her flowers, and we'd leave. But even if I had known that her aunt would put me on the spot and make me feel like a fucking teenager, I still would have rung that fucking doorbell. Or at least, that's the first thing I think when Kaia rounds the corner and steps into the living room.

The sight of her damn near steals the breath from my lungs.

She's dressed casually in jeans and a sweater, her blond hair pulled up on the sides, the rest left hanging down her back in soft waves. Her makeup is soft and natural, her lips coated in nothing more than a clear gloss, and yet I find it even sexier than the red they wore last weekend.

She's absolute fucking perfection.

If I could sketch the perfect woman for me based on appearance alone, she would be it. From the top of her head to the soles of her furry boots, there isn't a single thing I would change. But her appearance isn't the only thing I'm attracted to.

She's smart as hell. Quick-witted. Has the best fucking laugh. And I learned all that in the course of one evening. I can't wait to see what else I can discover. I've never been so desperate to know someone.

"Hey." I push to a stand, crossing the room toward her.

On the inside, I may be tied in a million different knots, but on the outside, you'd never know it. I've perfected hiding my feelings over the years because, for the longest time, I felt like I had to. Now, it's just become part of who I am.

"Hey." She smiles nervously, her hands already fidgeting in front of her. "Sorry I wasn't ready when you got here. Yiya needed me to run some errands for her and it took me longer than I expected."

"Yiya?" I arch a brow.

"Myra. It's a long story." She turns her attention to the flowers, reminding me that I'm still holding the damn things.

"These are for you." I hand them to her, feeling like an absolute fucking tool as I do.

"They're beautiful. Thank you." She leans in and takes a deep inhale. "I love lilies."

I had no idea they were lilies, only that it was the bouquet the florist recommended. There're also some pink roses and some kind of little white flower too, but let's be real, I don't know a damn thing about flowers.

"You're welcome."

"Let me just go stick these in water and we can go." She turns, damn near running into her aunt, who suddenly appears in the doorway.

"I'll take care of those." She's quick to take the flowers from Kaia. "You two go, have an amazing time." She shoos us toward the door, not that I'm complaining in the least.

"I shouldn't be too late," Kaia tells Myra over her shoulder.

“Take your time. I’ll be sleeping either way,” she calls behind us, and I like Myra a hell of a lot more.

Waiting for Kaia to slip on her coat, I silently follow her out of the house, blowing out a slow breath as we step out onto the porch, the action pillowing in front of me due to the cold air.

“Sorry about her. I promise she’s not always like that.”

“She was fine.” I take her hand, mentally doing summersaults when she doesn’t pull away.

“Somehow, I doubt that. Please tell me she at least didn’t make you too uncomfortable.”

“She didn’t,” I reassure her. “I’m built of stronger stuff than that.” I knock my hip into hers as we make our way down the sidewalk toward my car.

“You must be built of stone if my aunt Yiya didn’t make you crack.”

“Okay, you’ve gotta explain the Yiya thing to me.”

“I couldn’t say Myra as a child, so it came out as Yiya, and it stuck. You think it’s weird, don’t you?”

“Not at all. I like it, actually. Yiya.” I smile down at her as we stop next to the passenger door.

“So are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“That part is actually up to you.”

“Me?”

I tug open the door without answering, waiting until she’s tucked inside before closing it. Quickly crossing around the back of the car, I slip into the driver’s seat and immediately start the engine in order to get the heat going. Fuck, I can’t wait until summer.

“I’m going to need you to explain the *up to me* part.” She doesn’t miss a beat.

“Well, you’re new to the area, so I thought maybe this would be a good opportunity to explore. Is there something you’ve been eager to see? A restaurant you’ve been wanting to try? Anything at all. You’re in the driver’s seat.” I grin when she looks at the steering wheel and then back at me.

“Okay, not technically.” I chuckle. “But you know what I mean.”

“So that’s it. I get to pick whatever I want?” She nibbles on her bottom lip in a way that has me desperate to lean in and do the same. “Like, in the city?”

“Whatever you want,” I confirm, refocusing my attention. Tonight is not about anything but getting to know her, I remind myself. As much as I would love to sink balls deep inside of her, that isn’t what this is about. At least, not yet...

“What if I want to go skydiving?” she quips.

“I know a great place not far from here. Though we might freeze in the process, but hey, you only live once.” I give her a cheeky grin.

“What if I want to do something lame and cliché like visit the White House or The Lincoln Memorial?”

“Why is that lame?”

“Really?” She snorts out a laugh.

“I happen to think that kind of stuff is really cool.”

“Because you haven’t seen all that a hundred times before?” She gives me a doubtful smirk.

“I have. But I’ve never seen any of it with you,” I tell her, not missing the way her lips part in a silent gasp like she can’t decide if that was the sweetest thing she’s ever heard or the cheesiest.

“Do women actually fall for that?” Her mouth quirks into a half smile, and once again I am momentarily taken by just how fucking beautiful she is.

“Truth?”

“Always.”

“This is my very first real date.”

“Yeah, right.” She barks out a quick laugh.

“No, I’m serious. I’ve met up with women at bars and things, but I’ve never actually taken a woman on an official date, ever. Unless you count Aspen, but really, she doesn’t count.”

“You’ve never been on a date?”

“Nope. You’re my first.”

“Bet you haven’t been able to say that for a long time.” She clasps her hand over her mouth, speaking between her fingers. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I chuckle, loving that she seems to just say whatever comes to mind without even really thinking about it.

“Sometimes my mouth works faster than my brain.”

I have to bite back the urge to make a comment about how I can give her mouth something to work fast on...

“I love a woman who says what she’s thinking.”

“You say that now. Just wait. Give it a few hours and you’ll be ready to be rid of me.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.” I reach out, brushing her hair over her shoulder, so fucking tempted to lean over and kiss her that it’s downright painful not to.

Her breath hitches when my fingers brush the side of her neck, making my earlier thought even harder to ignore.

“So where do you want to go first?”

“We’re really doing this?” she asks like she just needs to make sure I’m not messing with her.

“We really are.”

“Okay, then.” She blows out a soft breath. “How about we start with dinner. I’m actually pretty hungry.”

“Where would you like to go?”

“That one isn’t something I know because I don’t know any restaurants other than the one we were just at last weekend. So my choice is that I want you to choose.”

“Anything specific you’re craving?”

“I like everything.” She shakes her head. “Surprise me.”

“That I can do.”

“Okay.” She leans back, quickly snapping her seat belt as I do the same.

“Ask me a question,” I say, pulling away from the curb before making a quick left at the stop sign.

“Why?” I feel her eyes on the side of my face, but I keep my gaze on the road.

“We’ve got thirty minutes to kill in the car. Best way to get to know someone is to ask questions, right? So ask me something. Anything you want.”

“I’m not sure you want to open that can of worms. What if I ask you something you don’t want to answer?”

“Then I won’t answer.” I shrug. “Though I’m a pretty open book, so it’s unlikely that would happen.”

“Okay, then.” She thinks for a long moment. “What do you do for a living?”

It isn’t until she asks that I realize she doesn’t even know the most basic things about me. I guess I just assumed Aspen had told her something, but maybe I was wrong in that assumption.

“I’m a marketing analyst.”

“And what exactly does a marketing analyst do?”

“In a nutshell, I analyze data to determine the success or lack of success in various marketing techniques,” I tell her.

“And do you enjoy doing that?”

“Yes and no. I have a lot of freedom, which I like. If I don’t feel like going into the office, I can work remotely, things like that. But it can be kind of boring at times. What about you? Do you enjoy being a counselor?”

“It has its moments. I mean, I love helping kids. It’s the very reason I got into it to begin with, but sometimes it’s really hard.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine some of the things you must hear. Pen has called me before when she’s handling a particularly difficult case, and while she can’t tell me patient information, I get the gist of what’s going on and it’s hard to wrap my fucking head around.”

“It’s horrifying what some children go through. But not all of them are that bad. And it can be very rewarding.”

“Is there a specific reason why you wanted to work with children?” I ask, knowing that there was a reason Aspen got into it, specifically the abuse and neglect she personally dealt with growing up, most of which came from the hands of her perverse, sadistic foster brother. The thought still makes my fucking stomach churn.

“When I was in high school, I volunteered at the children’s hospital for my mandatory volunteer hours. We had to have them to graduate,” she explains. “There was a child there. He had been beaten so badly by his stepdad that he nearly died. Every day I would go in and see him, talk to him, sneak him in treats even though I wasn’t supposed to. I don’t know, I guess in a small way, I felt like I helped him get through it, and I just decided that I wanted to keep helping.”

“Aspen says it’s the hardest but most rewarding thing she’s ever done.”

“It really is.”

“Where did you go to college?”

“I thought I was the one asking the questions.”

“I think it only fair that I get to ask a few of my own.” I flash her a quick smile.

“Cal State.”

“Did you like it there?”

“I did. It was nice because it was close enough that I could commute instead of living in a dorm. What about you?”

“I went to GW.”

“GW?”

“Sorry. George Washington University.”

“But you didn’t grow up in D.C. I feel like I remember someone saying you’re all from Ohio.”

“We are. Pen and I came here first. Sutton didn’t move here until they got together, and then my parents followed once they started popping out babies.”

“So you lived in a dorm? Did you like that?”

“It was okay. I was pretty happy once me and Aspen had our own apartment, though.”

“How long did you live together?”

“A couple of years. It was easier to afford things that way. Besides, she practically lived with me the last two years of high school anyway, so it didn’t feel like anything new.” I shrug.

“Why did she live with you in high school?” She pauses. “You know what, don’t answer that. I shouldn’t ask questions about someone else’s life. But I am curious. How is it that you two have been so close all these years, and even lived together, but have never hooked up?”

“She’s like my sister,” I say instead of giving her the full truth, which is that it’s a fuck lot more complicated than that.

“Did it weird you out when she started seeing your brother?”

“Very much. I had a hard time with it at first, but now I can’t imagine a world where they’re not together.”

Of course, I don’t go into why I had such a hard time with it. The fact that I had always believed Pen and I would end up together being the biggest reason. I can’t imagine that’s something that goes over well on a first date.

“Are they always so…”

“Sickeningly in love?” I finish the question for her. “That would be a yes.”

“What about you? Have you ever been in love?”

“Love? Hell, this is my first date, remember?” I chuckle.

How could I ever explain that I had, in fact, been in love? Or at least, the closest thing to love I’d ever known. And that she chose my brother instead. Again, I’m not upset or sad about the way things ended up. I just don’t know how to explain it all to her in a way that doesn’t sound ridiculous.

“Right.” I can see her head shake in my peripheral.

“What about you?”

“Pass.”

When I glance her way, I find her staring out the window instead of looking at me.

“That bad?” I guess, figuring it must be bad if she’s not willing to talk about it. Hell, most women don’t shut up about shit like that. Well, most women *in my experience*. That’s not to say *all* women.

“No. Just not something I really want to talk about right now.”

Something about her expression when she does finally glance my way tells me not to push, so I don’t, even though it takes everything in me not to.

“What’s your favorite movie?” I say instead of the hundred other questions now swirling around in my head, my attention now back on the road.

“*The Wizard of Oz*,” she answers without a second of hesitation.

“*The Wizard of Oz*?” My shoulders shake in laughter.

“What? It’s a classic.”

“I’m not saying that. I just can’t believe out of all the incredible movies in the world, you went with that one.”

“All right then, oh movie God, what is your favorite movie? And it better be a good one.” She gently shoves my shoulder.

“If you put a gun to my head, *The Goonies*.”

“And you gave me crap about *The Wizard of Oz*. Are you kidding me?” She slaps her leg. “Could you get any more basic?”

“At least my movie has action and adventure. Yours just has a bunch of little people running around singing about lollipops.”

“If you think that, then you’ve clearly never watched it.” Her eyes are burning holes into the side of my face as I do my best to skew my expression. Though based on her next words, clearly not well enough. “Are you serious? You’ve never seen *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“Is that so hard to believe?” I hitch a brow in her direction. “Look at me. Do I strike you as the type who enjoys such things?”

She gives me a long, hard look.

“But how will you know if you don’t like something if you’re not willing to try it? Just because you’re an obvious man’s man doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy things that aren’t dripping with masculinity.”

“I do. Just not that.”

“Well, then it’s settled,” she says matter-of-factly, arms crossing over her chest.

“What is?”

“I’m going to make you watch *The Wizard of Oz*, and when you end up loving it, I’m never going to let you live it down.”

I don’t know why, but hearing her talk about things beyond tonight excites me in a way I can’t easily explain. Probably because I know an immediate connection like the one I feel with Kaia doesn’t come along every day—hell, sometimes ever—and I’d be an idiot not to want to hold onto that at least long enough to see if we could be something real.

“Already planning our second date, are we?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Oh, I’m already miles on the other side. Don’t you worry.”

“Anyways…” She tries and fails to hold in her smile. “What kind of music do you like?” She refocuses the conversation.

“Honestly, a little bit of everything. I’m not much of a music guy, but I do get down to some NF and Dax in the gym.”

“Didn’t peg you for a rap guy.”

“I’m not really. I just like the hit of the beat. Pumps me up.”

“You’re one of those gym bros, aren’t ya?” she says teasingly, though I’m not sure if it’s a question or a statement.

“I wouldn’t go that far. I enjoy working out, sure. But I don’t eat, sleep and breathe fitness. I haven’t counted a fucking macro a day in my life.”

“Are you sure?” She gives me a quick once-over, briefly meeting my eyes when I glance in her direction.

“Is that your way of saying you think I’m hot?” I smirk.

“That’s my way of saying you have a lot of muscle definition. Not a compliment, a fact.”

“Why can’t it be both a compliment and a fact?” I’m convinced by the end of the night, my cheeks are going to hurt from smiling like such a damn fool all evening.

“I guess it can be.” She concedes. “So any other artists you enjoy, inside or outside of the gym?”

“I mean, I’m more of a radio guy. Just whatever comes on is fine. What about you?”

“You’re going to think it’s weird.”

“What?” I nudge her gently with my elbow. “Tell me.”

“Elvis.”

I bark out a laugh the second it leaves her lips, and not because it’s hilarious to like Elvis, but because of the way she says it.

“Elvis. That’s your favorite musical artist?”

“See, I knew you’d be an ass about it,” she grumbles.

“I’m not, I promise. It’s just... unexpected,” I admit. “What is it about Elvis that makes him your favorite artist?”

“When I was little, my mom used to play Elvis on this old record player we had. I remember her swaying and singing as she cleaned or did laundry. She always found such peace in his music, and after a while, I started to as well. It wasn’t until I was a little older that I learned why she played Elvis so often. It was because he was my dad’s favorite, and after he died, she said it made her feel like he was still there, busting out in song as he twirled her around the living room.”

“How old were you when he died?”

“Three. Not old enough to remember much, but my mom kept so many pictures of him up and talked of him so often, it always felt like I knew him, if that makes sense.”

“It does.”

“So yeah.” She blows out a soft breath. “Elvis.”

“You know, I’ve been known to do quite the Elvis impersonation.” I lift my top lip and give her a little *uh-huh*.

“Oh my God, please stop.” Her laughter fills the car.

“In all seriousness, though, I happen to love the king,” I tell her. “I also happen to share his obsession with peanut butter and bananas.”

“Seriously? Me too. There’s this place where I used to live that made peanut butter and banana grilled cheese sandwiches called The King, and they were so good. Like I can’t even tell you how delicious these freaking things were.”

“Cheese with peanut butter and bananas... That might be taking it a little far for me.”

“I thought the same thing, but I’m telling you, the addition of cheese is surprisingly so good. Yiya refuses to make them for me, citing them as an insult to food, but when I have my own place, just you wait.”

“Well, if you’re offering to make me some, I *do* happen to have a kitchen of my own, and I’d be more than happy to let you make anything you desire.”

“Nice try, but I’m not going to your house.” She grins.

“Like ever?” I gasp playfully.

“You know what I mean,” she mutters with a laugh.

“So is getting your own place something you’re working on? I mean, not that I didn’t love your aunt grilling me and all. Made me feel young.”

“I’m sorry about her. She means well, I promise. It’s just, after her husband died and then Mom... we’re kind of all the other one has. She’s protective of me.” She pauses, and since I can tell she wants to say more, I don’t speak. “I don’t know if you know this, but my mom died a few months ago. That’s why I moved here, to be with the only family I have left.” She tries to hide the emotion that clogs her voice, but there is no mistaking the sadness behind her words.

“Your aunt told me...” As did Aspen, I obviously don’t say. “Before she threatened me within an inch of my life.” I try to lighten the mood with a joke, though I’m not sure if it’s ill-timed. “I’m just kidding. She just wanted to be sure my intentions were good.”

“I’m so sorry,” she grumbles.

“Don’t be. I think it’s great that you have someone looking out for you.”

“Yeah, I honestly don’t know what I would do without her. Give her some time. I promise she’ll grow on you. Especially if you eat her cooking.”

She flies past the mom conversation before I can really ask a single question about her. Of course, I’m curious about what happened, but I’m not insensitive enough to ask.

“She’s a good cook?” I ask instead.

“She’s actually a retired chef. And I don’t just mean a fry cook at some little diner. I mean, classically trained, Michelin Star type of chef.”

“So I can expect my invite to dinner... when?”

To this, she just laughs.

“I really like living with Yiya, but I’d like to have my own place by next summer.” She reverts back to where we started. “I went from living at home, to... taking care of my mom.” She hesitates, like she is going to say something else but changes her mind. “I’ve never lived by myself before. I kind of feel like it’s time, ya know? To build my own life.”

“I get it. Though living alone isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Hell, I would have lived with Aspen forever. The apartment was way too fucking quiet after she moved out. It’s been years and I still haven’t fully adjusted to being alone.”

“Yeah, if it were up to Yiya, I’d never leave. I think she likes having someone else in the house. But as much as I love her, I came here for a fresh start, and I don’t think I’m going to get that by living with my aunt until I’m forty.”

“Do you ever regret leaving California?”

“Yes and no. I mean, I miss my old friends. I miss the house where I grew up. I miss... my old life. The one I had before Mom died. But after she was gone, it just didn’t feel the same.” She lifts a single shoulder in a half-shrug. “Anyways, let’s talk about something else. Tell me about your parents.”

“There’s really not much to tell. They married in their twenties, popped out a couple of kids, and now are happily retired as Memaw and Pop-pop.”

“Were they good parents?”

“The best. I didn’t realize it as a kid, but as an adult looking back, I know how lucky I was, how lucky I *am* to have them.”

“Do you look like your mom, your dad, or both?”

“My dad for sure.”

“So does that mean Sutton looks like your mom?”

“He absolutely does. Same dark hair, same eyes.”

“Your parents must be really good-looking,” she blurts, realizing too late that she once again voiced her thoughts out loud. “You know what, just forget I said that.”

“I don’t think that I will.” I laugh.

“You’re an ass,” she grumbles under her breath as she moves to shove my shoulder a second time, only this time I catch her hand midmotion, entwining my fingers with hers before she has time to even process the movement.

“Is this okay?” I ask, resting our joined hands against the leather console between us.

“Yeah.” There’s a slight shake to her voice that hits me square in the chest and quickly spreads south, my cock instantly stirring.

Not right now, boy, I think to myself. The last thing I need is to spring an erection from something as simple as holding her hand and for her to notice. Which, given that my jeans are tighter in that area when I’m sitting, she most likely would.

We spend the remainder of the car ride like that, holding hands, asking each other silly questions that hold no real weight. Not that I mind because I’m like a starving man, gobbling down every single tiny nugget of information she feeds me.

Her favorite foods. What she likes to do in her free time. Her interests and hobbies, things I normally wouldn't care to know but can't seem to get my fill of with Kaia.

I want to know everything. Every detail, no matter how minute.

And once I know her mind, I'm going to take even more time getting to know her body. So much time, in fact, that when I'm done, there won't be a single inch of her flesh I haven't memorized.

Chapter Seven

Kaia



“Where are we?” I follow Remi through a dark makeshift hallway, barely able to see six inches in front of my face. If not for Remi’s hand wrapped tightly around mine, I’d likely have gotten turned around and walked directly into a wall at this point.

“You’ll see.” He all but purrs.

If I thought I knew what I was getting myself into by agreeing to go out with him tonight, I couldn’t have been more wrong. I mean, sure, he’s cocky and self-assured, but he’s also surprisingly sweet and kind and so attentive that sometimes I feel almost overwhelmed by the attention.

It’s like he wants to know every single thing about me and finds even the most mundane things interesting. And when he smiles at me... I can’t even begin to break down all the ways that makes me feel.

“Is it the part of the date where you murder me in an abandoned building and leave me here so that it’s months before someone finds my decomposed body?”

“Jesus, Kaia.” I can see just enough to distinguish his head falling back as laughter vibrates through him. “You really need to stop watching true crime shows.”

“Then how will I be able to plot all my ways of escape? I have to know how a killer thinks in order to outsmart him.”

“And you think you’re going to learn that from a TV show?” Humor laces his words.

“Maybe.” I huff.

“Well, rest assured, I have no intention of killing you, but if I did, I’d cut you up into little pieces and spread your body all over the state so that no one

would ever find you. Movies will teach you something true crime shows never could.”

“Noted. Now at least I know what’s going to happen to my body after I die.”

“If you think I would touch a hair on that pretty little head of yours, then you clearly haven’t been paying attention. Actually, that’s not entirely true. I *would* most definitely touch it. Pull it. Use it as handlebars. You know, whatever you prefer.”

For this, I have no words.

It’s not the first comment he’s made like this either.

When we were eating dinner, the first bite I took of my ravioli, I let out a little moan of appreciation and the way he looked at me... I swear I still feel the sear on my skin from his gaze. Then he said something along the lines of *“If you make another noise like that, I can’t be held accountable for what happens next.”*

I almost wanted to do it again just to see what he’d do, but obviously didn’t.

“Okay, we’re here.”

We pull to a stop when the hallway dead-ends into a door. Lifting his hand, he raps his knuckles against the steel, which swings open after a few long seconds, revealing a middle-aged bald man in a security uniform on the other side.

“Thank you so much for doing this, Hank.”

“Thank your brother,” he grumbles. “You have thirty minutes. I mean it, Rem. Thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes, heard.” Remi smiles at me like a kid on Christmas morning. “You ready?”

“I don’t know, am I?” I murmur as Remi leads me through the door, past Hank into an open room with ceilings so high it would take a fire truck to reach them. “What is this place?” I look around at the walls made up almost entirely of glass, construction tarp and equipment strewn across the massive room.

“It’s a project my brother is working on.”

“Why are we here?”

“You’ll see. Come on.” Not once releasing my hand, he guides me farther into the room to a set of elevators that sit along the far side wall.

The doors slide open the instant he presses the button.

“Um, should we be here?” I gesture toward the construction debris before following him inside.

“The building is done. They’re just designing now. It’s perfectly safe. I promise.”

“Then why did we have to walk through a dark tunnel to get here and not through the front door?”

“We had to come through the construction hallway because the front entrance isn’t accessible yet. Sorry for the dramatics, but I think it’ll be worth it once you see.”

“See what?”

“Patience, babe.”

Babe...

My heart kicks against my ribs so hard I’m fairly certain I hear one crack on impact. I run my tongue along the front of my teeth, my mouth suddenly bone-dry.

I’m sure he meant nothing by it, but the endearment was certainly not lost on me.

I won’t deny that it felt good. Or that the wall I built around myself, in an effort to keep him out, just crumbled a little more. At this rate, there won’t be a single brick left by the end of the night.

I can’t help it. Remi is... Well, he’s addictive. Like the more I get, the more I want. I’ve never felt so overwhelmed by a man before. Hell, by anyone.

I don’t look at him, so sure he’ll be able to read my thoughts all over my face. Instead, I focus on the screen that lights up each floor as we pass it. It dings at the twenty-sixth floor before the doors slide open, revealing another open area with floor-to-ceiling windows.

“There is no better way to see the city than from here,” he tells me, leading me out of the elevator and across the unfinished floor. “There are no skyscrapers in D.C., so a lot of developers buy land here and build them because, well, look at that view,” he says, pulling to a stop in front of the windows, releasing my hand for what feels like the first time in hours.

I wish I could say the break in contact brings me relief, a moment to collect my thoughts, but really, all it does is make me miss the feel of his fingers tangled with mine.

Taking a deep breath, I blow it out slowly as I let my eyes take it all in.

The lights. The buildings. The monuments. You can see it all from up here.

“This is incredible,” I hear myself say, flattening my palms to the glass.

“You told me to surprise you.”

I turn my head to find him watching me, his smile by far trumping any other view in the world.

“Did I do good?”

“You did really good,” I tell him, turning back to the expanse of the city below. “I could have done without the dark, scary hallway,” I add with a smile.

“I don’t know. I kinda thought it added to the mystery.” He chuckles.

“You said this is one of your brother’s projects?”

“He’s a structural engineer.”

“I didn’t know that,” I admit, not that it should be a big surprise. I know very little about any of them. “What exactly does a structural engineer do?”

“Beats me.” He snorts out a laugh. “Makes sure the structure doesn’t collapse, I would assume.”

“You don’t know what your brother’s job actually is?” I drop my hands, turning to face him.

“Can’t say I ever asked for a detailed account.”

“Men.” I roll my eyes. “All the same,” I tease. “Well, you went through all the trouble of bringing me here. Should we maybe do a little exploring?”

“I think Hank might have my balls if he catches us anywhere but here.”

“Well, I guess we wouldn’t want that, now, would we?”

“We most definitely would not.” When he gets closer to me, it takes everything I have not to step back, a nervous pit opening in my stomach.

But nervous isn’t the only thing I feel...

“Besides, every floor looks exactly the same right now. I could bring you back once it’s finished if you’re interested to see how it turns out,” he offers, closing off the last remaining space between us.

“Remi.” My voice shakes as I look up at him.

“I promised myself I would be on my best behavior tonight, but fuck, Kaia, if I don’t kiss you right now, I think I might fucking explode.”

His words make me feel like *I* might explode.

“Well, I guess we wouldn’t want that, now, would we?” I repeat my earlier statement.

“We most definitely would not,” he repeats for a second time as well, a smile touching his lips as one hand slides up the side of my neck while the other gently grazes across the small of my back.

I swear I’m so taut with anticipation that when he leans down, his face but a whisper from mine, I feel at risk of becoming completely unraveled.

“I don’t usually ask for permission to kiss a woman.” The hand on my back becomes firmer as he presses into me.

“Then don’t start now.” The words barely make it out before his mouth closes down over mine, his full lips silencing any and all thought that isn’t him.

It’s gentle at first. A peck. A second one. A nip of his teeth across my bottom lip. But it quickly escalates when his tongue drags across the seam of my lips, asking for silent permission that I willingly grant.

The instant his tongue slides across mine, I’m a goner. Rational thought goes right out the window, replaced by a carnal need only his touch can satisfy.

My hands are around the back of his neck now, my fingers diving into his thick, silky strands of blond hair, tugging on the ends.

He lets out a groan that comes from somewhere deep in his chest, and I swear I can feel the sound all the way to the tips of my toes.

My entire body aches for him in a way I didn’t know was possible. Every fiber of my being alive with desire. Like touching a live wire, I feel the electricity spread, burning everything in its path until I’m nothing more than an empty shell.

I feel his hands on my backside seconds before I’m hoisted in the air. I wrap my legs around him, desperate to get closer, to *feel* everything. And I do. I feel the thickness of his erection press directly into my center, and I swear I see stars.

Grinding down, I smile against his mouth when another groan slides up his throat.

I feel the cool bite of glass against my back through my sweater as he presses me against the windows. Feel the heat of his body consuming me from the front as he repays my action by grinding right back against me.

Sweet Lord. If he keeps moving like that, I don’t know what will happen.

He hasn’t even touched me and I can already feel the build start. My body begging for something it’s been denied for far too long...

I'm ready to beg for it. For him to strip me bare and take me right here, but before I can utter a single word, the elevator dings. Like being doused with a bucket of ice water, the fire inside of me fizzles out in an instant.

"Fuck," Remi grumbles, the warmth of his breath dancing across my face as he breaks the kiss and quickly lowers me to my feet but doing very little to put any real distance between us.

I can't bring myself to look into his eyes, embarrassed by how quickly I let myself be carried away, so I stare at his broad chest instead.

"Sorry to uh... interrupt. But shift change is happening in fifteen," Hank calls from the open elevator, and I'm so incredibly grateful that Remi's large frame hides me because if he saw my face, there's no way he wouldn't notice how fiercely red I'm sure my cheeks are right now.

"We'll be down in five minutes," Remi promises, his body remaining facing me instead of turning around to address the security guard.

"I need you gone before the late guard gets here."

"You have my word that we'll be gone before then," Remi tells him.

Hank grumbles something under his breath, not loud enough that we can hear what he says but loud enough that we know he said something.

I'm frozen like a statue, afraid to move. Hell, afraid to breathe.

I listen to the elevator doors once again slide closed before I chance a look up at Remi, who I find smiling down at me with a grin that overtakes his entire face.

"What?" I can't help but say, suddenly self-conscious.

"You're fucking incredible," he tells me. "I can't wait to do that again." He dips down, laying a light kiss to the corner of my mouth. "Come on, we should go." He takes my hand and tugs me toward the elevator.

My legs feel like jelly, but I somehow manage to keep myself upright as we wait for the elevator car to come back up.

I'm not sure how to feel.

Well, that's not entirely true.

I should feel ashamed or, at the very least, embarrassed.

I don't.

If anything, I feel the opposite of those things.

"So where to next?" I ask just as the elevator door slides open.

"You mean, you're not ready to make a run for it?"

He pulls me into his chest the moment we step into the elevator, his hand once again going to the side of my neck, cupping under my jaw in a way that

feels almost possessive, which I honestly can't get enough of.

"Do you want me to make a run for it?" I look up into his incredible eyes.

"Does it look like I do?" His mouth quirks on one side as he lowers his face to mine. "I'm fairly certain I'd just run after you even if you did."

"And what would you do with me if you caught me?"

I know I'm playing with fire, but dammit, I can't stop myself.

I don't want to just play with fire. I want to live in it.

"Oh, I could think of a few things." When his lips touch mine this time, I'm prepared for the heat that floods my body, but it doesn't diminish the intensity of it.

I almost press for more, but the ding of the elevator stops me, and honestly, I'm glad for it. Tonight has gone further than I ever anticipated, and as easy as it would be to go back to his place and let him satisfy this deep ache inside of me, I know I would regret it tomorrow. Not because I don't want to... Trust me, I do. But because I'm not the type of woman who can just sleep with someone just for the sex. It has to be more for me. My heart won't allow anything less.

"I do have one other place I'd like to take you if you're up for it." Remi takes my hand as we exit the elevator, once again entwining our fingers.

"As long as it's not *your* place," I say almost apologetically.

"As much as I would love that, I know that's not going to happen tonight." He kisses the side of my head in a gesture so sweet I could just about cry. "How do you feel about ice cream?"

"Ice cream?"

"I know this great spot that stays open until midnight on the weekends, if you're interested."

"It's ice cream. Of course I'm interested."

"You really are the perfect woman, aren't you?"

My heart does a full flip inside my chest.

"You're observant," I tease, crinkling my nose at him seconds before he leads me back inside the dark tunnel of doom.

Okay, so it's not the tunnel of doom after all, but it still doesn't make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside having to walk through it without light.

"Thank you for this, by the way," I say when we emerge on the other side, knowing I don't need to elaborate further. It's pretty obvious what I'm thanking him for.

"You're welcome. Though, you didn't get much time to take in the view."

“Says who?” I bat my lashes innocently, letting my eyes travel the length of him in one slow sweep before my gaze once again meets his.

“Perfection.” He lifts our joined hands and kisses my knuckles.

I never would have pegged Remi for someone capable of the night he’s given me, and it’s not even over yet. I think it would be fair to say this is probably the best first date in the history of first dates, and I don’t even need to have been on a ton of them to know this.

Men like Remi don’t exist in reality. At least, not in my experience. But here he is, the real thing. Not pulled from the pages of a romance book or taken from the screen of a television, where I thought the perfect man only existed.

Then again, he could only be showing me what he thinks I want to see, though somehow even that doesn’t sound believable. He’s just so genuine. I can’t say I’ve ever met someone like Remi before, and I doubt I ever will again.

“Can I ask you something?” I wait until we’ve resumed walking to ask.

“Anything.”

“How is it that you’re still single?”

“What do you mean?” He doesn’t seem the least bit offended by my question. If anything, he seems humored by it.

“I just... don’t get how someone hasn’t snagged you up already.” I feel almost embarrassed to say.

“I could ask you the same question. Why hasn’t a man dropped down on one knee and asked you to be his? Seems fucking insane if you ask me.”

My insides churn uncomfortably, guilt slicing through me like a dull knife, hacking away at my flesh.

I should tell him.

I don’t know why I haven’t.

It’s not like it’s some big secret.

I just...

I’m just not ready to share that part of myself yet.

A part of my life that seems so far removed at this point I can’t help but wonder if it was ever truly mine to begin with.

“Guess the right one hasn’t come along.”

Not a lie. I may have thought Blake was the *right* one once upon a time, but again, that feels like a different life altogether. I know now that he wasn’t the one, no matter how much I wanted him to be.

“That you know of.” He knocks his hip against mine.

“Careful, Mr. Barnett. I might start thinking you like me or something,” I playfully warn to cover up the tightness that has suddenly settled in my chest.

“Well, then, Ms. Sharp, you would be correct in that assumption.”

My heart isn’t sure what to do with that statement, swirling in my chest in a way that feels equal parts like a flip and a twirl.

“I should have known.” I sigh, like the fact irritates me when, in reality, it makes me want to do backflips in the middle of the street.

“Oh, yeah?” Humor dances behind his eyes. “What gave me away?”

“Ice cream.”

“Ice cream, huh?”

“Instead of taking me home, you asked me to go for dessert. That’s usually a good sign. Means you’re not ready for the night to be over.”

“You agreed to dessert. Should I also take that as a good sign?” He gives me a cheeky grin.

“The jury’s still out. Guess it depends on how good the ice cream is,” I tease.

“Well then, I have a feeling you’re gonna *love* me.” He winks.

Yeah, I think I probably will.

And it will have nothing to do with ice cream.



Remi: *So I was thinking maybe I should give The Wizard of Oz another chance.*

I read over the text message Remi sent me a few minutes ago as I was finishing up a session with a particularly difficult case, a welcome smile touching my lips. Sometimes this job can be really emotionally draining, and without even realizing what he’s done, he’s instantly brightened my mood.

It’s been three days since our date, and I’m fairly certain I haven’t stopped thinking about it, in some capacity or another, since the moment he left me standing on my aunt’s front porch, my body about to combust with how happy I felt. And it wasn’t even the unexpected and very hot make-out session against a window overlooking the city that was the highlight for me. I mean, don’t get me wrong, it was definitely up there in the high points of the

evening, but it was really what happened after that pretty much sealed my fate.

The way he held my hand as we walked to his car. The way he kissed my temple before opening the door for me. The way he sat next to me at the ice cream shop instead of across from me so he could be close to me. And don't even get me started on the whole walking me to my door and kissing me so slowly it was like he truly didn't want to leave. And trust me, I knew the feeling. Because I'm fairly certain if I had lived alone, the date wouldn't have ended on the porch, no matter how much I insisted otherwise.

A woman only possesses so much willpower, and trust me when I say that Remi has a way of stretching it to the absolute max.

Me: *Oh yeah?*

I type out a simple reply, setting the phone back on my desk before pulling up my email. I've only managed to get through one when my cell pings with another incoming text message.

Remi: *Not the actual movie. No offense, but it's kind of trash.*

Me: *Did you just call my favorite movie trash? And if not the movie, then what?*

His reply is instant.

Remi: *How do you feel about dinner theater?*

I bark out a laugh, the sound reverberating off the walls around me. I can't help it. The vision of him sitting in a too-small chair, watching people dance and sing on stage, is comical at best. Not that men can't like dinner theater. It's just... Well, Remi. I don't know how to explain it. He just doesn't seem the type at all.

Grateful that I at least closed my office door earlier so no one heard my outburst, I turn my attention back to our message thread.

Me: *Dinner theater? You? Why is this a hard image to picture?*

Remi: *Why is it so hard to picture? I love the arts.*

Me: *Do you?*

Remi: *I mean, maybe.*

Me: *Maybe? You seem unsure.*

I chew on my lower lip in an effort to keep my smile at bay, though it does me very little good.

Remi: *I can't say I've ever been. But it could be fun. Do you not like the theater?*

Me: *I actually love the theater.*

I'm hit with a memory of the last time I actually attended a theatrical production. It was before my mom got sick. Maybe three years ago. We went to see *Wicked* for the fourth time. It was my mom's favorite. I can't remember exactly, but I think I was only like four or five the first time she took me to see it. All I remember was how much I loved it and how I made her listen to the soundtrack on repeat the entire drive home.

We saw many productions over the years, but I think to this day *Wicked* is the one that stands out among all others.

Remi: *Then it's settled.*

Me: *What is?*

Remi: *There's a little place in Alexandria that is doing a production of The Wizard of Oz, and I'm taking you to see it.*

Me: *What if I say no?*

I smile to myself, knowing there isn't a chance in hell I would say no to a second date with Remi, much less to a second date with Remi that includes theater and a live performance of my all-time favorite movie.

Remi: *Are you saying no?*

Me: *That depends.*

Remi: *On?*

Me: *When and what time?*

I smile wider, at this point just messing with him to mess with him. It's ridiculous how much one person can change your life in what feels like an instant. Two weeks ago, I was fighting just to get through a day without breaking down. Today, I almost feel like a new person.

Don't get me wrong, my pain and grief are still very real. It's just that now they aren't the *only* things I feel. It's like the universe knew I needed someone like Remi in my life and planted him literally right in my path that day in the lobby.

Not that I'm over here planning our wedding or anything. Right now, I'm just taking it one day at a time and enjoying feeling like I'm actually alive again for the first time in way too long.

Remi: *A month from Saturday. Seven o'clock. Please don't say no because I may have gotten a little too excited and already bought the tickets.*

A month... I gape at my phone.

Not that I don't want this to continue. I do. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever wanted something so much. And while that's probably not entirely true, right now it feels about as close to the truth as you can get.

I won't deny that a part of me truly thought he was just laying on the charm until he could get me into bed and things would quickly fall away from there. But you don't invite someone to something that's a full month away if you have no intention of keeping them around that long, do you? Or is this just a ploy to make me think he's not in it for one thing? Does it truly even matter at this point?

Me: *A month is pretty far out.*

Remi: *Planning on ditching me before then?*

The inclusion of a wink face emoji helps me decipher the humor in his text. Sometimes you truly can't tell.

Me: *What if I was?*

Remi: *I've gotta warn you, I'm a hard person to get rid of.*

Me: *That kind of makes you seem even more stalker-ish.*

I make sure to include a laugh emoji, just to be safe.

Remi: *Shit, I guess it does. Fuck it. I'm going all in here. So what do you say? You, me, The Wizard of Oz???*

Me: *I could maybe make that work.*

I hesitate to hit send, not really sure exactly what my reservations are, but definitely having some. I guess when you've spent the last year of your life just hoping for another day, another hour to get to spend with a person you love, you forget what it's like to live for the future.

Remi: *What would it take to convince you?*

Me: *I do like a man who begs.*

My finger hovers over the send button for a long moment before I finally just say screw it and send the damn thing.

I've never been someone who flirts or insinuates things so openly, but something about Remi just brings that side out of me. A side I honestly didn't even know I had until that night at Happy's.

Remi: *Oh, I'll beg all right. On my knees... With you spread wide in front of me.*

I swear every ounce of blood in my body rushes to my face in an instant, making my cheeks and neck flush with color. But that's not the only reaction my body has as my lower belly aches in the most delicious way, making me feel almost desperate.

Jesus... I wipe my hand across my forehead, convinced I'm sweating.

Remi: *But for now, how about I beg you over a turkey on rye.*

Confusion tugs at my brow as I briefly wonder how he knows my typical lunch order. But the thought is short-lived when a light knock sounds on my office door.

I startle so intensely that I drop my phone, which hits the desk at an awkward angle and bounces to the floor.

“Shit,” I grumble, leaning over to pick it up. “Yeah?” I call to whoever is on the other side.

Seconds later, the door swings open, and that confusion I felt moments ago... Yeah, that shit quickly turns to surprise when a large frame appears in my doorway, accompanied by a head of messy hair and a lopsided grin.

I swear the world tips sideways for a brief moment.

“What are you doing here?” My voice catches in my throat as Remi steps inside my office, his size making the already small room feel damn near claustrophobic.

“I thought that much was obvious.” His grin turns to a full smile as he plops down into one of the chairs across from me. “Turkey on rye, remember?”

“How do you know my lunch order?” I blurt.

“I make it my business to know everything I can about the people in my life.”

“So you’re stalking me then?” I feel my own smile move into place.

“Maybe a little.” He lifts his shoulder in a casual shrug.

“You really should call before you show up. You know I do work.”

“I know. I also know you don’t schedule any clients before two, so you have time to eat and update patient files from the morning so you don’t have to do all of them at the end of the day.”

“Should I be worried about how much you seem to know about my schedule?” I lift an eyebrow, leaning farther back in my chair as I cross my arms in front of myself.

“You work with my best friend. It really shouldn’t be that much of a surprise.” He chuckles, the sound washing over me like a summer breeze, warming me from the inside out.

“Remind me I need to talk to Aspen about that.” I cluck my tongue against the roof of my mouth, feigning annoyance.

“It’s cute that you pretend to be offended when, in reality, you actually love it.”

“Love what?” I play coy to cover the sudden nervousness in my chest.

I can't help it. He makes me incredibly nervous, among many other things.

"That I can't seem to get enough of you. To the point that I'm hounding my best friend every day to learn everything I can about you."

My heart kicks against my ribs so hard I almost gasp.

"I'm sitting right here. You want to know something, ask," I tell him in the calmest voice I can muster, which comes out way better than I expect, considering on the inside I'm fairly certain I'm seconds away from a total nuclear meltdown.

"You want to go to lunch with me?"

I snort out a laugh.

"What? That's a question." He smirks, his green eyes alive with humor.

"I guess technically it is." I glance at the clock on the wall to the right. "I have an hour."

"There's a lot I can do in an hour." His expression shifts to something darker.

"I'm sure there is. But for now, buying me a turkey sandwich will do." I stop him before he can say anything more.

I'm learning Remi has quite the dirty mouth, and while I never thought I'd like that on a man, I'm finding it's actually one of my favorite things about him. I've never met someone so unapologetically themselves, to the point that he just says what he feels in the moment, no matter how inappropriate it may be.

"As long as I get to spend it with you, you could read me the phone book for the next hour and I'd happily sit and listen."

"You're laying it on thick. Is there something you're wanting?" I tug my lower lip through my teeth to keep my smile from taking over my entire face. Probably because I know what he's going to say long before he says it.

"Do you want me to answer that question honestly?" It's his turn to quirk a brow.

"Do I?" I find myself saying aloud even though I never intended the question to slide past my lips. "Maybe we should just go get something to eat." I abruptly stand, grabbing my purse from the top drawer of my desk before looking up to find him already up and waiting at the door.

"So, about that date." He waits until I step past him into the hallway before following me out of my office.

“You mean the one for the dinner theater you already bought tickets for?”
I keep my focus forward.

“What?” he says innocently. “I was excited.”

“Micha.” I pause at the front desk to address the receptionist working today. She’s younger than me, a senior in college, I believe, though I don’t know her all that well given that she only works one day a week. She’s a cute girl. A little heavy-handed on the makeup, in my opinion, but still very pretty. “If Theresa asks, will you let her know I’ve stepped away for lunch.”

Her gaze darts to Remi and remains there for a long second before coming back to me, a look on her face I recognize all too well, probably because it’s the same look I wear whenever Remi steps into a room.

I think you’d be hard-pressed to find a woman, no matter her age, who doesn’t appreciate the way Remi looks. He really is that attractive. The whole package. The height. The muscles. The hair. The eyes...

“O-Okay, I’ll let her know.” Her focus returns to Remi, a slight pink hue touching her cheeks. “Hi, Remi.” She bats her fake eyelashes at him dramatically, and I’m torn between laughing or reaching over and ripping the damn things off.

“Hey, Micha.” He smiles casually, like the two are old friends. “You ready?” he asks me, completely unfazed by her reaction to him.

I guess he probably deals with that kind of thing a lot.

The thought causes a tiny ripple of jealousy to move through me.

I know that probably sounds absolutely ridiculous for a woman my age to say, especially when it comes to a man I barely know, but there it is just the same. I can’t help how I feel, even when it seems completely irrational.

The thought disappears the instant I feel his fingers wrap around mine.

“Bye, Micha,” he calls to the receptionist before leading me out the front door, making a show of swinging our joined hands as if he could almost sense the direction my thoughts had taken and wanted to quiet them.

“About dinner theater.” I wait until we’ve crossed the street. “I’d love to. I mean, as long as you’re sure you want to. We can do literally anything else. You don’t have to sit through something you won’t enjoy for my sake.”

He stops so abruptly that I walk two full steps ahead of him before I realize he’s no longer next to me, his grip on my hand tugging my arm backward.

The instant I turn back toward him, he pulls me close. As much as I hate any and all types of public displays of affection, I go to him willingly, my

body ignoring anything my brain tries to tell it. I am the moth and Remi is the flame. It really is that simple.

“You still don’t get it.” He tips my chin with a soft touch of his hand. “I want to do anything that involves you. Whether that’s sitting in a theater...”

“Or listening to me read the phonebook.” I finish what I already know he’s going to say.

“Exactly. I just want to be near you. Though, saying it out loud kind of makes me sound pathetic.”

“It’s not pathetic,” I tell him, my heart ramrodding so hard in my chest there’s no way he can’t feel the vibration of it.

It’s so strange, how a man I’ve known only days can make me feel more in one look than my fiancé did in the five years we were together. I’ve never felt such an immediate and intense attraction to someone as I do to Remi. I can’t even begin to explain how overwhelming it is to be in his presence, especially when he looks at me the way he is right now.

“We should... Um, get inside,” I say when a man hisses a curse of irritation after having to step around us in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Fine,” he grumbles, reluctantly releasing me.

Chapter Eight

Remi



“What are you doing here?” Aspen smiles as she opens the door, Grace tucked into the crook of her arm.

“I had some things to do not far from here. Thought I’d stop by and see the kids before I head back into the city.”

“Is that so? What kind of *things*?” She quirks a brow, stepping to the side to let me pass into the house.

“How’s my sweet angel today?” I ask instead, making gimme fingers at my niece the second Aspen closes the door and turns back to me.

“Well, she won’t eat, and she won’t sleep, so you tell me.” She blows out a puff of air as I take Gracie into my arms.

“Aww. She just needed some Uncle Rem-Rem. Isn’t that right, baby girl?” I nuzzle my face against hers, little strawberry-blond curls tickling my face as I do. Smacking loud kisses on her cheek, she lets out a little squeal of laughter. “What the…” I look down at my niece, who just let out what might possibly be the cutest freaking sound I’ve ever heard.

“Yeah, she laughs now,” Aspen tells me, touching the back of her daughter’s head with gentle affection.

“Since when? You didn’t tell me she was laughing.”

“It just started. Sutton blew raspberries on her belly when he was putting on her pajamas the other night and she just giggled and giggled. It really was the cutest thing.”

“I bet it was. So what’s the problem today then, huh?” I talk directly to Grace, bouncing her gently in my arms.

“I have no idea. She’s just been unusually fussy.”

“She doesn’t seem fussy to me.” I give her more kisses and am once again rewarded with her adorable little laugh.

“Of course she doesn’t now.” Aspen rolls her eyes, moving farther into the living room before plopping down on the couch with an audible sigh.

“Where’s Rand?” I ask, realizing how incredibly quiet the house seems.

“He’s taking a nap.”

“Did he just go down or has he been out for a while already?” I ask, taking the chair catty-corner from Aspen.

“He’s only been asleep a few minutes.”

“Well, poo.” I speak directly to Gracie as I reposition her in my arms. “I was hoping to get to spend a little time with my best bud.”

“If I remember correctly, you spent two hours in his room on Sunday building castles out of blocks.”

“And?” I arch a brow in her direction.

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re really here?”

“I told you; I was in the area. And you know I can’t get enough of these beautiful babes.” I smile down at Gracie, who seems rather content at the moment, despite what her mother said about being overly fussy today.

“And you expect me to believe that the reason you were *in the area* has nothing to do with a certain blonde you seem rather smitten with?”

“Why ever would you think something like that?” I grin.

“I knew it!” She smiles. “I knew you were downplaying your date last weekend. Trying to act like it was no big deal. Don’t think Sutton didn’t tell me about the little favor he did for you by letting you take her to the Hasten project.”

“She wanted to see the city. Couldn’t think of a better way to show her.” I lift one shoulder in a half-shrug, purposely playing coy.

“Why are you being so secretive all of a sudden? First, you give me short one-word answers about your date, not really telling me anything. And now, you just happen to be in the area where Kaia both lives and works, and you expect me to believe you being here has nothing to do with her. I know you a lot better than that. Now spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill.”

“Remington Jonathan, you are a shit liar.”

“Language.” I tsk. “There are little people present.”

“Oh, shut it. She’s too young to know what I’m saying. Why won’t you tell me anything? You asked for my help and now you’re just cutting me out. If I remember right, I’m a big reason why you got her to agree to a date to begin with.” She huffs, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

“I took her to lunch.” I finally give, deciding perhaps I’ve screwed with her long enough. “And for the record, I wasn’t purposely keeping anything

from you. I just didn't want to hash out the details of my date in front of the parents. You know my mom. If she gets even an inkling that this could actually be something..."

"She'll hound you about meeting her until you have no choice but to introduce them, and you don't want to come on too strong." She finishes the thought for me, knowing my mother well.

"Exactly." I nod. "We've been on one date. And you see how my mother reacted when I told her about that. If I tell her she's agreed to another, I'll never get her off my back."

"You asked her on another date?" Her smile grows impossibly wide.

"She told me on Saturday that her favorite movie is *The Wizard of Oz*, and I just happened to find a dinner theater doing a performance of it, and I might have bought tickets."

"When is it?"

"Next month." I brace for her reaction.

"Next month?" She damn near tips out of her seat she leans forward so far. "You must really like this girl."

"I thought that much was pretty obvious." I snort.

"Yeah, but I've never known you to plan anything that far ahead, let alone for a woman you barely know. Hell, I've never known you to go on a real date, much less two. Let me go out on a limb and say she didn't know you were going by the office today either, which means you surprised her at work and took her to lunch."

My smile must say it all because I can't say Aspen has ever looked at me the way she's looking at me right now.

"You really, really like this girl," she amends.

"I really do." I finally let myself admit out loud. "I don't know how to describe it. She just makes me feel..."

"Happy?" Aspen guesses.

"Yeah. And weirdly excited. Like, I feel like a fucking giddy teenager whenever she's around. That probably sounds ridiculous."

"Not at all. I actually understand what you mean because that's exactly how your brother made me feel. Hell, he still makes me feel that way. Like I'm floating on a cloud."

"I can't remember ever being so instantaneously drawn to someone. Like the second she rounded that corner and ran into me, I knew. I knew I had to know her."

“Again, I totally get it. I felt the same the first time I saw Sutton.”

“You really did love him all those years, didn’t you?” I ask a question I wouldn’t have been able to ask five years ago. Mainly because I wouldn’t have wanted the answer.

“From that very first moment. I still remember what he was wearing. The way he smelled. How I felt when his eyes met mine, like the whole world had just opened up beneath me.”

“You knew that quickly.” It’s not a question.

“I did. I mean, I didn’t know he would ever feel the same. But yes, I knew he was someone who could change everything. And, well...” She gestures around the room at nothing in particular. “I think it’s safe to say he did.”

“How did you know? I mean, that he felt it too?”

“I didn’t. Not until he came right out and told me. I mean, sure, I suspected, but you can never truly know how a person feels until they come right out and say it. Why? Are you worried she doesn’t like you back?”

“Am I that transparent?” I blow out a slow breath, glancing down at my niece, who is now fast asleep in my arms.

“Remi, I don’t think it’s humanly possible not to like you. Honestly, you are the most likable person on the freaking planet. I can’t say I’ve ever met a single person who doesn’t think you’re the best. Not to mention, you’ve never had a single issue picking up women. If you wanted her, she was yours.”

“That’s not a hundred percent true.”

A brief moment of understanding passes over her features.

Because there is *one* person I wanted, someone I was so sure I would spend my life with, and she’s currently sitting right in front of me. So I guess we can all see how that turned out. Even knowing that things landed exactly where they were meant to, it doesn’t change the fact that the only time I’ve truly offered my heart to another person, she chose someone else instead.

“That’s different, and you know it.” Pen shifts in her seat.

I don’t know how different it really was, if we’re being honest. Of course, I don’t say any of this to her. She always assumed my playboy tendencies were just that. She never once considered the reason why I only ever had sexual relationships with women and avoided any kind of emotional connection. It’s because all those years, I truly believed I had already met *the one* and was just bidding my time until she realized it too.

Needless to say, things took a turn I never saw coming. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy as hell for her and my brother, and I honestly wouldn't want it any other way. But that wasn't always the case.

Eventually, I did find peace with it all, and since then I've tried. I've tried to open myself up more and get to know people, but I've yet to meet anyone worth taking a risk on... Until Kaia, that is.

Not that I'm saying she's it for me or anything. It's way too early to know what might come of this. But unlike all the others who came before her, I actually want to stick around long enough to find out.

"Relationships are scary," Aspen continues after a moment. "Brand-new relationships are *terrifying* because you never really know the other person's true intent. It's okay to feel unsure."

"I guess."

"I know it's not easy for you to be emotionally vulnerable, hiding behind your witty charm and dirty mouth. But even if things don't turn out the way you want, at least you can say you were brave enough to take the chance." She glances at her daughter. "She's asleep, isn't she?"

I smile. "I told you, she just needed Rem-Rem."

"You know what, at this point, I'm just glad she's sleeping." She relaxes back onto the couch with a slow exhale.

"You look like you could use a nap yourself," I point out, just now noticing how exhausted she seems. Not that it's uncommon for her to look tired—she does have two small children—but today she looks even more so.

"I don't know what's wrong with me, but I just can't seem to get enough sleep. Even when I do sleep, it never feels like it's enough."

"Tell that brother of mine he needs to get up with Gracie from time to time."

"He does. Or at least, he tries. It's hard because I'm breastfeeding. Even if he gives her a bottle, I still wake up needing to pump. I do usually nap the days he's home, and your mom comes over every now and again to let me get some rest. I try not to complain too much, though, because I know I'm going to miss these days when they're gone." She smiles at the sleeping baby in my arms.

"Well, that's going to be a while. The way Sutton talks, you're going to have at least one more."

"He wants more. I'm not sure I do yet. Not because I don't love being a mom. I do. It's the absolute best thing I've ever done. But it's a lot of work,

and the more you have, the harder it is. I think two is the perfect number. One boy. One girl. Done.”

“I give it a year,” I tell her bluntly.

“A year?” She gapes at me.

“Before you’re pregnant again.”

“Not a chance.”

“Need I remind you, you said that after Rand was born and he was no more than crawling when you and Sutton decided you wanted another.”

“That was different. He was our first. I knew long before he was born that I wanted at least two.”

“I’m sticking to my earlier prediction. One year.”

“Whatever.” She rolls her eyes at me. “I think the next grandchild born should be yours. Can you imagine a little Remi running around?” She gives me a cheeky grin.

“I don’t even have a girlfriend yet. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“I mean, you kind of do.”

“We’ve been on one date,” I remind her.

“No, you took her to lunch. That’s two dates.”

“Fine. Two dates. Does that really make a difference?” I chuckle softly, trying not to wake Gracie. She doesn’t even stir.

“I guess in the scheme of having kids, not really.”

“Exactly.” I shake my head at her.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m getting way too ahead of myself, but the thought of you having kids, of my kids having cousins to play with, it just makes my heart so happy.”

“It can make your heart as happy as you like, as long as you realize it’s not going to happen anytime soon, if ever.”

“I know.” She huffs. “For the record, though, I think you and Kaia would make the most beautiful babies.”

“Way too fucking soon, Pen,” I groan, not sure how the fuck we got on this topic to begin with.

“You’re right. You’re right. Besides, they wouldn’t be the *most* beautiful because my kids hold that title. But yours would be second most beautiful.”

“Pen.” I give her a pointed look.

“Okay, no more baby talk.” She makes an X over her heart. “So when are you seeing Kaia again? I mean, other than a month from now.”

“I don’t know. We didn’t really discuss it at lunch, but I was thinking about asking her to the Commanders game on Sunday.”

“This Sunday? Meaning you won’t be at Sunday dinner?”

“Well, technically, I was still planning on coming. The game will be over by four, so I could easily make it here by five. Then again, if Kaia goes with me, I probably wouldn’t come.”

“Why not bring her here with you?”

“Absolutely not. I’ve only just started hanging out with the girl and you want me to bring her here? With my mother? She’ll have us walking down the aisle before Kaia’s ass ever hits the chair.”

I know that my mother’s behavior is entirely my fault. Product of me never bringing girls home when I was younger. To be fair, I did bring a girl home almost every day—Aspen. Though we were such close friends, I don’t think she ever considered that the same thing. And I guess, technically, it wasn’t.

“I guess that’s a good point.” Aspen’s quick to agree. “I take it your work gave out tickets again?”

Typically, when my manager gives out tickets to the luxury box our CEO owns, I usually go with another coworker or one of my college buddies because neither Sutton nor Aspen has ever been interested in going. Not that I’m really a huge football fan either. I mean, I like the game. It’s entertaining enough. But really, I just go for the free food and beer.

“Yeah.”

“It’s fine if you wanna skip this Sunday. I think you two will have a blast at the game.”

“Well, I haven’t asked her yet. She could say no.”

“If she agreed to a date a month from now, I think it’s a safe bet she’ll say yes to a date this Sunday. Why didn’t you just ask her while you were at lunch?”

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t want to overwhelm her. I had already asked her to the dinner theater thing. You don’t think it would’ve been too much to ask her to a game too?”

“One, you can never ask a girl out too much. If she likes you, she’ll take any excuse to spend time with you. Two, since when have you ever worried about coming on too strong? That’s kind of your thing.”

“It’s my thing when I’m not trying to do anything but sleep with the woman. This is different.”

“I can see that.” Her expression softens.

“I don’t want to scare her off.”

“Remi, I’ve seen the way she looks at you. I don’t think you have anything to worry about.” She gives me a soft smile. “But something tells me you already know that.”

“You’re right.” I sigh audibly. “I don’t know why I keep overthinking this shit. The worst she can say is no.”

“Exactly.”

“I just keep getting in my head, you know?”

“Trust me, I know that feeling all too well. When Sutton and I first started seeing each other, all I did was overthink everything. Every word he said. Every touch. Every expression on his face. I would replay things over and over in my head, thinking them to absolute death. That will go away... Eventually.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” I grumble.

“So are you for sure out for Sunday dinner because if so, I think I’m going to cancel with your parents and spend the day in my pajamas.”

“You deserve a day in your PJs.”

“I do, don’t I?” She smiles.

“Yeah, count me out. I’m going to ask Kaia if she wants to go, and if she says no, I’ll just get someone else to go.”

“She won’t say no.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe she’s busy.”

“She won’t say no,” she repeats a second time.

“Why? Because you’re some kind of psychic who can see the future and you’ve been keeping it hidden all these years?”

“Because sometimes a woman knows these things. Just trust me on this.”

“Yeah, okay.” I shift, stirring the sleeping baby in my arms.

One second, she’s sound asleep; the next, she’s looking up at me with big hazel eyes just like her mommy’s.

“Hello there, beautiful. Did you have a good nap?” I ask in my best baby voice.

“It wasn’t long, but maybe now I’ll be able to get her to eat.” Aspen stands, leaning over to take Grace from me.

“Well, as much as I love you, I think that’s my cue.” I push to a stand, kissing the side of Grace’s head. “Tell Rand that Uncle Rem-Rem has got a surprise for him the next time I see him.” I give Aspen a mischievous grin.

“Oh no, what this time?”

“Nothing too extravagant. Just the best Nerf guns money can buy.”

“You didn’t.”

“I picked them up at the store yesterday. I would have brought them today, but I didn’t know I was coming this way until I was already here.”

“Take your time.” She turns, walking me to the door. “And I do mean, take your time. I know how into things you two get, and I have a bad feeling about what the condition of my house will be in post nerf-gun wars.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be sure to clean up,” I tell her, tugging open the front door.

“Yeah, sure you will,” she murmurs under her breath loud enough that I can hear her.

“Well, thanks for letting me love on this little beauty.” I reach out and squeeze Gracie’s tiny foot.

“Thanks for getting her to sleep for a few minutes. She needed it.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” I step out onto the porch before turning back to Aspen. “Thanks for everything else, too.” I don’t need to elaborate. She knows what I mean.

“Always.” She grins, giving me a small wave seconds before closing the door behind me.

Chapter Nine

Kaia



“Wait. So the owner of your company owns this box?” I look around the luxury suite, complete with a buffet-style food set-up—sans food at the moment—and open bar.

“Technically, he doesn’t own it, but yeah, it’s his for the season. Upside of being in marketing. Land the right accounts and they come with some very nice perks.” Remi lifts a shoulder in a half-shrug, following my gaze around the empty room. “If you’re the CEO anyway.”

“Well, at least he lets you guys use it. Not everyone would be so generous.”

“Yeah, I guess. Usually, two or three times a season, he’ll give management a handful of tickets to give out.”

“And how is it that you were one of the lucky ones chosen?”

“Would you believe it’s because I’m incredible at my job?” He grins. “Which, for the record, I am.” He pushes away a chunk of hair that falls across his forehead in the sexiest freaking way. “It also doesn’t hurt that my manager likes me and we have a standing agreement that whenever tickets become available, he asks me if I want them first.”

“Well, that must be nice. For you, anyway. I’m sure your coworkers just *love* that.”

“Nah, they don’t care. Most of them don’t even watch football.”

“In truth, I was kind of surprised to learn that you do,” I say almost apologetically.

“Why? Do I not seem like the football type?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just that typically, when guys like football, it comes up pretty early on. My ex was a huge 49ers fan, and I swear that’s all he

talked about on our first date.” I realize too late what I’ve done. I’ve opened the door for him to ask me about Blake.

Then again, I haven’t said anything too damning. I’m twenty-seven years old. Of course I have ex-boyfriends.

“Is that right?”

“I’ve always liked football, but I’m not a diehard fan. I have been keeping tabs on the Commanders, though. I like to support the home team.”

“So did you watch the 49ers when you lived in California?”

I can tell he’s curious, but he doesn’t press me for information about the ex I just so casually mentioned like a freaking dumbass. At least, not yet.

“I did. Well, up until my mom got sick. Then I didn’t have the time or the desire to watch the game. It actually feels good to be at a stadium again.”

“So this isn’t your first game then?”

“No, I’ve been to several.” *With Blake*, I think but don’t say. “But I’ve never seen a game from a luxury box.” I turn, approaching the glass that gives off the most incredible view of the field below. “Usually I’m up in the nose bleeds. Suffice it to say, this is way better. Thank you.” I glance over my shoulder as he steps up beside me. “For inviting me, I mean. This really is incredible.”

“Thank you for agreeing.” The back of his hand brushes mine just enough that I know the contact is intentional, causing my stomach to twist in excitement.

I can’t help it. Remi is just so... overwhelming. He can look at me for the briefest moment and I feel like the world stops. He can touch me so gently it’s almost as if he didn’t touch me at all and yet I can feel the contact *everywhere*.

“Where is everyone anyway?” I ask, quickly pushing the thought away.

A suite this size, there’s no way we’re the only two people who are going to be in it. Though you wouldn’t hear me complaining in the least if we were. Then again, something tells me it could be standing room only and somehow it would still feel like we were the only two people in existence. Remi just has that way about him, where he can make you feel like you’re the only person in a room filled with people.

“They’ll be here soon. We’re pretty early,” he tells me, looking out over the field below.

“Yeah, I guess we are.” I glance over at one of the large screens that’s currently counting down to kickoff. There’s still an hour before the game

even starts and nearly every seat in the stadium is still empty.

His hand brushes mine a second time before his fingers close around mine. My heart is in my throat in an instant. And then he's turning toward me. I can feel his body shift. Feel his eyes on the side of my face, silently coaxing me to look at him.

"I know I already said this, but I'm really glad you're here." He pulls me impossibly close to where I have to lean my head all the way back to look up at him.

"Me too." I let myself admit, and it has nothing to do with football. If that weren't already painfully obvious.

I curse the slight hitch of my breath when his hand slides up the side of my neck.

"It's going to kill me to be here with you the entire afternoon and not be able to do this anytime I want." He leans down, brushing his lips against mine.

Screw my breath hitching. I'm pretty sure I forget how to breathe altogether.

"Well, then you better take advantage while you can," I murmur against his mouth.

I feel his smile first, then the slight parting of his lips. My mouth opens on instinct, warmth spreading through my limbs the instant his tongue slides against mine.

My hands find the back of his neck, pulling him deeper into the kiss. I've never been so desperate for someone as I am for Remi. I don't know how to explain it or even begin to rationalize it, but it's there just the same, overwhelming every single one of my senses until the only thing I can taste is Remi. The only thing I can smell is Remi. The only thing I *feel* is Remi.

"Fuck me..." Remi groans, nipping at my bottom lip. "You keep kissing me like that and I can't promise not to bend you over one of these chairs and take you right here and now."

My stomach coils tightly.

"Kissing you like what?" I press up on my tiptoes to deepen this kiss a second time. "Like this?" I purr, sliding my tongue against his.

I don't even know who I am right now.

I've never been this person. Someone who unapologetically takes what she wants simply because she wants it. But if my mom's illness taught me

anything, it's that nothing is guaranteed. And by God, if this is the last time I get to feel this way, I wanna make sure I don't look back with a single regret.

His hands find my backside, squeezing my ass roughly as he presses into me, making sure I feel every inch of his thick erection against my belly.

I don't know what it is about this man that makes me so ravenous, but that's the only way I can describe how I'm feeling in this moment. If we were anywhere else, I have no doubt I would be begging him to do exactly what he just threatened.

For someone so hell-bent on not being one of *those* women who give their bodies so freely, I sure am walking on very thin ice. So thin, in fact, that I can hear it crack and groan beneath my weight with every move I make. And yet, I feel powerless to stop any of it.

"Come home with me tonight." His panted words feel more like a plea than a request.

"I can't." I plant my palms on his chest and press just firmly enough that he pulls back to look at me.

"I didn't mean for that..." He moves to explain, misreading my expression. "I just want to spend some time alone with you."

"I didn't say I didn't want to." I touch the side of his face. "I said I can't. I have to work tomorrow, remember."

"But if you didn't, you would?" The corner of his mouth tips.

"Maybe." I shrug, tugging my bottom lip through my teeth to contain the smile that threatens to take over my entire face.

I don't know how to put into words what Remi has brought to my life. Ever since our *run-in* at my office a few weeks ago, I've gone from fumbling through life, unable to feel anything but my grief and guilt, to actually looking forward to each day as it comes. I'm excited, and hopeful, and... happy. I wasn't sure I would even recognize happiness if it bit me in the face, but there's no denying that's how I feel in this moment.

"Maybe, huh." He tugs me closer again, tipping my chin up with the back of his hand.

"Why don't you ask me again next weekend?"

"Yeah?" His entire face lights up, and I swear, it's hands down the most breathtaking sight. "You got plans on Friday?"

"I think I could make myself available. I mean, just to hang out, right?" I arch a playful brow, knowing full well there's no way I won't cave the instant we're alone at his place.

I may have a lot of willpower, but even I have my limitations.

“Of course.” He grins, probably thinking the exact same thing I am.

“Send me the details later,” I say, like we’re making some formal agreement.

“I’ll be sure to do that.” He chuckles, pressing another kiss to my mouth before reluctantly releasing his hold on me as the door to the suite swings open, revealing a middle-aged couple and two younger-looking teens.

“Remi.” The man looks from Remi at me and then back at Remi. “I heard you were going to be here.” The man approaches us, extending his hand to Remi as I do my best to put on a smile that doesn’t completely give away that just moments ago he had his dick pressed against my belly.

“Good to see you again, Jack. I appreciate the tickets.”

“My pleasure. I’m just glad Timmy didn’t end up with them. No offense to him, but he’s hard to watch a game with.”

“Trust me, I’m aware.” Remi chuckles.

“And who is this beautiful creature?” Jack smiles, revealing a row of teeth so straight and white there’s no way they’re natural.

“Jack, this is Kaia, my girlfriend. Kaia, this is Jack. He’s the CFO at Pulse Marketing.”

I’m too stuck on the fact that he just called me his girlfriend to think of a single freaking thing to say. I mean, honestly. We never even discussed being exclusive and he’s just introduced me as his girlfriend?

Maybe it was just easier to introduce me as such, I reason with myself, seeming to gain some semblance of thought when Jack extends his hand to me.

“Nice to meet you, Kaia.”

“Yeah, you too,” I blurt, heat rushing to my cheeks as I allow him to shake my hand.

“Remi, you remember my wife, Anna, and my kids, Josh and Jenner.”

“Of course.” He tips his head toward the back of the room where they’ve all three taken seats. “It’s nice to see you all again,” he says before turning his attention back to Jack. “Should be a good game today. Nice weather for it.”

I only half listen to Jack’s response or what Remi says back as my mind keeps drifting back to the girlfriend comment.

Is it really that *big* of a deal? I mean, so what, he referred to me as his girlfriend. We are kind of dating, I guess. We’ve been out together a few

times and we text pretty much all day every day. Hell, he's even called me a few times. In fact, last night we were on the phone until damn near 2:00 a.m.

Is it so far-fetched that that's how he would refer to me to one of his colleagues?

And yet, no matter how much I try to rationalize it, I can't make it feel any less significant. And if I'm honest, I liked that he referred to me that way. Not that I expected to jump into something just a few short months after ending things with Blake, but there's no denying the way I feel when I'm with Remi. It's so different than I've ever felt with anyone else. And I would be doing myself a huge disservice by not seeing this through.

Hell, I don't think I could walk away now, even if I wanted to. The coaster is already spiraling down the tracks, and all I can do is hold on tight and enjoy the ride. Sure, it may end badly, but it also may take me somewhere, that a month ago, I couldn't even begin to imagine.

Eventually, Jack rejoins his family while Remi and I take two seats right up against the glass as more people filter inside. Some stop and say hello, Remi introducing me the same way to every single person I meet. Others are people I assume Remi doesn't know considering he doesn't speak to them and they don't speak to him.

It isn't until the room is full and the game is about to start that Remi finally addresses the elephant in the room that has planted itself squarely on top of my chest.

"I... um, I hope it's okay." He leans in close so that only I can hear him. "What I said to Jack and the others."

"What do you mean?" I play stupid, but there's no way he doesn't see the lie all over my face.

"I didn't mean to assume or anything. I just... I wanted to introduce you that way because, well, I want you to be my girlfriend. I mean, if people even call each other that anymore," he rambles nervously.

For a man who always seems so sure of himself, it's actually kind of sweet to see him so unsure.

"I guess what I'm really saying is that I want to be exclusive. I want you to know I'm not going to be seeing anyone else, and I don't want you to either. Would that be okay?" He holds my gaze intently.

"Yeah," I finally say, pretty sure my heart has beaten an entirely new cavity in my chest. It seems preposterous that after only a couple of weeks of

really hanging out, we're already throwing a label on things. But at the same time, it feels more right than anything has felt in a long time.

Because I've actually worried about this. That he was seeing other people. That he would get off the phone with me and then be balls deep in someone an hour later. I'd be lying if I said I didn't lose sleep over the thought. So yeah, it feels good to hear him say that he wants to be exclusive. But it's also kind of terrifying.

I guess that's how I know I really like him. Because if I didn't, I wouldn't be scared.

"Yeah?" He smiles, the action crinkling the corners of his eyes in that cute way of his.

"Yeah," I repeat, giggling against his mouth when he leans in and kisses me.

Despite the fact that we're surrounded by at least a dozen other people, I don't pull away. In fact, I don't even consider pulling away. Maybe it's because it's just a brief press of his lips to mine, or maybe it's because I want his kiss more than I care about who sees us, and yes, that is definitely a first for me.

Tangling our fingers together, he smiles at me again. And not just your average smile. The kind of smile that touches every single inch of his face, overtaking his entire expression.

I don't know how, or when exactly it happened, but somewhere over the course of the last couple of weeks, I've started to develop feelings for Remi. And not just because I'm incredibly physically attracted to him—that much is obvious—but because of the man he's shown me that he is.

And if I were a betting woman, I'd say he feels the same way. You don't look at a woman the way he's currently looking at me if you're not at least a little smitten.

It seems so unreal to me that it's been only three weeks since Aspen sat in my office, promising me that Remi was one of the good ones, and all I could think was how absolutely full of shit she probably was.

Turns out, maybe I was the one full of it. Because he is everything she said and so much more.

"I changed my mind," I say after a brief moment.

"About what?" He hitches a single eyebrow in question.

"Maybe I can come over tonight after all," I tell him, feeling brazen.

He looks out over the field where the game has already started, but neither of us is paying any attention to it.

“Did I hear you say you don’t care about this game and you want to leave early?” He gives me a cheeky grin.

“Don’t push your luck.” I crinkle my nose at him.

“After the game.” He concedes with a visible pout, laughter bubbling from my throat at the sight.

“And you have to promise to have me home by ten,” I tell him, suddenly so nervous it feels like hundreds of butterflies have come alive inside my stomach.

“I’ll promise to bring you to the fucking moon if it means I get to spend even an hour alone with you.” He shifts and I quickly realize it’s to hide the erection pressing visibly against his pants.

“You know what, on second thought. Why don’t we get out of here?” I hear myself say, though I can’t quite believe the words that come off my lips.

Who am I? I find myself asking for the second time. I swear, I don’t recognize this version of myself. I have to admit, though, I kind of like this side of me. The side only Remi has ever brought out. He makes me feel sexy and powerful in a way I never have before.

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” He’s on his feet so fast that I’ve barely processed the movement before he’s tugging me upright as well.

At this point, most people are watching the game and no one pays us any attention as we quietly excuse ourselves from the room.

We’ve barely made it to the hallway when Remi shoves me into a small little nook next to the door, pressing me against the wall, his body like a rock against mine as his mouth covers mine in one swift motion.

I bite back the groan building in my throat as he kisses me so hard and deep that I feel the kiss all the way to my toes.

I know I said I wasn’t going to sleep with him, but when his hand slides down my side and slips between my legs, testing my reaction, even I know it was a lie.

“Fuck,” he breathes against my mouth. “If we don’t get out of here, I might fuck you right where you stand.”

His words have my lower belly clenching in the most delicious way. I’ve never craved someone so fiercely the way I crave Remi right now. His touch. His tongue. His... Well, you can guess the other part.

“Then what are you waiting for?” I blink up at him. “Get me out of here.”

Taking my hand again, he pulls me back into the hallway, walking so fast that I damn near have to jog to keep up with him. Not that I'm complaining. At this point, I'm just as hurried as he is.

An hour ago, I was so excited to watch a football game from a luxury box I could barely stand it. Now, the football game is the absolute last thing on my mind.

I have no idea how things escalated so quickly. All I know is that if I don't satisfy this deep, aching need building inside of me, I might combust at any moment.

We stop more than once on our way to the car, Remi finding little areas to stop and kiss me like I'm the very air keeping him alive. By the time we reach the parking garage, I'm wound so tight that when he shoves me against the car and grinds into me, I damn near come apart right there on the spot.

The drive to his place is even more tense because I don't have the distraction of his kiss or touch to keep my mind from wandering to places I don't want it to go.

Even still, when we arrive outside of a brick apartment building, doubt has already begun to take root.

Is this too fast?

Am I walking into something I'm not ready for?

Do I really want to do this?

But when Remi looks at me from the driver's seat, his eyes alive with desire, I answer my own question. Yes. Yes, I really *do* want this. I want *him*. In a way I've never wanted another person before.

I let that knowledge be my driving force. Let it guide me out of the car and up to his apartment, which it feels like we can't get to fast enough.

It isn't until he unlocks the door and guides me inside that my nerves really kick up a notch. It feels like my heart might give out at any moment it's beating so fast and hard, and you'd have to be blind not to notice the way my hands tremble as he kicks the door closed behind us.

I turn, watching him close the distance between us so fast I barely register his movements. His arms wrap around my middle, pulling me impossibly close. So close that I can feel the heavy beat of his heart that seems to mirror my own.

"We don't have to do anything you don't want to do," he reassures me, his warm breath dancing across my face.

"Shut up and kiss me already."

And he does. He kisses me so hard and deep that my entire body sings with delight.

We hit one wall and then bounce to another, knocking into random things as we move farther into the room. There's no tour. No welcome to my home. Nothing. Honestly, I'd be disappointed if he tried.

But like me, he's driven by only one thing...

Pure, carnal need.

I don't take a single moment to take in any of my surroundings, allowing him to guide me through the space. I have no real knowledge of where I am inside the apartment until the back of my knees hit a soft surface, seconds before I'm on my back on top of a pillowy mattress.

It's dark. Not so dark that I can't see Remi as he crawls up my body like the most lethal predator, but dark enough that he's about the only thing I can see clearly. And my God is he the most beautiful creature I've ever seen as he settles between my thighs, grinding into me through the too-thick confines of our clothes.

He dips down, kissing me slow, much different than the hurried nature of basically every other kiss we've shared in the last forty-five minutes, swiping his tongue along mine in a way that ignites every pore in my body, not a single inch of me unfazed by his tortuous assault.

His lips move to my jaw, dipping to my neck as he licks and sucks the flesh, making his way to my ear.

"Just tell me to stop and I will."

"Don't stop," I groan in response, already too far gone to even consider stopping a possibility. I paw at his back, working the material of his shirt up, desperate to feel his skin beneath my fingertips.

He rewards me with a slow, purposeful thrust of his hips, hitting me just right to make me cry out.

He's barely even touched me and already I feel myself starting to split apart at the seams.

He kisses just below my ear, sucking the soft lobe between his teeth before his lips move lower, across the base of my neck, tugging my shirt down to kiss across my collarbone.

"Too many clothes," he murmurs, rocking back to his knees, taking me with him in one quick motion.

My shirt is the first to go, followed by my bra, the articles tossed somewhere to the floor as my back once again hits the mattress.

Remi looks down at me for a long moment, and while everything inside of me is screaming to cover myself, the look in his eyes keeps me from doing so. Like a lion stalking his prey, his expression becomes almost animalistic.

His eyes trace every inch of my exposed flesh, making my skin prickle as his gaze moves along it.

“So fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, leaning down to kiss the swell of my breast before moving to the other.

I tense when he flattens his tongue and licks across my nipple, sending a wave of intense desire ricocheting through me. My back arches when he moves to the other side and repeats the process, the nub puckering on contact.

“You have no idea how much I’ve thought about this.” He sucks the nub into his mouth, gently twirling it between his teeth. “How badly I’ve wanted this.” My stomach twists violently when he moves lower, trailing kisses down my belly.

Stopping at the band of my pants, he inches it down, kissing across my abdomen to my hip and then back again before tugging the fabric down with very little effort. I’ve only just processed the movement before my pants and underwear are tossed in the air haphazardly, landing silently on the floor somewhere behind him.

I tense again as he nestles between my legs, my breath entering and leaving my lungs at an alarming rate as his face dips, kissing the inside of my thigh.

He moves at a leisurely pace, kissing and nipping the sensitive skin until I’m so worked up that I almost completely come undone when the first swipe of his tongue hits the bundle of nerves at my center.

An involuntary groan slides past my lips as I fist the blanket beneath me, holding on for dear life when another swipe of his tongue hits the mark, and then another and another until I’m fairly certain I’m seeing stars.

My body builds and aches in the most delicious way and I become so desperate for the feeling that my hips begin to move, shamelessly taking more and more from Remi until all of my nerve endings feel alive with electricity.

The build hits me fast and without mercy, a sound like I’ve never made before tearing from my throat as my orgasm peaks. Remi knows exactly how to touch me, applying the perfect amount of pressure with his tongue at just the right moment, sending me over the edge a second time with another guttural cry.

Wave after wave washes over me, my body trembling beneath Remi's assault. And he doesn't stop there. Not until he's milked every single ounce of pleasure he can from my body. Not until I'm begging. Begging for him to stop. Begging for him not to stop. Begging for him to be inside of me.

I'm so drunk with lust that I don't care how desperate I seem. I am desperate. Desperate in a way I've never been before. Like I would quite literally do anything to hold onto this feeling for as long as humanly possible.

"Tell me what you want," Remi groans, kissing his way back up my stomach and across my chest.

"You," I plead, my fingers finding his hair, tugging on the silky strands as I urge him higher.

"And what is that you want me to give you?" He kisses the crook of my neck, back up to my ear a second time. "Tell me what you want, Kaia," he purrs.

"I want you inside of me." I whimper when he grinds down against me, impossibly hard.

"Fuck." He hisses, pressing down into me again. "Are you sure?" His lips finally find their way back to mine. "Tell me you're sure." He kisses me slowly, swiping his tongue along mine so that I can taste every ounce of my pleasure on his tongue.

"I'm sure." I tug on his hair. "Please."

I feel him smile against my mouth.

"Say that again. Beg me."

"Please, Remi. I need to feel you inside me," I say shamelessly, too far gone to be even mildly embarrassed.

"Now how can I say no to that?" He kisses me again and I'm only vaguely aware of him rummaging for something in the nightstand beside us.

He doesn't break the contact until he's found what he's looking for. Rocking back on his knees, he looks down at me with hooded eyes as he finally removes the shirt I tried to tear off him earlier, revealing defined muscles that start at his chest and ripple all the way down his abdomen. He's so freaking beautiful that I have to fight off a wave of an entirely different kind of emotion. I watch in awe as he tears open a condom wrapper between his teeth, freeing his erection from the confines of his pants before sliding the rubber over his thick length.

It's impossible not to look, not to take in the incredible sight of his cock, heavy in his hand. The anticipation in my stomach only grows with every

second that passes.

When I glance up at his face, I find him watching me watch him, a satisfied smirk on his swollen lips. He likes what he's doing to me, and you know what, I like it too.

He lowers down on top of me, pressing me further into the mattress.

Lining up at my entrance, I don't have even a second to prepare before he sinks deep inside in one fluid motion, causing me to cry out from being filled so incredibly full all at once, stretching me impossibly wide as my body works to accommodate his size.

"Fuck, you feel even better than I imagined." He pulls almost all the way out before sliding back in so deep I swear I can feel him in my stomach. "You feel as good as you taste." His lips find mine as he sets up a relentless pace that has my body moving farther and farther up the mattress.

He's everywhere. There isn't a single inch of my body that can't feel the effects of his body inside mine and it's all meeting directly in the center, sending off tiny explosions through my limbs.

My nails dig into the skin of his back as a wave of pleasure, even more intense than the last, begins to build inside of me.

He must sense my nearness because he increases the pace, hitching his arm underneath my knee to give him a better angle. That's all it takes to send me careening over the side of the cliff without a fucking parachute in sight.

My vision blurs, my entire mind going blank, blocking out anything and everything that isn't pure and unadulterated pleasure. It overtakes everything until there is nothing left but this. His hands on my hips as he arches back, sinking even deeper inside of me as I pulse around him. The look on his face as his own orgasm begins to peak. And the roar he lets out when it finally takes him under.

He continues to move for a few more seconds before his body once again collapses on top of mine, the weight of him the most satisfying thing I think I've ever experienced.

His chest rises and falls against mine in rapid succession as he works to catch his breath. I have so many thoughts all at once.

How could I let this happen?

What was I thinking?

And the most prominent one of all...

When can we do it again?

“You are absolutely fucking incredible.” Remi pulls back just enough to be able to look down at me, his hand reaching up to brush matted hair away from my face.

“I try,” I croak, my throat hoarse. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Oh, just you wait.” He slides his nose against mine. “That was only the warm-up.” He twitches back to life inside of me.

“Is that so?” It’s the only thing I can think to say.

What am I supposed to say? That if that was the warm-up I may not survive the main event? Because that might actually be true.

And yet, no part of me wants to leave.

No part of me wants this to be over.

Hell, I’m pretty sure I won’t ever want this to be over.

And that, my friends, might be a big problem because it means one very important thing. I’m already in way too deep.

Chapter Ten

Remi



“I think maybe I never want to leave this spot,” I tell Kaia, whose back is pressed to my chest as we lie in the bathtub, bubbles surrounding us on all sides.

“I don’t know. You’re already starting to get pruney.” She glances up at me over her shoulder, a smile gracing her lips. Lips I can’t resist leaning down to kiss.

How does one describe the last six hours?

Incredible.

Amazing.

Phenomenal.

Fantastic.

Extraordinary.

And yet, none of those words seem to do it any kind of justice.

Kaia is... Well, fuck me, Kaia is *special*. And I mean that in the best fucking way possible. It didn’t take me long to figure out that she was different than the others. It wasn’t just about fucking her, but don’t get me wrong, that was... fuck, there are no words. But it was also just her. Her smile. Her touch. The little noises she makes when she’s about to come, which I have heard multiple times today and yet not nearly enough at the same time.

I can’t get enough of her. I’ve never felt this before. This undeniable draw to another person. Generally, any and all feelings I may have thought I could have for someone go out the door the instant I’m finished fucking them. I’ve never met a woman who made me want to stay.

But Kaia, she didn’t just make me want to stay. She made me never want to leave.

“Again?” She smiles against my lips when she feels the obvious signs of my arousal pressed into her back.

“What?” I dip my tongue inside her mouth, wrapping my hand around her throat to hold her in place. “It’s your fault,” I groan, pressing up.

“You keep saying that.” She slides my hand away from her throat, turning over to face me, causing the water to slosh over the sides of the too-full tub.

I get one look at her wet tits, suds clinging to her perfectly pink buds, and I know I’m a goner.

“I think maybe you’re just insatiable,” she practically purrs, her words caressing my ears as she straddles my lap.

“Only when it comes to you.” I look up at her, loving the sight of her on top of me.

“Is that so?” She positions herself over my cock. “Tell me how badly you want me.”

“So bad.” I try to press up, but she lifts, not allowing me to enter her.

“How bad?”

She’s fucking toying with me now, and fuck if I don’t love every second of it.

Fisting my own cock, I make sure she can see how hard I am as I pump my hand up the length.

“Bad,” I say simply.

“Would you beg for it?”

“Fuck yes, I would,” I groan when she lowers, teasing me at her entrance.

Leaning forward, she presses a slow kiss to my mouth, sliding her tongue seductively against mine.

“Then beg,” she whispers against my lips. “Seems only fair after all.”

“Please, Kaia,” I groan when she moves ever so slightly, allowing my cock to slide between her folds. “I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” She arches a brow.

“Anything. I’m on my knees here, not literally, but you get the picture. I would burn the fucking world if you asked me to.”

Something passes over her features, something I can’t quite place. I don’t have time to decipher it because, in an instant, she sinks down on my cock, and everything else fades into the background.

This is the first time I’m feeling her bare, having already had the safe sex talk earlier while lying in bed. She’s on birth control and knows she’s safe

with me. Otherwise, she wouldn't be doing this. And fuck me, am I salivating at the feel of her around me, so wet and warm I nearly come on contact.

She moves slowly, arching so that I'm hitting her in just the right spot. I see it the instant it happens, watch her face furrow in pleasure. Again, I have to fight off the urge to come way too fucking soon.

The water sloshes over the tub, crashing to the floor below, but I couldn't give two shits about the fucking floor right now.

My hands are on her hips now, my fingers biting into her flesh as I work to sink as deeply inside of her as I can get from this angle. You would think after a handful of mind-blowing orgasms that my body wouldn't be so primed for another, and yet, when she throws her head back, making my new favorite sound in the world, it overtakes me. I spill my release inside of her, not letting her stop moving until she's milked every last drop of it out of me.

Only then, when we're both sated and spent, does she collapse down onto my chest, my cock still buried deep inside of her.

I don't know how long we lie like that, an hour, a minute? All I know is that when she crawls off me, it's not nearly long enough.

"Where are you going?" I ask, loving the view of her naked, wet body as she stands above me.

"I really need to get going. Yiya is likely to send out a search party if I don't get home soon." She steps over the side of the tub and I can hear the squish of water under her foot when it lands on the rug.

"Can't you just text her?" I visibly pout, like the pathetic fucking tool I am.

"And say what? Sorry I'm not coming home because I'm too busy screwing the god-like man who is Remi Barnett." She slides a towel around her body, cutting off my view of her delectable tits.

"God-like?" I bark out a laugh.

"What?" She gestures to my body. "You do realize you look like you're carved from freaking stone. It really is unfair."

"Why is it unfair when it belongs to you?" I ask, not missing the way her features twist in the same unreadable expression as before.

"Does it?" she asks like she genuinely isn't sure.

I immediately push to a stand, my still semi-hard cock bobbing in the air as I do. Grabbing her arm, I tug her back to me, my hand finding the side of her neck as I dip down to meet her gaze.

“This is real.” My other hand slides up to the other side of her face. “You know that, right? Like, I didn’t just fuck you to send you on your way. I’m asking you to stay. You’re the one insistent on leaving.”

“I have to work tomorrow.” She weakly excuses. “You don’t have to drive me or anything. I can order an Uber.”

“You don’t know me very well if you think there’s a chance in hell I’m letting you leave my place in a fucking Uber.” I press my lips to her mouth in a soft kiss. “If you need to go, I’ll get dressed and take you. But will you at least let me feed you before you leave?”

“Okay.” She nods ever so slightly.

“Okay.” I kiss her again, stepping over the side of the tub.

“You know, you’re not at all like I imagined you’d be,” she muses, watching me wrap a towel around my waist.

“How so?”

“I had you pegged for a cocky, arrogant playboy, and while you are cocky, you’re also surprisingly sweet.”

“And killer in bed,” I tack on with a grin.

“And killer in bed,” she concedes, a soft laugh slipping past her lips.

“Admit it, you like me.” I nudge her chin with the back of my hand as I move in closer again.

“I think that’s pretty obvious. I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Well, in case you need to hear it, I like you. And I mean, I really...” I kiss her lips. “Really.” Another kiss. “Like you.” My arms are around her in an instant, my tongue sliding against hers.

I feel her towel shift, followed by the warm press of her skin against mine.

“Maybe I could stay just a little longer,” she groans into the kiss, her arms coming up around my neck.

“Thank fuck,” I mutter into her mouth as I rip off my towel, grab her under the ass, and hoist her up. “Because I am not even close to being done with you yet.”

With that, I carry her back into the bedroom and proceed to fuck her with the sole purpose of making sure she will be able to feel the remnants of our time together when she wakes up tomorrow deliciously sore. Because then I know that when those beautiful eyes of hers flutter open, I’ll be the very first thing that crosses her mind.

And fuck if that doesn’t make me one happy son of a bitch.



“You had sex, didn’t you?” It’s the first thing I hear when I press the phone to my ear, Aspen’s hushed voice on the other end.

“Excuse me?” I croak, not yet fully awake.

“Kaia. You had sex with her!” It’s not a question.

If she could see the huge smile that takes over my entire face at her words, there would be no denying she’s right.

“Why would you say that?” I try to keep my tone even.

It’s not so much that I care that Aspen knows. It’s that I don’t want to tell her in case Kaia wants to keep it under wraps for now. Which I would know had I asked her, but I was too busy fucking her at the time so...

“Because I have eyes,” she whisper-hisses, and I quickly realize she must be at the office.

“I’m confused.” I continue to play dumb.

“If you didn’t screw her, someone did. You should see her. She’s practically skipping around the office, and let’s just say I don’t think she’s stopped smiling since she walked through the door three hours ago.”

The sight of Kaia flashes through my mind, Aspen’s words causing my chest to stir in the strangest way.

Yesterday was... Let’s just say it will go down in history as one of the best days of my life. And not just because I fucked Kaia on every imaginable surface of my apartment, but because I also got to spend some real time with her—talking and laughing. She has the most amazing laugh too. Like I could record that shit and play it on repeat over and over again and never tire of the sound.

And when I drove her home, it was the most comfortable I think I’ve been with another person outside of Aspen.

The thought brings me back to the present and something else Pen said registers...

“Three hours?” I bolt upright, searching for a clock. “What fucking time is it?”

“Almost eleven. Why? Are you not at work?”

“I took a half day. Wasn’t feeling great last night,” I lie, which feels bitter on my tongue because lying to Aspen isn’t something I’m accustomed to.

“Wasn’t feeling great or stayed up way too late with a certain someone I think we both know?”

“I gotta go, Pen. I need to get my ass to work.”

“Remi!” I can quite literally see her face furrowed into a pout.

“Talk later. Love you.” I hang up before she can say anything else.

Trust me, I want to tell Pen everything. She’s my best friend. If I can’t tell her, who can I tell? But something about sharing this with her feels wrong. Like a betrayal to Kaia somehow.

I mean, it’s not like Aspen tells me about her and Sutton’s relationship. Not that I’ve ever really asked. She loves him, he loves her, they have kids, so I can imagine what happens behind closed doors, but we don’t actually talk about it.

Maybe there are some things that even best friends can’t share, especially ones with a past like ours.

I hoist myself out of bed, muscles I didn’t even know I had screaming in protest the instant my feet hit the floor. I smile, despite the discomfort, because I know how those muscles got sore and fuck me if I can’t wait to work them again, and again, and again.

My mind flashes back to Kaia as I quickly dress and brush my teeth. The way she looked at me when I walked her to her door, almost like she was trying to decide if I was real. Weirdly enough, I felt the same way. Like I expected to close my eyes and then open them and she’d be gone.

I don’t have to have a lot of experience with relationships to know that this feeling I have with Kaia, it doesn’t come around often.

I thought after Aspen, maybe I’d be lucky enough to find someone who makes me feel even a fraction of what I felt for her. But Kaia, she doesn’t make me feel anything like I did with Aspen. What I feel for her is something all of its own. Uniquely hers in every way, as it should be.

So yeah, maybe I’m getting a little ahead of myself, but I can’t help it. When you feel this good, it’s hard not to lose yourself in it.

I don’t bother fixing my hair, settling for running a quick hand through the strands on my way out the door. I stop at a coffee shop on the corner of my block, grabbing a quick cup of coffee before heading to the office.

Somehow, I manage to walk in five minutes ahead of when I said I’d be here, though when I enter my office, I still feel rushed, like my body hasn’t

quite caught up with the fact that I made it.

My ass no more than hits the chair when Travis appears in the doorway.

“Morning, princess.” He smirks over his cup of coffee. “Was starting to think we weren’t going to see your pretty face today.”

“Unless you actually need something, I’m gonna need you to go ahead and fuck off,” I tell him jokingly.

Travis is one of my only *real* guy friends. I mean, I have a lot of friends, but none that I talk to on a daily basis. Then again, we are around the same age and we work together, so that’s kind of a given.

“A little birdie may have chirped in my ear this morning about you and a certain blonde in the luxury suite at the Commanders game. I hear you two left just a couple of minutes into the game and in quite a hurry and never returned. Wonder what was so important.” He chuckles, fully entering the office before he proceeds to plop down in one of the two chairs opposite me.

“Who told you that?” I move my mouse, powering up my computer like I couldn’t be less interested. There were a few of my coworkers there yesterday. In hindsight, maybe I should have made a more stealthy departure, but in my defense, I wasn’t exactly thinking clearly.

“She said she spoke to you.”

“Fucking Margie,” I groan.

She’s Jack’s receptionist and has been known to be quite the gossip, something I hadn’t really considered yesterday. But again, wasn’t actually thinking with the right head at the time, if you know what I mean.

“So who’s the lucky lady?” he asks condescendingly.

“Fuck off, T.”

“Oh, come on, Rem. You know I live vicariously through you. Tell me everything.”

“What are we, fourteen-year-old girls?” I bark out a laugh.

“I can’t help it if my life is boring as shit. I wish someone had told me marriage is so fucking boring.”

“Stop it. You’d be lost without Trace.”

“Okay, yeah, so maybe that’s true. But she also makes me stay home on the weekends and watch home renovation shows. Man, I used to tear the town up. Now I’m watching some random woman trying to pick out tiles for her shower.” He runs a hand through his dark hair, blowing out a slow puff of air.

“Trust me, tearing up the town isn’t as fun as it used to be. Everyone has to grow up eventually.”

“Except you, apparently.” He gives me a knowing look. “So who was she this time?”

“You’ve met her, actually.”

His eyebrows shoot up in question.

“At my birthday party,” I remind him. “Gorgeous blonde. Big blue eyes.”

“Oh, trust me, I remember.”

I have the sudden urge to take him by the collar of his freshly pressed button-down and tell him he better keep his fucking eyes to himself. The reaction comes on so fast and strong that I have to take a moment to collect my shit.

What the actual fuck...

“So are you two like a thing?” He gives me a curious look.

“Something like that,” I confirm with a stiff nod.

What can I say? I’m a guy and guys aren’t really known for sharing many details.

“Well, fuck me.” He leans back, a wide smile on his face.

“What?” I try to act like I don’t know why he’s looking at me the way he is.

“Could it be? *The Remington Barnett* has finally met someone?”

“Why do you say it like that? *The Remington Barnett*,” I mock him.

“Dude, no offense, but if I had a dime for every woman you’ve fucked, I’d be rich.”

“You act like I’ve stuck my dick inside of every woman in the city.”

“Maybe not every...” He laughs.

Okay, so yeah, I’ve gotten around. One-night stands were kinda my forte because it was the only way to get my dick wet without forming any kind of emotional connection to another person. When you think you’ve already found your person, you stop looking for anything else.

But, turns out, the joke was on me. Because my person didn’t turn out to be my person at all, but my brother’s. Which is about as fucked as it sounds. I mean, obviously we’re all good now, but yeah, a lot of my twenties were wasted spinning my wheels because I thought I already had it all figured out.

The last five years, though, it’s not like I haven’t tried. I just haven’t met anyone I was even remotely excited about. Until now, that is.

“Fuck you,” I bite.

“Seriously, though, bro. Are you two like actually dating?”

“We are.”

“Well, fuck me.” He slaps his knee. “Guess I don’t have to wonder why you two ran off yesterday then. I can use my imagination.” He lifts his eyebrows suggestively.

“I would rather you not,” I tell him pointedly.

“We should go out on a double. Trace would love that. She’s always complaining that I need more grown-up friends since most of mine are single.”

“Let’s give it a bit, yeah? I mean, we literally just made it official yesterday. I’d rather not throw her into the fire first thing.”

“Did you just refer to me and my wife as the fire?” He laughs.

“You know what I mean. I don’t want to overdo it first thing.”

“You must really like this girl,” he observes.

“Am I that obvious?”

“Yeah, you kind of are.” Laughter vibrates his words.

“If you’re done busting my balls now, I really do need to get to work.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” He pushes to a stand. “I’ll see you later, *lover boy*.” He waves his fingers at me daintily as he exits my office.

“Motherfucker,” I mutter under my breath, turning my attention to my computer, where I try, and fail, to focus on work for the next couple of hours.

Turns out, I’m not very good at not thinking about someone when all I want to do is think about them.

I make it a whopping hour before I finally cave and text Kaia.

Me: *Can I see you tonight?*

I hit send without giving myself time to overthink it.

I watch dots instantly appear on the screen and then disappear, only to reappear again.

Kaia: *That depends. Will there be food this time?*

I smile at her response.

I guess I should have realized that I never actually fed her yesterday until I literally heard her stomach growl in the car on the ride home. I felt fucking horrible, but to be fair, I was kind of distracted.

Me: *Anything you want.*

Kaia: *What time?*

My fingers can’t type fast enough.

Me: *I can pick you up around six thirty.*

Kaia: How about I just meet you at your place? I do have a car.

Me: You sure? I'm happy to pick you up.

Kaia: I'm sure. I'll text you when I'm on my way.

Me: Can't wait.

"I recognize that smile." The familiar voice draws my gaze away from my phone. "Who is she?" My eyes land on blond hair, cut short to the middle of her neck, then to red lips, and finally, to amused eyes.

"Liv, what the hell?" I'm on my feet in an instant, crossing the space to tug her lean body into a hug. "I didn't know you were in town," I say, quickly releasing her so I can get a good look at her face.

She looks younger with her hair cut short like this, but I have to admit, it suits her.

"I was going to call, but I thought it would be more fun to surprise you." She smiles, following me farther into the office when I gesture for her to sit down, taking the seat next to her.

"What brings you to D.C.?" I ask. The last time we spoke, which was just a couple of months ago, she was still living in Chicago and still working for the same company she worked at with Sutton.

Long story short, Olivia is my brother's sort of ex. Though I don't know if you can actually call her that because the two were never actually exclusive, no matter how much she wished they were. She actually found out about Sutton and Aspen long before I did, and somehow, the two of us bonded over the whole thing and have been friends ever since.

I will admit, I was attracted to her when we first met, but the fact that she was with my brother in any capacity made her off-limits from the jump. Even if their relationship wasn't serious and Sutton discarded her like yesterday's news, I have a pretty strict no fucking my brother's leftovers rule. There was only one person I was willing to make the exception for, and even then, deep down, I knew I would never be able to get past the fact that Aspen had been with Sutton.

Olivia and I don't see each other that often, but we check in every now and again to see how the other is doing. I sure as shit never expected to look up and find her standing in my doorway.

"I'm actually here on business. My boss has a meeting with one of the builders here, and when the opportunity presented itself to tag along, I jumped at it. Figured it would give me a chance to pop in and see you."

"Well, I'm glad you did. How have you been?"

“Really good actually.” She extends her left hand, showing off the diamond ring sitting proudly on her third finger.

“Ian proposed?” I take her hand, eyeing the impressive diamond.

“He did.” She smiles widely.

Olivia kind of got the raw deal with my brother. I was really happy for her when she told me she had met someone new. She never said it to me directly, but I know she loved Sutton, and he really hurt her. It’s good to see her doing so well.

“Congratulations. That’s fucking incredible.”

“Thank you.” She smiles down at the ring. “After everything, it feels good to be happy again.” She meets my gaze. “Speaking of happy, what was that I just walked in on?” She gestures to the phone still clenched in my hand.

“Nothing.” I shake my head.

“Didn’t look like nothing.” She calls my bluff, able to read me easily after all these years.

“I may have met someone.” I let myself admit.

“Shut up!” She smacks my knee. “Who? Tell me everything.”

“It’s still really new, so there isn’t a lot to tell. Her name is Kaia. She actually works with Aspen.” I don’t miss the way her features shift.

“You don’t think maybe that could get a little messy?”

“No. Aspen is still my best friend. She wants me to be happy. What happened in the past, it’s just that. In the past.”

“No, I know that you’ve made your peace with Sutton and Aspen and that you’re all still really close, but what does *she* think about it? Kaia, I mean.”

“About what?”

“You know, all of it. You and Aspen and Sutton and that whole mess.”

“Well, she doesn’t actually know.” I clear my throat.

“Remi.” She shakes her head at me. “You know better than anyone what it’s like to have things hidden from you. If you actually like this girl, you should tell her before things go any further. How would you feel if you learned she used to be in love with someone you’re close to?”

“I see your point.” I can’t help but admit, because, well, I do. “Enough about me.” I’m quick to move on from the conversation, knowing it’s not a problem I can solve right now. “Tell me more about you. How long are you in town for?”

“Just today. Our meeting was this morning. Our flight leaves tomorrow at nine a.m.”

“Well, shit.”

“So are you gonna invite an old friend out for a drink or what?”

The thought of canceling on Kaia makes me want to curl into a ball, but knowing I don’t get to see Liv often, I can’t see another way out of it.

“Of course I am,” I finally say with a smile.

“What time do you get off?”

“Should be finished by five thirty or so.”

“I’ll meet you at your place at six?”

“Sounds like a plan.” We both stand.

“It’s so good to see you, Remi.” She pats my cheek. “You’re just as handsome and stupid as always.” She grins.

“Need I remind you that you dated my brother?” I take a playful jab at her.

“Fair.” She laughs. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you then.” I follow her to the door, not leaving my doorway until I’ve watched her step onto the elevator.

Plopping down behind my desk, I pull up the text thread between me and Kaia. Typing and erasing no less than twenty messages before finally settling on the truth... of sorts.

Me: Can we reschedule for tomorrow? I had a friend unexpectedly come to town who wants to meet for drinks.

I wait for her response... It never comes. I consider texting her again but decide against it. She’s probably with a patient and will text me when she can.

Checking the time, I realize that if I want any hope of getting out of here in time to meet Olivia, I better get my ass in gear. So that’s what I do. And no, I don’t obsess over the unanswered text more and more as time passes. Because that would make me pathetic, right?

Right?

Chapter Eleven

Kaia



“Do you need anything before I leave?” I stop by Aspen’s office on my way out the door, honestly surprised she’s still here this late.

I got held up with a patient and am just now finishing up for the day, even though I agreed to meet Remi in less than an hour. If I book it, I can still make it in time, but I’ll have to drive straight there, and since my phone is dead—thank you cheap-ass charger—I’ll have to keep my fingers and toes crossed that I can remember the way. Though I do have a charger in my car, so hopefully it will charge enough on the drive over that if I get turned around, I can use my phone to find it.

Just the thought of seeing him again so soon after what happened yesterday has my stomach swimming with an array of nerves and excitement. I still can’t believe I let him get me into bed so easily. Then again, who could really blame me—look at the man. He’s been practically begging me with those seductive eyes of his since the moment I met him.

Aspen looks up, a smile touching her lips.

“No, I’m good. Just had a couple of things to finish up since I won’t be back in the office until Thursday. Why are *you* here so late?”

“Appointment ran over. Well, if there’s nothing you need.” I start to back out of the doorway but stop when she stands.

“Give me just a second and I’ll walk out with you.” She starts to gather her things and despite the fact that I really don’t have the time to wait for her, I do so as patiently as I can muster.

“Okay.” I watch her slip on her coat.

“So I take it things are going well between you and Remi?” She drapes her purse over her arm before moving toward me.

“I... uh...” My tongue suddenly feels too heavy to spit out the words I try to say next.

Certainly, he didn't tell her already, right? Then again, she *is* his best friend. Even still, I don't know how I feel about him sharing such things without at least checking with me first. I mean, I have to work with this girl, for heaven's sake. Talk about freaking awkward.

“Don't worry.” She smiles, reading my reaction perfectly. “He didn't tell me anything.” I turn, allowing her to pass me in the doorway before following her into the hall. “But I like to think I'm a pretty perceptive person, and when you take how happy you've seemed all day coupled with the fact that when I spoke to Remi earlier he gave me an epic blow-off, I can connect the dots from there. So...” Her gaze drifts to the side of my face as we make our way outside. “Are you going to tell me how things are going?”

“Well...”

My nonanswer is answer enough because when I pull to a stop next to my car that is parked beside hers, there's a wide, knowing smile on her face.

“I knew it.” She clasps her hands together. “You two slept together.” She practically squeals, immediately backpedaling when I grimace. “Sorry, got over excited for a moment.”

“It's fine. It's just all happening so fast...”

“That's how it happens sometimes. Sutton and I... Well, let's just say within a week of reuniting as adults, we were going at it like rabbits. You get no judgment from me. I know what it feels like to be seduced by a Barnett brother. They are a special breed them two.” Her smile softens. “You really like him.” It's not a question.

“I do,” I weakly admit. “Does that make me pathetic?”

“Are you kidding? Of course it doesn't. Remi, on the other hand.” She chuckles to herself. “You've got that man so twisted I don't think he knows which way is up anymore. Thank you.”

My forehead furrows in confusion. “I'm sorry?” I question, trying to decide if she just thanked me for sleeping with her best friend because if she did, that's totally weird.

“Thank you for making him happier than I have seen him in a very long time. I told you he was a great guy.” She nudges my arm. “And I know that he's my best friend and all, but if you want to talk about him, or about anything really, you can always come to me. I promise to be as impartial as possible.”

“I know. And I appreciate that,” I tell her, really needing to get a move on. “Well, I hate to rush off, but Remi is actually kind of waiting on me.”

Another smile splits her face in two.

“Well, in that case, don’t let me keep you.” She backs away slowly. “Tell Remi I say hello.” She’s still grinning like a fool when she unlocks her door and slips inside her car.

Shaking my head, I climb into my own car, settling into the driver’s seat before snapping my seat belt into place. As soon as the engine purrs to life, I plug my phone into the charger and quickly pull out of the parking lot.

Traffic is pretty light until I hit the freeway, which is bumper to bumper the entire way into the city. It’s not a standstill, but it’s slow enough that I grow more and more anxious by the minute. I’m sure Remi won’t care that I’m late, but *I* care. I pride myself on being a punctual person.

It’s quarter after six when I finally pull into the lot across from his building. Grabbing my phone, which now has thirty percent battery, I pull up my messages to let him know I’m here, only to see that I have an unread message from him already sitting in the thread. Clicking on it, I could seriously almost cry with what I read.

A friend is in from out of town and they’re going out for drinks instead... Fucking great. I rush out of work, stress the entire drive here, only to find out he canceled on me hours ago and I didn’t even know it.

Great... Just great.

This is totally my luck.

Restarting my car, I text Yiya to let her know I will, in fact, be home this evening, before dropping the phone onto my passenger seat. I’ve just shifted the car into reverse when movement in front of me catches my attention.

In an instant, I feel everything tip on its axis. Because right in front of me is the proof I knew would surface eventually. Remi exiting his building with a busty blonde who’s got her arm locked through his as they step out onto the sidewalk.

I watch in horror as he leans down and says something into her ear, to which she throws her head back on a laugh that I can almost hear if I try hard enough.

That. Motherfucker.

I’m half a mind to pound the gas pedal and run the asshole over. Or at the very least jump out of this car and give him a piece of my mind. But of

course, I do neither of those things. Because at the end of the day, the fault is mine and mine alone. I knew better.

Tears sting the backs of my eyes.

A friend came to town and wants to meet for drinks... Yeah, okay. Seems more like he wanted to stick his dick in someone else tonight and gave me the most generic freaking blow-off he could come up with.

My knuckles are ghost-white as I grip the steering wheel with all my might, willing myself not to cry. A man who would do me this way doesn't deserve my tears. Doesn't make holding them in any easier unfortunately, and it's only a matter of seconds before the first one falls.

God, how stupid am I?

I grab my phone, pulling up my mom's number, crying harder when I realize that no matter how many times I call it, she won't answer. The only person I want to talk to, the only person who would listen and comfort me with zero judgment, the only person who loved me unconditionally, and she isn't here anymore.

Dropping my face into my hands, sobs rack my shoulders as the last few months fully catch up to me. Don't get me wrong, I've grieved. I've grieved so hard I didn't think I would ever stop. But I've never fully let myself just let it go.

So, in the middle of a parking lot, across from the apartment of a man who used me and lied to me, I open the floodgates and let it all pour out.

Every emotion.

Every ounce of pain.

The loss of my mother.

The loss of my life.

The loss of a man I agreed to marry...

If he could see me now. I'm sure he would get great satisfaction in knowing that I ran so far and fast from him that I wound up in the arms of a man who only wanted one thing.

I was so sure, though...

The way Remi spoke to me. The way he treated me. The lengths he went to... Did he really do all that just to fuck me? It seems inconceivable, and yet, the truth just hit me in the face like a boulder falling from the sky.

I can make excuses all I want. I saw what I saw, and there is no unseeing it.

I don't know how long I sit here, only that when I finally put my car back in gear and back out of that parking lot, my entire body aches and my eyes hurt so badly, I can only imagine what they look like. Not that any of that matters.

All I want to do is go home, curl up under my blankets, and forget this entire thing ever happened.

Only something tells me Remi is not someone so easily forgotten.

Doesn't mean I'm not going to try like hell to do just that.



Remi: *Why aren't you texting me back?*

Remi: *Did I do something wrong?*

Remi: *Can you at least let me know you're okay?*

I scroll through the dozens of messages Remi has left me today, not bothering to answer a single one.

Dropping my phone down onto my desk, I scrub my hands over my face, glad the day is almost over. I didn't sleep well last night, for obvious reasons, and I am definitely feeling it today.

I'm still really sad over everything, but more than anything, I'm embarrassed that I fell for his whole spiel so easily. Or that he thinks I'm too stupid to have figured it out, which is why he keeps texting me like he didn't just use me and lie to me. Guess he figured he'd try to get in a few more rounds before he finally went in for the K.O.

I had planned on staying until five to catch up on some files, but I honestly don't think I have it in me to stay another minute.

It was easier when I had appointments to fill my time and occupy my mind, but now, just sitting here, it's driving me crazy.

The only saving grace to this horrible day is that Aspen isn't here. I wonder how she'll react when she learns what Remi did. Will she try to defend him? Will she be angry with him? Will she take his side?

I shake my head.

I may not know Aspen well, but she doesn't strike me as the kind of person who condones this kind of behavior. Then again, I know her even less than I know Remi, and we all see how that played out.

Gathering my things, I quickly power off my computer and head for the door.

Yiya no doubt has a seven-course meal prepared after the way I unloaded on her last night. It wasn't my intention to tell her anything, but as soon as I walked in the door and looked into the eyes of the woman who resembles my mother so much, I broke down and told her everything.

She offered to cut him up into tiny pieces and serve him as stew, claiming no one would ever find the body that way. It did manage to bring a smile to my lips, but it was incredibly short-lived.

I shouldn't feel so devastated by this. I mean, yeah, we slept together. So what? It's not like we have been together months, or even years, and I caught him cheating on me. But weirdly, that's how it feels.

He asked me to be exclusive, screwed me on every conceivable surface of his apartment, and then blew me off for another woman the very next day?? I just can't wrap my head around it.

Like, who does that?

"Micha, I'm heading home for the day. If anyone calls, will you forward them to my cell, please?"

She's too busy scrolling on her cell phone to actually look up at me, but she at least has the decency to acknowledge she heard me.

"Yep." She pops her lips.

How she still has a job here is beyond me. Then again, I'm learning she saves her true colors just for me. I don't know why she doesn't like me, but it's clear she doesn't.

"Thanks," I grumble, half a mind to tell her how unprofessional and lazy I think she is.

Not today, Satan, I think to myself.

I may be in a shit mood, but that gives me no right to take my stuff out on other people. At least, that's what I think until I step outside and look up, narrowly avoiding a head-on collision with the absolute last person I want to see today.

"Hey." Remi cuts off my path when I attempt to keep walking, a lethal concoction of anger, jealousy, and disappointment stirring in my gut.

Why am I not surprised that he would just show up here...

"Get out of my way." I grit my teeth, refusing to look at him.

"What's wrong?" He tries to dip down to meet my gaze, but I quickly jerk my head to the other side.

“Nothing. Now please move.” I attempt to step around him again, to no avail.

“Kaia.” The confusion in his voice brings a laugh bubbling to my lips. How dare he.

How dare he show up here after what he did and then act confused by my reaction.

“What’s going on with you?”

My heated gaze slices to his, and even though I could damn near breathe fire I’m so mad, the look on his face gives me pause.

“You must think I’m really stupid,” I say much more calmly than he deserves.

His brows furrow deeper.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know damn well what I’m talking about. Your *friend*...” I sneer. “You know, you went through an awful lot of trouble to fuck me when you could have just had someone like her all along.” When I move to step around him this time, he lets me, but that doesn’t mean I don’t feel him on my heels as I jog across the street to where my car is parked.

I unlock it with the key fob, but before I can get the door open, Remi’s large frame presses into it, cutting off my ability to get inside.

“Is that what this is about?” he asks, almost like he finds it funny, which only fuels my anger more.

“Fuck you, Remi,” I spit, half a mind to slap him across his stupid, smug face.

“Kaia, I didn’t fuck her.”

“You can’t actually expect me to believe that. I saw you two. I saw the way you were hanging all over each other.” I will myself not to cry with everything that I have. “My phone died, so I didn’t see your text.” I don’t give him a chance to interrupt. “So I was sitting across from your apartment building when the two of you came out.”

Understanding crosses his face. Like he could possibly understand anything, the dick bag.

“I promise, it’s not what you think.” He dips down to meet my gaze.

“Don’t insult me further by calling me stupid.”

“I would never.” He’s so calm it makes holding onto my temper really hard to do. “Olivia is the friend I texted you about. She was only in town for one night and wanted to meet for drinks.”

“Yeah, right. *Drinks.*” I balk. “Explains so much.”

“I’m serious. She was hanging onto me because it was freezing outside and she only had a light jacket. She was trying to shield herself from the wind.” He pauses just long enough for me to cut in if I want to. I don’t, so he continues. “I’ve known Liv for years. She used to kind of date my brother. It’s a long and kind of complicated story, but I swear to you, she is just a friend.”

“A friend with benefits maybe.” I huff.

Honestly, how stupid does he think I am? I’m not actually falling for this crap, am I?

Am I?

Then again, he got me to sleep with him on our second *official* date, so I guess that doesn’t exactly bode well for my intelligence.

“Look at me.” He dips again when I refuse to meet his gaze. “Kaia, look at me.”

I don’t want to... God, fuck, dammit—a slew of curses goes through my head as my eyes flick to his despite my attempt to look anywhere else.

“I have never and will never sleep with Olivia. For one, I don’t sleep with women who have had my brother’s cock inside of them.” His nose crinkles in a way that would make me laugh under normal circumstances. “For two, and the most important thing of all, why would I want to sleep with anyone else when I can sleep with you?” He seems so genuine that I almost cave... Almost. “You know I’m telling the truth. I know you do. Because you can see how crazy I am about you.”

I feel my resolve start to fizzle up in a big pile of flames, embarrassment starting to creep in.

“You can ask Aspen about Liv. She doesn’t really like her, for obvious reasons, and she would most definitely not lie to protect me if I ever did such a thing.”

“If she doesn’t like her, then why do you?” I ask instead of the five thousand other things swimming around in my jumbled brain.

At this point, I don’t know what to believe.

I mean, he seems like he’s telling the truth, but just because it seems that way, doesn’t immediately make it so.

“Again, kind of a long story. Basically, my brother was with Liv when he and Aspen started... Well, you know.”

“Aspen slept with your brother when he was seeing another woman?” I find myself saying aloud, not able to hide my surprise at learning this. She does not at all strike me as the type.

“Technically, they weren’t really together. It was more like a two-month-long one-night stand.” He realizes that sounds bad and quickly moves to elaborate further. “They weren’t exclusive, and despite what Olivia had hoped, my brother never made her any promises.”

“And that makes it okay?” I look at him like he has five heads.

“No, of course it doesn’t. Like I said, it was kind of messy. My brother used to be the type to step over anyone who got in his way, including me, if it got him what he wanted. Once he had his sights set on Aspen, there was no stopping him. I love the guy, obviously, but he didn’t use to be that great of a person. Aspen’s changed him a lot over the years. She and the kids have. Try not to judge either of them too harshly.”

“So what, you friended this girl out of pity?”

“Not exactly. We hit it off when Sutton brought her home for my parents’ vow renewal a few years ago. But it wasn’t until everything went down with Sutton and Aspen that we got close. We don’t talk that often, and I only see her once every couple of years. Though I’ll be seeing her a lot sooner this time because she invited me to her wedding.”

“She’s getting married?”

Okay, so this maybe changes things. I think...

“She is. In two months.” He takes both of my hands in his, and despite my better judgment, I let him. “I’m sorry you saw what you saw. I get that by having no real context, how it must have seemed. But I swear to you, I’m not that kind of guy. When I say I’m in, I’m in. When I say you’re the only one I want, I mean it.”

The last of my anger filters away, and more than anything, I just feel stupid for flying off the handle so easily. He’s right, though, without any context, what was I supposed to think?

“You probably think I’m one of the crazy, jealous women now, don’t you?” I feel pathetic for even asking.

“Of course I don’t. Truth be told, seeing you jealous kind of does it for me.” He takes my hand, still in his and presses it to his crotch.

My eyes instantly widen both at his audacity and at how incredibly hard he is right now.

“Remi...”

“Told ya. Even raging mad, your effect on me does not lessen.” He spins around, taking me with him. Seconds later, my back hits the cool metal of the car door. “Now”—his face dips, his lips just a whisper from mine—“what do you say we have a do-over?”

“A do-over?” My breath hitches.

“A do-over.” He presses a kiss to my mouth. “Come back to my place.”

The way he says it has my entire body clenching in anticipation; our fight, if that’s what you want to call it, already a thing of the past.

Talk about whiplash.

“I can’t,” I reluctantly tell him. “I promised Yiya I’d be home for dinner tonight, which means she’ll no doubt be cooking a feast.”

“Then I’ll come with you,” he offers, sliding a hand across my cool cheeks.

“Um, that might not be the best idea.” I grimace. “I may have told her that I saw you with another woman, and she may or may not have offered to cut you up in tiny pieces and serve you in a stew.”

A wide smile takes over his face.

“I knew I was gonna like that woman.” He chuckles. “I’ll follow you over.” He presses away from the car and I instantly feel cold without the warmth of his body surrounding me.

“You’re sure? You understand that I can’t promise she won’t follow through,” I say, obviously joking but also kind of not. If he walks inside that house, who knows how she’ll react.

“I’m sure. Being a part of your life means being a part of hers. Give me the evening. She’ll love me almost as much as you do.”

“I never...” I start to correct him.

“Relax, Kaia.” He backs away. “I know you can’t help it. Look at me.” He gestures to himself, a cocky smirk on his face.

“You’re really full of yourself, you know that?” I raise my voice as he gets farther away.

“Yeah, and later, you’re going to be full of me, too.”

My mouth drops open in shock that he just said such a thing so loudly through a public parking area. Who knows who could have overheard him. Then again, I don’t think he much cares.

Remi winks, spinning around before quickly disappearing inside his car.

Chapter Twelve

Remi



“Well, I’ll give your aunt this. She *is* a damn good cook.” I plop down on Kaia’s bed, rubbing my overly full belly.

Despite Kaia’s concerns, Yiya did not attempt to kill me when I walked into the door. Then again, I think she was probably debriefed before I arrived and knows the whole thing was one big fucking misunderstanding.

I take the blame. I should have been more direct with Kaia and not just sent her some vague message like that. Maybe then, none of this would have even happened.

Weirdly, I’m not sorry that it did, though, because seeing how upset she was... As much as it gutted me, it also made me deliriously fucking happy. Seeing her get so worked up over me, it told me more than words ever could.

She’s really into me and thank fuck for it because Lord knows I’m into her, probably more than I have any right to be given that I really haven’t known her long.

“That she most definitely can,” Kaia agrees, taking a seat on the edge of the mattress next to me.

“Why are you so far away?” I lean up just enough to snag her around the bicep before hoisting her up next to me.

She settles into the crook of my arm with a satisfied sigh.

“What time do you have to leave?” she asks, glancing up at me through thick lashes.

“Leave?” I snort. “I’m just getting comfortable.”

“You know you can’t stay. Yiya may not care that you’re in here because, well, I’m a grown woman. But I think she’ll draw the line at having to listen to us... You know.” I watch a soft pink suffuse her cheeks.

“Who said we were going to?” I arch a brow. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I want to. Like really, really fucking bad. But I have no intention of disrespecting your aunt by fucking her niece into oblivion.” I smirk.

“Oblivion?” She visibly swallows.

“You keep looking at me like that and I may forget everything I just said,” I warn her, already growing hard under her gaze.

She stares at me for another long moment like she might actually want to test me on this before her cheek finds my chest.

“I’m really sorry about earlier,” she speaks after a long moment of comfortable silence passes between us. “I don’t know what came over me. I’ve never been that kind of person. You know, the kind who just flies off the handle in a jealous fit.”

“That was nothing. If I had witnessed what you had, not a chance in hell would I have remained in that car. I probably would have beaten that motherfucker black and blue before you ever had a chance to explain what was happening.”

“Possessive much?” She chuckles, her hand sliding across my abdomen.

“When it comes to you.” I run my hand through her soft waves.

“Extremely.”

“When it comes to me?” When she glances up at me this time, I can’t resist the urge to lean in for a brief kiss.

“I don’t know how to explain the chokehold you have on me, Kaia,” I tell her bluntly, smiling when her lips part in a silent O. “From that first day...”

“I know,” she cuts in. “Because I feel the same way. You make me weirdly crazy but in the best way possible.”

“Feels incredible, doesn’t it?” I roll, taking her with me. Within seconds, she’s pinned to the mattress beneath me. “You’ve got me by the balls.” I grind into her. “If you asked me to jump off a fucking cliff, I don’t think I’d hesitate. I’m yours.” I lean down, swiping my tongue across hers in a kiss that takes me from semi to rock-hard in an instant. “Now,” I breathe against her lips. “The only question is, what are you going to do with me?”

“I can think of a few things.” She smiles against my mouth.

“Oh yeah?” I kiss her deeper, press into her harder, every pore in my body craving the feeling of being inside of her.

“For starters.” She reaches between us, palming my cock, causing me to groan against her mouth.

“Kaia,” I warn.

“What?”

“Remember what we talked about like two minutes ago?” It physically pains me to say.

“I think we can be quiet,” she whispers, wrapping her legs around my back, giving her the ability to press up and grind her sweet pussy against my groin.

“You’re insatiable.” I twirl my tongue around hers, so fucking riled that if she keeps grinding on me the way she is, I might fucking bust one right in my pants.

“Only with you.” Her next words damn near send me over the edge.

My restraint has just reached the point of snapping when a knock sounds against Kaia’s door, instantly pulling me out of my lust-fueled haze.

“Kaia.” Yiya’s voice quickly follows.

“Yeah?”

I look down at her flushed cheeks and swollen lips—pretty sure it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life. No, not pretty sure, damn sure.

This woman... It’s like she has me under some kind of fucking spell.

“I’m heading to bed. Perhaps it’s time for your friend to say good night.”

Friend... I almost laugh out loud, given our current positioning.

“Bed?” I mouth, my brow furrowing, knowing it can’t be any later than nine. Do people actually go to bed this early?

“Okay, Yiya.” Kaia works to keep her voice even, her gaze locked on mine as she speaks. “I’m getting ready to walk him out now.”

She clamps her mouth shut to contain the laugh that bubbles in her throat when I push my lower lip out in a big ole pout.

“Good night,” Yiya calls through the door.

“Night.” Kaia waits until she’s sure she’s gone before speaking directly to me. “I really need to get my own place.” She smiles up at me, stealing the fucking breath from my lungs, which until this moment, I didn’t know could actually happen. And yet, here I am, my chest so tight I feel certain I might suffocate at any moment—but in the best way—if that makes a bit of fucking sense.

“Well, it just so happens that I *do* have my own place.” I lift my eyebrows suggestively.

“As tempting as the offer is, I really do need to try and get some actual sleep tonight. I feel like I haven’t slept in days.”

As much as I want to keep her here, right beneath me, the evidence of her exhaustion is etched into every line of her face. It's the first thing I noticed when I saw her earlier. I hate that I'm the reason. Not that she said as much, but I know I am.

I've definitely learned a lesson here, though. Considering I've never actually been in a real relationship, I have a feeling I'm going to be learning quite a few along the way. Once upon a time, that thought might have scared me, but right now, fear is the last thing I feel. Maybe it's because I'm finally mature enough to want something real. Or maybe it's just Kaia. Perhaps it's a little bit of both, though I'd say the latter is the more prominent reason.

"Okay." I kiss the tip of her nose before reluctantly rolling off her. As soon as my feet are on the floor, I extend my hand to her, helping her up.

She's no more than in front of me when I tug her close, kissing her long and deep, making damn sure that when she falls asleep tonight, she does so thinking about nothing but this.

"If I don't leave now..." I pull away, even though it goes against every instinct I have. I've never been one for self-control. To say this is a foreign feeling—denying myself—is the understatement of the century. "I might never," I finally finish.

"What if I promise to come over after work on Friday? Would that make leaving a little easier?" she asks with a sweetly seductive smile.

"It would definitely help. But only if you promise to stay the night. Scratch that, the whole weekend."

"I promise to see how it goes."

We both already know once I have her inside my apartment, I won't be letting her walk out of it until I've devoured every inch of her a hundred times over.

"So you'll stay."

"Maybe," she says teasingly.

"I'm not leaving until you say yes."

"Somehow, I actually believe you." She giggles. "Fine, I'll stay."

"I knew I'd wear you down eventually." I have to resist the urge to lean down and kiss her again, instead releasing her as I turn toward the door.

"Eventually?" She snorts, following me out into the hallway. "It took you like thirty seconds," she says to my back.

"Thirty seconds too long." I turn to face her when I reach the front door.

"You're too much. You know that, don't you?"

“Too much of awesome.” I give her a cheeky grin, for which I’m rewarded with another breathtaking smile.

“On that note.” Kaia reaches around me to tug open the door, forcing me to step out of the way so she can fully open it.

“I see how it is.” I pout as she playfully pushes me out onto the front porch, pausing in the doorway to grab the collar of my shirt and tug me back toward her, the elevation difference putting us at eye level with each other.

“Shut up,” she murmurs against my lips as she leans in, rewarding me with a deep swipe of her tongue when my mouth opens to speak words I now can no longer remember.

My arms are around her waist in an instant, pulling her body flush with mine as I kiss her back with the ferocity of a feral cat that hasn’t quite yet adapted to humans. I can’t help it. Her kiss—hell, her very presence—makes me wild with desire.

“You should go.” She’s the first to pull away, and I’m as grateful as I am disappointed because I’m pretty certain I could fuck her right here in this doorway, and I’m just as certain that I shouldn’t.

“Do I have to?” I press a kiss to the side of her mouth.

“I’ll see you Friday.” She takes a step back farther inside the house, and despite my desire to hold on to her, I let my hold fall away.

“I’ll be counting down the seconds,” I tell her, taking one step backward and then another, not fully turning around until she closes the door with a smile and a soft shake of her head.



“So when do we get to meet this woman who has my sweet boy so smitten?” My mom takes the stool across the bar from me, giving me that look only a mother can give.

You know the one. The one that says she’s fairly certain you’re perfection personified even though you know yourself to be riddled with more flaws than you could ever hope to account for.

“Who says I’m smitten?” I arch a brow, accepting the sandwich she slides across the counter to me.

“You speak as if I don’t have eyes, Remington.” She uses my full name, something she rarely does. “Besides, a mother just knows these things. So when do we get to meet her?”

“Well, unless you’re hoping to scare her off, I’d say not anytime soon.” I give her a pointed look, not bothering to argue with her earlier point. It wouldn’t do me any good anyway.

“You think meeting us would scare her off?” My mother balks, flattening her hand to her chest.

This isn’t exactly the conversation I had anticipated when I decided to stop by, not that I should be surprised. This is my mother we’re talking about, after all.

I actually drove out this way to talk to my brother. We’re not really the type to share our feelings or anything, but considering he’s happily married, I thought maybe he could give me some advice on how to not epically fuck this thing up, considering that I almost did.

Have I resorted to seeking Sutton’s help, you ask?

How fucking far gone am I, you want to know?

Pretty far, it would seem.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, he wasn’t home from work yet, so after getting in some squeezes with my favorite little people, I decided to stop by my parents’ house instead. I mean, since I’m already in the area and all.

And no, before you ask, it isn’t lost on me that Kaia’s aunt’s house is just around the corner and she’s likely there right now. And again, before you ask, yes, it is killing me not to just show up there like I so desperately want to.

I’m trying to hold onto a semblance of my manly pride over here...

“Not because you’re not arguably the best parents in the world,” I finally say. Not an understatement by the way. My parents really are the best. “But because it’s too soon.”

“Too soon for whom?”

I think about her question for a long moment.

It’s a valid question.

Because as twisted up as I am over Kaia, a part of me isn’t sure I’m ready to take that kind of step yet. Everything is still so new and well, I’ve never taken a woman home to meet my parents... Like, ever. I need to be sure before I do. And not for them, but for myself.

This is where talking to Sutton would have maybe helped. He has been through this himself, after all. Though his experience was a little less conventional than mine. As in he stole Aspen right out from underneath me and hid her from everyone for months. But alas, that is no longer the point.

“You know,” Mom continues without waiting for me to answer one way or the other. “I imagine it’s probably pretty scary to open up to another woman after what happened with Aspen.”

“Mom,” I cut her off, not wanting to go there.

“What? You were heartbroken over everything that transpired between her and your brother. And while I know you’re happy for them now, that wasn’t always the case.”

I stare back into eyes that look so much like my brother’s it’s uncanny.

Where I look like my father, Sutton is a hundred percent my mother. Same dark hair. Same mannerisms. Same stark blue eyes. It’s funny how two people can produce children who look so much like one parent and nothing like the other.

“What happened with Sutton and Pen is a thing of the past. I don’t even think about that anymore. It feels like someone else’s life. I can’t even imagine a world where they aren’t together.”

It’s true, of course, all but the not thinking about it part. I do, in fact, think about it, but not because I’m in love with Aspen—she’s my best friend for forever and nothing more—but because of the lesson it taught me.

“We all feel that way. Of course we do. But you did love her, Remi. For nearly half your life, you loved her. And then you lost her. No matter how happy you are for her now, something like that changes a person.”

That it does.

Because there will never be a time that I won’t remember exactly how it felt. I’m pretty sure that shit is etched into my fucking soul. Even if I truly believe that Aspen ended up with who she was always meant to be with, it doesn’t mean I didn’t have a hard time accepting it as such at the time. But I meant it when I said that I can’t imagine a world where she and my brother aren’t together. I truly can’t. If there is such a thing as soul mates, Sutton and Aspen are definitely that. Perfect for each other in a way I didn’t know was possible.

“Can we please not?” I pick up the turkey sandwich off my plate and tear off a too-big bite between my teeth. The last thing I want to do is dive down the rabbit hole that is my brother’s love life... for the millionth time.

“Okay.” She nods softly. “I’m just going to say one more thing, and you won’t hear another peep out of me on the subject.”

“Mom.” I let out a frustrated groan around a mouthful of food.

“Don’t assume that just because Aspen chose someone else, that every other woman will too. I know you, Remi. You hide behind an easy smile and carefree attitude, but I know you feel more deeply than most. You just don’t show that side of you easily.”

“Do you have a point? Because if you do, can you please make it so we can talk about something else?” I drop the sandwich back onto the plate.

“If you find someone worth loving, love them fully and completely without apology.”

“I barely know Kaia, Mom. I think it’s a little early to be talking about love.”

“I know. I know. I just want you to be open to it should your feelings develop further. With her or someone else. Just promise me when it comes along, you’ll hold onto it with everything that you have. It truly is the most beautiful gift this life can bestow on a person.”

“You need to stop reading your romance novels. I’m pretty sure they’re rotting your brain.” I laugh to hide the uneasiness this conversation has stirred in my gut.

Not because I’m afraid to love Kaia. But because deep down I’m afraid I already do.

But that’s crazy, right?

We’ve known each other like five minutes...

Yeah, it’s definitely crazy.

I think maybe I’m drunk on lust and not really thinking clearly.

“Your father doesn’t mind them.” She lifts her eyebrows up and down with a wide smile.

“Eww, Mom, fuck.”

“Language,” she scolds. “And don’t say eww. Sex is a very natural and beautiful thing.”

“Mom.” I’m tempted to stick my fingers in my ears so that I don’t have to hear another word.

“Stop acting like your father and I making love is the most repulsive thing in the world. It’s the very reason you’re sitting here now.”

“Doesn’t mean I want to hear about it.” I push the sandwich to the middle of the table, trying like hell to erase the last sixty seconds from my mind.

“Stop it.” She laughs, loud and full, like she finds way too much amusement in my discomfort.

Both of our gazes dart to the door when my father, who could be my twin if you erased a few decades, steps inside the room, hesitating at the end of the breakfast bar as he takes in the situation. Me grimacing. My mom laughing.

“Do I even want to know?” he asks my mom, but I’m the one who answers.

“No, Dad.” I stand. “I really don’t think you do.” I grab my jacket off the stool next to mine and slip it over my shoulders.

“Where are you going?” My mother objects. “You haven’t even eaten your sandwich.”

“My appetite checked out the moment the word sex left your lips,” I tell her pointedly, turning toward my father. “You need to get this woman a hobby that isn’t reading. I’m honestly worried that it’s warping her mind.”

“Not a chance.” My father grins. “I rather like the things she learns in those books.” He winks at my mother, causing her to giggle like a fucking teenager.

“Not you too.” I scrub a hand down my face, feeling like I’ve entered an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Growing up, my parents were always very private when it came to their... Well, you get the idea. But the older they get... Let’s just say I wish they’d adopt the same policy as when we were kids so I could go on pretending like I was delivered by a stork.

“We’re retired, son. When we’re not watching the grandkids, what do you think we do to keep ourselves busy?” He, too, has a good laugh at my discomfort.

“On that note. I’m leaving.” I zip my coat.

“Will we see you at Sunday dinner this weekend?” my mother asks, standing.

“As long as you promise to never speak of this again. Otherwise, I’m going to forget that I have parents.”

“You always were melodramatic.” My father continues to laugh, finding my reaction even more amusing than my mother does. “Good to see some things never change.”

“I can think of a few things I wish hadn’t changed,” I fire back, spinning on my heel as I head out of the kitchen.

I don’t turn around to know that my mother follows me out. She always walks me to the door.

“Don’t forget what we talked about,” she says as I turn to give her a brief hug.

“I’m going to spend the rest of my life trying to forget.” I snort out a laugh as I release her.

“You know what I’m talking about.” Her expression falls serious. “You deserve to have someone in your life who puts you first.” She pats my cheek like she used to do when I was little and she was trying to reassure me of something.

“I already do.” I grin. “You.”

“Someone besides me.” She shakes her head.

“Yeah, yeah.” I tug open the door and step out into the cold evening air.

“Be careful on your way home,” my mom calls to my back.

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you.” I hear seconds before the obvious click of the door.

Chapter Thirteen

Kaia



“Thank you for earlier.” Aspen enters my office without so much as a hello, taking the seat across from me with an exasperated sigh. “Cassie can be... difficult, but you handled her beautifully. You really have a way with these kids.” She tucks a strand of strawberry-blond hair behind her ear.

“Thank you.” I don’t know why, but it feels good to hear her say as much.

“It’s easy to see why they love you so much,” she continues. “And why a certain someone is so enamored by you.” She gives me a knowing smile.

“Who? Remi?” I play stupid even though we both know who she’s talking about.

She answers me with nothing more than a nod, causing my stomach to twist with a mixture of nerves and excitement.

This isn’t the first time Aspen has said something to this effect, but it’s the first time I’m actually starting to listen. In the beginning, it was so easy to dismiss Remi’s behavior as nothing more than a predator chasing his prey. But now, I’m pretty convinced I sorely misjudged his character.

Sure, he’s cocky and self-assured and has quite the mouth on him, but he’s always a beautiful man and he makes me feel... Well, he makes me feel like if I don’t tie sandbags to my feet, I might float away at any moment.

“How are things going with you two anyway?”

I fight to contain my smile.

How are things going?

Well, I’ve got a bag packed in my car and I’m heading to his place directly after work to stay the weekend for the third weekend in row, if that tells you anything.

I think maybe it's safe to say things are going well. Like, really freaking well. I mean, other than the little blip with his friend that I assumed he was sleeping with and lost my mind for a second, but we aren't going to talk about that... like ever again.

"Why are you asking me? I'm sure he's told you everything by now," I say instead of giving her any real answer.

"He hasn't. It's strange because, in a way, I feel like he's kind of closing me out. Not that I mind. I mean, it's only natural to want to keep certain parts of yourself private. But Remi has always been an open book until now. I'm not used to it."

"Did he tell you about what happened with Olivia?" I ask, even though just seconds ago I said I wasn't going to talk about it ever again. I mean, I'm not. At least not to Remi. But I am curious to know if he told her what happened now that I've had a couple of weeks to process it all.

"Olivia?" She gives me a confused look.

"She was in town a couple of weeks ago." I start to fill in some of the gaps for her.

"I wasn't aware. Then again, Remi doesn't usually tell me when they get together. Not that I have a problem with her or anything. It's just weird being around someone who's slept with your husband." She grimaces, like the thought is physically painful.

Weirdly, I kind of get it. Because I feel the same way when I think about Remi with someone else. Like I wanna rip the hypothetical girl's eyes out and feed them to her...

That got violent quickly.

Funny enough, I never felt that way with Blake. I can't even remember a single time that I felt jealous over him, and given that we were together five years, that's really saying something.

When Remi and I first started talking, I was filled with so much guilt every time we'd part that I felt like I was drowning in it. Guilt over Blake. Guilt over my mom. But now, I don't have it in me to feel guilty. How can I when he has quite literally brought me back to life? And while the loss of my mom still lingers, it doesn't feel as devastating as it once did because I know she's looking down on me with a smile so bright it could shed light on even the darkest of days. I know a part of me will always feel sadness when I think about her, but more than anything, I feel so incredibly lucky that I got to have her in my life at all. Even if it was cut way too short.

It's strange how one person can change so much in such a short amount of time. How one day it can feel like a struggle to even get out of bed and the next you wake up with a smile on your face, excited for what the day might bring.

"I get that," I say after a long moment.

"Did you meet her?"

"Not exactly."

"Uh-oh." She reads my expression perfectly.

"I may have seen them coming out of his apartment together and jumped to conclusions."

"That man." She rolls her eyes. "I swear sometimes he can be so dense. You know he would never, right? I mean, not just with Olivia but with anyone. I know he might come off as the type, but I swear to you he isn't. If he had intentions of being with other people, you'd know it."

"No, I know. He explained the whole situation, and we're all good now."

"So did he say why she was in town?"

"Some kind of work thing. She was only here for one night."

"I see."

"And fun fact, not that you really care, but apparently she's getting married."

"Really?"

"I obviously don't know the details or anything, but I guess she invited Remi to the wedding."

"That makes sense. The two have been friends for years. Truthfully, I'm actually kind of indebted to her because of a favor she once did for Remi that played a big part in me getting Sutton back."

"I didn't realize you two had..." Broken up, I don't get to say.

"It was a messy and complicated situation," she cuts me off.

"Messy and complicated how?" Something about her expression gives me pause.

"Just messy and complicated." She blows out a breath. "Anyway, she intervened, even though Sutton and I hurt her, and that told me a lot about the kind of person she is. I judged her far too harshly when I first met her, and I wish I could go back and change some of the things I did. She didn't deserve what Sutton and I did to her."

"Remi told me that they were kind of together when things started with you two."

“He did?” She seems almost surprised by this. “You must think I’m a horrible person.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to understand why people make the choices they do. I wasn’t there, so I can’t judge your actions. It’s clear you two were meant for each other,” I tell her instead of saying what my initial reaction was to finding out this little piece of information.

“Thank you for saying that. Though I wouldn’t blame you if you thought poorly of me for it. I wish I could say I was young and clouded by love, and while both of those things would be true, I was also extremely selfish.”

“Sometimes life warrants a little selfishness,” I say, my mind once again drifting back to Blake.

I know I hurt him. I know some people might learn of what happened and question how I could just end our engagement so abruptly and with no real reasons to give other than my mom was sick and judge me for it. But life is too short to settle for things that don’t make you happy. So in that way, I was selfish. And while I felt awful for it, I don’t regret my decision for a single second because it brought me here, to Remi. And while I may not know exactly where this is going, I’m excited to find out, and excitement has been in short supply in my life until recently.

“I guess it does,” she quietly agrees. “So when are you seeing Remi next?” She changes to a lighter topic of conversation, going from serious and contemplative to excited and nosy in a matter of seconds.

“Tonight.” Warmth creeps up my neck at the thought. “I’m actually going to stay the night with him again.” I don’t know why I tell her as much. Maybe because she’s the closest thing I have to a friend, and right now, that’s exactly what I need. Or maybe it’s because I suffer from word-vomit-itis and don’t know when to shut up sometimes.

“Again?”

I don’t realize this is the first time I’ve mentioned as much. Then again, I haven’t really seen her a lot in the past three weeks outside of with patients.

“I stayed with him last weekend, too,” I admit. “And the weekend before that.”

“I knew it!” She slaps her knee excitedly. “I knew something was up when Remi missed two Sunday dinners in a row and then showed up at the last one looking like he hadn’t slept in two days. So this is like legit. Like you two are together, together.”

“Yeah, I guess we are.” I nod slowly.

“You have no idea how happy I am to hear this. I mean it. There isn’t a person on this planet who deserves happiness more than Remi.”

“Well, it is still really new.” I try to reel her in, or maybe it’s me I’m trying to reel in because I’ve kind of gone off the deep end myself.

“No, I know.” She shakes her head. “It’s just... well, we’ve all been kind of waiting for this day for years. You know he’s never had a girlfriend before, right?”

“He really hasn’t?” I ask, just to confirm something Remi already told me himself.

“He really hasn’t. He’s never even so much as kind of dated someone. So to say this is a big deal, well... It’s a big deal.” She gauges my reaction, quickly adding, “I’m sorry. That probably feels like a lot of pressure.”

“Is it weird that it doesn’t?” I ask, dragging my bottom lip between my teeth to stop the smile that threatens to split my face apart. “I mean, I kind of like that he hasn’t been with anyone else in that way, if that makes any real sense.”

“It makes total sense.”

“And I thought I would be scared by how fast I’ve fallen for him, and while I am terrified for other reasons, I’m not scared of my feelings for him.”

“I get that. When Sutton and I first got together, I was scared, too. Mainly because we were hiding it from everyone, and I was forced to lie to my best friend in the whole world. But I never felt scared of how I felt for him. I knew I loved him from the first moment I saw him. To me, it was years of pining finally coming to fruition, and all I wanted to do was wrap him in my arms and never let him go. Consequences be damned.”

“How did you know you loved him?” I find myself asking. “That early on, I mean.”

“It’s hard to explain. Almost like the world stopped for a few brief moments and all that existed was him. In that moment, he was everything. My sun. My sky. The very earth beneath my feet. The air in my lungs. The blood in my veins. It took my brain a while to catch up, but my heart knew the significance of that moment right away.”

“I can’t say I’ve ever been that sure of anything in my life,” I admit.

“I wasn’t either. I mean, I knew something had changed in me that day, but like I said, it took my brain a while to catch up.”

I think on her words for a long moment, realizing she’s just perfectly described how I feel about the day I met Remi. I knew the instant I looked

into those incredible green eyes of his that something inside me changed. I just didn't understand in the moment what that was. Now, I think maybe I'm starting to.

"Did you always know you'd end up together?" I lean back in my chair, crossing my feet at the ankles.

"My thirteen-year-old self sure hoped we would, but no. In fact, I spent many years certain that we wouldn't."

"What changed?"

"I can't say I honestly know. It all happened so fast."

"Can I ask why you hid it from Remi? I mean, you said you kept it a secret from everyone. Why?"

"I think a part of me was ashamed. Sutton was a bit of a womanizer back then. That, and Remi had always felt second to Sutton, and on many occasions had expressed his distaste for his brother. I was scared he wouldn't be able to forgive me for what I knew he would see as a betrayal. Like he had lost yet another thing to a brother who always seemed to get everything."

"And did he? Feel that way, I mean?"

"I think maybe you should ask him about that," she says almost apologetically.

Again, her response gives me pause. Almost as if she's only telling me half-truths, but I have no idea why that would be.

"But he forgave you, obviously." I switch angles.

"He did. It took a while, but eventually, we found our new normal again."

"Can I ask you something?" I continue when she nods. "Did you ever see Remi that way? I know you said you believed Sutton was the one the first time you saw him, but you and Remi have been close for most of your lives. Was there never a point that you thought maybe *he* was the one?"

"I won't lie and say I didn't consider it, but no. At the end of the day, I just didn't love him that way."

"But did he?" I don't know where the question comes from, but I have a sneaking suspicion that maybe I know why she seems to be skipping over some crucial details. Because she knows I won't like the answer.

And she'd be right in that assumption.

I know she's happily married to Remi's brother and that the two of them will never be together, but that doesn't mean the thought of being second pick to a woman who is a very large part of his life wouldn't feel like a huge pair of scissors to the already too-thin thread I'm balancing on.

“Did he say something to you?” Her next question all but confirms my suspicions, my stomach coiling at the realization.

“No.” I shake my head softly.

“You really should talk to Remi.”

“I’m talking to you,” I tell her bluntly. “So tell me what I know you’ve been trying to dance around and just get it out in the open. Is the reason why Remi had a problem with you and his brother being together because he was in love with you himself?”

Indecision swims through her eyes. I can tell she wants to say it, but she’s also not sure if she should.

In all these weeks, I hadn’t even considered this as a possibility, but now it seems so obvious that I honestly don’t know how I missed it.

“Yes.” She’s quick to continue. “And no. It really is quite complicated.” She blows out a hard breath. “Remi caught Sutton and me together in my apartment one night. He left. I went after him. That’s when he admitted to being in love with me. He said he hadn’t made a move because he was waiting for me to be ready. I had a pretty rough childhood, and as such, I wasn’t that open to relationships. Remi thought what I needed was time, when in reality, what I needed was Sutton.”

“So what happened? You said you two were never together.” I remind her of an earlier conversation we shared.

“We weren’t. After Remi found out, he gave me an ultimatum. Him or Sutton. I chose him, even though it killed me to do so. We did kiss a couple of times after things ended with Sutton, but that’s all. I was trying to convince myself that I could love Remi that way because the thought of hurting him further was too much to bear. But in the end, he knew it. He knew my heart wasn’t in it. And Remi being Remi, what does he do? He brings Sutton back into my life. He accepts our relationship even though I know it gutted him to do so. And he loved both of us in spite of it all. When I say he’s an incredible guy, I mean it. Because no one but him could have made such a sacrifice.” Unshed tears fill her eyes. “He doesn’t love me, Kaia. Not like that. It’s been years since this happened. Trust me, if he had even an inkling of feelings for me, my husband wouldn’t let him walk through the front door, let alone hang out at my house all day while he’s at work.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this in the beginning?”

“Because it’s irrelevant.”

“If it was irrelevant, you wouldn’t have hidden it from me. It’s been weeks, and neither of you has said anything.”

“You have to understand, it’s not an easy thing to tell people. I was in love with one brother. The other was in love with me. Around and around we went in this weird triangle. How do you easily explain that to someone you’ve only just met?”

“It doesn’t excuse the lie.” There’s no anger in my words. Irritation and uncertainty, but not anger.

“I never lied to you.”

“Lying by omission is still lying. You should have told me. You should have given me all the information before you let me get in too deep to do anything about it. So now what? I’m just supposed to pretend like I don’t know? I’m supposed to act like every time we’re all together that I’m not worried that he’s secretly wishing he were with you and not me?”

“Kaia, no. I swear, it isn’t like that.” Panic floods her expression.

“How do you know?” I voice my *real* concern. “He hid the fact that he was in love with you before. How do you know he’s not still hiding it?”

“He wasn’t in love with me. Not really. He just didn’t want Sutton to have me. That’s why I said you should talk to Remi. I think he could explain it better than I ever could because they were his feelings, not mine. Regardless, that’s in the past. Sutton and I are married. We have children together. We’re happy. Happier than I ever thought I’d have any right to be. And Remi is happy for us. Because he loves us. He loves me. But don’t confuse that with something more. It isn’t.”

“I honestly don’t know what to think,” I admit.

“I never meant for you to find out this way. I’m so sorry. I just want him to be happy and, Kaia, you make him happy. Happier than I think I’ve ever seen him. Please don’t let something that happened in the past spoil what you could have in the future.”

“Would you?” Her eyebrows knit in confusion at my question. “If you were in my shoes, would you be completely unaffected by what you’ve just told me?”

She thinks on that for a moment.

“No. I would probably be terrified by it.”

For some reason, her answer gives me some semblance of comfort because at least she sees my position in all of this.

And while no, I have no intention of ending things with Remi over something that happened before he ever met me, it certainly does complicate things a bit. It would seem complicated is his specialty, given everything I've learned.

"Please don't let this affect your relationship with Remi," she pleads, on the verge of crying, which is probably fifty percent worry and fifty percent hormones, given that it wouldn't be the first time I've seen her cry since she came back from maternity leave.

"It's *going* to affect our relationship, Aspen. How could it not? But that doesn't mean I'm going to just end things because of it. I care about Remi... A lot. More than I have any right to given how short of a time we've actually known each other. But I won't lie and say that this whole thing doesn't bother me. It does."

"You're right. I should have told you all of this from the beginning. I'm sorry for not being more upfront with you."

"I get it. Who wants to tell something like that to a practical stranger? You weren't kidding when you said it was messy."

"Right." She swipes at a nonexistent tear. "Are you angry with me?"

I think about that for a moment. Because while yes, a part of me is upset and jealous and feels stupid for not seeing it earlier, the other part of me knows I can't really fault her either. If the roles were reversed, I likely wouldn't have told her either.

Hell, I haven't mentioned Blake to a single person. Not even when Remi asked me about how no one has asked me to marry them yet. He gave me the perfect in, and I never said a word. So really, what are he and Aspen guilty of that I haven't done myself?

"Of course I'm not." My expression softens. "I do wish you had told me earlier, but I'm not angry with you."

"I really am so sorry."

"It's fine, really. I'm sorry for overreacting. I guess it was just a bit of a shock to hear."

"If that was overreacting, then you haven't seen anything. I've been known to make a mountain out of a molehill a time or two in my life, and I can promise you it looked a hell of a lot more dramatic than that." She smiles, gesturing to me.

"Oh, I have too at times. But when you've been through what I have in the last few months, it really puts things into perspective. What maybe once

would have felt earth-shattering, now doesn't. Because I know what it feels like to have it actually shatter, and I promise you, this doesn't even come close."

"I can't imagine losing someone that close to me."

"I hope you never have to find out." I give her a sad smile.

"Please don't be too hard on Remi."

"I won't."

Truth be told, I'm not even sure I will bring it up right away, but given that I have zero doubt she's going to call him the second she walks out of my office, I guess I should start mentally preparing for it.

"Well, I think I've caused enough damage for one day." She pushes to a stand. "I'm really sorry again."

"It's fine, Aspen. Truly. Everyone has a past."

Boy, don't I know that...

"I'm getting ready to leave for the day, but if you need to talk or have any additional questions, just call me."

"I won't." I smile.

"Okay." She hesitates in the doorway. "See ya."

"Yeah, see ya." I wait until she's gone before letting out a slow breath, releasing some of the heaviness that's been sitting on my chest for the last several minutes.

Not exactly the turn I expected my afternoon to take, but also not really all that surprising either. I've never seen two people as close as Remi and Aspen are. Platonic or not, feelings can get messy really fast.

I'm still not really sure how I feel about the whole thing.

On one hand, I hate it.

On the other, I get it.

I've barely had time to gather my thoughts on the matter when my phone signals an incoming text.

I'm not at all surprised when I pick it up and see Remi's name across the screen.

That was fast...

Then again, nothing about his text gives me any indication that Aspen called him... yet. Maybe I was wrong to assume... Or maybe she's just waiting until she's home or, at the very least, in her car.

Remi: *We still on for tonight? You better say yes because I've already stocked my refrigerator with Coke Zero and stinky yogurt.*

A small laugh slides past my lips.

I'm obsessed with Chobani flips, and when I ate one the other day in front of him, he wouldn't shut up about how much they stunk.

Me: *I'll be heading that way in about an hour.*

I hit send. His reply comes so quickly it's a wonder he even had time to type it out.

Remi: *I'll be counting down the minutes.*

Me: *So will I ;)*

Some of my earlier excitement returns as the anticipation of seeing Remi grows. Sure, finding out that he was once upon a time in love with a woman who looks like she was plucked out of a Victoria's Secret catalog wasn't exactly the cherry on top of my sundae, but it didn't completely melt my ice cream either.

Because as I said before, we all have a past.

The only difference is, now I know about his...

Chapter Fourteen

Remi



“Can I ask you something?” Kaia surprises me by asking, her face pressed to my bare chest as we lie in bed, our legs tangled together.

“Anything.” My fingers move lazily through her hair, exhaustion making my eyelids feel heavy.

It has to be at least two in the morning, and truth be told, I thought she was asleep until about ten seconds ago.

“Do you still love her?”

Confusion is the first thing I feel, my tired brain not able to fully process who the hell she’s talking about or why.

“Who?”

“Aspen.”

Realization replaces confusion, and suddenly, I’m wide awake.

“Why would you ask me that?” I ask in lieu of an answer.

“Aspen told me... She told me about what happened when you found out about her and Sutton. About how you admitted to being in love with her and how hard them being together was on you.”

Anger slides through my chest.

I’m not angry at Kaia for asking. Of course I’m not. I am, however, angry with my best friend for telling her something she had no right to tell her. Not that I’m ashamed of it, but I should have been the one to tell her, not Pen.

“I see.” I swallow, my throat suddenly fucking bone-dry.

“I’m not upset, if that’s what you’re thinking.” She shifts, her face tilting up to look at me in the dim light that spills in from the open bathroom door.

“I just want to know if you still love her. It’s okay if you do.”

“Is it?” My anger morphs into uncertainty.

How can she say that? If I thought there was even a chance she had feelings for someone else, I'd be burning the fucking world to the ground. And yet here she is, as calm and cool as if we were talking about the weather, telling me it's okay?

What happened to the woman who looked seconds away from punching me in the face when she thought I fucked someone?

Now she's telling me it's okay if I love someone else?

"I just mean, I know you can't help how you feel. But if you do, I'd rather you tell me now so I know."

"Kaia..." I roll to my side so that I can face her fully, my hand sliding around her side to pull her close. "I do not love her," I tell her, our noses practically touching. "I'm not sure I ever really did. I mean, I thought I did, but now..."

"Now?" I can hear the hitch of her breath.

"Aspen is my best friend. I love her. I always have and I always will. But not like that. Maybe I thought I did once upon a time, but not now... I know now that I was never truly in love with her. I was just scared of losing her, so I convinced myself I was because I thought maybe then things wouldn't change."

"How can you be so sure?" she all but whispers.

"Because she never made me feel like this," I admit without apology.

It's the truth. Even when Aspen was trying to convince herself she could love me that way and I was desperate to let her, I never felt this... This undeniable pull to another person.

Aspen once described how Sutton made her feel. Like the earth stopped spinning when he entered a room. Suddenly, I know exactly what she meant.

"She is my friend. My brother's wife. The mother of my niece and nephew. And that is all she will ever be. It's all I *want* her to be."

There was a time when Pen was my whole world. Every plan I made, everything I did, I considered her first because I never wanted to be without her. But she fell in love and moved on, and things changed.

She still means a great deal to me, and she will always be one of my favorite people, but I let her go a long time ago. Honestly, I had to. And losing her made me see how unhealthily I relied on her. I was clingy and needy and truthfully, just a pathetic excuse for a man who didn't want to grow up and let go of the past.

I'm not that man anymore.

“Please say you believe that,” I finally say after too long of silence. “I need to hear you say it.”

“I do.”

Relief floods through me. Not just because she said the words, but looking into her eyes, I can see she means it.

“Aspen will always be a big part of my life. She’s family. But’s that all. I planned on telling you about everything, one day. It just didn’t feel relevant because I don’t feel that way about her. I’m sorry. I should have been the one to say something.”

“It’s okay. I understand. It’s impossible to know everything about someone, especially when you haven’t known each other that long. You have a past. I have a past.”

A past I’m suddenly even more curious about, given how she says it.

And while I didn’t expect the Aspen situation to be a huge deal between us, and I wasn’t purposely hiding it from her either—like she said, we haven’t known each other *that* long—I *did* expect more of a reaction than this. Especially given that she found out from Aspen and not me.

“Will you tell me what happened?” she asks after a brief pause.

“You mean between me and Aspen?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s kind of a long story.”

“Well, lucky for you, I’m here all night.” She presses a soft kiss to my mouth.

“Okay,” I agree, happy to tell her anything she wants to know. “Where should I start?”

“From the very beginning.”

“Like the very, very beginning. As in, when we were kids?”

She nods.

“Okay, but I can’t promise I won’t bore you to sleep.” I grin.

“Somehow, I doubt a single thing you’re about to tell me is going to be boring.” I feel her smile rather than see it.

“From the beginning then.”

And that’s where I start. I tell her about how I met Aspen in seventh grade. How I felt instantly drawn to her. How I was convinced I would marry her one day. How we became inseparable, doing everything together. Every high school event. Every family gathering, she was there next to me. That I followed her to college, and we lived together for a couple of years, which

she already knew, and that even after Pen got her own place, we were still a package deal. You never saw one without the other.

Then I tell her about Sutton. About finding him at her apartment. About the betrayal I felt. About how desperate I was to hold on to her and keep her all to myself.

I'm embarrassed by some. Amused by others. But by the end, the only real thing I feel is contentment. I don't regret how things turned out. How could I when I'm lying here with the most beautiful woman in the world in my arms?

She listens to me quietly, digesting everything I say, and when I'm done, she leans in and kisses me good and proper.

And that's when I know...

I know that everything that happened, happened so that one day, I could find myself here...

I've never been more grateful to Aspen than I am in this moment. She knew my heart as well as her own, and she knew there was somewhere else I belonged.

And she was right.



“How do you eat those things?” I crinkle my nose when I get a whiff of the yogurt Kaia’s eating. If I thought maybe they’d smell better the second time around, I was wrong. I think it might actually smell worse than the first one she ate in front of me.

“They taste a lot better than they smell.” She smiles around the spoon in her mouth, looking so delectable I could eat her, though she doesn’t *just* taste good, she smells divine as well.

“Somehow, I doubt that.”

“Why don’t you see so for yourself?” She extends the spoonful of yogurt in my direction.

“Pass.” I lean back to avoid having to smell it that close up.

“Oh, come on.” She laughs. “You won’t know if you like it if you never try it.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“One bite.” She’s on her knees on the couch now, waving the spoon in front of my face.

“What will you do for me if I take a bite?” I give her a wicked grin.

“I’ll stay another night,” she offers, having insisted since she arrived yesterday that she couldn’t stay Saturday because she had things to do. The most generic response ever.

“So you *are* free.” I narrow my gaze at her.

“What?” She lets out a little squeal when I take her by the hips and tug her into my lap, her legs going to either side of mine. Considering she has a yogurt in one hand and a spoon full of yogurt in the other, there’s very little she can do to stop me.

“You said you couldn’t because you had *things to do*,” I mock her earlier words.

“You didn’t expect me to make it too easy on you, did you?” She smiles down at me, once again waving the spoon in my face. “One bite.” She tugs her bottom lip through her teeth in a way that makes me want to lean forward and do the same, stinky yogurt be damned.

“Fine.” I open my mouth, letting her slide the spoon inside.

I grimace when the tanginess hits my tongue, but I will admit, it’s not nearly as bad as I thought. Still not great, but not horrible either.

“See, it’s good, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” I smack my tongue against the roof of my mouth, trying to rid my mouth of the aftertaste.

“Stop it. It’s delicious,” she quickly disagrees.

“It’s edible. That’s about as good as you’re gonna get out of me.”

“Well, I think it’s delicious.” She makes a show out of scooping out another bite and plopping it into her mouth.

“You know what I think is delicious?” I reach up where the oversized button-down she’s wearing is open just enough to give me a view of the top of her incredible tits.

It’s mine, something she threw on this morning to make coffee and has yet to take off. Not that I’m complaining. She looks better in it than I ever could.

Pulling the material to the side, I lean in and trail my tongue along her nipple, which immediately puckers under my assault.

“I’m starting to think you’re Superman,” she muses, leaning to the side. I move to stop her until I realize what she’s doing, loosening my grip enough

to allow her to lean over and deposit her yogurt container on the end table next to the couch.

“Why is that?” I go right back in the moment she’s upright, swirling my tongue around the other nipple.

“Because only a superhero could have your kind of stamina,” she tells me, her hands finding the back of my hair as she urges me to continue.

“It’s not me.” I drag my teeth along her peaked bud, causing her to hiss in delight. “It’s you.”

“Me?”

I reluctantly release her breast.

“You make me this way,” I tell her, slowly unbuttoning her shirt until she’s on full display for me. “So fucking beautiful,” I murmur, leaning in to take her nipple into my mouth once more. “I could fuck you right here and come in minutes. That’s how wild you drive me,” I tell her, moving to the other side.

“Prove it.” She groans when I press up, showing her how fucking hard I am, despite the fact that I’ve been balls deep inside her a handful of times today already.

I meant what I said. She just does it for me. I’m usually a two, maybe three times in a single day kinda guy and then my body stops cooperating. But with Kaia, fuck, I’m like a pubescent teenager walking around with a perpetual hard-on.

“Your wish”—I lift her at the hips to give myself enough room to release my cock from my boxers—“is my command.” I slide her panties to the side, lining myself at her entrance.

She doesn’t waste a single second lowering herself back down, taking me fully inside of her on a groan of pleasure that already has my nuts seizing, begging to be emptied.

I let Kaia take the lead, letting my head fall back against the couch as she moves on top of me, swirling her hips in such a way that it’s less than two minutes before I feel my release begin to mount.

“Kaia.” Her name touches my lips when she tightens around me.

She cries out, the pulse of her orgasm taking me over the top in an instant. Burying my face in her chest, I grunt as I empty myself inside of her.

She’s still panting when I pull back and look up at her, a wide smile on my face.

“Told ya.”

“Superman.” She leans down, taking my face in her hands. “Fucking Superman.” She drops a kiss to my mouth.

“My, my, my, such language.” I tsk. “I knew you weren’t as prim and proper as you try to act like you are. Get you naked with a cock inside of you and you become a different person.” I keep her in place when she tries to rock back, sliding my tongue along the seam of her lips.

“Are you complaining?” she asks, granting me access to her mouth.

“Not for a single second.” I smile into the kiss.

“Looks like you’re stuck with me another night.” This time when she pulls back, I release her, groaning in protest when she slides off me.

“Lucky for you, stuck with you is all I want to be,” I tell her, my eyes tracking her every movement the entire way to the bathroom.

“Well, I hope you know you’re going to have to feed me with more than just yogurt for dinner,” she says before closing the bathroom door.

I push to a stand and grab some paper towels out of the kitchen to clean myself up and adjust my boxers before I snag some menus out of the drawer next to the fridge. When she exits the bathroom a few moments later, I have them spread out on the table.

“What’s this?” she asks with a smile, working the buttons of her shirt closed.

“Dinner,” I tell her, gesturing to the table.

“Lord, how many menus do you have?” She stops next to me.

“I’m a single man who lives alone. I order in a lot,” I tell her with a shrug.

What I don’t tell her is that most of these have been here since Aspen lived with me. Not that I think it would be a big deal if I did tell her as such, but honestly, I don’t want to try my luck. She’s already been more understanding than I probably ever would have been when it comes to Pen’s and my friendship. If I knew she was once in love with someone who is still a very big part of her life, I can’t say how I’d react, only that it likely wouldn’t have been the way she did.

“You *were* single,” she corrects, picking up a Chinese food menu. Fuck, have three words ever sounded so good? “And I think I’d like to have some sesame chicken, if you please.” She hands me the menu.

“As my lady wishes.” I bow dramatically, causing a small giggle to slide past her lips.

“You *are* something else,” she repeats a familiar phrase, following me back to the couch where the movie we abandoned is over, the credits rolling across the screen.

“So I’ve been told.” I grin over my shoulder before plopping back down on the couch, taking my cell phone and the menu with me.

Looking down at my phone, I see that I have a couple of messages from Pen. Honestly, I’m surprised it’s taken her this long.

Not feeling like dealing with all that at the moment, I unlock my phone and type in the phone number of the Chinese restaurant. Kaia joins me on the couch as I order, but I don’t look over at her until I’ve ended the call.

“Sesame chicken will be here within thirty,” I tell her, gesturing for her to move in closer, which she does without hesitation, settling into the crook of my arm. “Now, I have one very important question for you.” I pick up the remote and point it at the television. “Hughes or Spielberg?”

“Hughes, of course.” She looks at me in a way that says *is that even a question*.

“That’s it,” I announce with a slap to my knee.

“What’s it?” Her brow furrows in confusion.

“You really are the perfect woman,” I tell her with a soft kiss.

“And don’t you forget it,” she murmurs against my mouth.

As if I ever could...

Chapter Fifteen

Kaia



“You’re alive.” Yiya looks up at me from her seat at the table as I enter the kitchen, a cup of coffee held in front of her with both hands.

“I am.” I try and fail to contain the smile that tugs at my lips.

What can I say? These past few weeks... Well, they’ve been like something out of a fairy tale, and this past weekend was no exception. I still haven’t fully wrapped my head around any of it. What happened. The step forward I feel like we’ve taken. The way I feel. It’s just all so... overwhelming, in the best way possible.

“Uh-oh, I know that look.” She chuckles, her eyes tracking me as I move toward the coffee pot.

“What look?” I play stupid, pouring myself a cup before joining her at the table.

“That look.” She waits until I’ve taken my seat to say, “I know that look well. It’s the very look I wore when I realized I was in love with your uncle Nick.”

“Love?” I choke from the sip of too-hot liquid that slides down my throat, quickly lowering my cup to the table to let it cool. “I think it’s a bit premature to be throwing out the... L word.” I swallow the consonant down.

“Is it?” She cocks her head to the side, studying me in a way that makes me feel far too exposed. “You two have been inseparable for weeks. I knew I loved Nick almost instantly.”

“I’m not you, Yiya,” I tell her pointedly.

“No, but you are human. Do you really believe you get a say over such things? You can lie to me, and to yourself, all you want. But the proof is written all over your face. You, my dear girl, are in love.”

“Yiya...” I blow out a slow breath, not sure why I’m putting up such a fight.

I mean... Is she wrong?

“It’s just you and me here. You can tell me how you’re feeling, Kaia. No judgment. I know I’m not your mom, and that this is the kind of thing you wish you could still talk to her about, but look at me...” She gestures to her face. “I’m the next best thing.” She smiles past the sadness that swims in her eyes.

“It feels too fast,” I admit, settling back in my chair. “This whole thing. It just feels...”

“Too fast.” She nods. “I know it can seem like that when it hits you so unexpectedly that you feel like you can’t catch your breath. But that’s the beautiful thing about falling in love. It comes out of nowhere and turns your entire world upside down.”

“Can I ask you a question?” I say in lieu of responding to how accurately she seems to have just described how I’m feeling.

“Anything.”

“Was it hard for you, knowing that Nick and my mom were so close?”

“Maybe at first, but the way that man felt for me was never a question. It didn’t bother me that they were friends, but rather that he actually had feelings for your mom first.”

“He did?” I gape, having never heard this little tidbit of information before.

She nods slowly.

“When they first became friends, he was actually interested in being more, but your mother wasn’t interested in him that way and told him as such when he admitted to having feelings for her.”

“Wait, what?” I feel like I’ve just entered an alternate universe.

“Oh yeah, he pined after her for quite some time. But eventually, he accepted that they would never be more than friends, and that was that. We knew of each other, of course, but I didn’t exactly *know* him. Your mother and I, while always very close, had different groups of friends growing up. Your mother was the popular one. The one everyone loved. Whereas I was more reserved, quieter, and tended to spend most days with my face in a book rather than socializing.”

“So what changed?”

“Well, your mom dragged me to a party at one of her friend’s houses one night. Nick was there. We got to talking. Hit it off almost instantly, and well, the rest is history.”

“But did you ever feel like you were second choice? Like he chose you because he couldn’t have her?” I ask apologetically.

“That was one of my fears in the beginning, but the more time we spent together, the more I realized it wasn’t my sister he wanted—that ship had long since sailed—it was me. Trust me when I say, your uncle practically kissed the ground I walked on. That man was so good to me. You could never argue with how much he loved me.”

“Oh, I remember.” I grin, thinking back on memories I haven’t thought of in years.

“Is there a reason you’re asking me about this?”

“I just recently found out that Remi used to have feelings for Aspen, his best friend, but she chose his brother instead.”

“And you’re worried that maybe he still loves her?”

“Yes. No... Honestly, I don’t know.” I let out a humorless laugh. “I just don’t want to be anyone’s second choice.”

“Kaia, people fall in and out of love every day. Just because he loved someone once, doesn’t automatically make you second choice. You know that, right?”

I think on her words for a long moment.

“Yeah, I guess so.” I lift my coffee cup to my lips, taking a tentative sip before lowering it back to the table.

“Has he given you any reason to believe that he still loves her?”

“No,” I answer honestly because, in truth, he hasn’t. Nothing about the way he treats Aspen makes me think he’s in love with her. It’s clear that he does love her, sure, but his affection feels more familial than anything.

“Then why do you seem so worried?”

“Because I think you might be right,” I finally admit, glancing down at the table rather than looking in her eyes. “I think I might love him.”

“Well, of course you do.” Her smile lights up her entire face, and I struggle to remember the last time I saw her smile so effortlessly.

“The way he speaks to me. The way he finds any excuse to touch me or hold me. It’s hard to be near him and not think that maybe he loves me too.”

“Kaia, I knew that man loved you when he walked in here and faced my wrath after the misunderstanding with that friend of his.”

“Olivia.”

“Her name is irrelevant.” She shakes her head. “My point is, he went out of his way to make things right. A man who doesn’t care about a woman doesn’t go out of his way to do anything, much less where her family is involved.”

“And that’s what you’re going on?” I arch a brow, not sure that’s convincing enough to make her so sure he’s in love with me.

“What I’m going on is the way I’ve watched him stare at you. Like he can’t bear to tear his eyes away from you for a single moment because he’s afraid you might disappear. It reminded me of how your uncle used to look at me. Like I was his whole world.”

“You were his whole world.”

“You’re right, I was. Just as he was mine.”

“I can’t imagine how much you must miss him.”

“It’s like missing a part of my very soul.” A sad smile tugs at her lips. “But I get through each day knowing that one day we will meet again. And when that time comes, and I can hold him in my arms once more, I will do so without having a single regret of the time we spent on this earth together.” Unshed tears fill her eyes. “If losing him, if losing your mother, has taught us anything, it’s that tomorrow isn’t guaranteed. We owe it to them, to ourselves, to live each day we’re given to the fullest. To be fearless. To be happy. And most importantly, to embrace love when it comes into our lives.”

“I’m scared,” I admit, my real hesitation boiling to the surface. “Mom lost Dad. You lost Nick. We lost Mom. What if we’re cursed to lose those that we love?” My chin quivers with emotion.

“Oh, honey.” She’s on her feet in an instant, quickly moving to sit in the chair next to mine, taking my hands in hers. “Losing the ones you love, it’s part of life. You can’t control when you lose someone or how long you get to have with them. The only thing you can do is love them with everything you have while they’re here.”

I sniff, fighting back my own tears as two spill in quick succession down Yiya’s cheeks.

“I can see it in your eyes, how deeply you feel for this man. It’s okay to be scared. It’s okay to worry. Just don’t let that fear keep you from embracing how you feel. You can tell yourself that walking away would be easier, and maybe you’d be right, but you’d regret it, of that I have no doubt.”

I nod, not sure I have the ability to fully form words at the moment. Because she's right. Deep down, I know that.

Because this... The way I feel about Remi. This is what it's supposed to feel like. Like you're being stretched apart in so many directions that you're sure you'll rip apart at any moment, and yet, you never want the feeling to end.

"And I know a part of you feels guilty for moving on with your life after your mother... But, Kaia, she's still here." She squeezes my hands. "She's everywhere you are. You are an extension of her. Of her soul. Of her heart. Carry it proudly. And know that she's looking down on you, smiling as she watches you fall in love the way she did with your father so many years ago."

I open and close my eyes rapidly, trying to blink away the tears that cling to my lashes.

"Thank you, Yiya." I release her hands, throwing my arms around her neck. "Thank you for everything," I speak into her neck, squeezing her impossibly tight.

"You don't have to thank me for loving you. I've been doing that since before you were born." She hugs me back just as fiercely.

I don't know how long we stay like that, only that when I finally let her go, my cheeks are stained with tears and I've ruined the little bit of makeup I put on, having to reapply before rushing out of the house a few minutes later, likely going to be late for work.

Weirdly, though, I don't care.

I needed this morning.

I needed Yiya's reassurance more than I thought possible.

And as I walk out of her house, the sun kissing my skin, warming me from the inside out despite the cold temperatures, I feel lighter than I have in a very long time. Maybe ever.

I may have lost a lot in my twenty-seven years on this earth, but I've also been loved more than most people have in their entire lifetimes. It's time I start honoring what I have instead of wallowing in what I've lost.



“Aspen, are you okay?” I rap my knuckles against the bathroom stall she’s currently inside, puking her guts out by the sound of it.

I wasn’t going to say anything, but given that I’ve used the facilities and washed my hands, and she’s still in there heaving, I thought maybe it’s best to check on her.

“I’m fine.” The words are gargled by another heave.

“Are you sure? Do you need some water or something?”

“No. I’m okay.” The toilet flushes, the door opening between us just seconds later.

I quickly step to the side to let her pass, not missing the smear of her mascara or the deep flush of her cheeks.

“You sure I can’t get you a water?” I step up next to her at the sink.

“Maybe a gun instead?” She smiles in the mirror, but the action doesn’t meet her eyes.

“That bad?” I step around her, grabbing a couple of paper towels from the dispenser before wetting them down and offering them to her. She quickly accepts, dabbing her forehead and cheeks with the cool cloth.

“That depends on what you call bad, I guess. I mean, technically, it’s not bad. In fact, it’s probably incredible. I’m just not sure I’m ready to do it again.”

“You’re pregnant.” It’s not a question. It doesn’t need to be. The answer is written all over her face.

“I am.” She sobs, the towels I just handed her coming up to cover her face.

“Hey...” The rest of my words fall away when she abruptly turns and leans into me.

Wrapping my arms around her shoulders, I give her a soft hug, rubbing my hand up and down her back in the way my mother used to always do to me when I was really upset.

“It’s okay,” I reassure her. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“You only say that because you don’t have two kids in diapers at home already. One who has taken to coloring on the walls, and the other who still isn’t sleeping through the night. I don’t think I can handle another.” She pulls back, tears spilling past her lashes.

“You’re right. I don’t. I do, however, know how much you adore those kids and that you would quite literally die for them. Maybe it seems

overwhelming right now, but you know that you're already so in love with this baby it hurts, and your husband probably is too."

"Oh, Sutton is going to be over the moon."

"You haven't told him yet?" I won't deny I'm a little surprised by this news.

"I literally just found out this morning. I've been having horrible nausea for days. So tired I could barely hold my head up some days. I knew something was off. I took a test just to rule out pregnancy, not because I thought I was pregnant, though." She lets out a strangled noise in between a laugh and a cry. "I just had a baby. How can I already be having another?"

"Well, I think you know how." I try not to smile, but I do anyway. I can't seem to help it. Not that I find humor in her being upset. It's just... underneath it all, I can tell she's actually happy about it but isn't sure she should be.

"We haven't used protection since before Rand. It took us months to get pregnant with him and a year and a half to get pregnant with Gracie. I never dreamed it would happen so fast."

"That's kind of the thing with making babies. They're unpredictable."

"Clearly," she grumbles, swiping under her eyes.

"Why don't you go home, talk to your husband. I'm sure you'll feel better once you do. If you have any additional appointments today, I'm happy to step in. I have a pretty light afternoon."

"I don't. Just some filing and paperwork to catch up on."

"I can do that for you."

"Really?"

"Of course. I'm happy to help."

"Thank you so much, Kaia. You are seriously a life saver. I'll drop everything off at your desk before I leave." She turns quickly, heading toward the door. "Will you do me a favor?" She turns back to where I'm still standing next to the sinks.

"I won't tell Remi," I promise, having a feeling I already know what she's going to ask.

"Thank you. The last thing I need right now is for his smug butt to come over and rub it in my face that he was right."

"He predicted this?" I laugh lightly.

"He gave us a year. We didn't even make it a quarter of that," she grumbles.

“I won’t say a word. It’s not my news to share anyway.”

“Thank you.” She pulls in a deep breath before disappearing from the bathroom moments later.

Well, this day just keeps getting more interesting... I think as I exit into the hallway and turn toward my office.

I spend the next few minutes going through the files Aspen left on my desk before heading to the lobby to get a few papers I printed from behind the front desk.

“Kaia, there’s someone here to see you,” Micha announces as I round the corner.

My heart rate kicks up speed in an instant.

I should have known Remi couldn’t wait until this evening.

He’s nothing if not predictable that man. And damn it if I don’t love that about him.

I follow Micha’s gaze to the chairs lined along the front windows, expecting to see Remi standing there, only it isn’t Remi’s stark green eyes that meet mine, but a deep brown I’d recognize anywhere. Probably because I spent five years of my life staring into them.

“Blake.” I don’t recognize the voice that leaves my mouth. Too high to ever belong to me. Only, I’m the person who spoke.

My heart drops to what feels like my feet as the reality of him actually being here takes hold. Confusion is the first thing to hit me. It floods my entire body, making my limbs tingle in the most unpleasant way.

“What are...” I don’t get the next words out before he’s moving toward me.

He looks exactly the same as I remember. Dark, thick strands of hair combed to the side, not a single hair out of place. Tall and slender, his face void of even so much as a five o’clock shadow. The little knot on his nose where his brother hit him in the face with a baseball when he was ten, breaking it. The deep tan of his skin. The tiny hitch out of his left eyebrow where the hair never grew right.

It feels just like yesterday, how quickly it all comes back. Lazy days in our pajamas. Nights out where we’d get dressed to the nines and spend hours out on the town. Family dinners. Birthday parties. Holidays. It all hits me in a blur, flooding me with memories I’ve spent months trying to suppress.

He’s dressed in his usual pressed polo and khakis, an air of inferiority surrounding him, like he’s better than everyone else and he knows it. I used

to find his confidence kind of charming... Though standing here, I'm not sure why.

I also used to think he was so good-looking, but compared to Remi, he's more unattractive than attractive. Remi is just... Well, perfection is what Remi is. From his looks to his smile to his charm, there isn't a thing about him that doesn't draw you in.

And, of course, I feel the immediate guilt of my thoughts, clawing deep at my insides. Even though I know I shouldn't.

"Kaia." Blake stops in front of me, my entire body tensing when he leans in like he's about to kiss me. I quickly turn my face so that his lips hit my cheek instead.

I want to withdraw, but shock holds me in place.

"What are you doing here, Blake?" I finally manage to get my mouth working again when he pulls away.

"You didn't think I'd stay away forever, did you? We are engaged, after all." He almost laughs, like he finds humor in my reaction.

I can quite literally feel Micha's eyes burning holes into my back as she watches the scene unfold.

"We're not engaged anymore." I grit my back molars to keep my jaw from ticking.

"You needed time. I gave it to you. It's time to come home now."

"I am home," I tell him, my nerves misfiring all over the place, making it feel like tiny missiles are exploding all over my body.

"Can we go somewhere more private where we can discuss this?" He looks over my shoulder for a brief moment before his rich brown eyes narrow on me, like he's frustrated he even needs to ask.

"I'm working."

"Surely you can take a break." He insists. "I came all the way here..."

I take a deep breath, trying to gather my bearings. As much as I don't want to deal with this, I also know I can't ignore the fact that he's here, and like it or not, I'm going to have to. And perhaps it is better that we have this conversation somewhere other than my place of employment.

"Micha." I glance behind me at the girl who tries to act uninterested, but I know is watching and dissecting our every move. "I'm going to take my lunch break now. Call my cell if anyone needs me."

"Okay." She gives me a smile that puts me in the mind of a cat who's just caught a mouse between her teeth. "You two have fun."

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I turn back to Blake.

“Let’s take a walk.” I step past him, quickly exiting onto the sidewalk without turning to see if he’s following me.

I swear it feels like my heart has beaten a new cavity inside my chest by the time I reach my car across the street, figuring that will at least give us a semblance of privacy. I don’t know what I’m going to say or how I’m going to say it in a way that he will actually listen, but one way or the other, he *is* going to listen to me. He has to.

I told him months ago that we were done. And while yes, he insisted I wasn’t serious and that I just needed some time, I never dreamed he’d just show up here like this. Clearly, he didn’t think I meant it last time. This time I’ll make sure he does.

“Someone’s in a hurry,” he observes.

“Get in,” I tell him, quickly unlocking the doors before tugging the driver’s side open and climbing inside.

Without a word, he crosses around the car.

The instant his door closes, sealing us both inside, the space becomes too small, his familiar scent stinging the back of my throat as I briefly wonder if I’ve always hated his cologne or if I’m just now realizing that I do. Despite the cold temperatures outside, I crack a window because I’m fairly certain, if I don’t, the smell might choke me to death.

“Why are you here?” I shift toward him. There’s no anger in my voice. Frustration maybe, but not anger. I know Blake well enough to know he’ll feed off that.

“What do you mean, why am I here? I thought that much was obvious.” He tries to act innocent, his façade firmly in place, but I know him well enough to know there isn’t anything innocent about him or his sudden appearance here.

It’s one of the things I once found so attractive about him, but now, can’t for the life of me figure out why. What did I see in someone as cold and calculating as Blake when there are people like Remi in the world? Someone who lights up a room just by walking into it. Someone whose smile can lighten even the worst of moods. Someone who makes me feel cherished in a way that Blake never did.

“We aren’t together anymore, Blake. You know that, right? I ended things between us months ago,” I needlessly say because, of course, he already knows all of this.

“You were upset. You needed time. I gave you that time. Now, it’s time to come home, where you belong.” He reaches for my hand, but I’m quick to pull it away before he can take it.

I don’t mean to be cold-hearted, but I know his game. He thinks he can force me to do what he wants like he used to. But I’m not the same woman I was when we were together. In fact, I’m so far removed from that woman that it doesn’t even feel like she was me. Like this version of myself, the one where I actually thought I could marry Blake and be happy, existed in an alternate reality altogether.

“This is my home,” I repeat more forcefully than the first time I said it.

“We’ve been together over five years...”

“We *were* together... As in past tense,” I quickly correct. “We haven’t been together in months.”

“Fine. We *were* together for over five years,” he lashes, his temper flaring. “Is it so wrong that I don’t want to just let those five years go?”

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

“I miss you.” Nothing has sounded more disingenuous in my life.

“Blake...”

“Just let me say this, okay? I miss you, Kaia. I miss waking up with you in the morning. I miss watching you dance around the kitchen as you made breakfast. I miss...” His eyes momentarily drift to my body. “Other things.” He clears his throat. “I walk around the house and it’s just so empty. Everything feels empty without you.”

I know better than anyone when he’s trying to lay something on thick, and right now, he’s trying to bury me in it. What’s worse, once upon a time, I might have believed him.

I don’t anymore.

It’s funny what kind of clarity a person can get with a little time and distance.

“It’s been months, Blake. If you missed me so much, you would have come after me the instant I left. So now tell me, why are you *really* here?”

“I just told you.” He reaches for my hand a second time, but again, I pull it away. “Why are you being like this?”

“Like what?”

“Acting like you don’t love me when we both know you do. Do you want me to beg? Is that what you want? Because I will. I will beg for you if that’s what it takes.”

This really is as bad as I feared it would be, only not for the reason I thought.

“I don’t want you to beg. I want you to go home.”

“Not without you.”

“I’m happy here. Happier than I have been in a very long time. I’m not going back to California.”

“Then I’ll move here.”

“No,” I quickly interject.

“Why? It solves both of our problems. I get you, and you get to stay here with your aunt. It’s a win-win.”

“You’re not listening. I’m not in love with you anymore.” The words are off my tongue before I can take them back, or at the very least, deliver them more gently.

He draws back like I’ve just physically slapped him across the face.

“I don’t believe you. You can’t just wake up one day and decide you don’t love someone anymore.” The first crack in his armor starts to show.

He may be an asshole, but he’s not impenetrable. I didn’t want to have to do it this way, but he’s left me no choice.

“Actually, you can,” I correct. “It happens all the time.”

“This is because of your mom, isn’t it? Because she didn’t like me, and now what, you think it’s some sort of betrayal to be with me now that she’s dead.”

I swear I instantaneously see red.

“Don’t you dare talk about my mother that way,” I warn, heat spreading through my limbs as my anger takes root and quickly spreads.

“What way? She *is* dead. That’s not an insult. It’s a fact.”

There’s not a trace of empathy to be found.

Did I really just spend the last few months feeling guilty over someone who would speak of my late mother in such a way? Who would look at me with such disdain and not care that I’m hurting?

I look at him like he’s a complete stranger because honestly, he just might be.

“Get the hell out of my car. We’re done here.” My tone is downright murderous.

“Like hell we are. I came all this way. I’m not leaving until I get what I came for.” His nostrils flare.

“That isn’t going to happen.” I draw back, ready to flee the car if he leans in any closer.

I’ve seen Blake angry. I’ve even seen him borderline violent. Not that he ever put his hands on me... Well, that’s not entirely true. He has gotten a little physical before, but he’s never hit me. Now that I think about it, that really doesn’t make it much better.

“You forget I know you, Kaia. I know how to get you to do exactly what I want. You used to be so docile, so agreeable.” He tsks. “I’m sure we can get you there again.”

“I’m in love with someone else.”

I immediately want to take the words back with the way his expression contorts.

After existing in Remi’s light, being with Blake feels like being shrouded in darkness. I knew before I met Remi that Blake wasn’t the one. But now, I see just how right I was. Just how right my mother was. She could see so clearly what I ignored. That Blake is manipulative and cunning, and if I had let him, he would have slowly changed everything that made me, well, me. And what’s worse, I would have let him.

“You’re lying.” He hisses.

“When have you ever known me lie?” I counter, not able to recall a single time that I did in the entire span of our relationship. “You need to hear me, Blake. This is over. You and me, we’ve been over for a long time.”

“But you still love me.” He keeps going, reaching across the console to forcibly take my hand. “I know you do.” He squeezes so tightly that pain radiates through my fingers.

“You’re hurting me.” I pull as hard as I can, able to free my hand from his grasp. Without giving him a second to recover, I shove open the door, practically falling out of the car.

I’ve barely had time to right myself when he comes barreling around the front of the vehicle toward me, having gotten out of the car with lightning speed.

“I just want you to come home with me. I just want things to be the way they were.” He pushes me into the side of the car, pinning me between it and him.

“I don’t feel that way about you anymore.” I refuse to let him bully me into submission.

“I don’t believe you.” His face dips down level with mine, our height difference pronounced. “He’s just a rebound.”

“He’s not,” I disagree.

“I give it a month, two tops, and you’ll come crawling back.” He hisses, so close to my face that I can feel the warmth of his breath.

“You said that before. But I didn’t. You came to me.” I stand my ground.

“Why do you keep doing this to me?”

“I’m not doing anything to you. You are the one who came here. You are the one holding onto something that doesn’t exist anymore.”

“It doesn’t exist because you threw it away.”

“Does it really matter? It doesn’t change the way things are now.”

“Maybe if you remembered what it was like to be with me.”

“No, Blake.”

“You’re not even willing to try.” His hands are on my face before I’ve even registered that he’s moved, holding me in place. “Don’t give up what we had.”

“You need to let me go.”

“No.” He shakes his head adamantly. “I won’t. You love me still. I know you do. You just need to remember.”

His lips are on mine so fast that I can’t move my head fast enough to stop their collision with mine. I freeze in place, the familiarity of his kiss catching me off guard. It’s not because it makes me feel something. It’s because it doesn’t. Not a single blip of anything other than mild disgust. And that is how I know, with complete and utter certainty, that I made the right choice.

I’m finally able to shake my face away enough to break the kiss, albeit not nearly fast enough, moving to dip under his arm in an attempt to escape.

One minute he’s got me with an iron-clad grip, the next his hold on me disappears completely. It takes my brain several long seconds to figure out why. For my eyes to track the movement from where he was, to where he now lies, a large frame on top of him.

“Remi...” I act on autopilot, moving quickly to try and pull him off Blake, who is pinned beneath his weight. It does me no good.

He lands a punch square to Blake’s mouth, not giving him a single second to recover before another blow lands just below his left eye.

“Remi!” I scream, using every ounce of strength I have to try and pull him off, to no avail. “Remi!” I get right in his face, pushing on his shoulders with all that I have. “Stop!” Fist extended in the air to lay a third hit, he

freezes mid-motion, his heated gaze coming to mine as if he's just now hearing me. "Stop," I repeat a second time.

Looking down at Blake's bloody lip and already swollen eye and then back up at me, he shoves to his feet, stumbling backward a few steps.

"Who the fuck is he?" he spits, his voice so angry it causes every hair on my body to stand at attention. "And why the fuck was he kissing you?"

It takes me longer than it should to realize he saw something very different than what was actually happening.

"I'm her fiancé, you piece of shit." Blake rolls to his side, spitting blood onto the ground.

I see an array of emotions pass over Remi's features as he stares back at me in utter disbelief.

"No, that's not—" I try to explain.

"Don't lie to him, Kaia," Blake cuts me off, managing to hoist himself up on one knee. "You got mixed up with a real winner here." Blake smiles up at Remi, egging him on, blood staining his normally stark-white teeth.

I know what he's doing. He's trying to push Remi over the edge. Pushing people to their limits is Blake's specialty, after all.

"Blake, shut up!"

"I'll show you a fucking winner when I drag that ugly fucking face of yours down ten miles of concrete. You won't be smiling anymore then, will you? Better yet, you probably won't have any teeth left to smile with." Remi seethes, everything about his demeanor screaming that not only will he do it, but that he'd enjoy it.

"That's enough." I wedge myself between Remi and Blake. "He is *not* who he says he is." I insist, needing him to hear me. "Let me explain."

"You're gonna try to stand there and pretend like I didn't just see you two kissing..." He dips his face down level with mine, a wild, unhinged look in his eyes.

When I don't answer quickly enough, trying to find the right words, he continues.

"That's what I thought." A smile somewhere between sadistic and homicidal crosses his face.

"I broke things off months ago." The words break free, too shrill to belong to me.

"Is this what you call breaking things off?"

"You don't understand. I can explain."

“You know what, I don’t think I want to hear what you have to say.” He gives me a full once-over like the sight of me makes him physically ill. “You are not at all who I thought you were.”

Words can’t even begin to describe what that look and his words do to me—like driving a dagger deep into my heart, I can quite literally feel the pain slide through my chest, stealing my breath.

“Do us both a favor and forget you know me.” One minute he’s in front of me, the next he’s halfway across the parking lot, moving so quickly I can barely track the movement.

“Remi, wait.” I try to go after him, but Blake’s hand closes around my hand, cutting off my ability to do so.

“Let go of me!” I scream, my insides shaking so violently it’s a wonder I’m able to stand still. “Why did you say you’re my fiancé when we both know you aren’t?” The second he’s upright, I’m in his face. “Why?” I shove at his chest.

“Because now you know how it feels to lose someone you love,” he says so eerily calm that I blink several times, not entirely sure I heard him right. And then he smiles. A smile that causes the hairs on the back of my neck to rise. “Hurts like hell, doesn’t it?” He wipes the blood from his mouth with the back of his sleeve, smearing the red sludge as he pushes past me.

I turn, my gaze catching the back end of Remi’s car as he speeds out of the parking lot. I have no idea how I missed him pulling in. Then again, I wasn’t exactly paying attention to what was going on around me in the moment.

I’m not sure how much he saw, but I don’t believe that he saw everything because if he did, he would have known I was telling the truth.

Glancing back at Blake, I don’t attempt to go after him, even if a year ago I would have. I would have run after him and begged for his forgiveness, even though he was in the wrong. I was weak and easily manipulated by him then, and somehow, that didn’t become clear until today. Because what he just said... What he just did. It shows me what I should have seen a very long time ago. How vindictive and selfish he really is.

I’m done pretending he was some great guy whose heart I broke. Because the reality is, he’s not a good guy. I’m not sure he ever was. He never cared about what I wanted. Ever. That was always our problem. It was always about him. Him showing up here is just further proof of that.

“Don’t come back ever again!” I scream to his back, which earns me no reaction, not that I expected it to. He achieved what he came here to do—scramble what little pieces of my life I’ve managed to put back together without him.

He made his point. He got the last laugh. In his eyes, he won.
But I’m done playing his game.

Chapter Sixteen

Remi



“Now isn’t the best time, Rem.” Aspen looks about as bad as I feel as she opens the door.

“Sorry, Pen.” I step past her in the doorway. “But this can’t wait,” I say, my chest so tight it’s a wonder I can fucking breathe, let alone speak.

“What’s going on?” Her brow furrows as she closes the door, turning back toward me.

“Did you know she was engaged?” I don’t waste time with pleasantries.

“What?” She draws back, confusion knitting her eyebrows.

“Kaia. Did you know she was engaged?” I ask again, clenching and unclenching my fists like a madman, not able to stand still.

I can’t get the image out of my head. Of her in another man’s arms. His lips pressed to hers. I honestly felt like I could kill someone in that moment. That I could kill *him*... Had Kaia not stopped me, I actually might have.

When I rounded the corner and pulled into the lot, there they stood. Her back to the car, him pressed into her. I thought at first I was seeing things, but as I climbed out of the car, I watched in what felt like slow motion as it all unfolded. Watched him kiss her. Watched her not pull away. It was all the proof I needed.

“What are you talking about?” Pen seems as confused as I feel.

“Kaia, she’s engaged to another man.”

“No, she isn’t.” She shakes her head adamantly.

“Oh, but she is.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I pulled into the parking lot across from your office and saw them kissing against her car.”

“No.” Her lips part in a silent gasp. “Did you say something to her?”

“Of course I did.”

“Well, what was it?” She seems annoyed she has to ask.

“Honestly, I can’t remember. My mind was going a hundred miles a minute. I know I said something about forgetting we ever met or some shit. Fuck, I don’t even know. I may have also knocked that polo-wearing motherfucker to his ass and may or may not have broken a few bones in his face.”

“Oh, Remi, you didn’t?”

“What did you expect me to do? Sit there and let them make a fucking fool out of me? Been there, done that. No fucking thank you.”

She flinches at my words but not even the hurt that slides across her face can stop the anger coursing through me like a building volcano. It’s only a matter of time before I erupt, which is why I came here first. If anyone can talk me down, it’s Pen.

“There has to be a reasonable explanation.”

“A reasonable explanation as to why she was kissing another man?” I bark.

“One, please quiet down. The kids are napping and I don’t want to wake them. Two, I get that seeing that was probably horrible, but did she give you any type of explanation?”

“You think I was going to hang around and listen to her lie to my face like I didn’t just see what I saw?”

“Remi.” She gives me a look I know all too well. One that says what an idiot she thinks I am. I’ve seen it countless times over the course of our friendship.

“Don’t look at me like that, Pen. You didn’t see what I saw. Besides, you’re supposed to be on my side here.” I start pacing because if I don’t, I might put my fist through a fucking wall.

“I am on your side.”

I tense when her hand touches my forearm.

“Always.” She gives it a reassuring squeeze. “All I was going to say was it might not have been a bad idea to let her explain. You know better than most what things can look like. You and Olivia.” She needlessly reminds me.

“That’s different. I didn’t have my tongue down her throat.”

“Doesn’t mean it didn’t look worse than it was. Maybe this is something similar. Maybe it looked a lot worse than it really was.”

“Somehow, I doubt that. I know when I’m being made an ass of. You and Sutton taught me that lesson the hard way.”

She flinches a second time at my words and this seems to snap me out of my anger-fueled rant.

“Fuck, Pen. I’m sorry.” I scrub a hand down my face.

“Don’t apologize. I know we hurt you.”

“That was a long time ago. It’s not fair for me to take my shit out on you because of it. I’m just... I’m so fucking tired of always playing second best to another man.”

“I obviously don’t know what happened or the reasoning behind it, but I do know that Kaia is crazy about you. The way her entire face lights up every time you walk into a room. Hell, even the mention of your name brings a smile to her face. I find it hard to believe she is engaged to another man and hiding it from everyone.”

“Sometimes people turn out not to be who you thought they were.” I shrug, my chest burning like someone just took hot blades and sliced across it a hundred times.

The feeling is all too familiar, only this time, instead of the world flipping upside down, it feels more like the ground beneath me is going to swallow me whole and trap me in perpetual darkness for the rest of my existence.

“And sometimes there’s more to the story and you need to be understanding enough to hear it.”

“What excuse could she possibly have? Huh?” I run my hands through my hair, tugging at the ends so hard that I can feel several strands snap.

“I don’t know,” she quietly admits. “But I do know you need to find out.”

“I’m not going to be the one chasing a fantasy. I’ve been down that road before, and it doesn’t end well for me.”

“Since when is wanting to be happy a fantasy?”

“You don’t get it,” I grumble.

“Don’t I? You think because I hurt you that I don’t understand what it’s like to be hurt? To feel like everything you wanted just slipped through your fingers? Because I understand that feeling all too well. You should know that better than anyone. So don’t give me this bullshit about chasing a fantasy. Some things are just worth fighting for; your pride be damned.” She jabs a finger into my chest.

“This has nothing to do with pride,” I disagree.

“This has everything to do with your pride. You feel like you came out looking weak where your brother and I were concerned, and you don’t ever want to feel that way again. I get it. But, Rem, you can’t let our mistakes become your own. You can’t just walk away from the first woman you’ve truly cared about because you’re too scared to hear what she might say. Maybe it’s true. Maybe she has been playing us this whole time. Or maybe there’s a hell of a lot more to the story and you need to let her explain. Because I know you, Rem. If you don’t, you’ll never forgive yourself when you realize it’s too late.”

“And what if it’s all true? What if it was exactly what it looked like, huh? What then?”

“Then at least you know. Isn’t that better than wondering what if?”

“Honestly, I’m not so sure,” I admit.

“Do you want me to talk to her?” she offers.

“No.” I shake my head. “I appreciate the offer, but this is something I need to handle on my own.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Like I fucking know.”

“Remi.” She smiles weakly like she physically doesn’t have the strength to be standing here arguing with me.

“Pen. Are you okay?” I ask, not able to shake the feeling that something is off with her. Call it intuition. Or maybe I just know her well enough to know when she’s trying to put on a brave face.

“I’m fine... It’s just... God, I feel silly for even mentioning it given everything that happened to you today.”

“Trust me, I could use the distraction.”

“You’re going to laugh.” She grimaces.

“Doubtful. I’m not in much of a laughing mood. I mean, unless you’re pregnant again. That I might laugh at.”

Her expression tells me everything her mouth doesn’t say.

“No.” I step back, taking my first real look at her. She’s dressed in sweats, her hair tied up in a messy knot, not an ounce of makeup on her face. Honestly, she looks like hell. “Seriously?”

She nods slowly, biting on her bottom lip. “Please don’t say anything. Kaia is the only one who knows.” The mention of her name is like salt in a very sore wound. “I haven’t even told Sutton yet.”

“How far along are you?”

“Best guess, a couple of months.”

“Damn, you just went and put my projection time to shame. I gave you a year. Clearly, I was being very generous.”

“Now is not the time to gloat.” She pouts out her bottom lip. “What am I going to do?”

“What do you mean, what are you going to do?”

“I can barely manage two kids and myself. But three...”

“Hey.” I tug her into my arms, giving her the hug it’s very clear she desperately needs, and maybe I need it a little bit too. “You are the best mother.” I drop my chin to the top of her head. “If you and Sutton can’t figure it out, no one can.”

“You think so?” She pulls back just enough to look up at me.

“I know so,” I tell her. “Just like I know that this kid is going to have the best fucking uncle on the planet.” I give her a cheeky grin, despite feeling like my entire world just imploded on itself.

“Thanks, Rem.” She blows out a slow breath, both of our gazes darting to the front door as it opens and Sutton appears.

In an instant, Pen is out of my arms and into his, concern creasing his face.

“Is everything okay?” He looks at me as he says it, but I know he’s really asking his wife, who buries her face in his chest.

“I should go,” I say. “Let you two talk.” I step past them, tugging open the door Sutton just closed.

“Remi,” Aspen calls to my back. “Promise me you’ll talk to her.”

Not having it in me to lie, I give her a stiff nod before stepping out into the cold afternoon air.



I shut my phone off hours ago and have yet to turn it back on. Honestly, I’m afraid of what I might find if I do. Afraid that I’ll see a text from Kaia that will have me running to her side, despite everything that transpired earlier today.

And right now, I don’t want to be anywhere near her.

That's actually not true. All I want to be is near her. That's the fucking problem. Even seeing her make out with another guy and I still can't stop thinking about her. She has me in such a chokehold that I can't fucking breathe without her.

So instead of having the temptation, I powered the fucking thing off, and here I sit, staring at the black screen like somehow the damn thing is going to magically give me an answer I'm so desperately seeking.

When all that shit with Aspen and Sutton went down, I came out looking like the donkey. I tried to force myself on Aspen, emotionally speaking, of course, and later regretted how weak and pathetic it made me. I swore to myself I would never be that guy again. The guy incapable of letting someone go, even when they clearly don't want me.

Tipping back the rocks glass, I finish off my fifth glass of whiskey... Or maybe it's my sixth. Fuck, I don't even know at this point. All I know is that I need to forget. If even just for a few minutes.

I need to forget what she smells like. What she tastes like. How beautiful she looks lying beneath me, lips swollen and freshly fucked.

The knots in my stomach tighten, and I immediately signal the bartender for another glass. Luckily, the place isn't busy tonight, and within seconds, I have a fresh drink in front of me and thank fuck for it because I'm not in a patient mood.

"Remi."

I've just taken a long drink when I hear my name.

I turn my head just in time to see a lengthy brunette slide onto the stool next to me. She's gorgeous. Big tits. Full lips. Hair long enough to hold on to as I fuck her mouth, and yet, all the things that would once have me swiveling toward her and turning on the Remi charm seem so unappealing that I barely even look at her before turning my attention forward again.

That is, until I remember she said my name.

"You don't remember me, do you?" she asks when I glance back at her a second time.

"Should I?" My words scratch up my throat like sandpaper.

She doesn't seem surprised that I don't.

"Dalia Hendrickson. We had—"

"Econ together sophomore year," I finish, my brain seeming to click in place as I meet her familiar chocolate eyes.

“That’s right.” She smiles, signaling to the bartender for a drink. “Glass of Merlot, please,” she says before turning her attention back to me. “I haven’t seen you since the night you jumped off the roof at the omega house.”

Weirdly, I have no idea what she’s talking about. Then again, I’ve been known to do some pretty stupid shit when I’m drunk. Which is probably why I don’t drink that often anymore. I always hate myself the next day.

“You’ll have to refresh my memory.” I take another drink of whiskey, reveling in the burn as it slides down my throat, warming my insides.

“You don’t remember?” Her shoulders shake in silent laughter. “You were there with that one girl... Crap, what was her name?”

“Aspen.” I take a wild guess because, let’s be real, for over a decade of my life, she was basically the *only* person I ever went anywhere with.

“Yes, that’s right. The one with the pinkish hue to her hair.” She nods. “Anyway, some guy dared you to jump off the roof onto a trampoline they had stolen from a neighbor’s yard.”

“Let me guess, I did it.”

“You did. I’ve never seen anyone soar through the air the way you did when you hit that trampoline. I thought for sure you were going to fly off and break something, but you didn’t. You came back down and stuck the landing, throwing your arms up like an Olympic gymnast.”

“Sounds like me,” I grunt.

“So I’m guessing you don’t remember what happened after that, either?”

The way she looks at me tells me I *should* know, but for the life of me, I can’t seem to grasp the memory. I mean, come on, if I don’t remember jumping off a roof, it’s unlikely I remember anything else from the night either.

“Was I at least good?” I say in lieu of answering her question.

“Given that you were drunk enough to jump off a roof, I’d give you a solid eight out of ten.” She smiles, not seeming the least bit offended that I fucked her and don’t remember.

“Eight out of ten isn’t too bad.” I take another drink.

“You know, I used to have the biggest crush on you.” She continues like I didn’t speak.

“Oh yeah?”

“Like the biggest crush. Not to sound like a stalker, but I used to watch you in class. You were hands down the most beautiful man I had ever seen,

and I rather enjoyed studying the lines of your face when you weren't paying attention." She takes a sip of her wine. "That night, after you landed your jump perfectly, you met my eyes across the yard, hopped down, and came straight toward me. I can still remember exactly what you said. *I hope you're ready for the best fucking night of your life.*"

"I didn't." I scrub my hand down my face.

"Oh, you did. And then you took my hand and dragged me inside the house. I felt like the luckiest girl on the planet that night."

"Let me guess. I left you there, and the next time you saw me, I acted like I didn't know you."

"Pretty much."

"I'm sorry. I wish I could say you were the only one I did that to..."

"Oh, I know. You had quite the reputation around school."

"And yet you still went inside with me?" I hitch a brow.

"Of course I did. You were Remington Barnett, the most sought-after bachelor in school. Then again, I was immature enough to believe I wouldn't be just another notch in your bedpost. The way you looked at me that night...I guess in the end I just saw what I wanted to see. It was easier that way. You know, to think you wanted me for more than just my body."

"I'm sorry." I apologize a second time, not really sure why she even sat down next to me if I fucked her and forgot her, even though she clearly had a thing for me.

"Don't be. It really was one of the best nights of my life." She smiles. "Besides, it was a long time ago. I'm sure you've matured a lot since then." *Have I?* I think but don't say.

Kaia comes back to the forefront of my mind. Not that she actually ever left, but for a brief moment, I let Dalia distract me.

I think about how much she's changed me. In the span of a couple of months, I went from acting like the guy Dalia just described, to someone who would quite literally burn the world to the ground for a singular woman.

I know we haven't been seeing each other that long, but I was pretty convinced from the very beginning that she was it for me.

The thought only deepens the pit that has opened up inside my stomach.

"Yeah," I mutter, not really sure what else to say. "So how are you? You married? Got any kids?" I ask, even though I couldn't really care less.

"Newly divorced, actually. Which I guess explains the dress." She gestures to the silky, form-fitting material that doesn't even come close to

reaching her knee. Weirdly, I hadn't even noticed what she was wearing until she mentioned it. Normally, it's one of the first things I notice, for obvious reasons.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'm not." She shakes her head, taking another sip of wine. "My ex-husband was an asshole." She leans in a little closer. "What about you?"

"Not married. No kids." I realize how fucking pathetic that probably sounds. A thirty-year-old man who has no real ties to anyone but himself.

"Girlfriend?"

"Not really." The words taste bitter on my tongue.

"Not really."

"It's complicated."

Had she asked me this question yesterday, I would have told her about Kaia. I would have said, yes, I'm happily committed to someone. And I was... Happy, I mean. Maybe happier than I've ever been. So fucking happy that I spent most days feeling like I was walking around on clouds.

Funny how life has a way of bringing you back down to earth with a dramatic splat.

"I see." She crosses one leg over the other. "So does complicated mean you're able to invite me back to your place and show me the second-best night of my life?" She touches my arm with the tips of her fingers, and while my gut reaction is to pull away, I don't.

"What makes you think this time wouldn't trump the last time?"

"Just a feeling." She tsks, the conversation going from casual to something else entirely in the span of just a few seconds. "So what do you say? Wanna take this party somewhere more private?"

I should say no. Truth be told, I want to say no. But I also want to prove to myself that Kaia doesn't have the death grip on me that I think she does. I need to prove that to myself. I need to cleanse her from my mind and my body and forget I ever met her.

"Promise me you'll talk to her." Aspen's earlier words filter through my mind.

I didn't... Talk to her, I mean. What is there really to say? She was kissing another man. Even if she insists it's something else, I saw what I saw, and there's no changing that. Why should I give her another opportunity to lie to me further?

Had another woman tried to kiss me, I wouldn't have just stood there and let her. I would have shoved her away in an instant. But Kaia didn't. She just stood there and let him kiss her. Her fiancé...

The thought makes me want to throw up my insides.

How could I have been so blind?

Again...

It's this thought that has me dropping money on the bar and pushing to a stand.

"Let's do it." I wait until she collects her things before extending my arm to her.

She smiles, slipping her arm through mine as we make our way out of the bar.

The hole in my stomach continues to grow on the short walk back to my apartment. So much so that by the time we reach my building, I'm fairly certain it's going to swallow me whole at any moment. Even still, it doesn't stop me from unlocking the door, and it doesn't stop me from letting her inside.

When she turns, her hands sliding up my chest, the feeling turns from bad to worse. Because while my mind may have chalked up that Kaia's gone, my body, more specifically my heart, simply hasn't gotten the message.

Chapter Seventeen

Kaia



“Took you long enough.” It’s what I hear seconds before the door to Remi’s apartment opens and his large figure appears in the doorway in front of me.

The sight of him steals my breath and tears instantly prick the backs of my eyes.

I’ve been calling him on repeat all day, but I’m pretty sure he has his phone off and likely hasn’t listened to a single voicemail or read a single text I’ve sent him. If he had, I have to believe he would have called me back. Because then he would know the whole truth—every painful detail of it.

I watch in an instant as every ounce of color drains from his face, though I don’t fully understand the reaction. I expected him to be angry, sure, but this doesn’t look like anger. In fact, it looks a hell of a lot like panic.

“Do you need me to tip?” I hear her before I see her, my heart practically leaping out of my throat when she slides up next to Remi, her too tight dress making her boobs press up in an unnatural way.

The first thing I feel is disbelief.

It’s been only hours since the Blake fiasco and already he has another woman in his apartment?

The second thing I feel is complete and utter devastation, the kind that threatens to bring me to my knees.

But it’s quickly outweighed by the third and most prominent emotion... anger.

“Wow.” I shake my head, taking a full step back into the hallway. “Fucking wow.” My gaze slices to her. “I really hope for your sake, she was worth it,” I say as if the words are meant for her.

“Oh, it’s not—” She starts, but I quickly cut her off.

“Don’t say a fucking a word.” I hiss in warning, feeling on the verge of clawing both of their eyes out.

I’m familiar with grief and loss. It’s become quite common in my life as of late. What I’m not familiar with is this rage that takes me over so completely that it’s all I can feel.

“Kaia…” Remi starts, taking a step toward me.

“Don’t!” I warn. “Don’t you dare, you hypocritical asshole. You saw something you didn’t understand, and instead of giving me even two minutes to explain, you run away and bring home the first woman you can find?”

“I can explain.”

His words send me over the edge.

“Explain!” I laugh like an unhinged lunatic. “Explain!” I repeat a second time. “You didn’t give me a single moment to explain to you that what you saw wasn’t what you thought you saw, and you have the audacity to ask me to let *you* explain.” I snarl. “You said I wasn’t who you thought I was.” I remind him. “Well, you’re exactly who I thought you were, and shame on me for not knowing better.” I spin around so violently that I nearly take out the food delivery person, having not even heard him approach.

“I’ll take this.” I snag the bag away from the young guy, who seems borderline terrified by me, turning back to Remi. “I hope you like your food the way you like your women—trash off the fucking floor.” I slam the bag down, watching the Styrofoam containers split open, food spilling all over the place. “What was it you said to me earlier? Oh yes.” I smile wickedly. “Do us both a favor and forget you know me.”

With that, I spin, unintentionally knocking my shoulder into the delivery guy in my attempt to get away. Pain instantly shoots down through my fingers, but I don’t give Remi the satisfaction of seeing me flinch as I break out into a run.

I hear him call my name once, twice, and then a third time, his voice growing louder each time he speaks. No matter how hard I try to outrun him, I can feel him closing in on me with every step I take.

My lungs burn, not able to pump the air in and out quickly enough. By the time I reach my car, I’m panting so heavily I briefly wonder if I’m going to collapse from hyperventilation at any second.

“Kaia.” I just get my hand around the handle of my door when Remi appears, abruptly stealing the keys from my hand before locking my car so that I can’t get inside.

“Give me my fucking keys, Remi.” I hiss, tears nearly blinding my vision.

“Blake *was* your fiancé,” he says instead.

“Keys. Now.” I grit my teeth.

“I didn’t give you the chance to explain earlier. I saw him kiss you, and it drowned out everything else.” Pain tugs at his features. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“You listened to my voicemails... finally. Good for you.” I try to snag my keys from his hand, but he pulls them out of my grasp before I even get close.

“I didn’t give you the chance to explain,” he says again. “Let me.”

“You must think I’m really stupid if you think I’m going to listen to a word you have to say. You misunderstand a situation so epically that instead of helping me like you should have, you made it worse. Then you run off and fuck the first woman you can find! Why? To punish me?” I laugh wildly, not an ounce of humor to the sound.

“I did not fuck her.”

“You already insulted me enough today by not believing me when I told you it wasn’t what it looked like. Don’t insult me further by lying to me.”

“I. Did. Not. Fuck. Her,” he repeats, putting his face right in mine.

I can smell the alcohol on his breath instantly.

“Let me guess, you also haven’t been drinking.” I sneer.

“I saw another man kiss you today. Yeah, I had some drinks. Fucking sue me. That doesn’t equate to sticking my cock in someone else.”

“Doesn’t it?” I arch a brow. “I mean, it would fit your track record, would it not?”

“That’s not fair and you know it.”

“What’s not fair is that you believed the worst in me, and then you think it impossible that I could believe the worst in you when the proof is quite literally inside of your apartment!” My voice shoots up an octave.

“I went to college with Dalia. I ran into her at the bar. And yes, I was so fucked-up over the thought that I had lost you, that I said yes when she suggested we go back to my place. But that’s all that happened. I swear. I never touched her.”

“Then why is she here?”

“I wanted to fuck her.”

“Wow!” I step back, his words like a punch straight to my stomach, knocking the air out of my lungs.

“I wanted to fuck her to prove to myself that I could. Not because of who she is, but because of who she isn’t.” He grabs my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. “You have your hooks so fucking deep in me that I couldn’t even do that. I knew it before we even walked inside, and as soon as we did, I told her as much. In fact, I broke down rather pathetically. So no, we didn’t fuck. Because there is no one on this earth I want to fuck but you. Do you hear me? You are all I want, Kaia.”

“Then why is she *still* here?” My chin quivers, unshed tears clinging to my lashes as I push his hand away.

I want to believe everything he’s saying so badly that it physically hurts.

“Because she was already here, and I felt like enough of an asshole bringing her home and then turning her down, so I offered to order us some food. Besides, I needed someone to talk to. And that’s all we did. We talked. Mainly about you. I listened to your voicemails. I wanted to call you the instant I did, but I was still pretty drunk, and I wanted to be of sound mind when I told you how truly fucking sorry I am. And I am, Kaia. I’m so fucking sorry.”

I swipe angrily at the tear that manages to escape my eye.

“So you were going to make me wait? Do you have any idea what seeing you drive off did to me? And then to find out you turned off your phone. And you were going to make me wait?” I repeat.

“Well, when you say it like that, it sounds bad.”

“You think?”

“I’m just... Fuck, I’m not good at this kind of thing. This is all so new to me. I don’t know how to do any of this.”

“Sorry to inconvenience your life. I wasn’t aware I was such a burden.” I hold onto my anger like a lifeline, terrified to let it go.

“Don’t do that.” He takes my hand, refusing to let it go when I try to pull it away. “You are not a burden. You are the light in an otherwise dark room. You are the last thing I think about when I go to sleep at night and the very first thing I think of when I awake. You have consumed me so completely that I’m a blubbering mess without you. Can’t you see that? Can’t you see how fucking epically I have fallen for you?”

My heart is in my throat in an instant.

“You need to hear me say it, I will. I love you.” He releases my fingers, his hands finding my face moments later as he dips in closer. “Do you hear me, Kaia? I’m in love with you. I think I’ve known it since the day you ran

into me. I would never. I could never hurt you like that. I know I fucked up today, but this, you and me, it's the only thing in this crazy world that makes any kind of sense to me, and I can't lose you."

"I don't want to do this," I admit, my voice breaking at the end. He misunderstands, letting his hands fall from my face as he straightens. "I don't want to be one of those couples that fly off the handle and make everything way worse than it needs to be," I quickly continue. "I did it with Olivia. You did it with Blake. And now"—I gesture around at nothing in particular—"we can't keep doing this to each other. If we do, it's never going to work."

"Does that mean you still want it to? Work, I mean," he asks, almost afraid to be hopeful.

"I'm still standing here, aren't I?" I let out a defeated sigh.

"Well, I mean, technically, I have your keys." For the first time today, a smile forms on his mouth and my God, if it isn't like the sun peeking out from behind the clouds after too many dreary days.

I know maybe I shouldn't let the fact that he used the L word excuse everything that happened today, but how can I not?

If I truly thought he was capable of hurting me this way, then maybe. But deep down, I don't. Maybe that makes me stupid. Maybe it makes me a stupid, stupid woman who's only going to get her heart broken in the end.

But you know what? It's my heart, and I can do with it what I want.

"Tell me again," I hear myself say. I don't need to elaborate. He knows exactly what I'm asking.

"I love you, Kaia Sharp." His hands slide back up my face. "I love you." He presses his lips to mine, further overwhelming my already frazzled brain.

"I'm sorry to interrupt." I go ramrod straight when *her* voice muddles an otherwise perfectly imperfect moment.

Remi pulls back, tucking me into his side like he's afraid I might still try and make a run for it.

"I just wanted to say goodbye and that it was really great getting to see you again," she tells Remi, her gaze coming to me. "I hope you know how much he cares about you and what a lucky woman you are for it." She gives me a soft smile before walking away without another word.

"Bye, Dalia," Remi calls after her before his attention comes back to me. "Will you come upstairs? Please. We can talk about today. I want to know everything."

"On one condition."

“Anything.”

“You swear to me, from this moment forward, that no matter what happens, we will listen to each other before anything else. And that you will *never* bring another woman home who isn’t me, ever again.”

“Cross my heart.” He tightens his arm around me, leading me back across the street. “So are there any other ex-fiancés who are going to come crawling out of the woodwork next?” he asks as we make way our way inside the building. “I just wanna know if breaking people’s faces is going to become a daily thing.” He laughs, the sound full and rich.

It’s hard to believe just five minutes ago we were standing at complete odds and now here we are, walking into his apartment almost like nothing even happened. *Well... almost*, I think as I look down at the food splattered and ruined on the ground.

“You think it’s salvageable?” I ask, feeling mildly embarrassed for my behavior.

“I think we’d be better off ordering something else.” He grins, tugging me inside.

Kicking the door closed, he abruptly pushes me against it, trapping me between the door and his hard frame.

“I know I said we’d talk.” He peels his shirt over his head, tossing it to the side before his hands are on either side of my neck. “But I just spent the last eight hours not sure if I’d ever get to do this again, so forgive me if I can’t wait another second to be inside of you.”

He silences any words I might say with his mouth, his tongue tangling with mine in an instant. I lose myself to his touch, to the feeling of having him pressed against me when, like he said, I spent the last eight hours not knowing if I’d ever get to feel this way again.

I know a lot has happened, and there is still so much we need to talk about, but right now, I just want him to make me forget, to expunge this day from my brain and from my body.

Every kiss feels more consuming than the last.

Every touch more frantic, like neither of us can get enough.

And truthfully, I don’t think we can.

At least I know I never will. Not where Remi is concerned. Not ever.

He only further proves that point when he drives deep inside of me minutes later, my name falling from his lips over and over again as he fills my body so completely that the only thing that exists in the world is him.

His touch.

His kiss.

His love.

It pours out of his body into mine, consuming me from the inside out until there is not a single part of me that doesn't feel the effects of him. And I wouldn't have it any other way.



“We’re really doing this?” I stand outside the theater, staring up at the marquee, Remi at my side looking so freaking handsome in his suit and tie that I almost didn’t let him out of the car, tempted to call the whole thing off so I could spend the rest of the day tangled in his sheets with him instead.

“Of course we are.” He grins, lifting our entwined hands to kiss the back of my knuckles.

“It’s not too late to change your mind,” I tell him with a smile.

“And deny you the experience of seeing your favorite movie brought to the stage. Never.”

It’s been over a week since the day from hell—as I’ve taken to calling it—and while things aren’t exactly how they were before everything happened, in a way I think they might actually be better. Because while we both were in the wrong that day, I think in the end, it put a lot of things into perspective.

I haven’t heard from Blake since. I’d say his pride is hurt enough that he probably won’t be returning, and if he does, well, I think it’s safe to say he’ll regret it.

“I will admit, I am excited.” I rock back on my heels. And I am. I have been since the day he asked me. And while yes, I’m excited about the play, I’m more excited about who I get to watch it with.

“Should we head in?” He starts to move but stops when he realizes I haven’t.

“Can I say one thing first?” I ask nervously, my pulse spiking when he pivots so that he’s standing in front of me instead of next to me.

“Of course.” His eyes search mine. “Is everything okay?” he asks when I still haven’t gotten the courage to say the words.

“Yeah. I just...” I swallow hard.

Just say it, Kaia.

It's three words.

Three words he's said to you a hundred times in the last week.

I wanted to say them back the moment he told me, but it didn't feel right. Like I would only be saying it because he did. And now, well, I've waited so long that I've kind of got myself freaked out by it.

"You can tell me anything." He gives my hand a reassuring squeeze.

"I love you," I blurt the words so fast that they all blend together and come out sounding more like Olive-u.

"I'm sorry." A wide grin spreads across his face. "Did you just say you olive me?" he teases, knowing full well what I was trying to say.

"I did. I mean, I do." I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. "I love you," I repeat more slowly, making sure to pronounce each word perfectly. "I love you, Remi. I wanted to tell you sooner. I just..."

He silences my nervous rant with a kiss, his arms sliding around my waist as he lifts me straight off my feet. My hands slide around the back of his neck as I kiss him right back, despite the very public nature of our situation.

Right now, I wouldn't care if a million people were watching. Let them watch.

"Now it's your turn to say it again." He smiles against my mouth, pulling back just enough that he can look into my eyes.

"I love you, Remington Jonathan Barnett," I tell him proudly, my hands sliding to his cheeks as I kiss him again.

And I do.

Love him.

With every fiber of my being.

"Took you long enough," he murmurs, slowly lowering me to my feet. "And for what it's worth, I love you more." He pulls back with a wide smile.

"Are we going to make this a competition now?" I shake my head, not able to contain the upward turn of my own lips.

"You can't compete when you've already won." He chuckles when I give him a light shove, catching my hand between his fingers.

"I think they're about to close the doors." I gesture behind him.

He looks over his shoulder for a brief moment before those incredible green eyes find mine once more.

"It would appear they are," he agrees.

“What do you say, Mr. Barnett? Do you want to follow the yellow brick road with me?” I ask, giving him a silly curtsy.

“It would be the absolute pleasure of my life, Ms. Sharp.” He bows, kissing my knuckles. “I will follow you anywhere.”

I would too, I think, but don't say. To the ends and the earth and back I would follow him. Because this man... This beautiful man who has changed everything, I love him in a way I didn't know was possible to love another person. And I feel it stronger and stronger with each day that passes.

I don't care if it's too soon, or that it came out of nowhere.

All I care about is that he found me in the darkness and pulled me back into the light.

And I will bask in his glow for as long as he will let me.

I'm hoping for forever, but I'll take as many days as I can get, and I will cherish every single one of them.

Epilogue

Remi

Seven months later...



“Stop it. Could she be any cuter?” Kaia nuzzles her face against baby Hope’s cheek as she rocks her gently in her arms. “She smells so good.” She smiles up at Aspen, who’s watching the two of them from her hospital bed.

“There’s nothing like the smell of a newborn baby,” I agree, leaning in close to my wife’s side to squeeze my newest niece’s little foot.

Wife... We’ve been married only a few short weeks, and truth be told, I still can’t believe that I actually convinced her to marry me in the first place, let alone elope without telling anyone, which for the record, Aspen was not happy about.

Kaia was and will always continue to be way too good for me. But fuck if I’m not the happiest fucker in the world that she doesn’t seem to have caught on.

“Well, you better get your fill because this is the last one,” Aspen tells me pointedly, her gaze drifting over to Sutton. “Don’t you look at me like that. Three is already too many. Four would be madness.”

“I don’t know.” He grins. “I wouldn’t mind trying for another boy.”

“You stop it right there.” Aspen practically growls at her husband. “You have your boy. Right now we’re staring down the barrel of having to deal with two teenage girls at the same time. I’m not risking adding a third to that mix. We are done. Done,” she repeats for emphasis.

“Whatever you say, baby.”

“Sutton.” She narrows her gaze at him.

“Okay. Okay.” He chuckles, following his wife’s gaze to where me and Kaia are sitting with their daughter. “Speaking of babies...” He looks straight at me. “When are you two going to start giving my children cousins?”

“We’ve only been married a few weeks. Give us some time,” I tell him.

We're not actively trying, but we're not trying to prevent it either. She stopped taking her birth control the day after we got married. We're of the mindset that when it happens, it happens.

"But there will be babies, right?" Aspen is the one who asks.

"Someday." I look at Kaia, who's zoned out of the conversation, her focus on baby Hope. "Right, babe?"

"Huh?" She blinks up at me as if just realizing I've spoken.

"I said we'll have kids one day, but we're not in a rush," I repeat.

"Right." She nods, her gaze once again drifting down to the baby in her arms.

"From the looks of her, it'll be sooner rather than later." Aspen gives me a cheeky grin.

"Actually..." Kaia looks back up, uncertainty creasing her brow.

"Actually?" I choke out when she doesn't continue.

Standing, she softly deposits Hope back into her mother's arms.

"This isn't how I planned on telling you but..."

"Oh. My. God," Aspen says each word with a definitive pause at the end.

"You're not?" I ask, trying to read her expression. "You are?" I ask the opposite question, the smile that slides across her lips answering for her.

"I haven't been to the doctor or anything."

"Oh fuck, am I happy I got to be here for this." Sutton barks out a laugh at my expression, which likely looks like a deer caught in headlights.

"But I took three tests and they all came back positive."

"You're pregnant?" I ask directly, just wanting to make sure there's no misunderstanding here.

Like she's saying what I think she's saying, right?

She nods softly, holding her lower lip between her teeth like she's not sure if she should smile or not.

"Ha! Ha! I knew it!" I hear Aspen say, but I'm too hyper focused on my wife to really pay her any mind.

"I'm going to be a dad?" I croak, suddenly so overtaken with emotion I feel on the verge of crying.

"You're going to be a dad," she finally says the words out loud.

I shouldn't be surprised that it happened so fast—nothing about our relationship has ever happened slowly. Clearly... But you know what, I wouldn't have it any other way.

Within seconds, Kaia's in my arms, and despite the two other people whose eyes I feel dissecting our every move, I kiss her good and proper.

"Fuck, get a room," Sutton grumbles.

"Language," Aspen scolds.

"She's just a baby," he argues.

"Would you two shut the hell up?" I reluctantly break the kiss to look over at them. "I'm trying to celebrate becoming a dad here!"

"Then could you maybe do it elsewhere? I really don't want to see this shit." My brother grins, standing to congratulate me himself. "Welcome to the shitshow, little brother." He smacks my back.

"Is it too premature to squeal now? Because I think I'm going to squeal." Aspen's voice gets higher and higher as she speaks.

"You can squeal." Kaia laughs and I briefly wonder how I didn't see it before now. She's fucking glowing. Then again, my wife is always glowing, so how was I to know.

Aspen proceeds to let out a squeal that would wake the dead and does, in fact, wake baby Hope, who returns the gesture with a good wail of her own.

"See what you have to look forward to." Sutton moves to Aspen's side as she quickly soothes the baby back to sleep.

"I can't fucking wait," I say, turning back to Kaia.

It's funny how life has a way of working out just how it was meant to.

A decade ago, I was so sure I knew where my life was headed, and then suddenly, I didn't know anything at all. That is, until Kaia entered the picture.

I didn't know what it meant to love someone—and I mean truly love someone with everything that you have—until her. She has given me the life I don't think I could have dreamed up in my wildest dreams. More than a fucker like me ever deserved.

There isn't a day I won't cherish her and the light she brought to my life.

"So you're happy?" She looks up at me with those big blue eyes of hers, and I can see now how nervous she actually was to tell me, which is probably why she just blurted it out in the middle of a hospital room.

Not that I'm complaining. It feels weirdly nice to share this moment with my brother and best friend. Seems to fit the theme of our life. We've always been a little unconventional.

"Deliriously happy," I tell her, pressing my mouth to hers once more.

"And we're all happy, too. But again, can you take the celebration elsewhere?" Sutton interrupts yet another perfect kiss.

“I think that’s exactly what I’ll do,” I tell him, wrapping my arm around Kaia’s shoulders. “Shall we, wife?” I smile down at her, so beautiful that sometimes when I look at her, like right now, I find it hard to breathe.

“Let’s, husband.” She knocks her hip against mine.

After saying our goodbyes, we leave Aspen and Sutton at the hospital to spend time with their new daughter, heading back home to the little house we purchased the week before we got married. We’ve been fixing it up, and now it would seem we have another project to add to the list.

It’s not the biggest house, but it has a great backyard and is only a couple of minutes from both my family and hers, which was the biggest selling point. I thought it would be hard for me to leave the city, but it hasn’t been. If anything, I wish we had done it sooner.

Though, I don’t think it’s the house or the area that gives me such peace, but the woman currently in my arms, our baby growing in her belly.

I didn’t think a life like this was possible. The space between my heart and anyone else’s always felt insurmountable. I guess, in the end, it was just waiting for the right one to come along.

It was waiting for *her*.

Turns out, there is such a thing as happy endings. You just have to be willing to find yours.

The End



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Melissa Toppen is a USA Today Bestselling Author who specializes in Fantasy, New Adult and Contemporary Romance. She is a lover of books and enjoys nothing more than losing herself in a good novel. She has a soft spot for romance and all things fantasy, and focuses her writing in that direction; writing what she loves to read. You can find more information about Melissa and her books at melissatoppen.com

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