

A black and white artistic photograph of a woman's face and hands. Her face is partially visible at the top, with her lips slightly parted. Her hands are clasped together in the center. Two butterflies are present: a dark one near her face and a vibrant purple one near her hands. The entire scene is covered in numerous water droplets, suggesting rain. The title 'WHEN IT RAINS' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters.

WHEN

IT
RAINS

WE NEVER FORGET OUR FIRST LOVE...

B CELESTE

WHEN IT RAINS

B. CELESTE

OceanofPDF.com

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EPUB Edition

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Love is a Journey

Author Note and Acknowledgments

About the Author

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TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains cheating and toxic situations

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PLAYLIST

“This Is Me Trying” – Taylor Swift
“Lose You to Love Me” – Selena Gomez
“Love The Way You Lie” – Eminem ft Rihanna
“Whispers” – Halsey
“Boyfriend” – Dove Cameron
“i hate u, i love u” – Gnash
“Lonely” – Maria Petra
“tolerate it” – Taylor Swift
“So Small” – Carrie Underwood
“Never Enough” – Loren Allred

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OTHER BOOKS BY B. CELESTE

[The Truth about Heartbreak](#)

[The Truth about Tomorrow](#)

[The Truth about Us](#)

[Underneath the Sycamore Tree](#)

[All the Shattered Pieces](#)

[Where the Little Birds Go](#)

[Where the Little Birds Are](#)

[Into the Clear Water](#)

[Color Me Pretty](#)

[Tell Me When It's Over](#)

[Tell Me Why It's Wrong](#)

[Dare You to Hate Me](#)

[Beg You to Trust Me](#)

[Make You Miss Me](#)

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*A book for me.
About him.*

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PROLOGUE

December 2019

Y_{OU CAN DO this, Breena.}

Flipping the sun visor down to touch up my new favorite matte lipstick, I fluff my freshly curled hair and stare at my reflection in the tiny mirror covered in dust particles.

It's been a long time since I've worn makeup, but the dark eyeliner makes the green in my hazel eyes pop against my phony red hair. In contrast to my pale skin, the colored strands make me look like I'm living up to my Irish roots.

I look cute. Ready for the low-key breakfast date I've been pumping myself up for since me and the guy I met on the dating app agreed to it. I'm wearing my favorite pair of tight blue jeans that show off the long legs attached to my 5'10" frame and the round butt I've earned from my five-day-a-week workout routine. The burgundy sweater was a gift from my cousin, and the chunky-heeled combat boots have been my go-to since I found them at a thrift store years ago. The zipper is broken on one, but they give me a little something extra that adds a swivel to my step that I hope my date will like.

It's been seven months since I ended things with my ex-boyfriend. Though, *boyfriend* may be a strong word since Chris seemed to get hives every time I'd bring up the word over our nearly one-year 'situationship'. The breakup happened after realizing it was all one-sided. Every expectation was merely a fantasy I'd conjured in my head because I wanted to believe in the best of people. That doesn't stop me from feeling a little pathetic for hanging on so long though.

It took me a while to realize that it hadn't been *him* I was holding onto. It was the fear of having to start all over again.

But cutting ties with Christopher had been exactly what I needed to feel like I had some semblance of control again. It was a pressure lifted off my

shoulders the second I deleted his number and stopped feeling like I wasn't good enough because I didn't have the same life experience or common interests.

"Nope," I scold myself, putting the visor up and unbuckling. "Never again."

I remind myself of what my best friend, Trinity, tells me when I feel low about letting the situation get out of hand for so long, "*No more thinking about people who aren't worth our time.*"

Pushing my thick brown glasses up my nose, I turn off my car, deposit my phone and keys into the cute designer bag Trinity got me for my birthday, and force myself out into the crisp winter air.

It's warm for December in Upstate New York, but that doesn't stop me from hustling from the two-hour parking lot where I managed to swipe a space and into the cute brick café that serves the best breakfast sandwiches in town.

The salt put onto the sidewalks crunches as I pull open the glass door of the Espresso House and walk into the cozy establishment that smells like coffee beans and bacon—my favorite combo. I head toward the back where my date said he'd meet me, trying not to let nerves get the better of me.

I'm ready, I remind myself.

I'm worth it, I chant silently.

But there's nobody there.

I check the time on my phone.

I'm early.

Deciding on the yellow table in an alcove that offers some privacy, I peel off my jacket and drape it on the back of my chair.

Five minutes go by.

I look around the café.

Ten minutes pass.

I start to shift in my seat.

Grabbing my phone, I pull up the dating app and frown when I see that the person I was supposed to meet deleted his account.

Closing my eyes, I click off the screen and fight off the disappointment that tries settling into my chest.

I send a text to Trinity.

Me: He ghosted me

Sinking into my chair, I examine my reflection in my phone screen. My hair looks pretty and so does my makeup. I feel good in the clothes I'm wearing and decide not to waste the effort I put in.

I grab my bag and walk over to the register where a few people are waiting to order. Turning toward the large chalkboard menus, I study the breakfast options even though I already know exactly what I'm getting.

From behind me, I hear a smooth, rich voice ask, "What's good here?"

Turning toward the person asking, I start to answer when something gives me pause. The man gives me what I can only describe as a mesmerizing smile in return.

And...*oh my God.*

Tall.

Fair skin.

White teeth.

Short dark hair.

Something weird happens to me then.

A flutter in my stomach.

A kick to the chest.

A tug that feels like it's pulling me.

I push away the foreign feeling, afraid to read into it, and give him a cursory glance to study the unbuttoned black peacoat that he's wearing over an olive button-down and dark dress pants with a black leather belt wound through the loops.

Casual in a dressed-up sort of way.

I'd peg him as a businessman.

Maybe a teacher.

Attractive. Although, attractive doesn't seem to do this man justice. He's beautiful in a masculine sort of way. Clean-shaven which makes him look around my age, but eyes that are a unique shade of brown that I can't help but stare a little too long at.

Prying my eyes away from him, I jab my thumb behind me. "You can't go wrong with their breakfast sandwiches. The bacon, egg, and cheese one is my favorite."

A thoughtful noise rises from him as his eyes scan the menu before they turn back to me and do a slow perusal that has my toes curling into my boots. “You’re a bit dressed up for breakfast.”

Swallowing down the embarrassment of my failed date, I move forward when the line shortens. “I was supposed to meet somebody here, but they bailed.”

He sidles up beside me, hands in the pockets of his slacks. Are they ironed? “A date?”

From the corner of my eyes, I see him staring down at me expectantly.

All I say is, “Yes.”

When we get to the counter, I give the Avril Lavigne lookalike my order before digging through my bag for my wallet.

That’s when I see the twenty being passed to her followed by, “I’ll have what she’s having.”

My eyes quickly dart to his. “You don’t have to—”

“He’s an idiot,” he informs me.

“How do you know my date was male?”

Those dangerous eyes spark with the same mischievous glint my brother gets in his when he’s up to no good. “I’d be disappointed if they weren’t because then I wouldn’t be able to ask you to have breakfast with me.”

The woman behind the counter makes a noise, breaking our eye contact.

He holds out his hand, a confident smile on his face when I stare at his extended palm as he introduces himself. “I’m Sebastian Kennedy.”

The second our skin meets, my heart launches into my throat. With a shaky breath, I say, “Breena Murphy. It’s nice to meet you, Sebastian.”

His long fingers wrap around mine and that pearly white smile stretches across his face until my heart *thumps* even harder in its cage. He squeezes only once, gentle, and sure, but the movement sparks something in my chest—something that shoots prickles of awareness down every single limb.

In that same sure tone, he says, “You can call me Bash.”

I can’t quite explain what happens next.

Because not even I understand it.

All I know is that the second the sun hits his eyes, they turn a beautiful shade of honey brown that makes it hard to look away.

One look, one touch, one smile, is all it takes to realize that Sebastian Kennedy is going to change my life forever.

But no love story goes straight to happy ever after, and nobody ever makes it out completely unscathed.

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CHAPTER ONE

May 2022

EVERYONE HAS DEMONS.

I've learned over the years that the problem with fighting other people's demons is that you awaken more of your own along the way. I'd be a hypocrite not to address the ones masked in human skin that taunt me when I let the darkness in. They flourish in the state of my self-consciousness and bask in the pits of my deepest fears, feeding and growing with every internal dilemma.

And they all have the same face.

The same voice.

The same smile.

That stupid, charming smile.

Warmth settles into my chest when an arm hooks around my bare waist and tugs me backward. Lips pepper kisses along my naked shoulder as smooth fingers move hair away from my neck. I shiver when the shadow on his jawline caresses the sensitive skin of my throat as his kisses become teasing and his hand moves downward, slipping beneath the blanket.

I freeze for a moment when his hand settles between my legs, my breath catching in my throat as I force my thighs to part. Bottom arching backwards, I feel the hard length jutting against me. I let my eyelids flutter closed, a breathy moan releasing when his fingers dance along my clit until I'm writhing for more.

It feels good.

But it also feels wrong.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

I shiver when his lips press against my ear, and whisper, "I need to be inside you."

Goosebumps pimple along my skin as I hear the telltale sign of a wrapper being torn open before he nudges himself against my opening.

Tilting my head back, I capture his lips when he surges forward and buries himself hilt-deep until we're both groaning into each other's mouths.

He grips my hips and pumps hard and fast, stirring mewls of pleasure from me as he begins tweaking my clit again. When he rolls us over until I'm on my back with him seated between my thighs, I wrap my arms around his neck and let myself get lost in his groans and warmth as he plunges into me.

My body reacts to every sound rising from his throat. It feeds the part of me that used to shy away from intimacy, fueling it with confidence instead because I'm making him feel this way. Out of control. Desperate.

Confidence has become my biggest ally, even when I've had to fake it.

And it all stems from the person that broke me.

Don't think about it.

My ragged fingernails from all the years of anxious biting scrape down his back and cup his ass to push him deeper inside of me.

To feel aware in the moment.

To feel *anything*.

To know who's on top of me even if the person in my mind is entirely different than the one worshipping my body.

I need this.

Companionship.

Intimacy.

To feel needed. Desired.

I can tell when he starts losing control because his thrusts become frantic as he moves a hand between our bodies to get me to break apart with him.

But I know I won't.

I kiss him hard and use the heels of my feet to press his hips forward until he's bottomed out and filling me. His breath hitches as he pulls out until nothing except his tip teases my entrance before slamming back in one last time. His strong arms wrap around me, hugging me to him as his heavy chest rises and falls with his release.

His hugs are always tight and secure, melting a piece of the steel that I've barricaded my heart with even though it never lowers it. I'd built it too strong, too impenetrable.

Yet, it's not hard to ease into his hold and close my eyes, listening to the sound of him catching his breath and feel the drum of his heartbeat against my own like a calming lullaby that speaks to the anxiety settled into each crevice of my chest.

"Good morning," he murmurs, pressing his lips against my naked shoulder. He breathes me in, exhaling slowly and moving his mouth away to say the three words that I've never heard before. "I love you."

Everything hurts.

My chest.

My lungs.

My brain.

It's the two-year anniversary of the day I walked away from the man I wanted to hear those words from.

Seven-hundred and thirty days since my chest caved into itself when I let the door close behind me knowing he'd never reopen it.

My palm goes to the back of his head, stroking the stubble from the short crew cut he's been growing out. I lock eyes with the wall behind his dresser, staring absently at the painting of abstract shapes I don't understand, and force out a strangled, "I love you too, Austin."

And I want to believe it. Badly.

Because unlike Sebastian Kennedy, Austin Charles seems *safe*.



THE HANGOVER THROBBING in my temples makes it hard to focus on Dr. Barnett as she settles into her usual armchair with the chai tea she has during every session. I rub my skull and pray the Motrin I popped before leaving my house would ease the pressure before I emptied my stomach for the third time since waking up in a puddle of drool next to an empty wine bottle and shattered glass.

I stare at the bandage on my hand and try to remember what happened last night. I vaguely remember flailing my hands while I had an in-depth conversation with myself about what Jesus would do in the situation. And apparently, Jesus would have drunk the wine.

All of it.

Except it didn't make me feel better.

It's no wonder why I'm not religious.

"You drank again," my therapist states, crossing one leg over the other and sitting back in the chair to study me. "How much?"

I'm not an alcoholic. But do I use it as a coping mechanism to temporarily escape my problems sometimes? Maybe. "There was almost a full bottle of wine in the cupboard that I've had in there for a while. I told myself one glass wouldn't hurt anything."

She waits for me to answer her question, no emotion, no judgement, on her face as I loosen a sigh and close my eyes to block out the sunlight from the window.

I love you.

My eyes go to the waste bucket to gauge the distance. Just in case.

"The whole bottle." I lift my hand to show her the half-assed wrapping on my palm. The cut isn't deep. It won't need glue or stitches. It's just in a sensitive place that really likes to bleed when I move it. "I think I tried catching my wine glass when it fell but I was too late."

Her eyebrows arch ever so slightly. "You don't remember?"

She must have forgotten the part where I had an entire bottle of wine. "I should add that I hadn't eaten since Austin made me breakfast before he went to work yesterday morning. Egg whites. His favorite."

Not mine.

I don't tell her that.

Austin is a good person. He can cook, clean, and make me feel like there's hope. Hope for what, I still don't know.

I love you.

Austin is also charmingly clueless as to how attractive he is. It's not only his physical looks that people are drawn to like a magnet, though women check him out in public all the time even if he's blind to the attention. He could be a long-lost relative to James Dean.

No, it's in the way he carries himself that makes people see his uniqueness. He's successful, determined, and passionate. Three things I've always wanted in a partner.

And he loves me.

He chose me.

Somehow.

A thoughtful noise comes from the woman sitting across from me. "What triggered this, Breena? Did something happen between you and Austin? Perhaps a fight."

The nervous laugh bubbles past my lips and startles me. "A fight. No."

I shake my head, picking at my thumbnail even though there's barely anything there. So, I move to the skin around it until little droplets of blood start rising from the cuticles.

The pain helps ground me.

Makes me feel.

Feel something.

See? I'm not broken. I feel.

"He said he loved me." I gauge her reaction only to find her face unreadable. Not that I'd be able to read it well anyway. I bounce my knee anxiously. "We've only known each other for seven months and he already loves me."

Unlike the therapists I've seen in movies she doesn't have a notepad to jot down my problems, emotions, or reactions. She told me on the first day I sat down in her stiff chair that she believed conversations would naturally bring out what needed to be said without the pressure of her writing anything down.

I wonder how she could possibly remember everything I say when I barely do, even when I'm completely sober.

Dr. Barnett grabs her tea and takes a sip before resting the cup on her lap. She drinks too much of it. Then again, she probably thinks the same about my wine habits. "Do you think there's a timeline for relationships to follow? Or do you think the abandonment issues we've discussed in the past are stirring your anxiety about moving forward with a healthy relationship?"

Abandonment issues. If my head didn't hurt so badly I'd roll my eyes. "It's been two years. Two years yesterday. I'm the one who walked away. That should mean something. *I* got to choose to do that. *I* made the decision."

"But you didn't want to," she points out matter-of-factly. "You can't control everything, Bree. Just because you made those choices doesn't mean you're not allowed to be hurt by them."

My throat tightens with emotion so thick it chokes me. Clearing it, I massage my temples hoping to dull the ache she's adding by prying into old vaults I want to keep closed. "If I didn't walk away, I'd need therapy for a lot of other reasons."

"But are you truly allowing yourself to absorb these sessions?" she questions. "Therapy can do wonders for those who want to heal from their ailments."

"Who says I don't?"

"You took the step to reach out for help when you realized you were self-destructing. We are all allowed to have bad days. But some people don't believe they're allowed to have good days because of the choices they made in the past."

I'm pitifully silent.

Because she's right.

"Did you love him?" she asks next.

She's posed that question before.

"Did you love Sebastian?"

But she keeps asking the wrong question.

If she asked, *do you love Sebastian?* then I'd tell her yes.

Because I've never stopped.

I thought I did when Austin started paying attention to me the way Sebastian had. With affection. Like he wanted me. Wanted me in his life. Wanted to be there for me. Love me. But that freeing feeling was short-lived. Because nothing could ever make me forget what it was like to be adored by a man like Sebastian.

Even...after.

Which is why every time I see olive green it reminds me of the soft, fitted button-down that Sebastian wore on his sun kissed skin. I got rid of the few shirts I owned in that color because it reminded me too much of him.

I don't go to Somerset's main grocery store because I know he roams the aisles. His favorite cookie is in aisle seven. His favorite drink is in aisle thirteen. Right before the dairy section.

It's also why I don't go to the local craft fair when it's in town because he loves shopping for the handmade candles and supporting the small

businesses people bring there. He'd smell every soy single candle before settling for the same three.

Maple.

Vanilla birthday cake.

Lavender.

The only sanctuary I have is the Espresso House. It took me weeks to be able to go back only to find out from Diane, the barista who watched everything change between us, that Sebastian doesn't come in anymore. I'd like to think it was his parting gift to me.

A safe space.

Somewhere I didn't have to think about him leaving me for a future of his own. A career. Financial stability. Peace of mind.

Because I was too much and not enough all at the same time.

"What are you thinking about?" my therapist asks, moving her floral teacup to the table beside her chair.

She gets up and moves to the window where she draws the blinds to block the sun from my squinting eyes. Instant relief eases my shoulders as I sink into the chair and try getting comfortable.

What am I thinking?

That I messed up. "I told Austin that I loved him."

She pauses halfway to her seat, studying me inquisitively. "Did you mean it?"

I blink, rubbing my sore, dry eyes. "He's perfect on paper. Everything I've ever wanted in a partner. And he loves me."

He loves me.

He loves me.

He loves me.

When Dr. Barnett sits down, there's a flicker of something on her face. Interest. "You need to ask yourself if that love is going to be enough. There are many kinds of love out there, and sometimes we settle for the kind we think we deserve even if it's not for us."

Shoulders drawing back, I think about it for a second or two before challenging her. "I'd like to think we need different kinds of love for different phases in our life. Just because no two love stories are the same doesn't mean they're not both impactful."

Sebastian never told me he loved me, but I know he did. Felt it whenever we were near each other. Whenever he touched me, even if it was innocent. Whenever he looked at me with a glint in his eyes that mirrored his smile.

Sometimes you meet the right person at the wrong time, though. And not even love can hold the pieces together before the glue weakens and everything falls apart.

“You’re going to regret this one day,” I tell him, backing out of his office.

My therapist nods once. “Perhaps you’re right,” she relents, looking at the clock. “I have a homework assignment for you before our next session. I want you to get rid of any alcohol you have at your house. The less temptation you have surrounding you, the better.”

To which I reply, “I’m not an alcoholic.”

She sits back, her hands folding over her lap. Something resembling bemusement makes her lips twitch. “No, but if you continue the way you are now you’ll be sitting in AA a year or two from now wondering why nobody stopped you. You say you’re in control of your life now, but are you? Or are you fooling yourself like you’re trying to fool everybody around you?”

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CHAPTER TWO

June 2022

SHAWN BRIGGS IS the only child of New York City investor Carlton Briggs, so it's no surprise that he was given the editorial role when his father bought out *Women's Monthly* three years ago.

The takeover hadn't been a surprise to any of us at the office. We knew there'd be a huge office revamp which meant some of us were leaving long before our time was up. Anytime Carlton Briggs is brought into the publishing picture, there are always jobs being cut in the process and big headlines giving piss pour excuses as to why. That's why a handful of the women that make up the magazine's staff walked away before Shawn could step into the office and tell them to leave.

They wanted control.

I understand that.

You can't control everything.

When the thirty-four-year-old editor did arrive on the day of our big staff meeting, the women that stayed were definitely glad they did when the suited-up Bradley Cooper lookalike entered the conference room.

If I hadn't been so worried about losing my job since I was one of the newer employees, I might have indulged in the eye candy a little more like my coworkers did.

By the time I'd realized my position was secure in the company I hoped to grow in, I snuck a peek or two from a distance even though I figured out what most people haven't about the man in charge.

Shawn Briggs isn't here for the women.

He's here to prove a point.

And maybe for a few of the men on staff.

Knocking on the door to the glass office that Shawn took over, I hold up the manila folder he asked for when he glances up from his computer. "I printed the numbers you asked about and highlighted the past five months

to show you the engagement increase on two of our social media pages since the beta tests.”

He waves me in and points toward the chair before going back to whatever he’s typing furiously over. “Do the numbers look stable?”

“Better than.” I flip the folder open and slide it over to him, pointing at the latest numbers I highlighted in yellow. “Our last edition got almost three times as many views and they were heavily directed towards Paige’s article on the latest beauty trends. The picture tutorials printed in the physical paper were great, but the video tutorial we posted on our socials practically went viral and gave us a three percent increase in online subscribers.”

“I’ll never understand women’s obsession with makeup,” he huffs, sitting back until his chair creaks. He scrubs a hand down his face before leaning forward to go through the papers I printed. “Did you also highlight our lowest performing articles?”

I hesitate, not wanting to admit that the one to get the lowest numbers was written by the only woman here I talk to. Quinn worked her ass off on the piece Shawn agreed to publish, but it didn’t hit well with our readership when we did an online poll that the marketing team has started doing monthly to gather data. “I did, but…”

Shawn’s gaze lifts, one of his brows arched up. “But what? Spit it out, Breena. I’ve got things to do.”

My eyes narrow at his cool attitude. “Are you on another juice cleanse? Or did you cut carbs again?”

His narrow right back. “I hardly see how that’s any of your business. I didn’t promote you to editorial assistant for you to ask me dumb questions.”

“No,” I agree. “You hired me because you scared away Sasha with one of your mood rages and she quit. Eat a piece of bread. It’ll make you happier.”

He grabs the folder and sits back to examine the various reports I pulled. “I was on a fast. It’s not my fault she didn’t have the balls to handle it.”

“Well technically she doesn’t have proper equipment for that, so…”

His finger taps absently against the edge of his keyboard. “You’re cheeky this morning. It’s not like you to be in a good mood.”

What is that supposed to mean? “I’m not the insufferable bastard around here.” Risky to say to the man who signs your paychecks? Yes. Untrue? No.

He chuckles. "It takes one to know one."

My eyes narrow at the accusation. "That makes you delusional then."

He leans forward with a challenging yet amused smirk on his face. "And that makes you a woman in denial."

We stare at one another, his words sinking a little too deep for comfort.

He decides to switch gears. "Are you still dating the tall guy who keeps trying to buy your affection with things?"

His reference to Austin makes my eyebrow twitch. A habit Shawn notices, making his smile turn victorious. The first time he saw Austin come into the office with a box of chocolates, he'd rolled his eyes while the woman in the cubicle around mine swooned from the sweet gesture.

It made me uncomfortable.

The attention.

Then it made me feel guilty.

Because isn't that what I've always wanted? Someone who was unashamed to show their affection?

"He isn't trying to buy me," I argue, though there's a nudge inside me that I brush off before I think too much into my boss's ridiculous assumption.

He doesn't relent. "I know when a man is trying to bribe his way into somebody's good graces. Trust me, I'm one of them. He thinks he can use his money and wits to keep you around, but someone like you won't be entertained by material things for long."

Tone clipped, I counter, "He does it to be nice. You know nothing about me, so I really don't want to talk about this. It's inappropriate."

When he rolls his eyes it makes him look less intense than usual. The odd friendship we've grown to have usually ends once the workday is done, but that doesn't mean he isn't oddly astute to things I'd rather he not be. Especially when he puts his two cents in when I never ask him to.

And he does. Often.

He flattens the stack of papers down with the lower numbers on top, pulling us back into the conversation we started with. "Fine, I'll let it go for now. But don't say I didn't warn you. Misery loves company, and that's why we tolerate each other."

I'm silent, waiting for him to give me my next task since I'm determined not to let him bait me into admitting I'm unhappy.

Happiness is subjective anyway.

“I need you to pull the analytics for all of last months’ engagement and email me the numbers. And while you’re at it, go ahead and schedule the next staff meeting for Wednesday and make sure everybody has it on their calendar. We have content to discuss. I’ll need to see the numbers before then to decide if we need to change up layout.”

I nod and stand. “Anything else?”

“Tell Ms. Hurley to come see me.”

I cringe hearing Quinn’s last name. “I think she left for lunch, but I’ll tell her when she gets back.”

His jaw ticks as he glances out the door at the section of open cubicles where Quinn and I sit. Her spot has been empty for forty-five minutes. What I don’t tell him is that it usually is because she always takes a longer lunch to see her boyfriend in the town over.

“Fine. Do that,” he grinds out, turning back to his computer.

Hefting a sigh, I head back to my desk and pull out my phone to see a message from Austin on the screen.

Austin Texas: *Dinner tonight? I booked a reservation at Dante’s.*

Dante’s is the most expensive restaurant in town thanks to their imported steak and romantic atmosphere. The cheapest item on their menu is twenty dollars, something that Austin never blinks twice at thanks to the money he makes as an investment banker for a company in the big city.

My eyes travel to Shawn’s office, wondering if he could be right about Austin.

But I’ll never let a man buy my affection.

Because no man should have to.



THERE’S A BABY crying, and sometimes that’s all it takes for the guilt to sink its claws into me. I feel them lashing at my insides, making the food I forced down my throat to get stuck halfway.

“Poor little guy is tired,” Austin says, noting what my gaze is plastered on. The small baby currently being cradled against the chest of its mother

starts to quiet down when she pats his back and shushes him with a softness that takes over her facial features.

My face must be twisted because Austin picks up his wine glass and says, “You look like you’re going to be sick. What? Do you not like kids?”

Paling at the inquiry, my eyes dart toward his and widen. “Uh...”

“Shit,” he muses with a small chuckle, shaking his head and setting the glass down in front of the plate of steak he ordered. “Sorry. That was a lot, huh? I was curious is all.”

“About babies?” I find myself asking, my voice a little too high pitched. It’s been seven months. Why would he be bringing up babies?

His lips tug up. “Yeah. Do you want them someday? I’ve always wanted to be a dad.”

My stomach shrivels at the news. The tiny tremble in my hand starts to make holding the fork I’m white knuckling hard to do. “I’ve never much thought about it,” I lie. It tastes bitter on my tongue, and I hope he doesn’t hear the shakiness of my words.

I have thought about kids.

A lot.

Too much.

I think about how tiny they are.

How fragile.

How much work they’d be.

How much your life would change after you have them. I’ve heard there’s an instant unconditional love you share the second they’re placed into your arms, but I never let myself think about that for long before forcing myself to stop thinking altogether.

With wine.

With work.

With sex.

Thankfully, Austin is too busy cutting into his steak to seem to notice anything is wrong with me. “We’re both still young. We have time.”

Do we? He doesn’t seem to care if I limit how much of it we spend together. He’s happy with what I give him. Once a week sometimes turns into twice, but never more. Because the more time we spend together, the bigger the chance things will change.

The seafood scampi in front of me hardly seems appetizing anymore. I poke at a piece of shrimp and force a smile. "Yeah. Plenty of time."

Our timelines are very different though.

Clearing my throat, I swirl a few pieces of pasta around my fork. "I never asked if you got the new client you were speaking to on the phone."

He likes talking about work. Most nights, it's all he talks about. I think he likes it when I make it about him, but I do it for me.

Because the less he asks about my day, the less I have to lie. He doesn't ask about the bandage on my palm, so I don't tell him why it's there.

I nod when I need to.

I smile when I should.

But I don't really hear a single thing.

Except the baby crying.

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CHAPTER THREE

June 2022

BENTLEY, MY PARENTS' four-year-old English Bulldog, greets me at the door like he always does whenever I stop by. I squat down and pat his chubby sides as he slobbers all over the hardwood floor that Dad installed last summer. He makes his typical grunting noises as I stand up, step out of my sneakers, and peel off my wet raincoat before following him into the other room where Mom and Dad are sitting at the table.

"Hi, sweetie," Mom greets, looking up from the Kindle in her hand.

I hug Dad, give Mom a peck on the cheek, and sit down at the end of the table where Bentley tries climbing onto the chair with his stubby legs that have seen one too many treats. "How are you guys doing?"

Bentley nudges my hand with his wet nose to make sure I give him plenty of attention as if I don't see him every month, and an ache forms in my chest from how much I miss having a pet around since Sweet Potato, my orange Tabby, passed. I've considered getting another pet, but there's a hesitation I can't quite figure out. A loyalty that went beyond my love for the furry feline I'd loved for so long.

"We're okay," Mom says, glancing at Dad to pitch in from where he's skimming the ads page of the paper.

"Same shit, different day," he tells me, picking his gaze up. "It'd be better if it stopped raining, huh? How's work going? Is that shithead still giving you a hard time?"

I look out the window at the rain-streaked glass. For some reason, I'm calm when it rains. The tin roof of the house I managed to buy on foreclosure over the winter makes the prettiest sound. It's a sound that lulls me to sleep every time.

When it rains, it reminds me that the sky has bad days too.

"Shawn is still Shawn. It's not so bad being his assistant though. He hasn't asked me to get him a coffee in, like, two weeks. I think we're

making progress.”

Mom smiles warmly at the update. “Have you brought up doing a piece for the magazine yet? The amount of money you spent to get your degree should make him see you’re worth more than scheduling meetings and taking his phone calls.”

I’ve never answered Shawn’s phone calls before. He’s told me he doesn’t want to subject me to speaking to his father on the days he checks in. I’m thankful I get my own set of responsibilities that go beyond what an unpaid intern would have to do. Shawn lets me work with different departments on projects to give me a wider skillset. A few of the girls give me dirty looks when I enter their domain, but I usually don’t pay them any mind.

“I haven’t brought it up yet, but I’m thinking about contributing to the next staff meeting in a few days. My job is good right now, though, and I don’t want to mess it up.”

One of Dad’s bushy brows goes up. “The only way you’ll be able to advance is by showing what you’re capable of doing. Don’t hold back or he’ll never give you the opportunity.”

Mom cuts back in. “Maybe he prefers having you as his assistant instead of a staff writer because you’re around him more often.”

Here we go again. They don’t know his sexual preferences usually lean toward people with different appendages than me. It’s also not my place to tell them that the reason I know about who interests him is because I’ve caught him staring at one of the copyeditor’s bubble butt one too many times. Admittedly, Abram *does* have a nice ass. It’s captured more than Shawn’s attention in the time Abe has been with the magazine.

“He’s my *boss*, Mom.”

She waves her hand in dismissal. “It isn’t like those kinds of relationships are unheard of. Did I ever tell you about Maise?”

If she tells me about how the woman who runs the book club she’s in had an affair with her boss and ended up marrying him one more time, I may combust. “Yes, mother. I know about Maise.” Eyeing her, I add, “I don’t even want to entertain this conversation. You’re obviously reading way too many romances.”

Her Kindle is long forgotten on the table as she sighs heavily. “It has nothing to do with the books I read, Bree. Can’t I be concerned that my

daughter is so determined to hold onto the hurt she faced that she won't let herself be happy? Because that's exactly what you're doing. It's self-sabotage."

I'm about to argue when it sinks in, and I realize she's not entirely wrong.

When I was here more than a month ago, she'd hounded me about 'putting myself out there again' because I had yet to mention Austin to them. And it doesn't have anything to do with my reluctance about him as a person. He's fine. But for me? I'm still not so sure.

I love you.

An invisible rope tightens around my heart until panic seeps in. Because whatever is happening with the man who has at least two pairs of socks in my dresser and a spare toothbrush in my bathroom is something I'm not sure I can let go on.

You can't control everything.

How long can I pretend to though?

Flexing my fingers, I think about how badly I wanted Sebastian to leave one of his button-downs in my closet. A spare outfit for work. A pair of his polished dress shoes on the floor of my closet. A toothbrush in my bathroom with his favorite whitening toothpaste. I always wanted him to make himself at home in the little apartment I'd occupied with Sweet Potato. It didn't offer a lot of space, but it was cozy. And on the off chance he left anything behind, he'd ask me to bring it back to him the next time I went to his place.

Like it meant something if it were left with me. Because it would have.

Despite all that, I couldn't help *but* brag to my mother about Sebastian. He was the first man in my life who felt like a sure thing from the feeling in my chest alone. A tug so strong that it felt like somebody far larger than me was saying, *there he is. Don't let him get away.*

But I did.

Because I had to.

I still remember how Mom's eyes, the same pretty hazel color as mine, had lit up when I'd told her that I'd met my future husband. She looked like she won the mega lotto and not a potential son-in-law.

Now the hollowness left behind is slowly being filled with cement that I know I'll never be able to chip away at.

Soon after Mom heard about the young college professor that caught my interest, half the town did too. I'm both shocked and grateful there hadn't been a parade thrown in honor of me finally locking a man down, especially because of how things ended.

"I don't know what you want me to say," Sebastian tells me, walking out of the bedroom with clothes tossed around the floor and into the kitchen with a sink full of days-old dishes.

I follow him, wanting nothing more than to grab his arm and make him face me. "Say that you want me. That you love me. Something, Sebastian. Anything to make me stay."

When he's silent, I get my answer.

Austin has never been like that. He's more open, more honest. I don't have to pry his feelings or worries from him. I never have to wait days to get a reply when he closes into himself.

If anybody should be a sure thing in my life, it's him. He's stable, sweet, and caring.

But deep down, it's *too* different.

Too easy.

Love should never be easy because then there's nothing to fight for. And the fight is what makes it worth it in the end. Because if not, what were you fighting to keep?

"...even listening to me? I swear, Breena, you have such selective hearing."

Snapping out of it, I give her an apologetic smile as I sink into the chair. "I haven't been sleeping well lately. Sorry."

I found an old bottle of Melatonin that I'd hoped would keep me dreamlessly sleeping throughout the night, but it's barely worked. Instead of letting myself drift off from the pills, I overthink everything—from the sports Austin watches to the way he'll skip brushing his teeth at night when he's too tired. I think about his obsessive need to clean. How organized he is. He's clean-cut and precise in everything he does.

He's got a plan, and he wants to fit me into it however he can.

I thought I'd like everything he has to offer, but there's a meticulous nature about Austin that makes me wonder if I can truly fit into the mold he's been making for his future.

Even if Dr. Barnett reassured me that it was normal to compare my relationship with the one I had with Sebastian, there's an ache in my chest that tells me I'm too invested in finding the ways they're different. The faults.

Like one is better than the other.

Like I made a mistake.

"I was talking about my friend Anna. She's trying to set up her son with a nice young woman who's ready to get serious. He's a handsome thirty-six-year-old with a stable job and he's almost divorced."

I cringe instantaneously. "*Almost* divorced? Seriously, Mom?"

"They've been separated a long time. Anna said that his wife was far too materialistic for them to ever work out. She tried telling him before they got hitched and had children."

My stomach dips. "Children? As in...more than one? Mom! No way."

Dad hides his snicker behind his coffee cup, trying to focus on the newspaper unfolded in front of him.

Mom claps her hands together. "He's got three young children who are all precious little angels. I've met them before at club meetings. I think I've shown you pictures. Last Halloween they all dressed like characters from that musical you like."

I gape. "*Hamilton*?"

"Yes! That's the one!"

As much as she thinks this is helping, it's only making it worse. "Please stop. I'm not interested whatsoever."

Disappointment curls her lips. "Is it the kids? I know you've been on the fence about them, but they're sweet. You even said little Jakey had the prettiest eyes when I showed you his picture. He was the one dressed like George Washington."

I swallow the bile that slowly starts creeping up my throat. "Exactly, Mom. Why would I want to date somebody who's got three children when I'm not sure I want even one of my own?"

My hands are shaking under the table and I'm glad they can't see them.

Mom sighs. "You're so stubborn."

"No," I disagree firmly. Normally I'm not offended when people think that, but I am this time because she's so determined to change my mind. "I know what I want. There's a big difference between those two things."

Getting involved with another man who's probably got way more emotional baggage than the last guy who broke my heart isn't high on my to-do list no matter how cute his children are or how much you like him."

Dad lowers the paper with pride lighting up his face. "That's my girl. Never settle."

I hide my cringe with a half-assed smile pointed in his direction.

"I appreciate it," I lie to Mom unconvincingly. "But I'm not looking for anything right now. I'm sure your friend's son will find somebody great, but it won't be me. I doubt he's truly ready anyway if he's still legally married. The last thing I want to become is another guy's distraction."

Sadness clouds her eyes. "Sweetie, if this is about Sebastian—"

"Of course it's about him," I say a little too sharply. *It's always about him.* "Look, your friend's son probably wants a mother to his children. That's not me."

Anxiety bubbles deep inside me for even thinking about how blindly I believed in Sebastian. How every text made me light up and every touch scorched me. I thought we had a future together, but the second that future presented itself, I acted out of hurt.

And now I can't take it back. "I'm not talking about this anymore. It doesn't matter. It's over."

I repeat that in my head.

It's over.

Do they know it's a lie like I do?

My phone chirps, pulling my attention down to the screen.

Trinity: Mimosas and gossip tonight?

I look up from the phone to my mother, who's already dove back into her book after her failed attempt at matchmaking.

I should tell her about Austin. Make her have some sort of hope that I'm not going to die alone. Or I should tell her about therapy. That I'm getting help because I know I need it.

It's at the tip of my tongue to tell her *something* so she knows I trust her. I love her.

But I swallow my words and hold onto whatever is between Austin and I for a little while longer, just in case.

Me: *I'm in*

Sliding my phone into my hoodie pocket, I lean back in my chair and pet Bentley while thinking to myself...*just in case* what?

All the while Dad looks at me from the corner of his eye like he knows more about what I'm hiding than he's letting on.



KICKING MY SOCKED feet up onto my best friend's coffee table, I ask, "Aren't you supposed to ask how that makes me feel?"

Trinity finishes pouring our mimosas and passes me one of the skinny champagne flutes that I got for her as a housewarming gift years ago. "That's such a stereotypical question."

My eyebrows raise. "Aren't therapists supposed to care about how their patients are feeling? Dr. Barnett poses the question before I can even sit down."

Her brown gaze locks with mine skeptically as she takes a sip of her drink. "Yes, we are. But I'm not *your* therapist. I'm not anybody's therapist yet. Plus, you don't pay me. Hence Dr. Barnett."

I gesture toward the drinks. "I brought everything we need to make mimosas—*your* favorite. And I brought you one of those disgusting turkey sausage croissants you like since you never get up early enough to make it to the cafe for one before your class."

The psychiatrist in training sets her drink down and leans back on the couch. Her house is fully furnished with all matching, expensive, brand name furniture that her parents helped her buy.

Thanks to the trust fund her parents set up for her, she's been able to live in the beautiful, remodeled Victorian while working to finish her degree in psychology. She's been working as a receptionist at the same Psychology clinic since she graduated with her bachelor's degree and has gotten a lot of support from the women there as she's focused on getting her master's.

It's because of her that I was able to find Dr. Barnett through the office she clerked at for a few years before moving to the one she's at now, hoping they'll hire her once she gets her hours in.

She didn't think twice when I asked for her help in finding somebody because she'd suggested the idea more times than I can count. It was her who usually found me after my past caught up to me and triggered a late-night bender with Captain Morgan and my toilet.

And despite my best friend always being there for me when I need her, something she's proven through the toughest times I never thought I'd face at 27, I knew I needed somebody else to talk to about the things that are harder to sort out—the demons that like to sit on my shoulders and question everything when I can't sleep at night.

Trinity would never judge me, but I know there are too many things that I'm afraid to admit to her because I know she'd be disappointed.

The silence growing between us causes her to watch me carefully, giving me her Dr. Lewis eyes. I can always tell which version of her I'm getting—the one that I've seen drunk on tequila shots and making a fool of herself in front of a frat full of partygoers, or the one where she's trying to dissect every little movement people make by the critical precision of those intense eyes like she's been trained to do.

Finally, she says, "Fine. I'm easily bought, especially because I've been wanting the latest gossip on your life. We don't have to talk about whatever you've discussed with Marie at therapy, but I do want to know what's going on with you and Austin. Have things gotten better since you started sleeping together?"

Sex used to be a taboo topic for me. Turns out, it only took having *good* sex to want to talk about it with her. The difference between all the dirty details I'd given her in the past and the lack of ones I give now is that I don't know how to have good sex with Austin.

With Sebastian, it was easy.

He made it easy.

To communicate.

To tell him what I liked.

To learn from him.

With Austin, I take what I get.

Moan at the right time.

Touch him in the right places.

All for that connection I'm desperate for.

Like sex is the answer.

Because it used to be.

“Austin and I are okay,” I opt for carefully, staring down at my drink and thinking about what Dr. Barnett told me to do. I haven’t bought alcohol since the wine incident. Does this count if I bought it for Trinity?

The responding sigh my best friend gives me has her picking up her glass. “Saying you’re ‘okay’ with somebody means you’re the exact opposite. What’s going on, Bree Cheese?”

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I play with the stem of my glass. “Things with us *have* been okay. But it feels like we’re going at different speeds and it’s freaking me out a little. You know I want to take things slow. Because if we go too fast, it reminds me of—”

“*Don’t* say his name,” my friend warns, a stern expression shadowing over her sculpted features. I’ve never liked being on the receiving end of the sharp look she’s currently tossing at me. “You said you were over him when I asked if you were ready to move forward with Austin.”

Can you ever be over somebody you considered the love of your life? “I’m just...” She waits for me to finish my train of thought, her glass lowering slowly. “Sometimes I can’t help but have days where I feel too emotionally damaged from the past. Like I can’t fully trust my intuition about men. There’s nothing wrong with Austin. He treats me well. He likes buying me things. He sees a future with me. But it doesn’t feel right, Trin. I can’t force something that’s not there. And I know how unfair that is to Austin.”

Trinity shakes her head. “I don’t want you reverting back to your old mindset. I’m sure Marie has said the same thing about this. It took you months to start acting like yourself after *Sebastian* pushed *his* fears onto you. He was too scared to give up a future for himself to make one with you. That’s not your fault. It never was. And even though I can’t stand him for hurting you so badly, I know he never wanted you to doubt yourself or anybody else.”

Pain laces through my heart. No matter what happened between me and Bash, I don’t like anybody talking badly about him. Just because we didn’t work out doesn’t mean the blame was his alone. “It’s not entirely his fault, Trin. You have to see the truth in that. I was the one who ended things.”

Contemplation stiffens her shoulders before she slowly nods. “You had good reasons to, and I don’t want you to ever forget that. But as your best

friend, it's my duty to tell you he's a jackass who's not worth any more thought than you've already given him. I hated seeing you so sad knowing I couldn't do anything about it."

"But as Dr. Lewis, the future couples' therapist?" I ask cautiously.

She reaches over to squeeze my hand. "I would tell you that what you're feeling is totally normal. This time of year is really hard for you, so of course you're going to be thinking about him. You're going to worry that you're falling into the same pattern with somebody you're giving a shot, but you can't get stuck in that cycle if you've truly learned from your past."

The only thing that I've learned from my past is that fate is a cruel, cruel bitch.

My friend doesn't stop telling me what I need to hear. "You're right though. It isn't fair to Austin if you're thinking about another man every time you're together."

Weakly, I murmur, "It's not *every* time."

Sadness softens her eyes. "Oh, girl. I wish there was something I could say to make all the bad feelings go away. But the only way to truly get past them is to let them go."

Wetting my lips, I feel the crack in my heart as I absorb her words. It's been there for too long, waiting for it's time to splinter a little wider, a little deeper.

And today is the day that happens.

Let them go.

Let them go.

Let them go.

I swallow down the tears that prickle the backs of my eyes. "I know," I reply, voice cracking. Clearing it, I give Trinity a small smile. It doesn't meet my eyes and causes her to squeeze my hand tighter. "I'm glad I have you in my life."

She pulls me in for a quick hug. "You have Austin too, if you really want him." Pulling away, she gives me a knowing look, then lightens the mood with a small smirk. "And let's be real, babe. You're just glad I don't charge your ass my future going rate for my words of wisdom."

Her tease makes me snort because she's not wrong. "I'd need to take Shawn's position to afford you one day. Who knew advice I could get on Pinterest could cost so much?"

She nudges my foot with hers. “Better get working on the takeover plan because mimosas don’t pay my bills.”

“No,” I agree, a new feeling entering my chest as I sink into the couch and stare a little harder at the drink in question. “But it does loosen you up. Dr. Lewis is far too uptight for her own good. What happened to the girl who used to drag me to bars and then dance on the pool tables after hustling college guys out of hundreds of dollars?”

A long-lost look crosses her face. “That version of me needed to grow up and earn money the right way. No more relying on party tricks or Mom and Dad.”

I take a long sip of the drink in my hand, brushing off the nip of warning Dr. Barnett instilled in my head. “I never thought we’d ever grow up. When did we become adults?”

Something nostalgic sweeps over me.

A sadness.

Grief for the naivety that shielded me when the only thing that ever hurt my feelings were the bad grades my professors would give me on the papers I worked hard on.

I miss *those* days.

The days before I met Sebastian.

Trinity swirls her glass, a twinkle in her eyes. “Who says we have?”

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CHAPTER FOUR

July 2022

I HEAR THE loud *crack* of the baseball bat followed by the roaring crowd from my tiny basement-converted-office that my dad and little brother, Reid, helped me set up. Trudging up the narrow stairs, I see the game playing on the small flat screen I decided to treat myself with.

“Are you done working?” Austin readjusts on the couch and pats the empty space beside him for me. “Come watch the game with me. The Red Sox are getting their asses handed to them by the Braves. It’s amazing.”

The thrill in his tone doesn’t ease the nerves prickling the back of my neck as I watch the camera pan over the teams. “I’m not a baseball fan, remember?”

He takes a swig of his beer before peeling his eyes away from the screen. “I know, but it’s almost over. We could watch a movie afterward.”

Glancing at the TV again, I nibble the inside of my cheek. I told him I wanted to talk, but he mentioned the game was on. *We can talk after*, he’d said. So, I went downstairs to work after lying about a story pitch I had to come up with by Monday.

“We should talk,” I prompt.

Let them go.

He pats the couch again. “What’s up, babe?”

He kisses the top of my head when I settle into his warm body that smells like the organic lemon soap he loves buying. “How’s the article?”

I’m not writing an article, which I told him already. “That isn’t what I want to talk about.” His eyes aren’t on me. They’re on the screen. “Why are you so excited that Atlanta is beating Boston? You don’t like either team.”

Until a couple of years ago, I didn’t know a thing about baseball. I learned everything I know about it from the fanatic who used to have Red Sox paraphernalia everywhere. Buried in the back of my dresser is an old T-shirt with Boston’s team logo on it that I pretend I don’t own.

Austin looks at me with a skeptical brow quirked on his forehead. "The Braves are the underdogs compared to the Red Sox, so I'm always going to root for them to kick ass."

"You're a Pirates fan, right?"

His ocean-blue eyes glimmer with pride at the tidbit I remember from the night we met. He'd been wearing a jersey at the bar, telling me stats about the team that I'd been too drunk to really remember. "Pittsburg born and raised," he replies with a clear sense of mirth in his tone. "I didn't think you paid any attention to baseball. Have you been a secret fan this whole time and were too embarrassed to tell me? Because I'm not going to lie, Breena, it's sexy. It'd make watching these games a hell of a lot more fun if I had a cuddle buddy with me."

This conversation is getting sidetracked.

Ringling my hands in my lap, I shake my head and force my eyes toward the screen. "No, I'm not. I just knew someone who was."

Someone that I bought season tickets for because I wanted to see his reaction when he opened the envelope. He never got them, though.

I gave them to Reid and his frat buddies instead, earning me free food and affection whenever I visit him at the sketchy fraternity house he lives on outside of Somerset University.

"Ah. The ex." Austin's voice is casual.

Indifferent to the topic as if he has nothing to worry about. His palm rubs my upper arm in comfort when he feels the shoulder he's got an arm draped around lock. "Hey, it's no big deal. We all have pasts."

We don't know each other's pasts, though, because we barely talk about them. I know that he comes from money. Generational. Not new. Unlike my family, who grew up barely above the poverty line. I know that he's dated on and off but never seriously, something we both have in common. Though, it's not for my lack of trying. Something he knows but never pushes me on. *You just never met the right man*, he'd told me. He was wrong, but I didn't tell him that.

Despite what we know about each other, we don't know each other at all. Not the little things. The deal breakers. The small stuff that turns into something so much bigger.

So, how could he love me based on so little?

I never expected that the man I approached at a dive bar on Halloween eight months ago would be making himself at home with a bottle of Budweiser in my living room while watching sports.

Sports I can't stand.

With alcohol I can't stand.

With his feet on the coffee table.

He doesn't even like people putting glasses on his without coasters.

Clearing my throat, I thread my fingers together hoping he doesn't see the tremble to them. I remind myself of the same thing I've said since waking up.

It's not fair to Austin.

So, I say, "I don't know if I can do this."

Austin's hold on me tightens. "Do what?"

"This." I gesture between us.

He pauses for a moment. I can hear my heart. Feel the thumping of my heartbeat in my eardrums. "You don't mean that, babe," he insists.

I click my tongue and turn my head to meet his light eyes. They're soft and I have no idea what mine must look like in return. "Why do you want to be with me?" I ask.

Maybe if I understand, I'll feel differently. If he explains, I won't question it.

But he doesn't explain. He doesn't give me anything I need. Instead, his hand curls around my bicep, his fingers tighter than they usually are until they dig into my arm. They don't hurt but they don't feel right.

Not right. Not right. Not right.

His answer doesn't either. "Because I love you, like I told you before. You're just new to this and you're stressed. Overthinking."

New to this. Stressed. Overthinking.

All true things...technically.

I don't like when people use my inexperience against me though. "Austin, I really don't think—"

Breath catching when he tugs me into his side until I'm buried into the crook of his arm, I bite my inner cheek when those fingers hold me into his side. "Let's put on a movie and forget about this silly conversation."

Alarms go off in my head.

Silly. Is that what I am?

I try to think of something to get out of this, but it's hard to think.

And because I don't know what to say, I don't say anything at all.

I *am* new to this, and maybe this is what it's like when somebody is trying to fight for you.

I wouldn't know.

Because Sebastian never did.



I CRISSCROSS MY legs underneath me and stare out the window where the sunlight soaks into my face. "It happened again," is how I start off today's session, leg bouncing anxiously.

By 'it' I mean the dream. The one that woke me up in the middle of the night and left me itching to get out of my skin because of how vivid it was. I'd looked to the side of me to see Austin's sleeping form nestled into the sheets and couldn't stay in bed any longer before turning on the shower and standing in the cool water that trickled out until I was shaking for an entirely different reason.

Dr. Barnett adjusts her glasses. They look like the ones I used to have. Square. Thick. I wonder if she's as blind as I am. "Was it the same one as last time?"

Every dream is an edited version of a distant memory. It's as if my consciousness likes to tease me with what-ifs knowing I'll wake up with tears burning my eyes after realizing I'm no longer able to hold the hand of a man who would move me away from traffic if we walked along the sidewalk or push me behind him if a car was about to pass by us like he was ready to take a fatal hit to protect me.

The worst part of waking up is accepting your reality is never as fluid is the alternate one your brain creates. I was at peace in that realm. But the second my eyes opened my chest caved in with a disappointment so heavy it makes it hard to breathe.

I start picking at the skin on my thumb again before forcing myself to stop when she focuses on the movement. "I've been waking up at least twice a week from them."

"Why do you think that is?"

Fiddling with the loose thread on the hem of the denim shorts I threw on this morning, I limply lift a shoulder. “Lots of reasons.”

The sun feels too warm against my skin suddenly. Sweat dots my forehead as she waits for me to enlighten her.

“I went for a walk before they closed down Main Street for the Fourth of July parade. There were families setting up chairs on the side of the road and I...” I blink a few tears away. “I don’t know what happened, but I froze in the middle of the sidewalk when I heard a child cry. I panicked.”

Her face remains calm. “Tell me about the child.”

It’s nearly impossible to swallow the hoarseness of my voice. “She was two. Maybe three. She fell down and started crying until her father picked her up and kissed her knee.”

“No crying, sweet girl. I’ve got you.”

My knuckles rub circles along my aching heart as we sit in silence.

There’s a moment of pause where I have to lift my head to gauge her reaction before she speaks up. “Did she stop crying then?”

My head moves up and down, my mind latching onto the little girl’s curls as she clung to her father and buried her tear-stained cheeks into his neck. Her hair was dark and falling down her back with bows in them. I wonder what color her eyes were. Brown? Hazel? Blue? *Honey?*

“Do you believe in signs?” When all she does is quietly look at me, I elaborate. “I’m not a religious person. I’ve never been to church before unless you count the time I went inside one for a haunted house they were throwing for Halloween. But the day I decided to walk away from Sebastian I looked up at the sky and asked whoever would listen to send me a sign that I’d be okay. I was so torn up by that point I couldn’t eat, sleep, or focus. I needed to believe that I’d make it out on the other side in order to find the strength to walk away.”

Interest coats my therapist’s face. “Did you get the sign you were looking for?”

I take a deep breath, letting the oxygen flood my overwhelmed lungs until my head clears from the memory. When I woke up the morning after asking for a sign, for relief, I felt...calm. Calmer than I ever felt before. I hadn’t been panicked or emotional over what the day would bring or what would happen when I went to his apartment for the last time.

I’d been in control.

I'd known what to do.

So, I whisper, "Yes. I did."

The shifting sound of her in the chair perks my ears up as I find myself looking back out the window. "Do you think these dreams could be another sign for something?"

I've remembered all of three different dreams in my life. They're all fuzzy, barely memorable. But the ones I've had lately star Sebastian's 6'2" form wrapped in fair skin and toned with lean muscle. I remember each detail with so much clarity it's like I can reach out and touch him.

I see every freckle.

Every scar.

The gold flecks in his eyes that turn them such a unique shade of honey brown.

The bump in the middle of his nose from when he broke it playing football as a teenager.

And when I wake up and reach out for the body my consciousness yearns for, there's a man with flawless skin and light eyes lying beside me instead.

The one who says he loves me.

The one who tells me I'm overthinking.

Silly.

But what is love?

"I think there's a reason why I'm having them so often now," I amend, my eyes traveling back toward the window where I notice a butterfly landing on a rose bush. I stare a little too intensely at it until it flies away.

Only then do I take a deep breath.

Dr. Barnett is quiet for a moment or two, probably watching me as I focus on everything happening outside where part of me wishes I could be.

"Do you think perhaps your relationship with Austin is stirring up feelings that's causing you to think about your time with Sebastian?" she theorizes. "The subconscious can play many mind games with us when we're vulnerable."

Vulnerable. I hate that word. I hate it's meaning. And I hate that it's practically tattooed across my forehead for anybody to see or use when it's convenient for them. "I don't know. Maybe," I relent so quietly I barely hear myself.

Drawing my legs up to press against my chest, I wrap my arms around them and squeeze like I need the pressure to ground me.

I want to tell her about my failed talk with Austin, but I don't know what she'd say. What would she say? Would she be disappointed that I'm not trying as much as Austin clearly is?

We sit in silence for a minute.

Two minutes.

Four.

Eight.

I can hear the drum of each heartbeat in my chest, hear the rustling leaves on the trees from the blowing wind, and somebody slam a car door shut from somewhere in the parking lot.

Closing my eyes, I rest my chin on my knees and loosen a long sigh that relieves some of the tension building in my chest.

Dr. Barnett asks, "What are you thinking about right now?"

Tell her about Austin, my conscious urges.

But I don't.

Because I'm overreacting.

I lie. "I'm thinking about that toddler."

"Would you like to talk about—"

"No," my tone is hard.

"Breena, one day you're going to have to acknowledge that there are a lot of reasons why you came here. And that is one of the biggest. We've barely talked about it."

"Well, we're not talking about it today."

She gives me a few moments to compose myself before she relents. "Okay. We'll consider it for another day."

Unlikely.

"I have a new homework assignment for you," she proposes. "I want you to go somewhere you've been afraid to. Anywhere. A place that holds memories with Sebastian. Test your boundaries."

My brows crinkle. "Why should I do that? There's a reason I'm avoiding them. I'm trying to stop having the dreams."

"Avoiding is not the same as healing," she reminds me, a point she's made more than once in our time together. "Perhaps you're having dreams

that feature him in places you've both been because you're meant to go back there. It can be as simple as the grocery store."

"You want me to go to the grocery store," I say slowly, processing each word carefully. It's not an impossible task. Out of all she's given me, it's the easiest. And it doesn't take long to think about a few items I can only find there that I've sacrificed because I've been trying my best not to see him.

"There is a drink I like that I haven't had it in a while because the store I go to now decided not to carry it anymore. The one on Route 26 is the only place that carries them."

I hear her hum. "Then I guess it's good our time is about up. You can go get one today."

My eyelids peel open and turn toward the clock on the shelf, illuminating the time. "That went by fast." I slide to the edge of the chair and bounce my foot in hesitation. "Can I ask you something?"

Her brows go up expectantly.

"Do you believe it when people say that you never forget your first love?"

A small smile appears on her lips, making her look far more carefree than she normally does when she's listening to my weekly rambles. "I don't believe we truly forget anybody in our lives because each person we meet is somebody we're meant to learn from."

There's a tug in my chest in response to her words, like a rope binding itself around my heart and pulling just enough to let me know it's there. I stand up. "Thank you."

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CHAPTER FIVE

July 2022

THE GROCERY STORE is playing a country song that makes my face twist with uncomfortable recognition as the singer belts out the words in his usual twangy accent. I'm regretting not bringing my headphones with me, so I'm not subjected to songs that remind me of *him*, but I promised myself and Dr. Barnett that I'd try being less antisocial when I was out.

Rounding the corner of the soft drink aisle, I nearly collide with a much bigger body that sends me three steps backward once the smell of Old Spice and tobacco hits my nose.

"Sorry about that, I didn't—" Sebastian cuts himself off with a wide, piercing stare that pins me to my spot in front of him.

I feel so much smaller by him than I used to despite there not being a huge height difference between my 5'10" and his 6'2".

"Wow," he breathes, stepping toward me as if the motion is subconscious. But my step back isn't, which makes his lips deepen into a frown at the distance I keep between us. The air I need to breathe is suddenly becoming harder and harder to take in as I grip the handles of the basket in my hand tighter.

Slowly, he shakes his head in awe. "It's been a while, Breena. You look... Damn. Yeah, you look good."

A while. I'd say his measure of time is understated considering it's been two years.

A while. What a joke.

His eyes go to my hair. It's longer than he's used to seeing it—the deep purple strands wavy from the wet braids I'd fallen asleep in last night. Austin offered to help me comb them out this morning because there were tangles from the restless sleep I'd gotten, but I told him he'd be late for work.

For once, I don't mind work taking precedence over me because something about his hands makes me nervous when they get close to me.

"You dyed it purple," Sebastian remarks, smiling softly at the color I'd kept telling him I wanted to dye my previously red locks. I'd wanted something brighter, more vibrant. But the day I walked out of my typical salon with the pretty wine color that's currently showing my dark brown roots from the lack of care I'd given it, I'd been hooked.

Because it was different.

And different was good.

Shifting my weight from one foot to another, I nod absently. "I did."

We're quiet.

He watches me.

I look anywhere but at him.

I look at the drinks lining the shelves.

I look at the employee stocking new inventory from the large pallet on the floor and the customers walking around Sebastian and I, not sensing the thick tension rising in the air. Can't they feel it? The suffocating atmosphere? The way everything suddenly feels too small? Too hot? Too... everything?

I can and it's too much.

I itch.

Taking another step back, I debate on forgetting about Dr. Barnett's little assignment. I don't have the energy to deal with the man who hasn't changed one bit. His hair is still the same faded cut it always is, and his sharp, square jawline is outlined with the exact same dark trimmed stubble he likes keeping because it makes him look older than he really is.

Honey brown eyes scope me out from head to toe, making my toes curl into the tennis shoes I'd slipped on. I don't look like anything special today. My shorts are a little too big around the waist and my baggy pink T-shirt hides what little curves my size nine body has. It's nothing form-fitting or particularly sexy, yet the slow perusal of Sebastian's eyes says otherwise.

He makes me want to squirm, but I refuse to let him see that. I manage to fight the urge for my voice to break under the intensity of his stare, when I say, "I need to go."

Just as I'm about to walk around him, his hand shoots out to stop me. The quick movement makes me flinch involuntarily until those long fingers

delicately wrap around my arm and send tiny shockwaves down the limb.
“You’re not wearing glasses.”

It’s an obvious statement, one that has me touching my cheeks where the bottoms of the thick frames used to rest. I’ve worn contacts for over a year now, spending far too much money on the lenses I loathe putting in every morning.

“I have contacts.”

“You hate contacts.”

I stand straighter at his sure tone. “I hate a lot of things,” I challenge.

Hate is a strong word. We both know it.

His lips twitch at the corners. “How have you been?”

How have I been?

The question is laughable. Casual. Like old friends catching up. Why does he want to know now after two years?

I want to tell him that I’ve been shitty—tell him I’ve been confused. Sad.

But I say none of those things.

He doesn’t deserve an answer.

I opt to say nothing at all. Will I tell Dr. Barnett that this happened during my next appointment? I wonder how she’d feel knowing her homework assignment brought me right to the man that’s caused me to start seeing her.

Do you believe in signs? I’d asked her.

Internally, I laugh.

Like always, Sebastian refuses to give up when his mind is set on something. “I’ve been keeping up with the amazing things you’ve been doing. You’ve kept busy from what I’ve seen on your Instagram. Being the editor’s assistant means they must trust you there. You should be proud of yourself.”

If I admit that I know he’s keeping an eye on me then I’d have to admit that I’ve been watching for his name to pop up in my notifications. That my heart does a little dance whenever I see his profile picture lurking in places it probably shouldn’t be.

I’d have to admit that I’ve been silently hoping he’s kept me in mind and watched me grow and live my life without him.

To see how strong I am.

To show I'm doing my best.

I'd have to admit how badly I'd hoped he'd keep his word. "*I want you in my life, Breena. You're an amazing person.*"

If I told him how much I still think about those words, I'd be reopening a door I promised myself I wouldn't unlock. The past is the past. Exes are meant to be exes for a reason—they're examples of what to never do again. That's what Trinity told me when I fought the urge to text him. To reach out. To show up at his apartment when I was lonely. So lonely. When I was regretting ever walking away.

Regretted ever—

Don't think about it.

I become hyperaware of what his gaze is doing to me right now as it does another sweep along my body. I'm suddenly self-conscious of the dark stubble on my legs knowing I was too lazy to shave them this morning. It never used to deter him from holding or caressing my legs while we watched a movie or talked about our days. Our futures. Anything and everything.

Touch was always his love language.

It used to be mine too.

Sebastian's eyes turn sad as he risks another step closer. Except this time, I don't step back. Not when his familiar scent wraps around me, cocooning me into comfort like it always did.

"Talk to me," he pleads, eyebrows furrowing when he watches my throat bob with a hesitant swallow of emotion. "You're killing me here, Bree."

I'm killing him?

This time, I don't stop the quick laugh that bubbles past my gaping lips. "What's there to say, Sebastian? I think I left it all on the table that day at your apartment."

His hand finally slips from my arm, giving me a chance to pull it toward my body in a protective cradle. "That's not fair. I had a lot more I wanted to say, but you wouldn't give me the chance to before you walked out."

My shoulders pull back. If he thinks I'm going to feel bad for doing what was best for me, he's going to be disappointed. Just as disappointed as I was for having to accept that he'd never follow me out that door. "I did what I had to do to make it out with what little was left of my pride. What

did you want me to do? Wait around forever until you were ready? Until you were happy in your career? I swore to myself I wasn't going to settle for second best, that I wasn't going to be used as some time passer because a man was bored and horny, and I fell right back into the same pattern with you because I thought there was hope."

"There was hop—"

I hold up my hand because I don't know if I can handle whatever he's going to say. "No, there wasn't. Admit it. I was never going to get what I was looking for because you were too scared to think of anybody but yourself. I was willing to take my time. To go slow. I was willing to do so much to keep you, but you never wanted to keep me. The second I realized you weren't willing to fight for us, I knew it was time to walk away and stop wasting my time. And you know what? I'm glad I did."

Even if it killed me.

Even if I still feel the repercussions.

Sebastian's gaze darkens as his jaw ticks. When he steps back like I cocked a gun and pointed it at him, I feel like I can breathe a little easier.

I tell myself I'm in control.

That he can't hurt me.

Not even when he says, "When you ended things, I *wanted* to tell you to stay. To try."

"I did try," I reply tartly. "I tried for a lot longer than I should have. But I refused to be the girl who was too dumb to see when she was being used. And you know what? There's a difference between what you *want* to do and what you *need* to do. It's obvious we both knew that what we wanted was never going to be good enough."

The challenging look I cast him says, *I wanted you. But did I need you?*

His fists clench around the plastic basket hanging in his hand before loosening. I capture the movement before lifting my gaze to his mouth, watching his jaw moving back and forth.

"I only wanted to see you happy. Make no mistake, Breena. *You* made me happy. What we had made me happy. I know it made you happy too, once upon a time. When I said I was all in, I truly thought I meant it."

Taking a deep breath, I stand a little taller and finally move my eyes higher until they're locked with his. There's a coldness seeping into my bones that I let take over.

Because the thing is...life's a bitch.

And sometimes you have to be a bigger one to survive. "People change, including what and who makes them happy."

He matches my stance. "Are you seeing somebody?"

Maybe it's a good thing I didn't end things with Austin after all. Because I *want* Sebastian to hurt. I *want* him to regret letting me walk away like I told him he would. I want to cause him the same pain he caused me by making me feel like I'd never be good enough.

Like my feelings weren't valid.

In this moment, anger is all I have, and I embrace it like a weapon.

"Yes," I tell him coolly. "I am."

Sebastian blinks once, his lips rubbing together as he studies me carefully. When his head moves up and down slowly, I don't like the calculation in the movement. There's no emotion. No anger. No sadness. Nothing.

He says one word. "Okay."

He reaches around me and grabs my favorite strawberry lemonade sparkling water from the shelf, putting it into my basket. "This is what you're here for, right?"

The smile he offers is casual, yet there's nothing casual about the glint in his eyes as he brushes the edge of the drink I've been craving for a long time. Leaning in far too close, he whispers, "Some things don't change."

I suck in a silent, shaky breath at his close proximity before he straightens and looks down at me with something sparking in his gaze.

The itch is back, spreading all over my body and tightening my skin until I desperately want to crawl out of it.

We stare at one another until I find the courage to move backward and put the space between us that I know we need.

Need. Not want.

Sebastian looks down at the drink he placed in the basket and hums thoughtfully to himself before saying, "I'll see you around, Breena."

My brain says, *I hope that's not true.*

But my chest sings a different tune.

And the swaggered walk he has as he disappears from the aisle tells me the storm brewing inside me for weeks is about to unleash in ways I've only dreamt it would for two fucking years.

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CHAPTER SIX

January 2020

I'M LAUGHING UNTIL my lungs hurt from the bitter January air as I run around toward the front of the building that's surrounded by crowds of people holding cheap beers and significant others. Yelping when I slide on a patch of ice, I try catching myself on the scratchy bricks only to be caught by a strong arm when I start to go down.

Sebastian's lips press against my ear, and I can feel the smile in his voice when he says, "I told you that you'd never be able to outrun me."

Pushing off the former football player, I spin in his arms until we're facing each other and let his hands roam to my hips. He's not even out of breath like I am. "If I hadn't slipped, I would have beaten you."

"Babe, I gave you a head start and still caught up with you in a matter of seconds." He pecks my lips and brushes hair behind my ear before tugging the knit beanie I stole from him over my eyes.

I swat his shoulder and readjust the hat before sticking my tongue out at the man whose eyes are gleaming with mischief.

He steps closer, plucking my bottom lip with his thumb. His eyes spark with lust as he locks on my mouth. "What'd I tell you about that tongue of yours?"

Heat creeps into my cheeks despite the nipping wind against my skin when I recall exactly what he's told me my tongue does to him.

I hum, two of my fingers seductively moving up his chest. "I think you'll have to remind me somewhere more private."

His lips spread into a wolfish grin as his fingers tug me against him. Even through the thick layers of clothes between us, I can feel how hard he is. "Be very careful what you say, Breena. Because I can make that happen. Quickly."

Thighs squeezing together, I curl my hands over his shoulders and roll my hips forward to press against the bulge growing behind the zipper of his

jeans. “I thought you wanted to kick my butt in another round of virtual golf.”

His hands make their way to my ass, squeezing me before fully pressing our bottom halves together. I’m turned on by the feel of his body against mine and the possessive look in his eyes, and the sharp intake of breath I let escape my lips lets him know exactly how much.

Bash’s nose grazes my jaw, cheek, and nose before his lips are hovering over mine. My eyes close when his mouth barely touches mine in a teasing kiss before he says, “I bet if I touched you right now, right here in front of everybody waiting for the ball to drop, you’d be soaked.”

He’s right. I would be.

And even though I should probably be modest considering we’re at a New Year’s Eve party with a mixture of our friends and coworkers, I can’t help but be excited over the wicked things he’d be willing to do with me.

I’ve never jumped into bed with anybody as quickly as I did with Sebastian. It took two dates full of easy laughter and quirky banter before he had me straddling him on his apartment sofa and asking, “*How far do you want to take this?*” I hadn’t replied with words, but with a scorching kiss that seemed to surprise the former athlete-turned-college-professor. But the kiss was all he needed to pick me up and carry us into his bedroom where we got very little sleep.

Looking up at him through my lashes, I give him an innocent smile. “Don’t tease. That’s not playing fair.”

He starts slowly peppering kisses down my neck until his teeth nip at the sensitive spot above my pulse. “If you haven’t figured out that I don’t play fair, then I may need to show you a thing or two more about what I’m capable of.”

I exhale shakily, causing him to chuckle.

The tip of his tongue swipes along my skin to taste me. “I think you’d like that. Wouldn’t you?”

Trying to swallow the hoarseness in my voice, I clear it before admitting, “Yes.”

One of his palms trails up my back and into my hair, his fingers lightly wrapping a handful of the curled strands around them before he pulls them back to expose more of my throat.

He presses a single kiss against my pulse before whispering, “Good girl.”

From a distance, we hear the countdown.

Ten.

His lips brush against my throat.

Nine.

His mouth moves up to the underside of my jaw.

Eight.

His teeth nip at my chin.

Seven.

His lips tease the right side of my mouth.

Six.

Then they tease the other.

Five.

The hand that was on my ass moves to cup my front, causing me to moan.

Four.

He applies the perfect amount of pressure to rub the seam of my denim against my clit.

Three.

The fingers in my hair tighten.

Two.

His mouth moves over mine.

One.

“Happy New Year, Breena,” he says, right before crushing our mouths together. I let him control the kiss. The way he opens my mouth to taste my tongue, to how hard he bites my bottom lip.

By the time everybody is done cheering, my arms are wrapped around his neck, and we pay no mind to the people watching us make out in the middle of the sidewalk.

Neither one of us cares.

I pull back, sucking in a breath before saying, “Take us to your place.”

He doesn’t need me to ask him twice.

THE DRUMMING ORGAN inside my ribcage accelerates as soon as I feel his soft lips against mine when the door of his apartment closes behind us, and it pumps with fervor as the kiss turns into something otherworldly. His palm cups my cheek then moves to the nape of my neck and squeezes as he pulls me closer to him and coaxes my lips open to taste me.

I don't have time to overthink about my inexperience or feel embarrassed by what little I've done in the past because my mind is on one thing.

Sebastian.

Sebastian.

Sebastian.

All I can think about are his skillful hands cupping my ass and guiding my hips to roll into his hard length for friction, his experienced mouth teasing mine with delicious dominance, and his encouraging words between each heated movement.

He grabs ahold of my ass and lifts me up until my legs are wrapped around his waist. Instead of taking me straight to his bedroom, he presses me against the wall and uses his hips to pin me against it while kneading my ass and kissing me harder.

Hooking my arms around his neck, I kiss him back feverishly and grind down on him until I find the perfect amount of friction between him and the seam of my jeans.

"One day, I'm going to fuck you against every surface of this apartment," he promises. He bites into my neck until I'm sure a mark will be left behind. "But we have time."

After a few minutes of the steamy make out session, he peels me away from the wall and carries me into the bedroom as if I weigh nothing.

No time is wasted as he takes off my jeans, strips himself of his shirt, and climbs over me. Our lips capture each other's greedily as my palms roam over his smooth skin and trimmed torso until they trail down to tease the waistband of his jeans.

He begins his own exploration, playing with my clit over the lace thong I still have on. When he dips a finger under the material and circles my entrance, there's no denying how turned on I am, causing his cocky smirk to reappear.

Battling the heat trying to creep up the back of my neck when he dips down to kiss the edge of my panty line, I arch up hoping for more. A swipe of his tongue. A hook of his fingers. Anything and everything.

He groans in praise when I begin undoing the button of his jeans and tug on the waistband. I take advantage of him standing up to dispose of them and his boxer briefs to grab the hem of my shirt and strip that off too until I'm in nothing but a pair of skimpy panties and a plain bra.

I could have put something sexier on knowing this was a possibility tonight, but I know Sebastian doesn't care. His eyes scan over my body, flashing when he sees the narrowed curve of my waist and the flare of my hips.

The look reassures me that he couldn't care less that I'm not wearing something expensive from Victoria's Secret.

There's something empowering about bringing a man to his knees when they see you stripped down. I've never felt as powerful as I do now, watching the way Sebastian's eyes fill with lust as he crawls back over me with a growing erection he can't hide. It fuels me to pull him onto my body and wrap my legs around his bare waist. His cock is jutted out, brushing against my stomach as he claims my lips and pushes me up the bed until my hair is spread across his pillows.

"As sexy as these are," he says against my mouth, fingering my bright blue panties, "I need them off."

Before I can arch up for him to remove them, he rips them from my body to expose the trimmed curls beneath. I gape at him, making him chuckle before pecking my lips and then trailing his lips down my jaw, throat, and collarbone as he works his hands around my back to undo the hooks on my bra.

As soon as my breasts are exposed, the buds pebble and not even his heated stare can warm them. If anything, they yearn for his touch.

His hands.

His mouth.

Anything he's willing to give me.

And he doesn't disappoint.

His mouth covers my nipple as his finger thrusts inside of me. I gasp at the sudden intrusion, the sensation of him stretching me out causing my back to buckle before he uses my arousal to coat the tip of his cock.

The image of him rising onto his knees with a feral look darkening his face only turns me on more. Because I know before he can even show me that he's about to control my body in ways it's never been before.

I part my legs, nerves tingling the back of my neck before he guides himself to my center and enters me slowly. He's bigger than what I'm used to, and despite the times I've welcomed him in before, I still suck in a breath as he inches inside me with a gentleness I'm both grateful for and a little disappointed with.

His fingers find my clit as he kisses me softly, his body covering mine and urging my legs to wind around his waist again.

I kiss him back, swallowing the low groan that rises up his throat as he pulls out and surges forward until he's seated fully. Panting into his mouth at the fullness, I close my eyes and feel everything. His weight. His skin. His sweat. His breath.

There's not a single thing that my senses don't pick up.

"So fucking tight," he rasps, flicking his tongue with mine as he enters me at a delicious pace. The pinch of pain that was there the first few times we'd have sex has faded, and now everything he does to me makes me feel nothing but cared for.

I move my hips up to meet his until he hisses with approval at how much deeper he sits. I can't help but find a spark of pride as he kisses me harder than before, burying himself inside of me with a new sense of ravenousness.

His hands reach under me to cup my ass, spreading my cheeks and squeezing them before lifting me up to pump into me at a new angle.

My hands shoot behind me, palms pressing into the wall as his thrusts become faster and harder, moving me toward the painted drywall until the crown of my skull nearly makes contact with it.

"Your fucking pussy is so goddam wet," he praises, one of his fingers reaching down and moving around the arousal to show me. "See? See what I'm doing to you?"

Tears prickle my eyes at how intense the sensation is, my throat raw with every pleading sound I make for him to go faster.

He flips us without pulling out, causing my eyes to roll back when I sink down onto his cock until it hits a new place inside of me it hasn't before.

The first time we had sex, I'd frozen when he asked, "*Do you want to get on top?*" My first instinct was to tell him *no*. Because I hadn't been in that position before, open, exposed, my stomach with stretch marks and small boobs on display for him to watch.

I didn't know the first thing to do, but I couldn't refuse because I didn't want to. I'd given him a gentle nod, and experimentally moved the second he put me into position, circling my hips and finding a rhythm that he praised with soft, "*That's it. Just like that. Feels so fucking good.*"

He seemed surprised when I told him I hadn't done that before, but he hasn't shied away from teaching me new positions that he's since learned I've never experienced with the few men I've let between my legs.

And just like the first time I rode him, he holds my hips to help me set a rhythm until his face morphs into one of desperation that fuels something inside me I didn't even know existed.

I pick my hips up and slide back down his rigid length, grinding down to hit exactly where I need him before swiveling my hips. I feel him twitch inside me and arch up, his strong fingers kneading my ass as he starts picking me up and using my body to fuck himself until we're both panting each other's names with hooded eyes.

Every slap of our hips makes the sound of my arousal louder.

"So good," I moan, head tipping back as I let the heat overtake my body.

I let out a choppy breath that gets partially stuck in my throat when he hits a spot that has my eyes watering. Over and over and over again I grind down and circle my hips to chase the feeling tightening my stomach before Sebastian thrusts upward to set me off, grabbing a fistful of my hair and yanking my head backward as my orgasm takes over.

He flips me back over, moving my legs to his shoulders as something possessive shadows his sweaty face. His movements are powered by skill, driving him to the breaking point until he jerks inside of me one last time and collapses onto my chest.

His arms wrap around me, pressing our damp chests together before kissing me slowly and sweetly. There are two obvious sides to Sebastian Kennedy, and I like both.

Maybe a little too much already.

Because it hasn't even been a month.

I'm a goner for this man and his gentle kisses, sweet caresses, and dominating skills in the bedroom. The tug in my chest wraps around my heart and pulls as we watch each other with a softness that's almost too intense.

It scares me.

Does he feel it too?

Sebastian brushes hair away from my face before moving off of me and tugging me into his side.

We find each other's hands in the tangled sheets and thread our fingers together, laying in silence because no words need to be said.

I hear our hearts and nothing else.

They're in sync.

It's a peaceful lullaby that calms me.

When we turn our heads to look at each other, I can't help but let the smile spread across my tired face knowing I'll be sore in the morning because of him.

Then I look into his eyes.

His gaze tells me I'm beautiful.

His smile tells me he's happy.

He touch tells me he understands.

Whatever this is, it's big.

Too big to ignore.

I squeeze his hand back, afraid to let go.

Eventually he whispers, "Stay."

Stay.

How can such a tiny word hold so much meaning?

Stay.

I do.

And holding one another's hands in a mess of sweaty, dirty sheets is exactly how we fall asleep.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

July 2022

THE SOUND OF acrylic nails hitting keyboards echo in the office as I bite down on the end of my pen. I've got a stack of paper with highlighted sections that I should be incorporating into a document for our next staff meeting. Instead, I'm staring at my boss's office and wondering why he's pacing back and forth looking like he's ready to explode. When I went to give him the meeting details that he asked for, he'd nearly bit my head off and closed the door in my face. A first for even him.

"Creeping?" Quinn asks, peeping over the divider and watching the same spectacle me and at least three other women are. Shawn's been red-faced for the past ten minutes and moving for at least five of them with a phone pressed to his ear.

I look at my coworker whose dark eyes are clearly set in his direction. "What do you think his problem is?"

She clicks her tongue. "I bet somebody lost his dry cleaning that had his favorite four leaf clover boxers in them."

I giggle at the image. "Maybe somebody stole his favorite parking spot. The one by the front door that way he doesn't ruin his Tom Fords when it rains. Do you know how much those things cost? I Googled it last week. It's over a month's worth of my salary."

Humor dances on her face. "First, I'm not shocked about the shoes. Have you seen the clothes he wears? It's all designer. Most likely all dry cleaning, which is hard to come by here. He has to send it to Bridgeport to find anybody to clean it properly." We both make faces at what that bill must be. "And second, he gets here earlier than anybody else, so I don't think his parking spot being stolen would ever be a problem. The man practically lives here."

He is usually the first one in and the last one to leave. I stayed until almost seven one night trying to finish a few things Shawn gave me on a

long list of to-dos after his last assistant quit, and he was still working when I told him I was leaving.

I prop my chin on my hand. “Maybe his daddy told him he had to stop threatening to fire the employees that piss him off daily.”

My coworker snorts because we’re the two people he constantly threatens to get rid of.

She snaps her fingers. “Maybe that’s it!”

I’m pulled away from my thoughts, chewing on the end of my pen cap. “What is?”

“Didn’t you see the news? His dad just gave somebody a huge promotion at the first company he founded in New York City. Everybody thought Shawn would get the spot since he’s Carlton’s only kid. His heir. A lot of reporters have been talking about the rocky relationship between them for years. It’s been that way ever since some gala event made the tabloids because his father disapproved of the date Shawn brought. The promotion his dad gave away definitely won’t help mend anything between them.”

I bite down on my pen and sneak a peek at our pacing boss. “Do you think his dad did it to prove some sort of point? Shawn seems sort of...” I search for the word.

“Spoiled? Egotistical?”

I hold back a smile at her bluntness that I wish I wasn’t afraid to have here. “Yeah, he’s definitely those. But he’s been here long enough to prove he’s not going to fail. Even if Carlton Briggs put him here to knock Shawn down a few pegs, I’d hardly say it worked. He’s turned this place around. Made his dad a profit.”

“You’re as much to do with that as anybody since you took over Sasha’s job,” she points out. “He needed to be told that the layout was a mess when he first started and everybody else was too focused on kissing his ass to be real with him. It’s no wonder he gave you the assistant role.”

When he offered me the job, Quinn told me I’d be stupid not to take it even though she knew I was hoping to be a staff writer for the magazine one day. But editorial assistant came with a pay raise that staff writing wouldn’t have, and I knew I’d be stupid not to take it since I was trying to get out of my apartment and into a house.

It wasn’t what I wanted.

But it was what I needed at the time.

Funny how life works like that.

When Quinn and I see the man in question storm out of his office we turn toward our desks and try pretending like we weren't just guessing the reason for the thick vein popping out of his forehead.

"Murphy," he barks, stopping right behind my desk. "Where are those papers? I was expecting the file an hour ago."

Slowly, I turn in my chair. "You asked for the files by three."

My eyes go to the little clock I put on the corner of my desk that says it's not even 1:30. It's green, matching the fake plants Mom bought me when I accepted the job. She knows I can't stand regular ones because I kill them in an instant.

Quinn tries her best to divert the obvious tension budding on my side of the cubicle. "Hey, Shawn? Paige mentioned needing your approval on her newest article because she needs to set up meetings with marketing to help do another video tutorial. She said something about your last meeting getting rescheduled because of—" Her eyes go to me briefly. "—uh, personal matters."

Which means Carlton Briggs distracted him from the initial meeting. Again.

Shawn's shoulders draw back as he stands taller and turns his focus to her. "And what about you, Ms. Hurley? You have one more shot to impress me, and I'm not sure you can after the lacking performance of your last article. What's this one going to be? The latest trends in women's panties?"

We both balk at his cool tone.

Quinn presses her lips together to keep whatever response to herself for maybe the first time since I've known her. It's probably smart. Even if he threatens to fire us at least once a month, there may be a day his father pushes him over the edge, and he means it.

Thankfully, Shawn doesn't seem to want an answer from her. "Ms. Murphy. I'd like a word with you in my office."

Closing my eyes for a moment, I lock my computer screen and give a cross-eyed look to my coworker who looks like she's turning red from the secondhand embarrassment caused by whatever crawled up our editor's ass.

When I follow Shawn into his office, he says, "Close the door and sit down."

Blowing out a heavy breath, I close the door but stand by it while he rounds his desk and pulls out his chair. "With all due respect, you were out of line back there. Quinn didn't deserve to be spoken to like that."

As soon as he sits, he eyes me. "I wasn't aware I asked for your opinion."

Forcing my eye not to twitch, I push off the door and toward the seat across from him. "I know you didn't ask for it, but since you're so insistent that we seem to tolerate each other I figured I'd bring it up. Nobody else here will."

Shawn is quiet for a stretch of time as he watches me with an indifferent expression pinching his features. I have to make myself sit still and act like his gaze isn't making me uncomfortable. "If you think I'm being too hard on her, you're in the wrong industry. Don't think I've forgotten that you want to be a staff writer. If you turned in what she did and it performed badly, I'd be sure you knew it too."

"So that was your version of tough love?"

"Love," he scoffs, sitting back. "There's no room for any form of love here. I'm simply doing my job, which is something you should be focusing on."

"You're the one who pulled me in here," I point out gingerly. "What is going on with you? Does this have to do with your father's company?"

Based on the way his jaw ticks, I'd say it's definitely a sore spot. "That's none of your concern, so let's talk about the real reason why I asked to speak to you."

I wait for him to continue.

"Do you still want to write?"

His question takes me by surprise. "Yes?"

"Is that a question or an answer," he counters with in an unimpressed tone.

I straighten my spine. "It's an answer. I *want* to write."

"Good."

One word.

I'm not sure I trust it.

He leans forward, leaning his arms on the edge of his desk and threading his fingers together. "Then I have a proposition for you, Ms.

Murphy. One that I think you'll appreciate. However, it'll be set on my terms."

Although I want to be excited by his proposition, I don't know what terms he wants to set for it. "What exactly is the catch?"

"You're quick to assume the worst."

"It's better than always anticipating the best," I reply, looking away from him. "I know from personal experience that it only leads to disappointment."

There's a pregnant pause. "You're more cynical than I gave you credit for, which may actually work to both of our benefits in this case."

Now he's lost me.

He reaches over and grabs the typed-up meeting minutes I gave him yesterday. "Dakota brought up the possibility of doing serial articles on a specific topic and testing them in the next few months' editions. Perhaps even allowing multiple contributors to give varying perspectives based on personal experience. Human interest, I suppose."

I'm slowly starting to see where this is going. "And you think my cynicism will somehow benefit this endeavor how?"

His lips twitch upward at the corners. "I happen to think that you'd bring an interesting perspective to the trial run. You don't trust people. I don't either. Another reason we get along. And because you don't annoy me, I'd like to reward you by giving you this chance."

"What a ringing endorsement."

Shawn lifts a shoulder. "If you don't want the opportunity—"

"I didn't say that," I cut him off quickly, causing him to smirk. "But that doesn't mean I understand. And I never said I don't trust people, by the way. I said that I'm not one to look at the world as a glass-half-full kind of person anymore. You're reading between the lines."

He abandons the minutes to look at me with a raised brow. "Ms. Murphy, it's not about what's in between the lines. It's what your eyes tell me. And do you want to know what I see in them?"

No.

Shawn tells me anyway. "I see a person who's trying to make the most out of their life but barely willing to fight for anything in it. So, tell me. Do you want to write for this magazine like you told me you did three years

ago, or have you allowed yourself to be broken so badly that you've given up?"

Nostrils flaring in irritation, I grind out a bitter, "I want to write for the magazine. Like I already told you."

Cockiness pulls at his lips until any anger he had when he stormed out of his office earlier is gone. "Then I suggest you take this opportunity without questioning it. Impress me, Ms. Murphy. I have a feeling you can if you stop holding yourself back."

The nerve of—"Who says I'm holding myself back?"

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter. Whether you like it or not, we share many commonalities. Which means I can see when somebody is wasting their potential. This is me throwing you a lifeline before you sink." He points toward the door. "Now go get me my documents and we'll discuss the details of the article later."

He's going to leave me hanging? "You can't even tell me what the topic is that you want staff to write about?"

He's already gone back to his computer, not bothering to glance my way when he says, "I think I'll keep it a surprise and see how you do under the pressure. Some people do their best work that way."

Shawn knows I'm not that person, and I'm not sure I appreciate whatever game he's playing. "I don't know what you're up to, but something tells me it's not good."

He chuckles at my suspicion. "You best hold that tongue of yours, Ms. Murphy. If not, it can get you into trouble."

Ice instantly coats my heart at the familiar words.

Only then do I leave his office.



TRINITY GIVES ME a tight hug before sitting down in the booth she chose at The Jug, a well-known local bar that caters cheap beer to broke college students and underpaid editorial assistants.

"Where's Quinn?" my best friend asks, glancing toward the bar.

I set my purse down on the other side of my body and look at the glass of wine being pushed toward me. "She couldn't make it. Something with her boyfriend came up."

“Boo.” She watches me wrap my fingers around the stem of the wine glass. “Is it okay if I ordered you that? I wasn’t sure after...”

Both of our eyes go to the hand I’d accidentally cut last time I decided to have a pity party of one.

I open my palm and wave the healed skin for her to see. “I told you it was a one-time thing. I’m fine. And didn’t we just have mimosas? It’s not like I went crazy then.”

Trin’s lips, painted in a dark purple lipstick that she pulls off effortlessly with her smooth, caramel skin, rub together as she examines my hand. “Well, I didn’t pour as much alcohol in yours.”

Letting go of the wine, I drop my hands into my lap. “It’s never been your responsibility to monitor how much I drink, so don’t start now. And it was *your* idea to meet here.”

She sinks into the upholstery backing on the bench. “I’m sorry, Bree Cheese. I didn’t mean anything bad by it. I still think about—”

“We said we’d never speak of it,” I cut her off quickly, eyeing her. “I was a hot mess and I think my brother is still traumatized when he found me in the bathroom. I’m lucky they even let us back in here.”

Rubbing my arm, I look around the half-empty bar. It’s the middle of the week, so I’m not surprised there isn’t a crowd.

“I can guarantee that they’ve seen far worse than you were that night,” she tries reassuring me.

It doesn’t make me feel better though.

I’d drank so much that night, she’s worried I’ll have a repeat and puke all over myself in the bathroom again. Trinity had to call Reid to help carry me out and he saw me covered in the various cocktails, shots, and greasy food I’d consumed over the three hours we’d been there.

My brother said I was lucky that I’d barfed, or he would have probably had to take me to the hospital to get my stomach pumped.

I repeat the same words that I said to Dr. Barnett. “I’m not an alcoholic.”

When she’s quiet, my gaze pierces her. She’s looking at me with concern on her face, but not judgement. There’s no trace of pity like there used to be either, which would be relieving if she didn’t look like I was about to jump over the bar and start chugging vodka straight from the bottle.

I'm tempted to grab my bag and leave because it's been a long day. Shawn hasn't brought up the article again and I haven't had the guts to push my luck and ask. When I told Quinn about the opportunity, she hadn't been as excited as I thought she would be. But she says she's having trouble with her boyfriend, Jack, so I assume that's why she hasn't been her usual self.

"I'm going to grab some food. I haven't eaten since lunch, and it was a sad looking salad that didn't even have croutons." I start to slide out of the booth. "Did you want something?"

She sighs. "For you to accept my apology for being an overbearing friend?"

Her pathetic voice makes my eyes roll. She knows when she uses that tone and bats her ridiculously long lashes that I can't stay mad at her. "You're evil, but you're forgiven. Now, do you want food? Because I refuse to share my cheese fries with you. You always eat most of them even when you tell me you're not hungry."

She scoffs, digging through her bag and passing me a twenty. "Order us both burgers with the fries. It's on me for being a jerk."

I'm debating on not accepting the money when I remember that my mortgage is due. "You aren't a jerk. You're concerned." Swiping the money out of her hand, I blow her a kiss. "But you're still annoying."

She waves me away, making me laugh.

When I get to the bar, I lean against the edge and pull out my phone while I wait for the bartender to finish up another person's order.

Austin Texas: *Where are you?*

I frown at the message that was delivered ten minutes ago when I was on my way here.

"What can I get you?" a woman asks from in front of me, drawing my attention up to the bartender who looks exhausted.

Depositing my phone back into my bag, I give her a smile. "Two burgers and a big order of cheese fries. If you could add extra pickles to one of the burgers, I'd appreciate it."

"Drink?" she asks without looking at me, focusing on putting the order into a register.

"Just a water."

Once I give her the money and make sure to add what change she gives back to the tip jar, I sit down on the nearest barstool and wait.

“Pickles and water, huh?” a gravelly voice inquires from my right. When I look over, I see an older man holding up a tumbler. “Last time I heard that, my wife was telling me we were expecting baby number three. Learned after the second one to have those damn dill pickles in stock at all times.”

When I’m given a glass of water, I grab it a little too tightly. “I’m not pregnant,” I inform the talkative stranger, refusing to look at anything other than my water.

“That mean you’re single?”

I’m about to answer when the bartender comes back and says, “Leave her alone, Bobby. She’s not interested in your wrinkly ass even if you weren’t married.” She shoots me a wink when he holds up his hands and goes back to his drink. “Your food will be about fifteen minutes.”

Giving her a nod, I decide to slide off the stool and start heading back to Trinity rather than stick around to be hit on by random men. From the corner of my eye, I swear I see a familiar face looking straight at me from the corner of the bar.

I stop in the middle of the floor and stare at the table but...when I blink, nobody is there.

“Bree?” Trin asks.

Studying the area one more time before brushing it off, I force my feet forward and slide back into the spot across from the girl I’ve been close with since my sophomore year of college at Somerset University. “The food will be out soon. I put the change in the tip jar.”

“Are you okay? You look...off.”

I hate that she can read me so well. I fiddle with the napkin under my water. “You’re going to make an amazing therapist.”

She beams.

Taking a sip of water, I glance at the other side of the room wondering if Sebastian will reappear.

But he doesn’t.

And I’m grateful.

Defeatedly, I tell her. “That man back there thought I was pregnant.”

Her hand darts out and touches mine.

I shake my head. "It's fine."

It's not.

I pull away only when I hear my phone buzz in my bag, grabbing it and frowning at the screen and the messages lighting it up.

Austin Texas: *You're ignoring me now?*

Austin Texas: *I'm supposed to leave tomorrow. I thought we were going to get dinner*

Closing my eyes, I let my shoulders sag.

"Austin?" Trinity asks with furrowed brows, peaking at my phone.

Rereading his messages, I shake my head and lean against the booth. "I don't remember making plans with him."

We may have though.

When we spoke on the phone the other night, I'd tuned him out after he went off on a fifteen-minute rant about his coworkers and boss. I think I would have absently agreed to anything.

Meanwhile I spent the entire time wondering what he'd say if I told him I still wanted out. Would he stop talking about himself long enough to tell me how silly I am again? Or would he ignore it?

"Did you want to go? Or invite him here for dinner?"

I think about my conversation with him.

The *silly* one that made me feel lost.

But I don't feel lost now.

So, I answer, "No. I'll talk to him later."

And when I pull into my driveway a few hours later, he's sitting on the step by my front door with an unreadable look on his face.

I'm not sure why, but I hesitate to get out of my car when he starts walking toward me. As soon as I do, he pulls me into a tight hug, one that makes it hard to breathe, and says, "I was worried something happened to you."

He was worried.

When he steps back, his hands trail to my arms and grip them with the same tightness they did the night I tried to end it. "Never leave me on read again."

I gape at him.

He's smiling.

It doesn't reach his eyes.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

August 2022

I CAN BARELY keep my eyes open when I walk into the Espresso House in major need of a triple shot of their famous house drink. After a bad night's sleep of tossing and turning, I'm dragging today. And with two different meetings, another round of edits due to Shawn that I promised Quinn I'd help her with, and a desperate need to get food for my house before I have to endure another night of scrambled eggs and toast, I'll need all the caffeine I can get to survive the day.

"You look rough," Diane, my favorite barista, informs me, grinning when I flip her off. She's got a punk rock vibe to her and a sass to match. "Let me guess. House Espresso with a bacon, egg, and cheese on a bagel?"

I lower my middle finger and take out money from my bag. "I come here way too often for you to know that."

She grabs a to-go cup from the stack beside the register. "I know everything you love getting here, even if you don't come as often. Remember the day you used to come here when you were still with that hunk of a—" She stops abruptly, blinking rapidly at something behind me that has her ignoring the crisp ten-dollar bill I'm holding out and shaking.

From behind me, I hear, "Please, finish that sentence. I think I'd like to hear it."

No. No, no, no. There's no need to look over my shoulder because I know exactly who's standing there. I can feel his warmth and smell the Old Spice coming from him.

When a hand reaches out from around me with a twenty in his hand, he says, "I'll take a medium green tea and the same sandwich she's having. You might as well put ketchup on hers too because we both know she'll drown it in that shit at the condiments station anyway."

I want to smack his hand away, but I'm too afraid of what touching him may do to me after what it did in the store. "You're not paying for my food.

You don't even like breakfast, Sebastian."

The day we met, he offered to walk me to my car. When we stopped at my beat-up Toyota that my brother Reid helped me fix up, he'd said, "*I have a confession to make.*" I had no idea what he was going to say much less, "*I can't stand breakfast. Especially eggs. I never eat them. But I wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to get to know you.*"

He'd given me his number and the rest was history. A history that sometimes I wish I could forget for peace of mind.

"Maybe I've changed," he counters.

Doubtful. "Diane, take my money."

I wave it in front of her, but she gives me a sheepish smile and takes Sebastian's instead. When I gape in disbelief at her, she says, "I'm sorry, Bree Bree. You know I've always had a weakness for the attractive academic types. And I used to love it when he'd buy you breakfast in the mornings. It feels like my mom and dad are reuniting again."

Mom and dad.

Suddenly, the last thing I want is food.

The low chuckle sounding from the man who sidles up beside me sends waves of awareness down my spine. I tug on the sleeve of my shirt to hide the goosebumps that pebble my skin and try to avoid looking in his direction.

I hate that I still feel him. Still react. And the second he knows what he does to me, it'll be all over.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest as I watch Diane make change at the register as one of her coworkers starts preparing our orders.

From the corner of my eye, I see Sebastian casually tuck his hands into the front pockets of his gray slacks. Pressed. Wrinkle free. Still fitting his long legs a little too well. "I'm getting breakfast before work."

I force my eyebrow still no matter how bad it wants to twitch. "This is my spot. It always has been."

The man standing a few inches taller than me makes a thoughtful noise. "I didn't realize you started dabbling in business investments. Did you buy the Espresso House?"

Diane swallows a laugh as she passes him the change and gives me a quick, apologetic glance before darting away to help work on our order.

“No,” I murmur.

“Did you become a partner in the business?” he pries, cockiness in his tone.

My teeth grind. “You know what I mean. This was my safe space before...” *Before you screwed everything up.*

He tenses. “I’m sorry if I ruined the café for you. That was never my intention.”

Of course it wasn’t. “Look, Sebastian—”

“It’s Bash. And have breakfast with me.”

I blink slowly, turning my gaze toward his expectant one. “Excuse me?”

Diane walks over with our drinks, which Sebastian takes because I can’t seem to move from where I’m glued to the floor.

He lifts the Styrofoam cups. “Twenty minutes. Let’s sit, eat, and catch up. I never wanted to let you walk away, but you were right. It wouldn’t have been right if I’d asked you to stick around when I couldn’t give you my all then. That doesn’t mean I haven’t missed you.”

I’m tempted to leave my espresso behind. That’s how *pissed* I am to hear this now. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

His brows pinch together as if he’s surprised by my tart response. “I’m not trying to—”

“What?” I demand, clenching my fingers into fists. “Mess with my head? Play games with me? I asked you to give me a shot. No, no. I practically *begged* you for a chance like some pathetic girl who didn’t know when to give up. But you wouldn’t give me any time to prove how good we were together because you were too in your head about everything.”

He closes his eyes for a few seconds. “I know. It wasn’t fair to you.”

At least we can agree on that. “You’re right. It wasn’t. Nobody deserves to feel like they’re a time passer. An afterthought. You made me feel like I was a distraction. Nothing more.”

His sigh comes next, heavy with burden. I don’t sympathize with him. Not like I used to. The benefit of the doubt has no room in this conversation. “I was afraid to mess anything up that I’d planned for myself. I never expected to meet somebody like you back then. We’d been intense from the start, and I didn’t know how to...” He shakes his head. “Because of that fear I missed an opportunity that you told me I’d regret not taking. You were spot on, Bree.”

I refuse to acknowledge the way my heart drums to his words. How long have I been waiting for him to tell me that? To hear those words knowing what I felt wasn't as one-sided as he made it out to be? Over two years.

Twenty-seven months.

Eight hundred and twenty-one days.

How many of those days did I have to paint a smile on my face and pretend I was fine when I knew I wasn't? When I was hollow? Sad? Depressed? When I'd had to make the ultimate sacrifice that still haunts me?

"It's too late for you to come to your senses now. Too much has happened."

Not even he believes the forced hardness in my tone. "All I'm asking for is breakfast."

Evading my eyes, I glance toward the door where sunlight beams through the glass and makes a beautiful rainbow design on the tile floor.

It's warm today. A perfect one for a walk.

And fresh air clears my head, which is definitely what I need right now for even entertaining this idea.

Breakfast.

It's only food, I tell myself.

Sebastian sees my contemplation and does what he does best.

Pulls me back in.

"Somebody wise told me that sometimes second chances exist because the time wasn't right for the first one."

My lips part in disbelief, remembering those exact words I gave him a long time ago. "You remember that?"

Sadness dulls those honey eyes that I used to love waking up to every morning. "Breena, I remember everything. That's the problem. I can't forget."

In that moment, something happens to me. A button is pressed and the thick, steel wall I've kept up slowly starts to lower as if he knew exactly what would do the job. No amount of caution, hesitation, or strength could get the barrier to go back up in that moment.

I can't forget.

Well, I can't either.

“Why?” I whisper, staring up at him so he can see the defeat in my eyes.

“Why what?”

“Why couldn’t you just let me go?”

The pain in his expression mirrors my own. His focus only shifts when Diane walks over holding two plastics baskets with our egg sandwiches, bacon wafting in the air between us and making my stomach tighten.

Sebastian takes one of them and holds it out to me in offering. “Because I never wanted to. You told me I’d be miserable. I’m starting to wonder if both of us have been. But the ball is in your court. It’s up to you. Everything. Whether you stay. Whether you go. Whether you let me in. It’s all on you, Breena. I’ll follow your lead. I just want a chance.”

Stay. Stay. Stay.

My nostrils flare as I fight off the burning tears that well up in the back of my eyes. Because, for once, I don’t want control. I don’t want to decide if this is the last time I see him when I know I don’t want it to be. No matter how badly I should.

Licking my lips, I ask, “And if I tell you to fuck off?”

Humor dances in his eyes. “I guess I’ll fuck off then.” There’s a moment of pause between us. I know Diane is watching us with sheer intrigue, yet it doesn’t feel like there’s another soul around. “But I don’t think you’re going to.”

I want to tell him he’s wrong.

I want to say those two words.

Fuck off.

Screw you.

Or the three words I kept repeating to myself for weeks following the day I called it quits because I was so desperate to believe them. *I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.*

But I don’t.

I don’t hate him.

I don’t tell him to fuck off.

I don’t tell him anything.

In the deepest depths of my mind, I know I didn’t choose Sebastian Kennedy. I took one look at him and simply knew there was no turning back.

Because *he* was chosen for *me*.

And that's why I sit down across from him as if breakfast could really only be just food.

That's when he says, "I had to wait."

I blink in confusion.

"I had to wait until you were ready for me to step back into your life," he reiterates, grabbing his cup. "Because I was ready a year ago and had every intention of reaching out, but it wasn't the right time."

It hurts to swallow. "I don't know why you're telling me this."

Or how he could possibly know what the right time was. Time was always against us.

"Because you needed to know."

I don't.

You do, that voice says for me.

"The day you walked into the grocery store was a sign to stop waiting," is how he finishes the conversation before we spend the remaining twenty minutes in silence.

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CHAPTER NINE

August 2022

A BOX OF chocolates is tossed on Quinn's desk, startling her from the work she's been hyper focused on all morning.

My eyes move from the blank computer screen I've been staring at for the past fifteen minutes and to the chocolate that Quinn is staring at in confusion.

The man who dropped it there gives her a dry, "That's to say I'm sorry for last week. I was told that I was out of line."

It's rare to hear an apology from Shawn, so my eyebrows shoot up when he obviously listened to me.

Quinn must think so too because she gives him a worried glance and asks, "Are you feeling all right?"

His scowl deepens. "Christ. Just eat the chocolate."

I can't help but giggle when he storms off, not bothering to give me a second glance, knowing I'd look smug.

Quinn picks up the box and shakes it at me with a wiggle of her eyebrows. "Want some? He didn't even cheap out and buy the ones they sell at the grocery store for half off. I'm assuming you had something to do with this."

I push back my chair and walk over to her cubicle. "I never turn down sugar."

I could use the pick-me-up after my spontaneous breakfast with Sebastian yesterday. It left me discombobulated, and I was barely able to sleep last night. I knew once I closed my eyes that I'd see him exactly as I left him behind when I walked out of the café when the twenty minutes was up.

It was a sign, he'd said.

I wish he hadn't said that.

I wish a lot of things.

That Austin would let me go.

That Sebastian never did.

I wish, I wish, I wish.

Peeling the wrapper off and shimmying the top open, she pushes the box of assorted chocolates toward me. I try brushing off my heavy thoughts and lighten the mood. “He must have remembered that the dreaded time of month is coming for the office.”

Quinn snickers and takes one of the caramel candies. “Ever since he found out half the office’s periods synced he avoids us like the plague. Remember his face when he overheard Stacey complaining about how bad her cramps were?”

I read the top of the box to see the different flavors before selecting a truffle. “He bought the chocolate cake for the break room and tried convincing us it wasn’t him. If he hadn’t left the receipt out on his desk, I may have believed it since nobody would expect him to do something so...”

“Nice?” she prompts.

We both laugh quietly to ourselves.

“Maybe if I pretend I’m still mad at how he treated me, he’ll bring me lunch from that fancy Italian place. I’ve heard their primavera is the best around.”

I’m only sixty percent sure she’s joking, but I don’t take any risks. “I wouldn’t suggest using him to get free things.” The playful response tugs at a nerve that has my eyes traveling from the chocolates to our boss’s office where he’s on the phone with someone. “Can I ask you something? Have you ever dated somebody who tried to buy his way into your life?”

She spins in her chair until she’s facing me. “I take it this has to do with Austin?”

Reluctantly, I nod. “Shawn says that he thinks Austin is trying to use his money to buy his way into my life, and it sort of makes sense. He took me to the Dante’s.”

Her eyes finally meet mine. “That steakhouse *is* expensive, but it’s not like there’s many options for a date night around here. I’m sure he just wanted to dote on you. Where’s the harm in that?”

She’s got a point. “He was upset with me the other night because apparently we’d made plans that I didn’t know about.”

Upset seems like it's downplaying it. I've thought about it a lot. The way he looked at me. The way he touched me. The way he held me.

None of it felt right.

But then I'd remind myself that he was worried. Worried people are allowed to overreact.

Right?

I'd felt guilty for ignoring him instead of replying to his messages, especially since I knew he was leaving for a week-long business conference in New York City. It was the only reason I let him follow me inside and put on a movie despite how tired I was—despite how uncomfortable it made me to have him in my space that night.

Not bad enough to sit with Sebastian though. Not bad enough to feel some sort of safety when I was with him.

Picking up another chocolate, I let the coating melt in my fingers as I stare a little too hard at the squared sweet. "There's nothing wrong with being doted on, but I'm starting to think that I need to take a break from dating in general. He and I are both crazy busy with work, I'm trying to get onto the staff writing team—"

She shakes her head. "That's the *last* thing you should do. You're making excuses because you're nervous. What you need to do to help things along is to spice things up with him."

Trinity would like Quinn's suggestions a little too much. "The last time you gave me ideas it involved showing up to his apartment in nothing but a trench coat."

She gives me a wicked smirk. "I still think that's solid advice. Respectfully, your man is fine. I don't understand why you're so against him buying you things and spending money on you. Most women would kill for that."

But I'm not most women.

Not letting me make any more excuses, she claps her hands together once. "Why don't we do a double date?"

I balk. "With you and Jack?"

Quinn beams, standing up. "Yes! I'll plan it. Jack is free whenever, and Austin is coming back from his trip soon, right?"

"He'll be back on Friday or Saturday."

When he kissed me goodbye, I'd given him a tiny wave as he got into his car and felt something constricting my lungs as his taillights disappeared in the distance.

It hadn't been relief, because suddenly I was standing in a house that was too quiet. I was alone in my thoughts. But aren't I in my head even when Austin is here?

Silly. Nervous.

Why does everybody seem to know what I am besides me?

Sighing at myself, I shake it off when Quinn exclaims, "It's perfect! I'll handle the details. We can do something together Friday night when he gets back. You two are just in a rough patch. It happens to everyone."

A rough patch.

From the other side of the room, I hear a loud, "Murphy! Come see me."

I make another exasperated face at Quinn which makes her laugh. "Make him do something dumb so he rewards you with food when he feels bad," she suggests.

Shaking my head, I grab my phone and push off my chair. "You're relentless."

"I'm a woman who knows what she wants," she counters confidently.

All I can think is, *it must be nice.*



THUNDER RUMBLES in the distance as I watch the rain pour down from the dark gray sky underneath the awning that's protecting me from the sudden summer storm.

The early lunch I was supposed to meet my brother for was derailed by the apparent hangover he and half his frat house are currently suffering from.

Unfortunately, he'd called me as I was walking up to doors of the sandwich shop on Main Street. I'd swiped the last spot on the street, earning me the middle finger from a little old lady when I parallel parked into it with more skill than I thought I had.

I'm about to turn around and make an escape back to my car when I hear, "Need an umbrella?"

Freezing mid step, I peek over my shoulder at the man whose hands are tucked into the pockets of his blue Under Armour jacket. "Are you stalking me?"

His lips twitch upward, as if my accusation is somehow amusing to him. "I was about to grab something to eat when I saw you. Somerset isn't that large. It's not uncommon to see the same people."

I cross my arms over my chest. "We haven't crossed paths up until recently."

I'm tempted to ask if he just got back to town, but the few times I'd succumbed to curiosity and looked him up online, I never saw anything about him being in Connecticut like he told me he'd be years ago.

Had he lied to push me away?

Sebastian has always been a lot of things.

But a liar was never one of them.

If anything, he was always too honest.

"Do you ever think," Sebastian challenges, stepping toward me, "that the reason why we haven't crossed paths until now is for a reason."

I don't back down or step away despite him taking another intimidating step closer. "Is that your way of saying there's a specific reason I'm supposed to be reading into? I've stopped trying to read into everything a long time ago."

Liar, liar.

One of his dark eyebrows arch up. "Why is that? I always liked your outlook on life. It made things...tolerable."

I huff out a laugh thinking about my conversation with Shawn. "Reality reminded me that not everything deserves to be looked at in a positive light. Some things are too broken."

"Some *things* or some *people*?"

My lips press together to hide the irritation starting to bubble in my veins. His challenging stance and inquisitive eyes make my skin tighten.

When it's obvious I'm not going to answer him, his face morphs into one of intrigue as he studies me, then the area around us. "No boyfriend?"

Jaw ticking, I say, "He's away."

"Away," he repeats slowly, nodding in disbelief. Standing taller, he gives me a smile that I can't read. "Do you know what I find interesting?"

I've looked you up before and I've never seen pictures of you with anybody other than Trinity and your family."

It doesn't take long to know what he's implying, and it grates on me. "Have you ever thought that it's because I prefer being private about my dating life? I learned from you that being open about people isn't always a good thing. Because then you have to explain to everybody why it didn't work out. And the problem with that, *Sebastian*, is that I never had a good answer for anyone who asked."

Thunder cracks above us, echoing in the valleys and shaking the windows we stand in front of. I'm thankful for the storm. The noise masks the pounding sound of my heartbeat that I worry he'd hear if it were sunny out like it was supposed to be today.

"I'm sor—"

"Don't," I cut him off stiffly. My hands form into fists under my armpits. "I don't want your apology. All you ever were before was sorry, but never enough to change. Now I'm tired of hearing that word from anybody because I never know if they mean it."

He goes to reach out, but I jerk away from him before he can make contact. Cool raindrops hit my back, grounding me. "Breena—"

"Do you remember what it was like?" I ask him, voice uncharacteristically soft with nostalgia. Before he can ask what, I add, "Do you remember what it was like when we had each other, and it seemed like nothing else mattered? Being with you felt like I was invincible. Like nothing could touch us."

Sebastian's eyes dim with sadness. "I remember," he answers somberly, letting his hand fall to his side. I notice the way his fingers tighten and loosen before they move back to his pocket to hide.

Shifting on my feet, I look down at to the wet pavement and see my reflection staring back. I don't like who I see. My hair is a mess, and my eyes are dry, sore, and dull. I'd been tempted to dig out my glasses instead of my contacts, but I told myself to keep playing the part.

The part of the happy girl.

The one who didn't care about her appearance when she left because she was only going to see her brother. Reid would have told me I looked homeless even when I put my best effort in, so I knew I had nobody to impress when I slid on a pair of baggy, ripped jeans, an oversized sweatshirt

with a stain on it, and opted to run my fingers through my frizzy hair before running out the door.

But Sebastian is different. I never minded him seeing me like this before when I knew he wouldn't care. He'd kiss me and tell me I was cute or crack a dirty joke that would make me laugh and blush at the same time.

It's different now.

It matters when it shouldn't.

Lightning flashes in the distance, causing my eyes to travel toward the traffic passing by and the slight wind rustling the flags and signs hanging off buildings.

Taking a deep breath, I smell the fries cooking in the sandwich shop, lilacs from the florist, and his damn cologne.

Spicy.

Masculine.

Completely Sebastian.

It wreaks havoc on my nerves.

Especially when he asks, "Do you remember when we used to go outside in the middle of the storm and dance in the rain?"

I remember too well. We'd laugh as we danced to no music. Sometimes alcohol would be involved and we'd both be stepping on each other's feet, but neither of us cared. We were in each other's arms, spinning around as the rain washed away any problems we had.

The hesitation.

The doubt.

I used to think rain always made everything beautiful. It seemed like a fresh start after every shower wiped away whatever we were trying to hide.

But it's really a mask to show that things are perfectly fine when they're anything but.

Because when it rains, nobody can see the tears. And when the sun peaks through the clouds, it's a threat that reveals everybody's secrets.

Red-rimmed eyes.

Flushed cheeks.

A broken girl.

Sebastian breaks me from the thought by posing one more question that has my eyes moving toward his. "Do you still love the rain?"

He's not asking about the rain at all.

I know as soon as we lock eyes.

Do you still love me?

He may have never been a liar.

But I was.

So, I say, "No."

And then walk into the downpour not looking back once until I get to my car. Only when I slip into the driver's seat and close the door behind me do I glance in the direction I'd come from to see Sebastian staring back at me.

Even from here, I can tell he doesn't believe me.

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CHAPTER TEN

February 2020

SEBASTIAN LETS GO of my hand long enough to reposition us on the sidewalk, so he's closest to the road as the cars pass by. I peek up at him with a goofy smile on my face that he returns as he squeezes our fingers together.

"You didn't like it, did you?" I ask about the movie he took me to see. The romance wasn't overly cheesy, but it definitely isn't like the comedies we tend to watch when we're at his apartment and order food for a night in.

His lips tug up. "It wasn't awful. I only thought about falling asleep once."

"A glowing review," I tease, nudging my shoulder against his. "I'm sure if you posted that online it'll have people flocking to see it."

"In the movie's defense," he remarks, playfully nudging me back, "I didn't get much sleep last night."

I noticed he'd been restless. I'd woken up around 3:30am to see him getting out of bed. He'd bent down, kissed my temple, and told me to go back to sleep. I don't know when he crawled back in bed, but I vaguely remember the way he wound his arm around my waist until I was warmly spooned against the front of his body.

When I'd asked him if everything was okay, he'd simply said, "*A lot on my mind.*"

Then he distracted me with his mouth in other ways that made me forget all about his elusiveness.

We stop by his car, his body turning toward me as he backs me against the side of the cool metal. "The movie was simply a bonus. I just enjoy spending time with you."

His words melt my heart as I wrap my arms around his neck the same time his fingers latch onto my hips. There's a glint in his eyes as he studies my glasses. "Can I let you in on a little secret?"

Interest flicks my eyes up to his.

Bash tweaks my glasses, a predatory smile spreading his lips upward. "When a man meets a woman who's wearing glasses, the first thing he thinks about is what it'd look like if he came on them."

Eyes widening, I quickly punch his shoulder and start laughing. "Bash!"

He joins in, though he's unapologetic about the statement. Pulling me into him, he rests his forehead against mine. "I'm keeping it real, babe. Always."

I roll my eyes, still smiling like a fool at his lewdness. "You're vulgar."

He nips at my nose. "You love it."

Love.

We're quiet.

I stare at him a little too intensely while my heart beats so wildly in my chest that I feel it thumping in my eardrums.

Bash clears his throat and moves back when a group of people walk by us laughing loudly over something.

"Are you ready?" he asks, opening the door for me once I move away from it.

There's something distant in his eyes when I look over my shoulder at him before sliding into the passenger side.

The drive to my apartment is quieter than normal.



I NEVER USED to care about commercialized holidays like Valentine's Day because I can buy myself chocolate any day of the week if I want it bad enough.

And I do.

A little too frequently.

Which is why I'm surprised at my reaction when I see a large red box of chocolates waiting for me in Sebastian's hands.

Chocolate truffles. The expensive kind.

He struggles with money, but he still bought me chocolate.

Neither of us expect the glaze of tears in my eyes when I look up from the box to him. Or my speechlessness, which never used to be a factor in our budding relationship before now.

The knot in my throat as I reach out and take the box makes it hard to swallow down the ridiculous bubble of emotion.

Quietly, he says, "I'm sorry."

I'm sorry.

I know what he's sorry for, which is reason number two why I can't comprehend the soft-covered box my fingers are gripping a little too tightly.

I'm sorry.

He's sorry for how he feels.

Or, rather, how he doesn't.

He's sorry for not being ready.

I ripped off that Band-Aid a week ago after Trinity told me it was time.

Because it's been two months with the person fate made for me.

But my person isn't ready.

"I'm not comfortable with labeling this right now," he tells me, swiping his palms down his face. "I'm not ready for a relationship. I need a little more time to focus on me. On work."

I sit on the couch.

He sits in the chair.

He tries to touch my hand.

I move it away.

There's hurt in both our eyes.

So, why am I here?

Because I know he's sorry.

Because I know he meant what he said.

"I don't want to lose you because of this." He doesn't hide the glaze in his eyes, so I don't either. Tears begin to gather in my eyes and burn the ducts they're forming in. "You're an amazing person, Breena. I don't want this to be goodbye."

Maybe I'm weak for not letting go.

For not walking away.

I questioned myself when he said he wasn't ready. But the truth is, I needed Sebastian in my life in any way he'd allow it because I refuse to believe my feelings aren't real. My gut has never been wrong before.

And it's not wrong now.

Not when he nearly cried over the thought of this ending before it really had a chance to begin.

Not ready. Not ready. Not ready.

His fingers close around mine, pulling my gaze back up to meet his sincere eyes. "I wanted you to have them. Although, it's not completely selfless. I'm hoping you open them tonight so I can have one."

I told him I didn't like the holiday.

Didn't understand the point of it.

Yet, he bought me chocolates anyway.

That pesky, pesky feeling comes back.

The one that says I'm glad I stayed.

Hope.

I give him a sheepish smile, unsure of what these chocolates mean.

He's not ready, but he bought me chocolates for Valentine's Day.

He says those two little words again, this time his voice a little deeper, a little raspier, as if he knows what I'm thinking. "I'm sorry."

I blink as I absorb them, giving myself five seconds to make up my mind as to what to do next.

Then I step forward, cup his cheek, and kiss him.

Softly.

So softly.

He kisses me back with just as much tenderness that somehow leads us to his bedroom, box of chocolates forgotten unopened on the floor of his living room.

He strips me down, lays me on the sheets, and worships my body with a heart-stopping rawness that doesn't feel like he isn't ready at all.

It simply feels like he's scared.

But I am too.

Does he know that?

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

August 2022

I STARTED BAKING over a year ago. It started because of a Christmas party my parents were throwing. I channeled all my energy into the cinnamon rolls, sugar cookies, and gingerbread men that I helped Mom make, roll out, and decorate.

If I was stressed, I baked a cake.

Angry? Cookies.

Confused? Brownies.

On and on it went.

Baking has become my escape. I don't have to think beyond the measurements and recipes I create.

Trinity told me a long time ago that it may help me to find a hobby, and while she probably meant reading or joining some sort of club, I opted for this.

Now my sink is full of the pots and pans that my parents bought me, and my clothes are covered in flour and cocoa powder.

But as soon as Austin sees his favorite caramel chocolate brownies cooling in the glass container on the counter, the heartwarming light in his eyes makes the mess I have yet to clean somehow worth it. Because the way he's looking at me reminds me of when things were easy.

No stress.

No expectations.

Before he loved me.

"Did you make all this for me?" he asks, eyeing the brownies again.

No, I did it for me.

I don't tell him that though because he looks so happy. And despite Trinity and Dr. Barnett trying to help make me a recovering people-pleaser, the need to put other people first is still buried deep. "I wanted to do something nice for you as a surprise for when you got back."

My eyes startle back to Austin when he grabs my hips and pulls me in for a hard kiss that clashes our teeth together. It hurts my mouth, but he doesn't seem to notice the wince or the way I try moving back. He won't let me.

He's the one who finally pulls away, pecking my lips and saying, "Speaking of doing something nice..." Nervousness coats my stomach when he walks out of the room and comes back in with a bouquet of red roses tied together by a white ribbon that streams down into curls. "I got you these as an apology for being short with you about going out to the bar before I left. Forgive me?"

I blink at the flowers he extends to me before my fingers wrap around the middle with hesitancy. "You got me flowers?"

The dumb question makes him chuckle, like he doesn't understand why I'd be so surprised at the gift.

"Do you like them?" He watches me study the bright, flawless petals that make my nose itch. "I know you're not big on gifts, but everybody deserves something nice once in a while. I saw them and thought of you."

I don't understand how he could.

If I were like any flower, it'd be the weeds that dandelions grow into. One harsh blow and I break apart.

Swallowing at the gesture, I force out a half-genuine, "Thank you."

He kisses me again, this time softer, before smiling down at the bouquet he doesn't notice I'm white knuckling. "I'm beat. The plane ride was rough, so I think I'm going to crash for a bit. We'll get dinner later. Maybe from that pizza place you like so much."

My brows go up, glancing at the food I'd waited to eat until he arrived. There are more than just sugary desserts considering he doesn't have much of a sweet tooth. I worked hard on making some of his favorites. Because I want to talk. To tell him how I feel. What's on my mind. I thought food could be the peace offering leading into the conversation.

I don't love you, I want to tell him. I lied.

What would he do? What would he say?

"Don't you want a late lunch? I made that cauliflower recipe you said your mother used to make. I even used the same seasoning you said she does."

The seasoning is some special brand that only the organic shop in town sells for a price that I nearly had a heart attack over. He doesn't talk about her often unless it involves cooking. I'm not sure why I thought this was a good idea. Since when does food fix anything?

I wanted an escape, but I also I wanted to believe this would be enough. That he'd come back, and everything would be okay. That he would listen to me. That he'd smile and appreciate me. He'd give me *the look*. The one I feel in my soul.

I've never gotten that from him.

Never felt it once.

His smile wavers as he examines the two plates and silverware stacked next to the food. "I ate at the airport. If I knew you were cooking for me, I would have waited."

Stepping back, I shake my head when disappointment sinks into my stomach and set the flowers down on the empty countertop to start collecting containers from the cupboard. "Okay. I'll put this stuff away."

He grabs his travel bag from where he dropped it in the hall and asks, "Do you need help cleaning all this up?"

The kitchen looks like a disaster, but I don't bother accepting the help. With my mood quickly souring, I want the extra time alone despite telling myself to put in more effort with the man waiting for an answer.

What's the point?

"Go get some sleep. You look tired."

When he brushes a kiss against my cheek and walks down the hall to my bedroom, I feel my shoulders drop like two anvils landed on them. Now I wish he'd gone to his apartment instead of coming here. The house is too small when my mood shifts.

As if the walls are closing in.

It's suffocating.

I lean my lower back against the edge of the island and stare at the flowers across from me, wondering if I even own a vase.

I pull out my phone and look at the greasy fingerprints peppering the screen as I type in my passcode and pull up my messages.

Me: *He didn't eat the brownies*

It takes my best friend less than five minutes to reply back, which means she must be taking a study break from an upcoming exam she's worried about passing.

Trinity: Are we talking actual brownies or metaphorical brownies?

I have to think about what metaphorical brownies are before it hits me.

Me: Don't be gross. ACTUAL brownies

Turning to examine the various food littering the counter, I can't help but feel a tinge of something heavy. Dreadful. Sad.

*Trinity: It's only gross if the person eating your *brownies* doesn't know what they're doing*

I'm glad Austin isn't in here because he'd ask why my face is turning red.

He hasn't explored me like that on his own, and I've never been bold enough to ask him to because I wasn't sure he'd be into it.

I've only ever been with one man that I wasn't afraid to ask for what I wanted done to me, and that man isn't the one currently making himself at home in my bed.

Me: I don't want to talk about THAT

Trinity: We'll circle back to it later then

I know she won't let it go, which only adds to the pressure making it harder and harder to breathe as the seconds pass by.

Trinity: Is this really about the brownies or something else?

I stare between my phone and the food, debating on an honest answer or a white lie.

Opting for the truth, I let my thumbs scan across the keypad.

Me: It's not about the brownies

It's not about Austin ignoring the food.

Or about him going to sleep instead of helping me clean up the kitchen.

It's about how Sebastian always *would*.

I'd never have to ask.

He'd just do it.

He'd pick up a sponge, fill the sink with water, and get to work even if I tried prying him away. And whenever I'd try returning the favor at his place, he'd splash me with water and laugh until we got into a water fight like two kids until it led to far less clothes.

We were effortless when it mattered.

I miss the days when I didn't have to try.

Me: I think I might be making a huge mistake

I don't elaborate on what mistake that is because I'm not sure myself. All I know is that it's bound to be a big one either way.

Trinity: What's going on???

Jaw quivering, I stare at the text before lifting my gaze toward the direction of the bedroom where I hear the TV that Austin turned on. It's on sports.

Baseball.

Nausea rises up my throat that I have to swallow down.

Me: He bought me roses

He bought me roses.

Beautiful ones.

But I hate flowers.

◇ ◇ ◇

AUSTIN'S WARM HOLD leaves a suffocating feeling building in my chest as I wiggle from his arms. The clothes I have yet to strip off since coming back from Trinity's are molded to my body with sweat as I tiptoe out of the bedroom and into the bathroom to examine the red-rimmed, puffy eyes and running nose in the mirror above the sink.

Gripping the countertop until my fingertips sting, I drop my head between my shoulders and count to ten while trying to breathe.

The worst part of the silent breakdown is that Austin didn't even notice it when I crawled into bed long after he did. He pulled me into his side once I settled in, kissed the back of my neck, and held me against him until he drifted off to sleep while I trembled.

Splashing cold water in my face, I gently pat my skin with a towel before grabbing my phone from the nightstand and creep down into my basement hoping not to wake the man who stayed here while I went to Trinity's after our text exchange.

I told him she was having an emergency.

I lied for the sake of space.

Time.

Air.

I thought he'd go home.

He stayed.

He stayed.

So, I let him.

The second I showed up at my best friend's doorstep, she pulled me into her living room with a cup of warm tea that she insisted would calm me down, she asked about the flowers.

Those stupid, beautiful flowers.

It'd taken the future psychologist less than five minutes to tell me what I already knew but refused to say—that I needed to tell him that I'm not happy.

Communication is key, Bree Cheese. You know that, Trinity had said.

But how could I tell Austin that when I have no reason *not* to be happy? He worries. He texts me. He's there. I'm always looking for a logical explanation about why I feel the way I do, but sometimes the heart has reasons that not even reason can comprehend.

Which is why I'm sitting in the dark and pulling up my Instagram. Clicking on the name that I shouldn't even be looking at, I think about what Trinity told me.

Tell him that you're not happy.

I study the pictures on my phone screen and find myself smiling at the ones of him and his nephews. They share the same eye color. The same

nose. The same tint of hair. I can hear the rich sound of his laugh in each image that shows him having the time of his life with his sister's kids. I read every caption attached until I sink into the couch cushions with an unavoidable envy.

Because I wasn't there.

Because I wanted to be.

Because that could have been *us*.

My eyes water as I stare harder at the pictures of the youngest child he's holding before I force myself to exit out of the gallery.

He looks so content with them.

So happy.

He used to look that way with me.

An ache settles into my heart as my thumb hovers over the button that's highlighted with an unread message from him.

You need to tell him.

You need to tell him.

You need to tell him.

So, I do.

Me: It wasn't just breakfast

Jaw quivering as I swipe at the tear that manages to escape its duct, I cross my legs under me. I stare out the window into the dark night blanketed by clouds and bite down on my ragged nail that's practically nonexistent because of the bad nail chewing habit I have.

SKennedy_92: I know

I bite down harder until my nail snaps, making me wince when my teeth smash together from the impact. I cringe harder when I taste the twinge of blood on my tongue as his next message comes through.

SKennedy_92: Want to get lunch?

Say no, I tell myself.

The back of my neck tingles from the question. From the indecision.

My hands prickles as my thumbs hover over the keypad of my phone, debating on how to answer.

Two letters. N-O.

Those aren't what I type.

Me: Will it be just lunch?

SKennedy_92: No

Tell him how you feel, Trinity's words echo in my head.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I bounce my leg underneath me and wiggle until I'm sitting up straighter.

Me: I should tell you no

SKennedy_92: But are you going to?

My eyes go toward the stairs where Austin is sleeping, and I feel disgusted. Because I am. With myself. With the situation. With the pull for Sebastian that never fully went away.

When I don't reply, Sebastian takes matters into his own hands.

SKennedy_92: I'll pick you up tomorrow at your work

My eyes widen at the thought of trying to explain why a different man is suddenly gracing my cubicle with his presence. Quinn wouldn't let me live that down, and I know more than one of the other women would jump to conclusions.

And they'd have a right to, my conscience chides in disapproval.

Me: I'll meet you at the Plaza Diner

I'm sure he's got a cocky grin on his face.

One of victory.

The diner is a safe choice. It's close to both of our jobs, but not *too* close. There's nothing overly fancy about the location, which means no expectations.

Food. Talking. Leaving.

He's always made me feel comfortable enough to talk. I miss that.

SKennedy_92: *Afraid to be seen with me?*

I don't think twice before replying.

Me: *Shouldn't I be?*

Fear should be the exact reason why I stop this from happening. But it's not the unknown that scares me. It's what I think I know about it.

The ball is in your court, he promised me.

Does he really mean it?

Me: *12:30. I have 45 minutes. If you're late, I'm not sticking around*

SKennedy_92: *I'll be there*

His words send a shiver down my spine that I wish it didn't.

I quickly lower my phone when I hear footsteps creaking down the stairs until Austin's face pops up from around the corner of my tiny basement office. His sleepy eyes are glazed as he gives me a small smile.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asks, walking in and sitting by my feet.

Pressing my lips together, I draw my legs up to my chest and shake my head. "No."

His eyes go to the phone I have half-tucked under one of my legs. Then he grabs my feet and extends them out, rubbing the soles. I let my eyes close at the way his firm hands massage my tense muscles until I feel him shift, dropping my foot onto his lap.

"I can help," he whispers, suddenly moving over my body on the tiny couch my brother helped me find at the thrift store. He nips his teeth against the column of my throat and breathes me in, not sensing the hesitation of my locked body underneath him.

I'm not sure I want to do this.

Not knowing who I'm seeing tomorrow.

I move my palms to his chest and start to move him away when he captures my lips with his and lowers himself on top of me until his weight is holding me down.

It's the kind of crushing weight that reminds me he's the man in my life.
Not Sebastian.

His hands roam to my thighs, my phone falling off the side of the couch and making impact with the floor when he moves my legs around his waist.

Austin seems different.

Insatiable.

Desperate.

And because sex used to be the answer, I let myself get lost in it, hoping it'll solve something—the yearning inside my chest for companionship. The hole that can't seem to be filled with anything else.

I cling to that.

To what I know.

How to use my body.

How to ignore my heart.

Wanting to feel anything for the man currently using his hands to slowly peel away my clothes, I try getting lost in his soft lips and teasing fingertips against my skin. Choking down the conflict rising up my throat that tells me to protest, I help him strip us both bare until his cock is pressing against my inner thigh and he's kissing me with a newfound aggressiveness.

His fingers start to sting on my hips.

On my waist.

But I ignore it.

Anything to forget about Sebastian.

He peels his mouth away and curses. "I don't have a condom."

My shoulders draw back as I glance down at his erect cock twitching. We've always used protection. I make sure of it.

He asks, "Do we really need one?"

Yes. "It's better to be safe."

Safe. What an odd word.

His eyes darken, and I can't read them when he brushes his lips against my jaw. "Do you trust me?"

This time, I say nothing.

I don't know the answer.

Don't feel like lying.

Tell him. "Austin, I—"

"I'll make you feel good," he promises, his lips caressing my jawline until they meet mine. He reaches down between our bodies and starts teasing me until a noise rises from my throat.

Tell him you're not happy.
Tell him you think this should stop.
Tell him the truth.

He takes my burdened silence as the only greenlight he needs, pushing in and causing me to lock up.

It's slow.
Different.
And it hurts.
Hurts my body.
My mind.
My heart.

He doesn't whisper dirty words into my ear or pull my hair or touch my boobs. He doesn't bite my neck or tweak my clit or do anything to make me feel good.

All he does is take.
And take.
And take.
But I tell myself that doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter if he doesn't want to experiment with his many designer belts and silk ties. It doesn't matter that he's different.

Maybe it's a good thing. Different can be good. Welcoming. Better, even.

I widen my legs to let him position himself deeper, hitting me at an angle that should detonate me. Yet, no matter the nails I dig into his back or the palms I press into his bare ass to make him pump into me harder, there's nothing inside of me that threatens to break apart other than my heart.

I feel empty.
Too empty.
Nothingness.
Numb.
If I were smart, I'd tell him to stop.
Tell him this isn't working.
Tell him something is wrong.
Instead, I let him kiss me.

I let him fuck me with harsh hands and dry movements. I let him pull out and come on my stomach with a low groan.

It's not only my stomach that's wet.

My cheeks are too.

He doesn't notice the tears though.

I stay awake staring at the ceiling while he settles beside me and falls asleep, all the while panic seeps into my chest and threatens to splinter whatever is left of my heart.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

August 2022

THE SMELL OF Greek spices makes my stomach rumble with appreciation as soon as I walk into one of Somerset's many eateries. The Plaza Diner has a Mediterranean themed menu with some of the best gyros I've ever had. It's tiny, with only a few tables in the main dining room and a few more scattered in the back where it's a little quieter and far more intimate.

Subconsciously, I know my relief from that is a red flag. Because lunch should be lunch, just like breakfast should have been breakfast. But there has never been 'just anything' about the man I'm meeting here.

His presence has always been too captivating. Domineering.
Intriguing.

He's never been cocky about his charm or used it against me purposefully. But that doesn't mean it hasn't impacted me when I see those straight white teeth flashed in my direction.

Clearly there's a reason why I'm sitting in a diner and staring at the front door like a madwoman transfixed on an old habit, wondering if I can break it before it breaks me.

But the strongest drug that the world has to offer someone is another human being. I'm still trying to figure out if I was addicted to Sebastian Kennedy or to the way he made me feel.

I twist my hands in my lap before adjusting my sunglasses like they'll somehow conceal my feelings, but I know they're no use. No matter how much of my face the prescription frames take up, I wear my emotions like a mask for anybody to see if they pay enough attention.

And it was never attention that I lacked from the person who I'm both anxious and terrified to see.

Forcing myself to look anywhere but at the door, I glance down at my phone. There's a crack in it from hitting the floor last night. If I'm not

careful, I could slice my finger when I use it. I can't help but wonder if that was Austin's intent or if I'm officially becoming paranoid.

Because isn't that what cheaters become?

My ears perk up to the bell on the door ringing before a shadow casts over the spot I'm sitting. Slowly, my eyes trail up the tall figure dressed in dark slacks and a charcoal button-up clinging tightly to his trimmed torso. I know underneath the wrinkle-free shirt are valleys of taut muscles covered by naturally sun-kissed skin.

"You look beautiful," he tells me, pulling out the seat across from me.

I know he'd tell me that even if I was wearing something even frumpier and unflattering than what I am now. I slipped on a stained red sweatshirt over my work blouse before coming here because I needed its baggy comfort. And the dark jeans that I paired with my top do little for my figure, but they seemed...safe. Like I wasn't trying so hard to impress him.

My eyes do another scan down his body as he lowers to the seat with a palm flattening across the front of his shirt. "You look nice too."

It's civil, but not entirely the truth. The color gray he's wearing somehow makes the gold flecks in his eyes pop, making the honey color that much brighter.

It bothers me how attractive I still find him. Any straight woman would look at how his clothes emphasize his lean yet muscular body and appreciate the threads that hug all the right muscles he works hard for.

Sebastian watches me, his head tilting to the side as he studies the glasses still covering the two hazel eyes he used to tell me were his favorite feature of mine. "Do you have a hangover or are the shades some sort of fashion statement you're trying out?"

I touch the frames and lift a shoulder. "I like them."

His lips curve. "Me too. They remind me of the glasses you used to wear."

Silence.

"But they're not *you*," he concludes knowingly. "Neither are the contacts. You always insisted you weren't interested in getting them or having surgery because the thought of touching your eyes freaked you out."

I choose not to explain myself because I don't have the energy to tell him I wanted to be different after him. Experiment. Cut my hair. Change the color. Get contacts, as much as I hate putting them in. My glasses are

tucked away in a bathroom drawer in my house, the prescription out of date and blurry.

When he realizes I won't answer him, he gestures toward the menu I've been holding a little too tightly in my hand. "Have you ordered yet?"

I trail my fingers down the thin laminated paper, loosening my grip to try pretending I'm not nervous about being this close to him. I haven't had a big appetite since waking up this morning, and I was glad when Austin was already gone for work.

He wouldn't have seen my puffy eyes.

My trembling hands.

Would he notice I'm nervous?

I don't know.

"So," he hedges, glancing from me to our surroundings. "Was the location intentional? I didn't think you were being serious about not wanting to be seen with me."

Very few people dine in here. It's a known fact about the place that I took into consideration. Even if I should be, I'm not ashamed over it.

My eye twitches as I sit back and cross my arms over my chest. "You're the one who always said you didn't want your students seeing you out and about."

His palm swipes at the jaw he's shaven clean. I'll never admit it to him, but I miss his beard.

"At bars, Breena. I didn't want to be seen where college kids hung out. It was never you I didn't want to be seen with, and you know that."

Did I?

Face turning away when he sees the doubt clouding my guarded expression, he murmurs something under his breath before pointing toward the menu again. "I have an hour for lunch, and I know your time is limited. Do you want your normal?"

My normal.

I find myself saying, "I'm not a fan that you seem to know what my normal is considering we've never been here together before."

There's a smugness to the twist of his lips. "And I'm not a fan of you pretending like it bothers you. We both know it doesn't."

His wink grates on me as I watch him approach the counter and put in our order with the pretty waitress. I don't bother to feel bad about him

paying either since he's always insisted on doing that in the past. It didn't matter how often I fought him, or where we were financially, he'd manage to slip the money to whoever needed it before I could so much as reach for my purse.

When he sits back down, I have to force myself to sit still before he reads into my fidgeting. It's hard to do when he asks, "Is it because of the guy?"

The guy. "What?"

"Why you don't want to be seen with me," he amends, resting his elbows on the edge of the table and studying the twisted expression that takes over my face. "Is he the jealous type?"

"No. Austin isn't the jealous type." At least, he's never acted like it. Then again, he's never had to. I've never been more than a one-guy-at-a-time sort of girl. Until lately, it seems.

People change, I'd told him.

Me especially. "Maybe this is me being cautious for once. I've found that I'm too trusting. There are some things I'll never forget that serve as a reminder to never do again."

He doesn't make the wince completely noticeable, but it's there. A sense of victory high fives my inner conscious when he sits back. "I should have never said the things I did to you. Never made you feel the way I did."

I come back with a bland, "There's a lot of things you shouldn't have ever said to me. But here we are."

Sebastian's tongue trails along his bottom lip before he nods once. I watch the movement a little too closely, noticing the old scar on his top lip from where he split it open as a child. He's got one on his right eyebrow too that makes the hair grow in funny. He ran into the edge of a counter and needed three stitches.

"Here we are," he repeats, threading his fingers together on the tabletop in front of him. Casual, but not. Comfortable but tense. "I wasn't sure where we left off when we saw each other last."

Me neither.

Lips twitching downward, I stare out the window to collect my thoughts. Being cautious is the best path to take with men like him. He'd never take advantage of my vulnerability, but he has taken advantage of my understanding.

Rubbing my lips together, I murmur, "I keep thinking about what you said. About how people change. And it makes me wonder if I'd still like you if you had."

Sebastian's lips twitch, but they don't stay up for long before he evens them. "What's the verdict?"

If I tell him it's too soon to tell, that means we'll be seeing a lot of each other until I can make up my mind. It'd be a promise, one that I know he'd more than likely hold me to despite not being able to hold onto his own.

So, I choose a safe answer. "Do you want me to be honest?"

"You've never been anything but before," he points out.

I fiddle with my thumbs on my lap after dropping my arms into it. "That was different. I had nothing to lose when I opened up to you in the past."

He doesn't ask what that is. He assumes.

Austin.

But that's not entirely true.

If I lost Austin, I'd be relieved.

Another red flag.

Just like the little fingerprints on my hips that I woke up to this morning from how hard he gripped me last night.

I took the longest shower of my life when he left, wanting to wash off his scent and everything we'd done.

It's not supposed to be like that, a voice in the back of my head tells me.

Because of Sebastian, I know that.

I loved smelling like him.

Feeling him.

I loved...too much.

Throat tightening, I heft out a sigh and remove my sunglasses. "I put everything into one basket with you, and it didn't work out. I lost control to somebody again because of how much I felt for you, and it made me feel so..." I swallow down the hoarseness that starts chipping at my words. "I felt so ridiculous for falling as hard as I did for you and believing I had a fighting chance to be the girl who was worth it. And I can't pretend like that doesn't still hurt."

He's smart enough not to cut in, but I see his jaw move and his throat bob with a hard swallow.

Dipping my chin down, I toy with the glasses in my hand. “What’s worse is that I can’t pretend like I’m not still impacted by it either. It’s been over two *years* and the last place I should be is across from you getting lunch. The last thing I should be doing is telling you any of this because it shouldn’t matter anymore.”

He cuts in this time. “It does matter.”

I deadpan. “That’s the problem.”

We’re both quiet for a moment before I take a deep breath. “I don’t know why I’m here. I don’t know why I’m holding on. To the hurt. To the anger. To the confusion. It isn’t fair to me. It isn’t fair to Austin.”

But Austin hasn’t been fair either, I tell myself silently.

Sebastian gestures toward the menu I placed back in its holder on the side of the table, then moves his hand around us toward the workers behind the counter in white tees and black aprons. “We’re having lunch, Breena. You aren’t doing anything wrong.”

My laugh is distant because we both know that’s bullshit. Nobody can have a friendly get-together with their ex like it’s innocent. Least of all us. “Lunch. Just like we had breakfast?”

“No,” he counters. “*Not* like breakfast. Because you’re actually speaking to me this time which is already a step in a better direction.”

I stare down at the table, not wanting to meet his eyes. He gets up when he hears his name called and walks over to collect the food I shouldn’t be eating with him.

He puts a plate down in front of me with a Mediterranean panini, fries, and homemade coleslaw on the side, then a bottle of my favorite pink lemonade. When I glance up, there’s a hardness to his dark eyes.

Not knowing what to do to break the tension growing between us as we stare at the warm food in front of us, I say, “I had to fight every step of the way with you.”

When Sebastian looks up, there’s interest slowly coating the orbs that have always captivated me.

Emotion builds in the back of my own. “I was fighting for you for so long. Trying to believe that one day you *would* change for me because you wanted to be with me. Because you made it seem like you did. But at some point I realized I was only fighting to be lied to and taken for granted. I was fighting disappointment. I was fighting getting hurt by somebody I truly

thought was made for me.” I hiccup, clenching my bottled drink and tugging it toward me. “Then I started fighting to let go, which I thought I finally did. I started going to therapy. I met a man. I let him appreciate me. I let him dote on me. Adore me. Spoil me. I’d like to think I’m letting Austin love me. And I thought that was enough.”

I wish I’d never taken my sunglasses off because there’s a fresh glaze of tears blurring his vision. But I see his frown—see the heartache that my cracked words are giving him.

I want to be happy that he’s hurting.

But I’m not.

Because misery loves company.

“Shouldn’t a man loving me be enough to get over you?” I whisper, blinking rapidly to fight the tears off.

Sebastian’s throat bobs again. “Breena...” He reaches out and takes my hand, locking our fingers together and staring at them.

“I’m proud of myself,” I inform him, drawing my shoulders back. “I went through so many types of pain in my life. Trust issues. Insecurity. Heartbreak. Family problems. I did that all alone and never gave up until I made it on the other side. So why—” I pull my hand out from under his, instantly feeling an emptiness in my chest from his lack of warmth. “—does it feel like you just pushed me back into the storm that I’m struggling not to drown in?”

He doesn’t bother trying to answer because he knows it’s rhetorical.

Clicking my tongue, I swipe a finger under my eye to catch the tear that nearly topples over my lashes. “It seems like everyone talks about how hard it is to trust people after you’ve been hurt, but that’s not true at all. It’s harder to trust *yourself* after your gut instincts were undermined by somebody else’s problems.”

I uncap my lemonade and wonder if I’m being *too* honest. I know the blame doesn’t rest only on Sebastian’s shoulders, but I’m not the one who refused to fight harder to keep what we had. I was always the one *doing* the fighting. And even the strongest people need a break before they burn themselves out. I bowed out before that could happen, knowing it was imminent.

Eventually, Sebastian finds his voice. When he speaks, there’s a conviction in his tone that reminds me of what it used to sound like when I

thought it was him and I against the world. And that's a dangerous thought knowing he and I should be worlds apart instead.

"There's no way for me to go back and make it better. The only thing I can offer you now is an apology. Because I'm genuinely sorry, Breena. So damn sorry for everything I put you through. Put *us* through. It should have never happened, especially not the way it did." His nostrils twitch as he looks at his extended hand, still in the same position before I pulled away. "If you're truly happy with Austin, I won't ask for anything more than your friendship. But I can't help but put it all on the line right here, right now because I don't believe we're over. I don't think we ever really were."

I hold my breath.

Two years.

Two fucking years and we're not over?

"I should have told you before how much I fucking loved you. Because I did. I should have reminded you how happy you made me. Because it's true. I was comfortable with being vulnerable with you even if it made me feel weak." His fingers close together and clench until his fingertips turn white against the heel of his palm. "But I knew I couldn't tell you any of those things and give you the world you deserved. I can now. I swear to you."

My head slowly starts moving back and forth as he makes his proclamation. "Too much has happened," I try to tell him.

"You're right. We have a history. And not everything in it is pretty. But I'm all in," he tells me softly. "Tell me what you need, and I'll do it. I'll prove to you that I can do better than before. *Be* better. I want to be in your life, Bree. I want to watch you grow. I want to watch you succeed. I want to watch you be *happy* and be the reason for it. What happened before doesn't matter. We have time."

What happened before doesn't matter.

I lick my lips and feel my heart go into overdrive. Burdened heaviness churns my stomach as I think about what happened.

He has no idea what he's talking about.

"You're wrong. The past *does* matter. There's a reason people are warned about not letting history repeat itself. It's too dangerous."

He meets my eyes. "But history isn't just the past. It's the present. It's who we are and why we are the way we are. If I broke you by not fighting

the way you needed me to, I'm determined to spend the rest of my life fixing you, so long as you'll be in my life again. If you don't want that, you need to look me in the eye and tell me right here, right now."

How could he do this to me?

Blinking back tears, I stare at my untouched meal. "You're doing it again," I accuse, voice watery.

"Doing what?"

"Making me want you."

This version of Sebastian is the one I fell for a long time ago. The one who was determined to show me he wanted me in his life even when he wasn't ready. When I was sick, he'd take care of me. He'd watch whatever movie or musical I wanted even if he knew he wouldn't like it. He'd hear me out when I was feeling a certain way, apologize, and try his best to be better.

But when it stopped...that's when it all went downhill. When the doubt crept in.

I push my chair back and grab my sunglasses from the table, standing. "You asked me what I need from you. But the thing is, I don't need anything. I never *needed* anything from you except your love. Your respect. Your support. You couldn't give me those before, and I don't know if I can trust that you'll give them to me now."

"Like Austin does?" he questions, striking a nerve that makes my eyes twitch.

"This isn't about Austin."

He stands, too, putting his hands into the pockets of his dress pants. "If this had nothing to do with him, you wouldn't be here. But you are, so try again, sweetheart. You and I both know there's a reason that you're standing here fighting this and it's not because you don't have any fight left to give. It's because you're fighting something entirely different than before."

I swallow and look toward the door. "And how would you know?"

"Because," he says quietly, "I fought it before and look where that got us. If you can't trust me right now, let me prove to you how serious I am. I never went to Connecticut and accepted that job. I stayed. I watched. I gave you space."

My eyes widen at his admission.

“Life is made up of second chances. That’s why tomorrow exists.”

We watch each other carefully, my eyes slowly drying until I can see him clearly. I know he means every word, but that doesn’t stop me from questioning them.

“Time,” I tell him.

His brows pinch.

“You asked me what I needed,” I say, watching as understanding flashes in his eyes. “I need time.”

His chin dips. “Then take it.”

Take it.

Why does it sound like he means more than the seconds in a day?

When he reaches into his pocket, awareness shoots down my spine. And when he pulls something out and extends it to me, I can’t help but balk in breathlessness at the item in the palm of his hand.

“I kept it,” he admits, both of us looking at the worn paper butterfly between us that he spent hours making.

My hands start to shake when I see the familiar tear in one of the wings and the words scribbled onto the back in his illegible handwriting. “Why?”

His thumb brushes the torn wing. “You told me it was a reminder when you left it behind. I couldn’t get rid of it. No matter how much time passed. Not days. Not weeks. Not months. We both knew that I’d need to change one way or another, so this became a vow, of sorts. To try harder.”

You didn’t try at all.

But he didn’t go to Connecticut.

I want desperately to reach out and touch the item that left a heavy hole in my heart by leaving it behind. But I keep my hands by my sides and far away from the symbol of hope he’s held onto all this time.

“Who are you trying for?”

His smile shows hints of amusement in the curl of his lips, but his voice is calm when he answers, “If it isn’t obvious after today, then I clearly need to try harder.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

March 2020

TWO STRONG ARMS wrap around me from behind, pulling me backward until Old Spice envelopes my body and melts me into the hard torso I'm cradled against.

Tipping my head back to peek up at Sebastian, he bends down to press a kiss against my lips until mine curl into a happy smile. "How was your meeting with the department head?"

He tweaks my glasses, mimicking the smile on my face and says, "It wasn't as boring as I thought it'd be. All I kept thinking about was the sexy redhead I was going to see after they dismissed us."

I hum in contentment, relaxing my head against his shoulder and watch the stars twinkle in the clear sky above us. His apartment balcony overlooks the lit-up campus in the distance that's deafly quiet thanks to the early spring break the students are on for another few days.

His arms tighten around my middle as his lips press gently against my collarbone. "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

My arms circle his, hugging him back as I contemplate the answer to a question I've never been asked before. There's a lot of things I'd like to do in the next decade, but I've never thought about them in depth. I'm not sure I wanted to before now.

"I want to be...happy. Happy with my work. A staff writer or editor maybe. Financially stable with a house and room for Sweet Potato and her future dog brother to run around in."

The mention of my elderly orange Tabby makes him smile against me. He's met Sweet Potato a handful of times now, and always tries to win over the finicky feline with bribery of yarn balls and squeaky toys.

Like me, my cat is a total pushover for the man currently rocking me in his arms.

He asks, "Are you not happy now?"

It's a loaded question.
One we've never talked about before.
Not since our talk.
The talk.

But it's March now, and no matter how much his honesty should have probably halted what we were doing, nothing has changed between us.

I've found that there's a difference between chasing happiness and finding it. "I think happiness is a state of mind. You can be happy in the moment when you put yourself in positions to be. But I'm not always happy, and that's something I want to be secure in."

I want him to ask, *Do I make you happy?*
But he doesn't.

A thoughtful noise rises from him as he stands taller, letting his arms loosen from my waist as his hands drop to my hips. "You amaze me. Do you know that?"

I snuggle in when a cool breeze whips through. "How so?"

He's going to be 30 soon. Less than a month. So, I find it funny when he says, "You're only 26, but you act older. Wiser. I didn't have the same mindset as you did when I was 26."

My head tilts back to see his chin dipped down as his eyes trek along my features. From my hazel green eyes that I've got settled on his brown ones to the button nose I acquired from my mother, to the thin lips that I've thought about getting filled before I realized how expensive it'd be.

He sees it all.
Takes it in.
Smiles.

Whatever he sees creates a fondness in the hues I watch my reflection in which only tightens the cord that's been tugging at my chest since our first date.

The tug that's never gone away.
Which is why I'm still here.
Hoping. Feeling.
"Where do *you* want to be in ten years?"

I already know he hopes to get a teaching position somewhere closer to his family in Connecticut. Maybe Massachusetts. He's close with his family from the stories he's shared with me, a keenness for them that always

makes his eyes shine a little brighter whenever he tells me about the torture his older sisters put him through or the revenge he and his younger brother would get on them for it.

He loves hunting with his father and uncle and having movie nights with his grandmother, and there's something endearing about his relationship with each of them.

There's never any shame dulling his confident features when he tells me about crying over *Casablanca* with his grandma or tearing up during his eldest sister's wedding when she walked down the aisle. There's no hesitation when he says that his father is his best friend, or that his grandfather is his idol.

All of those things say a lot about his character. There's a warmth to his soft humility that wins me over with each story he tells me.

His chin rests against my head. "I suppose if I were to simplify it, I'd want the same thing. Happiness. Contentment. Hopefully five years from now, I'll be married. I'll have a chance to live my life without any type of overbearing hardship that stops me from living."

I can feel the vibration of each word as it soaks in, a sense of understanding cementing inside of me. Because isn't that what we all want out of life?

"Is that what your life is full of now?" I ask delicately, fingers stroking the coarse hair on his arm that tightens in reflex. "Hardship?"

When he hesitates, I bite down on the inside of my cheek wondering what he hasn't told me yet.

I'm not ready, he'd told me.

My throat constricts.

Patience, I remind myself.

"Doesn't everybody face that?" he challenges absentmindedly, voice distant with thoughts he clearly isn't going to share with me.

"I suppose." We stand like that for a little while longer, a quiet sigh loosening from him that I feel ruffle my hair. Afraid to ruin the night, I choose to change direction. "Do you want to watch a movie since we were a little preoccupied the last few times we tried watching one?"

When I glance up again, a wolfish smirk is stretching across his lips at the memories of the other times he's invited me over. His fingers dig into my sides, making me laugh at the ticklish feeling he taunts me with. "I'd

say we were a little more than preoccupied based on the noises you were making underneath me when I pinned you against the couch.”

A pleasant heat spreads down my neck and into my chest at the memory of his body bucking into mine. The constant needy ache whenever I’m not with him is thanks to the new, addictive positions he bends me in every time we’re together. The second I walk into his apartment, neither one of us can seem to keep our hands to ourselves.

He takes me against the wall.

Over the couch.

On his bed.

He wants to mark every surface with the magic we create, and I happily indulge him.

It only validates that the magnetic pull that flares inside of me isn’t one-sided. Neither one of us can get enough.

Will we burn out?

“We never did get more than forty minutes into that comedy you chose before you carried me into your room for round two.”

His lips coax my ear, nipping the top of it until shivers shoot down my spine. “Keep talking like that and I’ll bend you over this railing until the neighbors come outside to investigate what the noise is.”

My thighs clench together, making my ass unintentionally arch backward until it presses against the hard bulge in his slacks.

His hips roll forward, making me feel exactly what this conversation is doing to him. “I can tell you’d like that. Do you want Mark to hear you get fucked?”

Jesus. I’ve never been talked to like this before, but the instant wetness coating the inside of my panties is reminding me how much I actually want to consider his offer. That’s what Sebastian always does to me—bring a part of me I didn’t know existed to life.

I like his control.

His dominance.

I like being submissive to him.

Only him.

Even alpha females will become submissive to men they trust to lead.

I bite into my bottom lip when his hips do another pass and his hand slides between my legs to press on the button of nerves that has me letting

out a choppy exhale.

Sebastian hums as he circles my clit with the perfect amount of pressure before moving his hand away and practically making me whimper from the sudden loss of him.

Cockiness spreads across his face as I watch him slowly back into the living room that his balcony is attached to.

“Tease,” I accuse, unable to stop myself from picturing the mental image of him doing exactly what he said he would to me.

He winks, holding out his hand to me until I place my palm in his. “Later.”

When he pulls me inside, I see the two plates of food sitting at the table. “You cooked for us?”

The lust in his eyes is still there but softens at the sheer surprise in my tone as I walk over to examine the chicken cut into precise slices on some seasoned rice. He tips my chin up and smiles at me before pressing those pillowy lips against mine and pulling out the chair closest to me. “Hopefully you like it. If not, I can figure out something else.”

As I sink onto the seat and stare at the selection of meat, rice, and veggies in front of me, that funny feeling enters my chest again.

The one that is impossible to ignore.

Because I’ve never had anybody cook for me before.

Swallowing down the emotion that rises up my throat, I accept the fork he passes me and poke at the chopped bell pepper coated in butter.

“Thank you,” I tell him with a rasp to my voice that I hope he doesn’t pick up on, peeking through my lashes at him.

But he does.

Because Sebastian picks up on everything.



THE ESPRESSO HOUSE is packed when I walk in, making my late morning feel that much more doomed when I see the line. If I have to settle for the office coffee that always taste bitter and slightly burnt, I may have to jump in front of Shawn’s shiny sports car.

“Bree!” Diane calls out, waving me over once she catches my eye. A few people in front of me turn toward my pinched expression and watch me

skip the long line until I approach the barista where she's standing off to the side and holding out a bag. "This is for you."

She passes me the white bag and a to-go cup that smells exactly like the strong salvation I'd planned on ordering since I peeled my groggy eyelids open after Sweet Potato nudged her wet nose against mine for attention.

"I didn't order this," I tell her, knowing I'd feel guilty if I took somebody else's breakfast no matter how desperately I needed the pick-me-up.

Diane rolls her eyes and pushes it toward me before adjusting her apron. "It was called in and paid for already by a man with a very sexy voice. Well done, girl. I'm a little jealous."

A weird noise passes my parted lips, causing her lips to tug up.

"I'm assuming it was the academic hottie you've been in here with. He couldn't stop staring at you the entire time you two were eating breakfast before the holidays. Me and Erin were betting on if he'd kiss you right there in the middle of the café."

I laugh nervously as she fans herself off from the fantasy she's obviously picturing in her head. "He didn't."

"Trust me, we know. We kept an eye on you because we each had ten bucks in the pot. I said he wouldn't because he gave off gentleman vibes. She'd flipped me off when I held out my hand for the payout when I saw him walk you to your car without so much as a peck on the cheek. How cute is that?"

It's nice to know my dating life brings so much entertainment to people.

"Anyway, if he already knows your usual, you might want to put a ring on it." My cheeks tint with heat as I peek into the bag to see the breakfast sandwich I'd ordered the first time we met and smell the sweetness of the ketchup that he saw me put on the eggs without so much as flinching. I look up when Diane claps once to gain my attention. "Oh! I'm supposed to tell you to bring sweet potatoes to his place later and meet him on the balcony. Something about picking up where he left off with you the other night."

If my cheeks weren't pink before they definitely are now. "Okay," I squeak, clenching the bag in my fingers until it wrinkles under the death grip I've got on it. "Thanks for passing along the message."

Diane leans over the counter. "Is it code for something dirty? I've done a lot of things before, but they never involved sweet potatoes. Too thick.

Cucumbers, though—”

“Oh my God.” I back away, wishing I could cover my ears. “If I explain, I’m going to be even later for work, and then my boss will hate me ten times more than he already does when he’s on that dumb keto diet.”

Diane grabs a packaged muffin and tosses it at me. It almost lands on the ground before I save it with my bent arm. “Take that as a bribe then and come back to spill the tea about your man when you can. I need to know what this balcony business is about and why you didn’t choose a different vegetable.”

I shake my head and try ignoring the curious glances people give me as I make my escape.

Your man.

I want nothing more than to call him that.

After buckling into my car, I pull out my phone and snap a picture of the food waiting for me in the passenger seat.

Me: *Thank you xx*

Bash: *Needed to make sure you had energy for tonight ;)*

Groaning to myself as I put my car in drive, I try not thinking about what he has in store for me. But I fail miserably and find myself turned on all day until I’m sure at least two different coworkers know why my cheeks are colored the way they are.

I barely have time to close Sebastian’s door behind me and Sweet Potato before he’s taking the carrier from my hand, letting out the skeptical cat, and I’m being carried up the stairs.

After twenty minutes, I start to wonder if Mark really can hear the pleading noises I make, and when Bash gets on his knees between my legs out in the chilly spring air, I can’t think straight enough to care.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

August 2022

THE BLINDS ARE down but open, letting a subtle stream of light into the room that doesn't irritate the headache I woke up with. Soft music plays from Dr. Barnett's desk.

Not classical.

Soft rock.

My lips jerk upward for a second or two because it reminds me of driving around with Reid. He changes the words to ridiculous lyrics that always make me laugh, but the second anybody goes to touch the radio dial he smacks it away and gives a ten-minute lecture on how everybody needs classic rock in their lives even though he never sings the actual words.

I walk over to the window and move a section of the blinds to get a better look at the dreary day. It's been raining since six this morning when I woke up after another nightmare. I don't remember what it was about. All I know is that my heart was beating a little too fast and there'd been tears in my eyes. I'd turned to my side and stared out the window, listening to the raindrops smack against the wet ground and the wind whistle through the trees.

It was enough to drown out the silence. I dreaded how the house echoed with my thoughts when the weather was nice.

When I turn to find Dr. Barnett standing by her desk drinking a glass of water, I make my way over to the various pictures on her shelf. "Do you have any pets? Or kids?" I let my fingertips graze along the dusty frames of her with other adults.

No children. No animals.

I don't know anything about my therapist besides her degree and experience in the field. In hindsight, it's all I need to know. But doesn't personal experience help people understand others? Trinity wants to help people because she's seen the impact of people's mental health, especially

when they don't get help. Her cousin committed suicide after years of battling with crippling depression. They were like sisters.

Before the woman I pay to listen can answer, I look over my shoulder and say, "I used to have a cat. Her name was Sweet Potato because she was the color of one." Sadness nips at my stomach as I remember all the morning cuddles she'd give me, even if I was annoyed at how early she demanded them sometimes. "I thought I'd been clever to name her that because most people would have probably gone with Garfield."

My therapist sidles up beside me, examining the picture on the shelf closest to her with a warm smile on her face. "I have three dogs. Kota is my black lab, Dixie is my yellow lab, and our chocolate lab is named Cocoa."

I frown, doing another scan of the room to see if I'd missed any pictures of them. "Why don't you put any of their pictures up? If your office doesn't have emotional support dogs, the least you can do is put pictures of yours on the walls."

Amusement lightens her usually unreadable expression. "I'll take that into consideration. Maybe I should put a suggestion box outside."

She walks over to her desk and flicks off the music playing from her computer before gesturing toward the seating across the room that we typically occupy.

I don't even get a chance to sit down before she starts in on me. "You missed your appointment last week."

It's not accusatory like I think it'll be when she brings it up. Since I don't know what ailment I used when I canceled, I say, "But I'm here now."

The first rule about lying is to always remember what your lie is. And when you don't? Bullshit it.

Instead of hounding me for the reason that I'm sure she'll question either way, she decides to spin the conversation. "What happened to your cat?"

My throat tightens. "She passed away from old age. I like to think she had a good life."

To hide the way my lips instantly shake from the loss, I glance out the window and focus on the same raindrop stream coating the glass.

"It's always hard to lose a pet," she remarks softly, genuinely. I know she's not just saying that for the sake of my sanity knowing she's got three

of her own. “They’re often like children to us, and that can be an even tougher loss all on its own.”

My nostrils twitch knowing where she’s leading the conversation. “No,” Teeth clenching, I give her a solemn head shake. “It’s not the same, and I’m not discussing it.”

She’s calm in reply. “Then what do you want to talk about?”

My eyes go back to the window, focusing on the droplets that spatter across the glass. “I saw Sebastian.”

The conversation she wanted to have is quickly forgotten as she sits a little straighter with a blunt awareness she can’t hide. “Sebastian Kennedy?” she reiterates, as if I’d bring up any other man with the same name.

“It’s your fault. I went to the grocery store, and he was there. I went to the coffee shop, and he was there. He’s everywhere.”

Just like before.

Under my skin.

In the front of my mind.

Everywhere I go.

I thought I was getting over him.

Then, like a magician, he reappears.

I never liked magic tricks.

“Let’s back up a little,” she directs, gathering herself. “You saw him at the grocery store. What happened when you saw him?”

I bite down on my tongue for a moment as I recall the anger bubbling in my veins. “I got mad. And before you ask, it wasn’t just directed at him. I was mad at myself. I was mad at life.”

“Why were you mad at yourself?”

Why else would I be? I find myself huffing out a dry laugh. “Why am I sitting here right now? It’s not because I enjoy spending my hard-earned money on being asked a million questions that bring up the past. It’s because of him. Of what I...”

When I dare a glimpse in her direction, I find her head bobbing up and down slowly. “Did you speak to him? I imagine it had to be difficult if this is the first time you’ve seen each other since you ended things.”

Ended things. My stomach churns at the term that I refuse to think about. “We spoke,” is all I tell her, shaking my head and trying to make

sense of the thoughts swirling around. “How could somebody make it seem like no time has gone by at all? It’s been years and here I am still fucked up. Full of guilt. Full of confusion. And him? He acts like nothing happened. Like he can just waltz back into my life.”

“Breena—”

“How is that fair?” I ask, voice clipped as I eye the woman taking me in. “How could somebody that I swore I was going to marry make it seem so effortless?”

“Make what effortless?”

“Falling back in.”

Dr. Barnett is quiet.

Looking down at my lap, I squeeze my palms together and take a deep breath. “He apologized. That should make me happy, right? But it isn’t like he hadn’t said he was sorry before. He always did. The problem is that it never stopped him from doing the same thing that hurt me. Making excuses. Holding on but never going anywhere. It was a cycle.”

“It’s good to acknowledge that. It means you won’t fall back into the pattern you’ve admitted to fearing,” she praises. But what she doesn’t know is that my fear will never go away, especially not with Sebastian. It’s always going to be a threat. “Now tell me about what happened at the coffee shop.”

Clicking my tongue, I think about the sweetness of the ketchup against my taste buds when I bit into my breakfast sandwich. I think about the crumbled twenty-dollar-bill he gave Diane. And I think about the silence between us compared to the hum of lively conversation at the tables of people sitting nearby.

I can still feel the intensity of his eyes.

The thickness of the atmosphere.

How I choked on it.

So, I say, “I had breakfast.”

Not we.

Me.

“You had breakfast,” she repeats. “Did you have breakfast together?”

No, is what almost slips off my tongue.

Another lie. One that I can’t verbalize, like the denial is clinging to my vocal cords.

So, I stay silent.

And silence says more than words do.

“Who paid?” she asks next.

Nothing.

Dr. Barnett studies me for a long period of time, realizing she’s not going to get what she wants from me.

Even if I wanted to tell her, I can’t.

It’s all buried too deep. Rooted.

“Why did you ask about my pets?” she asks, causing my empty eyes to finally find hers through the thin glaze of tears I can’t hold back.

I gnash my teeth together until they hurt, needing that pain to ground me. “Sebastian always said he’d be there for me. But he wasn’t when Sweet Potato died.”

I don’t have to look at her to know she’s watching me with sympathy. I’ve learned to sense when people feel that way toward me because it’s how my friends and family saw me during the aftermath of Sebastian.

I scratch at my leg with my uneven, bitten nails through the denim I threw on. “I’ve been thinking about getting another pet. Maybe a cat. Something to fill the house. A companion.”

I’m surprised when I see a smile on her face. “I think that could be good for you. Is that something you’re considering doing with Austin?”

I refrain from twitching. “No.”

Austin is allergic to cats.

My lips twitch upward.

Then go back down before she can see it.

“How have you two been?” she inquires next, a question she hasn’t asked in a while.

It takes me a moment to think.

Think about the way he touches me.

The way he talks to me.

I think about the night in the basement.

My throat tightens. “You told me a while ago that I may have abandonment issues because of the past. That my insecurity will make it hard to know who to trust or not because I attach myself too quickly.”

I didn’t like hearing it at the time, but I knew she was right. I’m prone to toxic relationships. I’m in my head. Insecure about things I never used to be until my last relationship went south.

In a lot of ways, I self-sabotaged myself.

Sebastian just gave me the nudge.

“Did you read the pamphlet I gave you on the topic?” she questions, eyebrows raised.

No. I tore it up and threw it away in the garbage can outside. I’d felt a little bad. It was my third session with her, and I didn’t feel helped at all.

I felt judged.

Instead of answering her, I pose my own question. “What if my reluctance to be in an exclusive relationship means purposefully doing something that sabotages anything good in my life? The people in it.”

She shifts in her seat, a thoughtful expression softening her face. “Did something happen with Austin, Breena?”

My lips part to answer, but I hesitate.

I think about the way the hair stands up on the back of my neck lately when he gets upset.

You’re just new to this, he’d told me.

“I don’t know,” I finally admit.

We’re quiet for a long time.

When it’s clear I don’t want to talk anymore, Dr. Barnett says, “You should look at the information on the bulletin board outside. There’s plenty of flyers and pamphlets about a lot of things that could be resourceful to you.”

No doubt she knows I threw away the one she gave me.

As I’m getting up to leave when my time is up, she stops me before I open the door. “And Breena?”

I peek over my shoulder.

“If there’s something you’re uncertain about with Austin, you can tell me. Anytime.”

Even outside our session, is what she doesn’t say. Like right now.

But there’s nothing to say.

So, I nod, turn the door handle, and walk out without even glancing at the bulletin board that she mentioned.

TRINITY SMOOSHES MY face with her hands and turns my head in her direction until I can smell the peach and cranberry cocktails permeating from her breath. “I don’t know if you know this, but there’s a very sexy man staring at you.”

After drinking something called Tropical Depression, which she told the bartender officially made her feel far less depressed over her exam grades after cocktail number three, she’d switched to a different concoction with a side of onions rings that she devoured in five minutes flat. And despite the greasy food and water that I forced her to drink, I’m not sure she’s seeing anything quite clearly right now.

Peeling her hands away from my face, I study the dimly lit room. “I don’t see anyone.”

She swings her hand rapidly, almost hitting me in the chin. “*That* guy. God, Bree Cheese. You need to go back to glasses. He’s the one sitting in the corner booth behind you. He’s been looking over here for the past hour like he wants to eat you or something.” Her dramatic gasp comes next as she grabs her empty basket containing only crumbs from her food. “Or maybe he wants to steal my onion rings. What if he’s poor and is trying to scavenge because he needs to eat? I need to order more!”

It’s hard not to laugh when she goes into helper mode. Anytime we see a stray animal or homeless person, she feels the need to give them something.

I pry the plastic basket from her death grip and point out the obvious. “There’s only crumbs left, so I think he’s shit out of luck if that’s the case.”

Twisting to try seeing who my very drunk friend is referring to, I only get halfway when she smacks my boob hard enough to make me grab it and wince. “Don’t look! He’ll see you.”

I gape from her to my chest. “Did you just boob punch me?”

“It was a love tap,” she corrects, making the older guy behind the bar snicker as he clears our empty glasses from the countertop. “And you were being too obvious.”

Duh. “Isn’t it only fair that I look at him since he’s apparently staring at me? For that matter, who’s to say he isn’t staring at *you*?”

Bartender Guy leans against the bar top and tips his chin toward the direction Trinity’s attention is drawn to. “He’s definitely staring at you, sweetheart. Got here about forty-five minutes ago with some buddies.

They're all scattered about the room, but he seems to have his sights set on you specifically."

A déjà vu feeling settles into my stomach as I lean closer to the man. "Can you tell me what he looks like?"

The bartender gives the guy a once-over before lifting a shoulder. "I'm not gay or nothing, but I'd do him."

Trinity giggles, glassy eyes shooting over my shoulder. "He's definitely attractive."

If she's saying that, it can't be Sebastian. She'd waltz over and give him a piece of her mind, not ogle him from afar. Not even the amount of alcohol she's consumed could get her to change her thoughts on the man I still hadn't told her was back in my life.

Loosening a sigh, I do my best to be more subtle when looking over my shoulder at the man in question. As soon as I lock eyes with the person Trinity and our bartender have been talking about, my breath catches.

I murmur a cursed, "Shit." Turning around and shaking my head, I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I know him."

Trinity squeaks, her hand grabbing ahold of my wrist. "He's coming over here. Wow that man can *walk*. He's—"

"Breena?"

As far as men go, Monty Luis isn't bad. He's always been welcoming, warm, and nonjudgmental. In fact, I sort of wished we'd stayed in touch because he was always someone to count on.

If I could label the man standing beside me as he gives me a surprised once-over, I'd say he's the mediator—always the logical one.

Trin's grip tightens around me until I bat her hand away, not that she seems to notice. I don't blame her for how she's looking at Monty. He's an attractive guy in a hipster lumberjack sort of way. Great personality. Pretty smile.

Besides a few additional silver speckles of hair in his dark beard, he hasn't changed. He's still tall, muscular, and could probably use his dimples as weapons if he wanted to. Not to mention the man can wear plaid like nobody's business.

The problem with Monty? He's one of Sebastian's closest friends here in Somerset.

“Hi,” I greet weakly, wrapping my fingers around the wine glass I’ve been nursing all night. The liquid is warm at this point, but I told myself I wouldn’t drink more than one glass. Especially when Trinity told me she needed to take at least two shots to handle how awful her week has been.

Monty clears his throat, gesturing toward the table he was at. “I saw you from over there and couldn’t be sure I was seeing things right. You look different. You changed your hair, right?”

It’s Trinity who speaks up when I can’t seem to find the words to confirm or deny any of his suspicions. “I’m Bree’s best friend.” She sticks her hand out and puts on that charming smile of hers that he returns easily as he shakes her hand. “Trinity Lewis. How do you two know each other exactly?”

“Monty Louis. Maybe we’re related.”

From under her breath, I hear my best friend murmur, “I sure hope not.”

Monty definitely hears it too but refrains from grinning the way I can tell his wavering lips want to. “Sebastian introduced Breena and I a few years ago.”

Trinity instantly drops his hand like she’s about to catch something, and her quick mood change doesn’t go unnoticed by the university’s basketball coach. He and Sebastian used to play basketball once a week with a few other coaches at the college and would usually go out during the college basketball season to watch their favorite teams play.

That was when things seemed normal.

Routine.

It’s strange seeing Monty now.

He glances at Trinity’s pinched expression before turning to study mine with a new type of interest in his expression that worries me a little.

Because I have no idea what he sees.

Is it embarrassment? Confliction? Discomfort? He could see any combination of those flickering emotions that I’d rather he not.

But it isn’t the dark-haired mountain man watching me who hurt me in the past, so I have no reason to be uncomfortable around him. Monty did nothing but be kind to me whenever Sebastian brought me around his group of friends and coworkers. We’d met at the New Year’s Eve party where Sebastian and I had cut out early as soon as the ball dropped. Monty knew

where we were going and why. I'd seen him laugh and shake his head as his friend and I rushed to Sebastian's car.

His friends rooted for us once upon a time. They'd hear about me all the time. About my job. My aspirations. My quirks. I felt appreciated. Special. Like I was worth being talked about. Bragged about. It's funny. I never liked being the center of attention unless it was Sebastian giving it to me.

What has Sebastian told him? Do they still talk every day? Play basketball every Wednesday morning before work? This is the first time I've seen him at The Jug. There's another bar across town where less college students go that the local faculty gravitate to, to decompress, drink, and watch whatever game is on the flat screen. "I haven't seen you around," I tell him quietly, offering Bartender Guy a quick smile when he refills my wine with a wink like he knows I need it.

I tell myself I won't touch it.

Monty's smile is warm when I look back at him after debating on whether or not to take a sip of the drink that taunts me. "I ended up getting my degree and taking a job at a different college out of state, but it didn't last more than a semester. I was offered more money to come back and coach here on top of the classes they offered me first dibs on, so I took it."

He left and Sebastian stayed.

Huh.

I don't get a chance to express that I'm happy for him before Trinity cuts back in, her finger jabbing Monty's shoulder. "Does that mean you're friends with Sebastian? Because we don't like he-who-shall-not-be-named."

Heat prickles my cheeks at the lift of Monty's brows. "You *just* said his name," I tell her, grabbing her arm and lowering her hand before she can poke him again. "And quit it."

She squirms in her seat, fighting me like she always does when that protective side comes out of her. Even though she's always been like this, there was a point when her feelings shifted for the worst.

I give him an apologetic glance. "Sorry, she's had a little too much to drink tonight."

Monty lifts a shoulder, half his lips quirking up at the glare Trinity is giving him for no reason other than his association with public enemy number one in her mind.

I feign calmness when I say, “I don’t know what Sebastian’s told you, but we’re not necessarily on speaking terms. Things are a bit... complicated.”

I can’t read the flash in Monty’s eyes, but it’s almost as if he can sense the lie in my tone. Sebastian could have told him about our recent interactions, but I’d like to think he’d be too prideful to admit being turned down.

But you didn’t turn him down, my conscious pipes in. You gave him an invitation to keep trying.

Trinity crosses her arms over her chest as she scopes out Monty carefully. “I’m sure you understand that it’s my duty to hate your friend’s guts for hurting my best friend.”

“Trin,” I hiss under my breath.

She waves me off, still focusing solely on Sebastian’s coworker. “It’s unfortunate. You’re hot, but that hotness went down a solid fifty percent knowing who you’re connected to. Flirting with you would be like fraternizing with the enemy. I can’t do that.”

I close my eyes and mumble, “Oh God.”

Monty doesn’t seem fazed by Trinity’s statement, but rather amused. “Only fifty percent means I still have half a chance,” he returns easily, his lips curling at the corners. “And I can respect your loyalty toward Breena, the same way I’m sure you can respect mine towards Bash.”

She scoffs, grabbing her glass only to scowl when she finds it empty. “We’ll see about that.”

Mouth drying, I decide to take a large sip of my wine before setting the glass back down and pushing it away from me. When I turn in the stool, I see the stare off Trinity and Monty are having and realize I need to end this before something is said that can’t be taken back. “It was good seeing you, Monty, but I think we should head out. We’ve both had a lot to drink.”

Trinity snorts, pointing toward the wine I barely touched. “You’re only on your second glass of wine in, like, three hours. And you didn’t even technically finish your first one.”

I stand up, tugging on her hand until she slides off the seat reluctantly. “That’s one too many considering my stance on alcohol.”

Monty watches me steady Trinity, who’s obviously three sheets to the wind at this point. I knew she wasn’t joking about the bad week when she’d

ordered me a wine and didn't even nag me about drinking it.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Monty asks.

Trinity and I share a look before she lifts her shoulders loosely. "I'll wait for you by the door." She jabs her finger into Monty's chest again with what I'm guessing is supposed to be a heated expression on her face. "You have sixty seconds and I'll be counting. She's got a hot date tomorrow that she needs her beauty rest for."

I close my eyes when his eyebrows lift inquisitively at me and groan when Trinity adds, "Breena is finally on a good path no thanks to your friend and I'm not going to watch you derail it. Sixty seconds. That's all you get."

She stumbles away, no longer giving me an excuse to make a clean getaway like I'd hoped for. And thanks to her loose lips, I have more to talk about with the man who used to kick Sebastian's ass on the court.

He doesn't beat around the bush. "He was a mess, you know. I've never seen him that way before. It scared me a little. I know it's none of my business, but I wanted to tell you that."

My brows pop up my forehead. "I'm going to assume you mean Sebastian, but I'm not sure why you'd feel the need to share that. No offense, Monty, but he deserved to be a mess after what happened."

We both did.

He nods in agreement. "Most of the guys at work told him as much after they found out about your split. He wouldn't talk. Wouldn't eat. He'd do his job, but it was obvious he'd been fucked up over a lot of shit. He barked at everybody. Other faculty. Students. The head of his department had to sit him down at one point and tell him if he didn't calm down, he'd be fired. You know how hard he's been working for the tenure track."

I let out a tiny breath at the news.

His job meant everything to him.

Everything.

Yet, nothing Monty says makes me feel better even when I tell myself it should. Wasn't validation what I've always wanted—to know that it wasn't all in my head like I started believing it was? Sebastian may not have taught English, but he said the prettiest words for months to make me believe in us. In fate.

“We all liked you and thought he was being an idiot for letting things get the way they did. I know none of us can make excuses for him, but we *can* vouch for him. He’s stopped drinking as much. I never see him smoke anymore. Bash has cleaned up his act, is what I’m trying to say. He’s gone through a lot to make himself more clear-headed than before. I think he’s realized how much he’s lost by seeing everybody else move on with their lives while he sort of stayed put in his.”

Even if all that’s true, it shouldn’t mean anything to me now. But *shouldn’t* isn’t the same as *doesn’t* and both Monty and I know that.

“I’m not telling you to give him a second chance or anything,” he adds. “Especially if you’re dating again. And more power to you. You deserve to be happy.”

My face colors at the soft praise.

“All I’m saying is that he’s done what he’s needed to do to figure his own shit out, and I think you’d like this version of him better. It’s the version that can actually make a difference in the world. Because the Sebastian Kennedy you knew was trying not to put himself in a position to get distracted by anybody while he made a career for himself. He was a good man, but a broken one with skewed priorities. This one finally has those priorities sorted out.”

I flatten my palms along the side of the short skirt I let Trinity pick out for me. The material clings to my legs, riding up every time I move and making me tug it back down. “You think I’d like him better because he’s quit drinking? His drinking was never the problem. It was *why* he was drinking that tore us apart.”

Sebastian never drank much. I only remember two different times he was ever drunk around me. He was never mean when he’d gotten tipsy, just goofy. Energetic. Loose lipped.

Secretly, part of me liked hanging out with him when he did have a few drinks because I knew he was going to share things he might have held back.

Previous relationships.

Baggage.

Stuff I wanted to know but was too hesitant to ask him about.

From the first time he’d invited me over after having one too many shots with the guys after work, I’d known he was drinking to escape

something. Even if he didn't admit that to me verbally, I could sense it. Could read him because I'd figured him out by then.

He was scared.

But he never saw that I was too.

Monty shakes his head. "No, not because of the drinking. You'd like him better because he's quit making excuses and figured out that women like you only come around once in a lifetime. When a man wants a woman in his life, he'll make sure she knows it."

It's not what I'm expecting him to say, and my nose twitches as I blink back the stinging threat of tears that builds in the back of my eyes.

He gives a quick look at Trinity by the door before turning back to me with part of his lips quirked up. "So, a hot date, huh?"

Heat sweeps into the back of my neck. For some reason, I feel the need to say, "It's nothing. A double date with a coworker at the Italian place across town."

I'm not sure what to classify the noise that comes from him, but all he says is, "You should try their eggplant lasagna. It's good."

I'm glad Trinity sticks to her word and comes over after she decides the time is up for us to really leave. She wraps her arm around mine and pulls me away before I can form a reply.

I feel Monty's eyes on our retreating backs when Trinity speaks up. "I really want to ask what that was about because you look like you saw a ghost, but I won't remember any of this conversation in the morning, so we'll have to have it when I'm sober."

Letting out a nervous laugh, I fall into step with her and steal a quick glance backward before the door closes behind us.

Monty lifts his hand in a single wave, causing me to let out a long sigh wondering how I've gotten myself in this predicament.

The one where I'm wondering if I really *would* like Sebastian now more than ever. If I thought I loved him before, what would happen to me now if I saw this version of him?

I don't have to think about it for long before my only focus is on holding Trinity's hair back as she empties the contents of her stomach onto the sidewalk next to the small barbershop.

She groans.

I pat her back like she's done with me too many times to count.

All while thinking about the honey-eyed man who shouldn't be at the forefront of my mind as I guide my drunk friend to the car.

After dropping Trinity off, I pull into my driveway and see Austin by my door. Again. He hasn't texted me since I told him I'd be out with Trinity for a girl's night.

I'd appreciated it. The space.

Now that appreciation vanishes.

I don't like when he shows up unannounced.

His eyes go to my skirt when I get out of my car, then scan over my body from head to toe until I'm gripping the hem of the shirt that shows a sliver of my stomach and tugging it down. He grabs my hips as soon as I stop close enough to him and says, "I don't like that anyone can see you like this."

I want to believe that's a good thing.

That he thinks I look nice. Beautiful.

But his grip hardens, and so does the way he kisses me. Alarm bells go off in my head telling me to abandon ship.

Pulling my face away, I say, "Trinity thought it'd be fun to dress up tonight. I feel pretty, even if this is shorter than what I normally wear."

"Anybody could look," he points out.

I stand my ground. "That doesn't mean I entertain their stares, Austin. You never have to worry about that from me."

His nostrils flare for a moment. "I don't like it."

Looking away for a moment, I try figuring out my reply before choosing my words carefully. "I don't like that you don't seem to trust me. I've never shown you any reason not to. I was out with Trinity. I was having fun. There's nothing more to it."

I wait for him to reply.

One second goes by.

Another.

Finally, he dips his chin. There's a tick to his jaw. "You're right."

Two words. Simple.

I should be happy to hear them, but they don't seem genuine. So, I push my luck by telling him what needs to be said. "I can't be with somebody who's not comfortable with me going out and not texting them back right

away or wearing something they think shows too much. I don't want to be the girl that settles."

It's a warning. Will he read between the lines? His eyes meet mine. They're dark. Distant. Hard. I don't know how to take that. "Did you drink anything tonight?" is his response.

"No," I lie. "Why?"

He doesn't enlighten me. "Why don't you go inside and get some sleep? You'll feel better in the morning. Then we can go out tomorrow night and spend some time together."

I start to shake my head, tell him maybe it's not a good idea, but he steps closer to me and takes my chin in his fingers. "We promised Quinn and Jack we'd go."

He's right, we did. I don't like backing out of plans last minute.

Sighing internally, I find myself nodding reluctantly. "I'm getting a headache," I murmur. "I think you should go."

He kisses me softly before letting go of my chin. "I'll see you tomorrow. Feel better."

I don't watch him walk away.

I don't watch him get into his car.

I simply walk inside, press my back against the door once it's closed behind me, and close my eyes.

How did I get in this situation?

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

August 2022

AUSTIN FLATTENS HIS palm against the small of my back as we walk into Toscano's Italian Grill. His other hand holds the door open before he follows me in, moving his hand from my back and capturing mine as we approach the hostess stand.

"Reservation for Hurley," I tell the woman in front of the computer, shifting on the heels I decided to break out tonight. Trinity used to tell me attitude is all about the way you feel, and I wanted to feel beautiful. Confident. Despite what happened last night between Austin and I, I was determined to make the most of today. Which is the only reason I squeezed into the little black dress and silver heels that are killing my feet.

My stomach growls when I smell the garlic coming from a nearby table and mouth waters when a waiter walks by with a tray of pasta and bread on it.

Austin steps up to the woman whose eyes are scanning the screen with pinched brows. "It's actually under Charles."

My eyes snap to his when I hear his last name. "What?"

A secretive smile lifts his lips. "I spoke to Quinn this afternoon. She and Jack won't be able to make it."

I stand a little taller, wondering why my coworker hadn't said anything at work today. I didn't even know they talked. Is this the first time? My mind racks with some sort of hint that she could have dropped in passing the few times we did see one another, but there was nothing.

She either set me up for a one-on-one with Austin, or he insisted on it. I wouldn't be surprised if either were true.

The hostess smiles. "If you'll both follow me, I'll show you to your table. We selected one in the back like you asked."

Austin doesn't see the way I look at him in confusion as he takes my hand and guides us behind the woman weaving through the tables toward

the back dining room.

When we stop at the table, I see the candles lit in the middle and the bottle of wine in the ice bucket on the side. My stomach sours at the unopened cabernet, knowing the Napa Valley branding printed on the bottle goes for at least eighty dollars.

I pull my chair out and carefully sit down the same time he does, watching as a small menu is placed in front of me. The expression I see in my reflection is comical, but I don't feel the humor in my widened eyes.

Peeling my gaze upward, I see Austin flattening his hand along his silver tie. It's his favorite one. I've watched him put it on before going to work, straightening it in the mirror while smiling at the way I'd stared at his meticulous movements in the reflection.

He doesn't know why I stare.

I've never told him.

Silk on skin.

Skilled knots.

I swallow at the memory of what silk ties used to be used for on me.

"Everything looks good," he notes, scanning the list of food in front of him. He reaches over and picks up the wine. "I made sure to call ahead to get this chilled."

When he starts to open the top, I dart my hand out to stop him and blurt, "I'm not drinking right now. I've been wanting to cut it out."

Both of his eyebrows arch up as he gently places the bottle on the table. "But you love wine," he notes suspiciously. "You went to a bar last night."

Wetting my lips, I glance at the empty glass placed carefully in front of me. "I think it'd be good for me. A cleanse. I'll just get water."

I don't bother seeing what his expression looks like as I focus on the food selection, noting the eggplant lasagna printed at the bottom and wiggling in my seat at the thought of my conversation with Monty.

"You drank last night even though you said you didn't," he says. Before I can reply, he says, "I smelled it on your breath, so don't deny it."

I blink, taken aback. "I wasn't going to." When he hums, I can tell he doesn't believe me. Instead of focusing on that, I pick up the menu and ask, "What looks good to you?"

The prices listed next to the meals make my eyes widen. No wonder Quinn backed out. Neither one of us can afford this sort of thing.

“At the moment, you,” he responds, causing me to peek up through my lashes.

Heat prickling along my neck and cheeks from the low spoken comment, I bite down on my bottom lip.

It’s been days since we’ve had sex, and I’m grateful that he hasn’t pushed it despite him trying to initiate things in bed since. He usually turns over and goes to sleep when I tell him I’m not in the mood.

But I can tell tonight is different. His eyes are darker as they trail along my face, an obvious lust flaring in his eyes that has me clearing my throat and staring back down at the menu.

I don’t want tonight to be different.

“I think I’m going to try the eggplant lasagna.”

He’s quiet for a second. Two.

Then he replies, “Good choice.”

But his voice is off, distant, and I know it’s my fault. Guilt eats at my insides, and I’m counting down the seconds before our waitress comes over to take our orders.

My eyes survey the restaurant, noting the smiling, happy couples at the tables nearby. And even though I shouldn’t be, I’m jealous of them. I envy their wide smiles and loveable expressions as they stare at their significant others from across the table. There’s a sourness sinking in as I watch them hold hands across the tabletop like they can’t stop touching—like they don’t want to. Not even when their food is delivered, or their drinks are being poured.

I miss that feeling.

The need for connection.

To always want to touch someone.

Be around them.

The addiction of their company.

Swallowing down the emotion that starts rising in my throat, I roll my shoulders back and begin turning back toward Austin when I see somebody out of the corner of my eye.

Somebody I shouldn’t be seeing.

Have I official lost it?

When I blink, he’s still there. Not like at The Jug when I hallucinated him. Sitting by himself a few tables over in clear view of me is none other

than Sebastian fucking Kennedy.

And now that sourness turns into something else. Awareness bubbles under my skin, making it tighten and itch.

I find myself rubbing my arm, my freshly done nails that Trinity helped me with the other day scratching at the anxiety creeping along the layer beneath.

Sebastian picks his gaze up...

And smiles.

It takes two seconds to see the curl of his cocky lips as he lifts the tumbler in his hand toward me.

Turns out, he did lie.

Because he wasn't going to give me time at all. And I have no doubt he talked to Monty about where I'd be tonight.



THE PLATE OF eggplant lasagna doesn't get the attention it deserves once it's set down in front of me because all I can feel is the tingling sensation on the side of my face from the person watching me in the distance.

"...merger. The acquisitions team asked me to be part of the process, which means the managing director is finally testing the skillset I've been building for the past five years at the company."

Crossing one leg over the other to get comfortable, I poke into a piece of eggplant and lift my gaze at the man already half done with his chicken. "That's amazing."

He gestures toward my plate with his fork and asks, "Do you not like that? I can ask them to bring you something else. This alfredo is some of the best I've had."

My stomach dips as I force my lips upward in a reassuring smile. "I'm not feeling that well, actually. I'll be right back. I'm just going to go to the bathroom."

Concern smooths over his face as I set my napkin down on the table and stand. I head toward the women's bathroom tucked away in the far corner of the room.

Leaning against the wall as soon as the door closes behind me, I find myself pinching my eyes closed and shaking my head.

“Rough night?” an older woman’s voice asks, causing me to glance over to where she stands by the sink. She reaches over for the soap and turns on the faucet of the furthest sink.

Pushing off the wall, I walk over to the counter and cringe when I see my reflection in the mirror under this brutal lighting. It looks like I haven’t slept in days.

Then again, I haven’t.

“You could say that,” I admit to the stranger with kind eyes.

I study myself in the mirror, picking at a piece of lint on the fabric of my dress. My hair looks decent at least.

The woman turns to me and gives me a quick once-over. “Somebody as pretty as you shouldn’t have so much stress on their shoulders. It causes wrinkles.” She winks and points toward her face. “Take my word for it.”

The smile I give her is genuine.

“What’s wrong, doll?”

I let out a nervous laugh at the million-dollar question, so I give her the only reply I can think of. “My therapist and I are trying to figure out the answer to that too.”

Thankfully, she chuckles and finishes washing her hands. “Want a little piece of advice I’ve learned in my sixty-two-years?” I don’t get a chance to answer before she tells me. “Let go. Of whatever is making your eyes frown. Of whatever negativity is weighing your conscious down. I learned a long time ago that the second we stop letting the hurt win, we live life a lot fuller.”

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I let the advice soak in. It sounds simple. But we both know it’s always easier said than done. “What if letting go of the hurt only causes more of it in the long run?”

One of her dyed blonde eyebrows pops up in intrigue. “Then, child, you’re living a far more exciting life than I am.”

Her answer causes me to blink as she turns off the faucet, dries her hands, and smiles as she walks toward the door.

I find myself following her out, only getting a few steps behind when a hand darts out and stops me from walking away.

Old Spice surrounds me.

It’s a common brand.

But it’s not just anybody touching me.

I know by the way my arm sparks.

Yet, it doesn't stop the soft yelp as I stumble backward. It has the woman stopping and looking over her shoulder. She studies the situation, Sebastian's hand on my arm, my panicked eyes darting between the two of them, before her lips lift higher up her face.

"An interesting life indeed," she declares in amusement, sauntering away until it's only Sebastian and I left in the alcove.

It takes me a few seconds to gather my bearings before I'm yanking my arm from his grip and turning to face him. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing here?" I hiss.

A smirk lifts his lips that I'm tempted to slap right off that stupid, attractive face. Especially when he says, "I'm enjoying a nice night out same as you."

"At *this* restaurant? Out of all of Somerset's options?" I doubt, jaw ticking. I know he talked to Monty, but he won't admit it to me even if I pressed him. "What game are you playing, Sebastian?"

He rakes his eyes over the front of me, making my toes curl into my heels. His eyes lock on where the dress ends mid-thigh for a moment longer than necessary before dragging their way back up to the dip of my neckline and finally to my face.

"You're wearing makeup," he notes, focusing a little too closely on the dark red lip color that I carefully applied before leaving. Austin complimented the color, which I knew he'd like. It's the reason I even bought the shade, evidently called power red.

Seeing how Sebastian is enamored with the color painted along my lined lips, I'm suddenly more grateful for spending the money I did on it.

Instead of confirming the obvious, I decide to switch gears. "Is this another kink for you? Do you enjoy watching me with another man? Or were you trying to see if I made him up since you seemed so sure I was?"

There's something carnal about the way his eyes darken when they lift from my lips. He looks over my shoulder before pulling us into the men's bathroom behind him and caging me against the wall. His body all but presses into mine until I feel every inch of hard muscle beneath his clothes, and suddenly I'm hot.

Too hot.

Thick sarcasm coats his tone when he drawls, “Yes, Breena. Seeing you with another man really turns me on.”

Our close proximity makes it hard to breathe, as if the fabric of my dress is too constricting. Standing taller puts me closer to Sebastian’s face which is dangerous, but it’s the only way to show him that I’m strong.

Stronger than I was.

“What. Are. You. Doing. Here?” I repeat slowly, making sure every word is met with the same intensity as the glare that I hope burns him.

His head cocks as he studies me, his eyes roaming from the top of my carefully done hair back down to the way I lined my eyes and to the lips he’s bewitched by.

Finally, he breaks the silent-filled-stare down to say, “I needed to see for myself.”

His words echo in the otherwise empty room, bouncing off the walls until they smack me in the chest.

“See what?”

His eyes soften. “If you’re actually happy.”

I’m speechless, afraid of the way my heart reacts to those words. Because they’re thick with something I don’t want to acknowledge.

Care.

Feelings.

What’s worse, he doesn’t stop there.

“You know what I saw out there?” he questions, his fingertips dancing dangerously close to where my hand is clenched by my side.

His lips part to tell me, but before he can answer his own question, the door cracks open. With impressive speed, he pushes us into the closest stall and picks me up so my legs are forcefully wound around his hips. I’m about to protest at the way his hands grip my ass when he presses his finger against my lips to quiet me.

My teeth grind as the patron uses one of urinals outside the stalls, unaware of what’s happening right behind him.

Then again, not even I know what’s happening right now. My mind runs rampant with millions of thoughts and sensations. His scent overwhelming me. His strong hold securing me. The scotch on his breath tickling my lips.

And then I feel it.

The hardness pressing against me.

My eyes widen when I acknowledge what it is, and the man who it belongs to doesn't look as ashamed as he should considering I'm not here with him.

Yet, my body doesn't seem to understand what rational behavior is in this situation. Because despite my brain telling me how wrong this is, I can't help but move. The tug is there. The spark. The second I grind down on the bulge pressing me against the stall door, Sebastian groans.

And that sound brings everything back.

The lust.

The hunger.

The ache.

All things that shouldn't be there.

Not for him.

I blame irrationality for what happens next. For the slide of his finger from my mouth down my chest, the barely-there touch a teasing dance along my dress-painted-skin. Between the valley of my breasts that harden the covered peaks underneath the tight material, to just under my bust, and lower, lower, lower.

I swallow the gasp when he rolls his hips into me sensually, the button of his pants rubbing against my center barely covered by my thin lace thong. With my dress having ridden up my thighs from our current position, I feel too much.

The cool air against my heated skin.

His hard length.

The wetness building behind my fabric.

Sebastian's fingers trail further down, teasing the skin my dress has uncovered, not giving a single ounce of care to the person who can hear the sharp breath that passes my lips.

Not that having an audience ever stopped us before.

Which is why I find my hands on his shoulders, not to stabilize me, but because I can't *not* touch him. Throat bobbing with emotion I can't sort through, I squeeze my fingers against his shoulder blades and that lone action seems to be all he needs to move his hand between my legs and swipe his knuckles against me.

Jaw quivering as he sweeps his hand along the seam of me again, I fight to keep my eyes open. I'm too afraid of what will happen if I close them.

Will he kiss me? Would I want him to?

No.

I know what his kisses do.

I've fallen victim to the way they swell my heart and steal my breath. How each touch of his lips can cloud my mind and make me forget everything.

My problems.

My worries.

My logic.

I don't want him to kiss me.

I just want to do something that makes me feel anything other than the confliction I have been. Maybe if I do this, it'll be enough to walk away from Austin. He'd never want me. Never want to fight for me.

But what would he do to me once he finds out?

The bathroom door opens. Closes.

We're alone.

It's silent beside our heavy breathing.

"What I saw out there," he tells me quietly, "is a woman who wanted to be anywhere but across from him. How long can you hide in a bathroom before he comes looking? How long are you going to pretend that he's right for you when anybody looking at you tonight can see how miserable you are out there?"

It's hard to answer the questions because my words are lodged in my throat as he pushes down on my clit and runs his nose along my arched neck when I move my face away from his.

I feel his breath on my throat.

His teeth on my pulse.

He moves the thong aside and hesitates only a moment, gauging my reaction. Waiting to see if I'll stop him—if I'll tell him no.

I don't.

Because I'm weak.

Because I'm broken.

Because every time Sebastian Anderson Kennedy is involved, there's an addiction I fall back into without fail. He's a drug I never wanted to give up but had to for my health.

And he'll be the drug that ends me.

Finally, I force out a new question. “And do you think you’re the cure to my misery?”

“Oh, baby,” he murmurs, a kiss peppering along the underside of my jaw. “I know I am. You wouldn’t be letting me touch you if you didn’t want it. Remember what you told me when you left?”

I hold my breath.

His tongue dips out and grazes my neck, causing me to tighten my legs around him. “You told me I had to beg to be inside of you again. So, I’m doing it. Let me touch you. Let me make you remember what actual happiness feels like with somebody you care about. Because that’s not him. You’d never let him do this to you. Not here. Not now.”

Swallowing, I look down at him. His hand is still *there*, so close yet so far. His words echo in my head. His breath on my mouth. His scent on my skin. He’s everywhere.

Under my skin.

Inside my head.

In my heart.

I don’t hate it like I wish I did.

“Please let me touch you, baby,” he pleads, eyes darkening as his hand starts moving in a circular motion that puts just enough pressure on me to let a moan rise up my throat.

The second I let my eyes close is when I make my decision. As if the darkness could somehow blanket the obvious wrong choice I make by nodding my head and moving his hand to where I need it most.

“Touch me.”

When his finger surges inside of me, I can’t hold back the sharp noise that escapes me when he goes knuckle-deep.

He doesn’t stop there.

If anything, my reaction fuels him.

He fucks me with his hand so vigorously that my eyes roll into the back of my head from the dirty, wet noises that come from each pump of his digits.

One finger.

Two.

Three stretch me until there’s a bite of pain that has me clenching around him.

Eyes watering at his blissfully cruel ministrations, I dig my nails harder into his shoulders and hope they leave marks—that they draw blood. I pray that they’ll ruin his light button-down and remind him of the consequences our actions will bring.

Because every swivel of my hips is an invitation for him to keep going.

Every choked breath that escapes my lips as I get closer to breaking is a reaction that tells him he’s winning.

And I hate myself when I start to lose control when he hooks his fingers inside of me and caresses the spot that detonates me every single time.

He knows it.

I know it.

I tilt my head back in silent scream as the orgasm takes over my body, sending shockwaves throughout every limb until Sebastian’s hold grows tighter as I go limp from the sensation I haven’t felt in years.

Austin has never made me come.

He crushes me into his chest, his face burying itself into the crook of my neck as he holds me tightly.

As if he knows this could be the last time.

Will it?

“Why?” I whisper, my arms shaking as I come down from the high still racking my body in waves.

“Because we can’t help ourselves.”

“It’s wrong.” My voice cracks as I finally close my eyes to hold back the tears. Sniffing them back, I feel the burn in my throat and the way my skin overheats from his body heat. “I told myself I wouldn’t do this again. I promised.”

“Failure is all about falling forward,” he murmurs, causing my body to lock up at the familiar words I’ve heard before.

Back when things weren’t complicated.

When our entanglement wouldn’t hurt anybody but each other.

He’s quiet.

He doesn’t try to kiss me.

Doesn’t try to get himself off.

He simply lowers my wobbly feet back down onto the floor, helps me straighten out my dress, and then slowly, meticulously, puts the fingers that were inside me into his mouth to lick them clean.

All while I watch him.

All while I struggle to catch my breath and calm my heart.

His eyes go to the back of my arm when I begin to turn in the small space. "What happened?" he asks, reaching out and touching the faded marks left by Austin's grip.

My gaze drifts toward them before going back to Sebastian's pinched expression. "It's nothing."

He examines the other arm.

Same marks.

Same small, circular formation.

Fingerprints.

"I bruise easily," I inform him, the sated feeling of the orgasm quickly vanishing at the crushing reality of this moment.

He knows it too. "We both know that's utter bullshit. Try again. What happened to your arms?"

My nostrils flare. "Don't."

"Did *he* do that?" His eyes go to toward the door before bolting back to me. "Answer the goddamn question, Breena."

His harsh voice makes me wince, causing his eyes to widen from the reaction.

I swallow down the fear rising. "He didn't," I tell him. *He didn't mean to*, is what's said in between the lines.

Sebastian readjusts us so he's flinging the stall door open and walking toward the other door that leads back out to the dining room.

I quickly grab ahold of his arm. "Where are you going?"

He turns on his heels, eyes dark. "Where the fuck do you think? I'm about to go talk to the fucktard you're acting like you love just to spite me."

Is he kidding me? "You have no right to say that to me. To make assumptions."

"Assumptions," he spits out, laughing coldly. Gesturing toward the door, his eyes go to my arms. "That isn't love. Any man who leaves marks on a woman doesn't love them at all."

Now I'm fuming, dropping my hold from his arm and crossing mine across my chest. "How would you know anything about love? You refuse to feel it because you're so caught up in yourself. Don't act like the white knight. You're not one. Not mine anyway."

I can tell that hits him right where I want it to, and regret quickly fills my stomach when he slowly shakes his head. “What the hell has he done to you to make you think what he’s doing is okay? Are you really willing to settle for somebody who does that to you?”

That. The bruises.

The passive aggressiveness.

I don’t let myself think about it.

“Austin isn’t a bad man.”

Sebastian is silent.

Deadly silent.

“You have no right to pretend you care after all this time. You want what’s best for me, yet here you are, trying to sabotage the one thing that I have. A relationship with a man who makes it known that he wants me.”

Once again, he says nothing.

“You told me you’d give me time,” I remind him. “To figure things out. To sort through my head. Why are you here then?”

When he takes a step forward, he closes the space between us with a feral look. “Well, time is up. I’ve seen all I needed to tonight. You don’t deserve to settle for him because you think it’s all you can get. You don’t deserve that.”

“How would you know?”

“You said once that I was your person,” he answers, his voice far less cool than it was. His eyes scope over my face. “What I never told you was that you were mine. Still are. What if our situation was simply right person, wrong time?”

All I can do is shake my head.

Pretty words are just that.

Nothing more.

He’s proven that before.

Then he says, “So long as I exist, I will not let another man touch you. Not like that. Not unless they actually make you happy. If he did, you wouldn’t have let me make you come. Stop fooling yourself into thinking otherwise.”

I blink rapidly to fight the glaze blurring his image as he leaves me with those departing words, a crushing weight landing on my chest from the reality of what happened.

I wait a few seconds before making my escape too. Quickly. Quietly. My heels make no noise on the hard floor, but I wonder if people can hear the rush of my heartbeat.

There's a bite of pain between my legs with every step I take, reminding me of what an awful person I am as I approach the table Austin is waiting for me at.

No Sebastian anywhere.

When I sit down, I refuse to look anywhere else but at the untouched food I left cold on the plate and the man across from me who I know is studying my flushed features.

"Are you okay?" he asks, trying to reach out and touch me.

I don't let him.

Instead, I put my shaky hands in my lap and let my hair shield whatever guilty look must be plastered on my face.

Would he notice if I lifted my eyes?

I don't risk it.

Failure is all about falling forward.

Falling forward.

Falling forward.

"I'm not feeling well," I tell him, a rasp to my voice that I can't hide before he hears it.

"I'll get you a box and the check."

He flags down our waitress to get to-go boxes all while I sit with my head down trying not to hyperventilate. It's hard to do when the ache settled between my legs taunts me every time I shift in the seat, causing a burn of tears to sting the back of my eyes.

Not because I hurt, but because I know the man who I let touch me in the bathroom is right. Too right. Always right.

Right person, wrong time.

When the waitress comes back, she sets a box down beside my plate and says, "Your bill has already been paid for by somebody who insisted on paying it forward."

My eyes snap up to her. "What?"

She repeats herself, causing Austin to sit a little taller. "Wow. That was nice of him."

Eye twitching, I swallow the bitterness that creeps up my throat.
Because I know damn well that the man who paid for our dinner didn't do it
from the kindness of his heart.

He did it to prove a point.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

April 2020

MOM ROLLS THE dough out on the kitchen counter, causing a big plume of flour to cover her stained shirt. “Remind me not to let your father convince me to bake things for his damn coworkers again.”

I grab a slice of the banana bread she made yesterday and pluck a piece of walnut from the baked good. “Oh please. You love Ronnie too much not to bake him things whether Dad asks you to or not. He’s the only other person besides you who loves snickerdoodles.”

She always looks for an excuse to bake her favorite treats since Dad is as picky of an eater as me.

Brushing off her shirt, she gestures toward the bread I’m breaking apart. “There’s plenty there if you want more than one piece. You need some meat on those bones.”

I give myself a once over. My leggings show off the thickness of my thighs and my sweatshirt is baggy enough to give the illusion of a small waist. But considering Sebastian feels the need to feed me every time we see each other, and I have no struggles sneaking chocolate on my own whenever I can, I’d hardly call myself skinny.

“I’m fine,” I inform her, popping a piece of the bread in my mouth and chewing.

Her focus goes back to the dough. “Reid mentioned that you had plans the other weekend when he asked if you’d be around the apartment.”

Mom’s not-so-casual pry would normally make me change the topic, but I feel my lips kick up slightly before I can stop them. “Yeah, I was busy.” Peeking through my lashes, I see her watching me toy with my food with an inquisitive gaze and feel a ball of nerves form in my chest as I debate my careful answer.

Then I admit, “I had a date.”

Through my lashes, I see her hands stop moving the rolling pin. It only lasts a moment before she collects her obvious surprise. I rarely talk about the dates I go on because the men never turn out to be anybody special.

I told myself I'd only bring up a man if they were special to me—if I thought it was the real kind of love that could go somewhere. And the incessant tug that has wrapped around my heart since the second Sebastian walked into my life tells me that this is exactly that.

That four letter word spreads warmth throughout my body that leaves me smiling at my banana bread.

Mom says, "Good for you. You deserve to go out and have fun." Her voice is far too casual for me to believe she's not secretly jumping inside. I know her too well. I appreciate her effort to keep things as relaxed as possible though.

I only hesitate a moment before blowing out a breath and giving her the details that I can tell she won't ask no matter how much she wants to know. "His name is Sebastian."

Her eyes widen for a moment before a softness takes over them. "Sebastian," she repeats to herself. "Does this boy treat you well?"

Boy is the last word I'd use to describe him. Then again, most of the words I would use are far too dirty to share with my mother. "You told me that you knew Dad was going to be your husband since the first day you met him. I've never felt like that with anybody before now. None of the guys I gave a chance ever made me feel the way Sebastian has since he flashed me that damn smile the day we met." My throat tightens as I sort through the overwhelming thought. "And now it's like..."

"A whirlwind of emotion?" she guesses, a glaze to her eyes that I'm two seconds away from matching.

My voice is hoarse. "Exactly like that. Sometimes it feels like I can't keep up with them. They're all good emotions, but I can't help but be terrified of them. Like at any second the other shoe is going to drop, and I'll have no control over stopping it from happening."

Mom ignores her project and walks around the island toward me, grabbing my hand and squeezing it. "Baby girl, that's when you know it's *real*. Just remember that love doesn't have to be perfect. That's where people go wrong and find problems with the people they choose to have in their lives. They self-sabotage something beautiful because they're afraid of

it failing. Failure is all about falling forward. The only thing love has to be is true. That means embracing the journey even when it comes with flaws.”

I find myself nodding at the statement, struggling to swallow everything rising up my throat. Happiness. Fear. Anxiety.

When Dad walks in the front door with grease smeared on his face from whatever project he’s been restoring at his garage in town, he stops in his tracks when he studies the fresh glaze of tears in Mom’s and my eyes.

He stares at us for a moment, gaze bouncing back and forth with cocked brows, before shaking his head. “That must be some damn good bread.”

I choke out a laugh.

Mom joins in.

And I tell myself not to worry.

Because Bash has proven to me he wants me in his life. There’s still hope.



STEAM FOGS THE glass of the shower door as hot water streams from my wet hair and down my back. I massage my scalp and let out a long, tired breath as the door slides open and another body slips in behind me.

A pair of lips press against the back of my neck, making my lips curl upward. “You started without me,” Bash says against my skin, his hands traveling down my stomach.

I lean against him, the back of my head meeting his shoulder as I open my eyes to see him looking at me with a sleepy smile on his face. My palm moves to caress the coarse stubble on his jaw and play with the specs of gray that makes him look older than he is. “You were sleeping so peacefully I didn’t want to wake you up.”

He spent the night at my place, trying to win over Sweet Potato in her own domain. When he pulled out catnip from his bag, I knew it wasn’t going to be a fair fight.

He cooked us dinner—shepherd’s pie.

Rented a movie—*Dirty Dancing*.

And snuggled with both me and Sweet Potato until we fell asleep on the couch. Right before I’d drifted, I’d heard him say, “*I’m grateful for you.*”

I woke up to him carrying me to my bedroom and tucking me in under the pile of blankets I always have on my bed before settling in beside me.

“I was planning on waking you up for a little bit of fun, but you looked too damn cute when I saw you hugging the pillow,” he says against my skin as his mouth travels up my exposed neck. “You were even drooling a little. I found that endearing.”

“I don’t drool!” I quip, laughing when he chuckles against my throat and tickling me with his beard.

He presses a kiss against my lips the same time his hand slides between my thighs. I open my mouth to release a shuttered breath, letting his tongue slip in as one of his fingers works the bundle of nerves that makes my knees tremble.

I cuss into his mouth when one of his fingers surges into me, my ass moving backward to feel his hard cock twitching against me when I start circling my hips to tease him right back.

Prying my mouth away, I nip his bottom lip. “I wouldn’t have minded being woken up for the sort of things you clearly had in mind.”

He laughs against my mouth. “You told me two weeks ago that if I ever woke you up before seven you’d punch me in the dick.”

I vaguely remember that. “In my defense, you’d woken me up at least twice throughout the night and kept me up until nearly four. I needed a break before we went another round.”

Sebastian adds another finger inside my tight pussy, making my legs shake from the fullness as he scissors his digits and uses his lips to tease the sensitive flesh under my ear. His hips move in tandem with mine until my ass alone is getting him harder and harder and the noises rising from his throat makes my thighs clench around his hand with a desperation for him to do more.

When his teeth bite down onto my neck, I let out a breathy moan and arch backward hoping he’ll start using another part of him to get me off. I can feel his dark chuckle against my skin as he licks the spot he bit and withdraws his fingers from my aching flesh.

“Hold onto the wall,” he commands, planting my hands flat against the opposite side of the shower as he spreads my legs open for him. His palms trail down my sides before one of them presses against my back to bend me into the position he wants while his other hand comes down with a loud,

stinging *smack* against my ass cheek. He moves behind me, grabbing a fistful of my hair and pulling my head back until his lips meet my ear. "If you move from this spot, there will be consequences," he promises.

I bite into my bottom lip as his cock nudges my entrance. I know for certain the consequences he's referring to will be ones that I like more than anything, but that doesn't mean I want to do anything that could potentially make him stop from whatever he's planning.

He wraps a fistful of my hair around his palm and pulls my head back the same time he thrusts forward and fills me. Dark lust is what I see shadowing his face, his eyes narrowed in on me with a rawness that sets me on fire.

Because I do that to him.

I've always known I was submissive in the bedroom, but never experienced the kind of demanding sex life that Sebastian always offers me. Nobody has ever been willing to get rough with me after they find out my inexperience, as if they're either too scared to experiment or too afraid of hurting me.

But Sebastian? That's never the issue. He doesn't second guess any delicious, sexy thing he does to me. He owns it. Owns me. Knows what to do with his fingers, mouth, and cock. Builds a pleasure so deep that it burns me from the inside out. I never have to be self-conscious whenever we're stripped down because there's not an inch of me that he doesn't love drawing every ounce of energy from.

Every pull of my hair and slap of his hips against my ass triggers the agony inside of me that always makes me want more.

More of him.

More of his hands.

More of his dick.

I want his palm on my ass and his lips on my skin and his cock hitting the perfect spot inside of me while he coaxes me to come with his dirty words.

When I'm close to breaking apart, he lifts me high enough that my feet no longer touch the tub floor and slides me up and down his cock at such an intense pace that I can't think straight. He circles his hips until the sensation is too much and my body starts to spasm around him as he drops me onto

his length harder, the wet sound of the arousal he's created getting louder until I can feel his low grunts.

"I'm fucking coming," he growls, pulling my hair back again to smash his lips against mine as he pins my naked chest against the cool wall and empties himself inside me with slow rolls of hips until our orgasms slowly start to fade between us.

It's only in that moment, when his kisses become sweeter, and his cock becomes softer, that I realize the water has gotten cold.

Sebastian pecks my lips one last time and gives my body a devious once-over as if he's proud of the flush I'm sure my skin is covered with. His fingertips coast along my sore ass. "I love seeing my handprint here."

That's all he says before he readjusts the water and grabs the soap from the tray. When he starts lathering his palms against my body, there's a tenderness in his eyes. I press my lips to his and let out a content breath against his mouth as he kisses me back and washes my body with slow, skilled precision until the warm ache returns between my legs.

His nose nuzzles mine as he kisses my cheek, then my jaw, before pecking my lips and resting his forehead against mine.

No words are said between us.

When he smiles.

I smile back.

And when he carries our wet bodies to my bedroom and lays us down on the mattress, he gets us dirty all over again.

Slower.

Gentler.

With a meaning that leaves a colorful burst in my chest from the second orgasm he draws from me that I have no doubt he feels too.

It's all in the look.

One neither of us can look away from.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

September 2022

DR. BARNETT'S OFFICE smells like vanilla today, causing me to think a little too much about the candles I used to buy for Sebastian. It distracts me from anything she says, my eyes always moving to the flickering flame on the edge of her desk and wishing I could blow it out.

I regret agreeing to arrive for an hour-long session during my lunch when she said she was going on a last-minute trip out of state because of a family emergency. She gave me a discount because she didn't want me to miss the session. Apparently, she thinks we're on the verge of a breakthrough.

Me? I'm not so sure.

Yet, I still show up every single time.

The session is awkward because of that stupid candle. Because my brain kept wrapping around the way Sebastian's apartment used to smell like birthday cake. Vanilla and buttercream frosting. The scent took me back to all the times he'd make a makeshift bed in the middle of his living room and project movies onto the bare wall for us to watch, his candle the only thing that lit the room.

For my twenty-seventh birthday, he even bought me my favorite cake. Double chocolate with buttercream frosting and cookie dough in the middle. He spoon-fed it to me and bent over to lick the corner of my mouth every so often claiming there was frosting.

I don't think there ever was.

I think about that mouth often. I think about his tongue skimming along my skin the same way it did on my throat at the restaurant. I think about his hands, strong but gentle, dominating but careful, and how badly I want them back on my body.

Austin dropped me off at my house and didn't stay when I told him I was going to be sick. And I was. I'd ran to the bathroom and vomited as

soon as the front door was locked behind me.

I've never thought I was capable of cheating until Sebastian. Is that what love is? Having the capability of doing anything for the one person you can't seem to let go of?

It seems that way.

A moth to a flame.

A birthday cake-scented flame.

I'm the moth.

That's what I'm thinking about the entire time I'm supposed to be paying attention to Dr. Barnett. I don't know what I talked about or nodded along to during the sixty minutes. I think she asked me if I looked at possible cats for adoption. I told her yes.

I hadn't.

She asked me how Austin was.

I told her he was fine, but I doubt she believed me. My voice was too distant.

Too unreliable.

Because I know if Austin could get upset over the length of the skirt I wear when I'm out with Trinity, he'd be angry over what I let Sebastian do underneath the short dress I told myself I'd worn for him.

Isn't that what I wanted though? A reason for him to let me go?

In the back of my mind, I can't help but feel fear knocking and wondering what he would do if he knew.

The only words I really heard after letting my mind wander back to what happened in the bathroom are, "*Our time is up for the day.*"

I'd never stood so quickly before.

Now I'm walking toward the front doors of the building I spend once a week in and find myself slowing as I approach the bulletin board my therapist is always referring to.

Like always, it's covered with flyers, papers, and business cards for the other offices on the three different floors. Not once have I let my eyes wander too long over the resources people leave behind. Hotline numbers. Pamphlets. Flyers on the importance of mental health. Free diabetes awareness classes.

My eyes instantly find the pamphlet pinned to the top of the corkboard, and something in my chest urges me to reach for it. I hear Sebastian's words

in my head, like a pesky conscience. I hesitate only to study my surroundings before taking the paper down and letting my gaze scan the title.

How do you know if it's abuse?

My hands shake as I fold the paper in half and tuck it into my purse. I startle when I hear a door open from somewhere down the hall, causing me to hustle out of the building before somebody sees me.

It isn't until I sit in my car with the doors locked that I stare at my purse where the corner of the paper is peeking out.

Gripping the steering wheel, I sit back and rest my head against the headrest. Closing my eyes would only make me remember what's underneath my clothes.

The fingerprints. The discoloration.

The reason Sebastian reacted.

He's always been intense.

But never like that.

Livid. Raging.

One second fine. The next angry.

It confuses me.

Because once upon a time, I loved being touched with possessiveness. I'd loved being grabbed, flipped, and taken control of if it meant being shown how much somebody wanted me.

It made me feel sexy.

Desired.

Needed.

My soul used to spark to life whenever Sebastian laid those strong, capable hands on me. I'd melt when he moved me into whatever position he wanted. Lured me into an addictive submissiveness that he used to control my body in ways that made it sing.

I loved his roughness.

His authority.

But everything now feels different.

Because when Austin lays his hands on me, it's not for my pleasure. It's for his. And the marks he leaves aren't temporary.

Not Like Sebastian's used to be. A handprint on an ass cheek because he couldn't help but touch me. Red marks on my wrists from ties and belts.

I bruise easily.

We both know that's utter bullshit.

Sitting and staring at the sky doesn't keep me from questioning how broken I am.

It's a gorgeous day, even if doesn't feel like one. All because of what's lingering in my bag just inches away.

A hidden truth.

A harsh reality.

That's not love, Sebastian had told me.

Somewhere nearby, a bird chirps.

People laugh.

A gentle wind blows.

That's not love.

I take it in and wonder one thing.

Why do the sunniest days always feel the darkest?



MY FOUNDATION DOESN'T hide the dark bags under my eyes as I walk into the office with a large cup of iced coffee in my hand. Caffeine that I bought across town in the McDonald's drive thru because I was too scared to stop at the Espresso House in case I saw *him*.

What would he say to me? Would he expect me to thank him for paying for my meal? For the orgasm? Would he see the glaze to my eyes and wonder if it's because of Austin?

Quinn is already sitting at her desk when I walk past her cubicle, setting my drink down on by the monitor and peeling off the coat I put on over my sundress.

"I didn't get a chance to talk to you this morning to see how things went Friday. But from the look on your face, I'd say you had a long weekend," Quinn remarks, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

I shoot her an unamused look as I drop into my seat and pull myself toward my desk, grabbing my drink and cursing when I see the water ring the bottom left.

"I'm really not in the mood today," I tell her, grabbing a tissue and wiping up the condensation before it leaves a water mark.

There's a moment of silence that I use to power back on my computer and take a long sip of my coffee hoping it'll get me through this already torturous Monday.

I'm glad Austin has work that kept him busy because it meant only sending me one text asking how I was feeling.

I'd told him I was still sick.

He didn't ask if I needed anything.

He didn't tell me to feel better.

It made me relieved.

"Why are you biting my head off after what I did for you? I gave you time with your man, which you obviously needed." my coworker asks, walking over to my area with her arms crossed on her chest.

I take my time signing in before twisting my chair toward her. The iced coffee death gripped in my hand stings my fingertips, but I embrace the chilly discomfort. "I have yet to figure out why you thought you were doing me a favor by bailing last minute on our plans. Did Austin ask you to do that? He told me you talked Friday. You should have told me."

My voice is hardly quiet, which causes a few of the other women surrounding us to peek over their own cubicles to see what the commotion is about. And right now, my emotions are too haywire to care that I'm causing a scene.

If I were smart, I'd count to ten and breathe. But if anything has been proven over the past few days, it's that I'm not smart at all.

Quinn looks flabbergasted. "I thought a spontaneous date night is what you and Austin needed after the rough patch you two have been going through. When he asked, I didn't think twice about backing out. Excuse me for thinking I was doing something *nice* for you."

Rough patch.

Grinding down on my teeth until there's a bite of pain, I shake my head. "You don't know half of the things going on with us, Quinn."

"Because you don't tell me anything!" she counters, her voice a hurt hiss. "You used to tell me all the cheesy things he did that any woman would love a man to do for them. Now you only complain about him like him loving you is such a bad thing."

That's not love.

The woman standing with accusing eyes doesn't read the tension forming over my face when she adds, "You've got the kind of guy that any woman in this office would kill to have pay attention to them. And you're acting like one night at a fancy restaurant with him is the worst thing that could have happened to you."

Now the stares are focused on me.

A few of the women here have met Austin. They've seen the chocolates he's brought. The lunches he's drop off. He always made easy conversation with any of them he passed, and they'd bat their lashes and absorb everything he'd say.

Looking back now, I realize how much he loved the attention. It never bothered me.

It still doesn't.

Maybe that's a sign in itself.

Because I cared with Sebastian.

Not because I didn't trust him.

Because I was territorial.

Mine, mine, mine.

"Not all love is the good kind," is what I find myself saying to her.

Something in her demeanor shifts, the anger on her face softening as she moves from one foot to another. "I don't understand."

I don't either. "I told my therapist that we need love for all kinds of phases in our life because I wanted to believe that all of them were the good kind. How can love be anything but that? Some of them are surface level, though. It's about what you see. What you expect. Not what you feel."

My eyes go to my bag, resting in the corner of my cubicle with secrets inside.

Quinn slowly sinks down onto the edge of my desk. "You go to therapy?" she asks, pausing to nibble her bottom lip. "Is that the appointment you had to go to during lunch?"

I've always kept therapy a secret.

Like it was a bad thing.

Like it was embarrassing.

Quinn isn't looking at me like I should be ashamed, though. So, I say, "Over two years ago, I had to make a really hard decision, and I'm always learning new ways that it haunts me."

Squeezing the fabric of my dress before flattening out the wrinkled material, I lift my gaze to gauge her reaction.

She says, "I never would have thought someone like you needed therapy."

The smile I offer her is sad. "That's because I've learned how to fake being happy. Like I said, Quinn. Some things are surface level. You should never assume that what you see is what you get. That's hardly ever the truth."

This time, she's quiet, contemplative.

I focus on my computer, loading the spreadsheet that's due to Shawn by the end of the day. It's only when I start crosschecking the numbers that Quinn stands up and says, "I'm sorry if I stepped into something I shouldn't have with Austin. You're right, I don't know what's going on with you two. I really thought I was helping."

Another pause.

"Even though we're not close, you can talk to me. Women need to stick together, no matter who we are to each other."

My eyes go to her.

She's smiling.

I swallow. "Thank you."

When she goes back to her desk, I sit back in my chair and bite down on my acrylic nail until there's teeth marks in the corner.

Maybe Dr. Barnett is right.

Maybe I am on the verge of something.

Breakthrough.

Breakdown.

Same difference.

My phone buzzes, pulling me away from my thoughts.

Unknown: *We need to talk.*

I know the number by heart.

It'd killed me to delete it.

Sebastian.

Breakdown it is.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

September 2022

“**Y**OU ASKED TO see me?” I say, stopping at Shawn’s open door where he’s organizing his desk covered in paperwork.

He waves me in without so much as looking at me, which is probably a good thing. My eyes are bloodshot, my cheeks are flushed, and there’s a headache forming in my temples that knocks louder and louder on my skull with each passing minute. Not to mention I kicked off the wedges I’d slipped on this morning because I have a blister on my heel from the stilettos I wore over the weekend, and the flip flops I replaced them with are definitely not work appropriate.

They’re leopard print with tape holding the thong on.

“What do you think about this?” he asks.

I stop beside him and look down at what he’s spread across his desktop, noting next month’s first draft layout. He’s labeled them by section, with each staff writer’s contributions marked in sharpie across the bottom.

I gesture toward the open slot. “What’s supposed to go here? Marketing hasn’t mentioned a new full-page ad being submitted since their last campaign that was asking for advertisers.”

Shawn picks up a few pieces of paper from the side that have a couple of ideas on them printed in his chicken scratch handwriting. It’s good that most of his job requires written email replies because very few of us can read what he writes. “I’ve been going back and forth between these to switch up the interactive section.”

I take one of them and study the little bullet points he’s made down the middle. “You want to get rid of the quiz section?”

“Only for the physical copies.” He taps the paper I’m holding. “I took into consideration what was said during our last meeting and think moving virtual quizzes to our online platform and social pages would boost

interaction and give our print copies more room to explore other avenues for staff writers.”

Giddiness has my eyes darting upward at the lanky man beside me. “You’re going with my suggestion?”

He deadpans. “Don’t look so shocked. Have I not taken into consideration what you’ve said in the past?”

Although he has a point, I can’t stop the victorious smile from spreading upward. “Yes, but this is different. Before you listened to my ideas and then passed them out to the staff writers to handle. Now you’re implementing them.”

He hasn’t brought up writing again, so neither have I. And if I’m being honest with myself, I’m grateful. My focus has been on anything but advancing my career lately.

He stands a little taller. “Perhaps if you spoke up more about your interest in contributing to the writer’s room, I’d have given you a shot to see what you’re made of by now.”

Is he being serious? “I didn’t think I had that opportunity considering our last talk.”

His eyes roll before he takes the paper I’m holding back and places it into the slot to study the lineup. “Nobody gets anywhere in life by sitting on their ass, Ms. Murphy. Take it from me. Sometimes you need to fight for it.”

I don’t bother pointing out that his father gave him this position because, regardless of that, he’s turned this magazine from the underdog into something respectable.

There’s a lot I can respond with. Bold things that would probably surprise both of us. Or I could wait until I’m more level-headed before offering something to the table. “If I wanted to write something for the publication, would I get free range on the topic?”

His amused chuckle doesn’t sound promising. “Not even the seasoned staff gets that sort of privilege unless they’ve proven themselves. And Breena?”

My lips press together.

“They rarely do.”

My shoulders sag at the unwelcoming reply, not that it should surprise me. “Is there anything else you need?” I ask, glancing back at the layout

he's playing with and knowing this conversation is bound to go nowhere fast.

He switches another paper in the slot and cocks his head. "Not at the moment. Though I'm a little disappointed."

"Why?"

When he looks at me, there's a glint in his eyes. "I expected more of a fight from someone like you, especially about something you've wanted for years. Where's the girl that told me during her first day as my assistant that I needed to pull my head out of my ass before I caused a mass exodus around here?"

I cringe at the memory. "That girl was obviously aiming to be fired." *And she currently has her own head stuck up somewhere it shouldn't be.* "And who exactly is 'someone like me'?"

His hands go to the pockets of his slacks, his face oddly relaxed for the conversation we seem to be having. "The kind of person who isn't afraid to make sacrifices to get what they want," he replies, walking around his desk. "The type of person who isn't afraid to be selfish. I see that look in your eyes. Too often people mistake selfishness as a bad thing. But selfish people don't wait around for what they want. They take it. They do what's best for them. I'd hardly call that selfish at all."

He has no idea how deep those words cut.

I want to tell him I'm not selfish.

But I did take what I want by letting Sebastian take me.



I RUB MY arms as I pace in front of the door I'm all too familiar with. I know that there are sixteen steps from the tiny, tiled foyer to the narrow hallway that leads inside the one-bedroom apartment. I know that that tan walls are all probably still bare save the patched drywall from an unfortunate accident that involved a little too much alcohol on both of our parts, and that the air smells like Febreze and a scented candle he bought from the Dollar Store.

Birthday cake.

The off brand because it's cheaper.

The temperature has dropped a little since the sun started setting, making goosebumps pebble my arms. I didn't bother grabbing my jacket

after making a beeline out the door. I didn't even bring my bag. Grabbing my keys from the hook in the hallway and slipping my flip flops back on was a last-minute decision.

Driving across town and turning onto the road that would take me up the steep hill was another decision that I'm starting to regret.

I'm about to turn around and get back into my car when I hear tires crunch against the pavement and park right behind me in the open spot for Hillside residents.

My spine straightens to full height when I hear, "Breena?"

The text he sent was left unanswered.

I had to think.

To focus.

Turns out, I couldn't do either while his words were right there in my phone.

We need to talk.

So, here I am.

Fingers reaching for the cell I slipped into my back pocket, I pull it out and glance at the dead screen. Closing my eyes, I silently cuss to myself and lock up when I feel a palm touch my upper arm.

"Bree?" Sebastian steps in front of me. When I open my eyes, I see worry carved into his features. "Are you okay?"

Trying to refrain from letting my lips quiver with the oncoming anxiety, I lift my phone and blurt, "My phone died."

He blinks slowly before peeling off the suit jacket he's wearing and draping it over my shoulders, then reaches into his bag and pulling out his own cell. "Do you need to use mine?"

I stare at the offer he's extending. It's the same phone he's had for years based on the tiny chip in the corner from the time he dropped it off the balcony and onto the grass after trying to show off by catching it.

He clearly failed.

Slowly, I shake my head. "No."

Sebastian slips his phone back into his bag and looks around, locking eyes on my car for a moment before pressing his lips together in contemplation. When his eyes find mine, he gestures toward his apartment. "Let's go inside. We can talk."

Talk.

Panic instantly triggers the warning alarms in my head causing me to take a step back. "That's not a good idea."

His eyebrows inch up his forehead. "Even though you look beautiful, you also look like you're freezing. It's warmer inside. Nothing will happen again until you tell me you want it to."

"Can we go somewhere? The diner is open until eleven."

Sebastian eyes the way his jacket drapes over my shoulders, covering me in ways it never used to before. It swallows me. He used to tell me he liked seeing me in his clothes.

"My clothes look good on you, baby."

Does he feel the same way now?

This morning, I opened the drawer to the bathroom vanity and stared at the old glasses case wondering if today would be the day I stopped pretending to be somebody different. Like maybe the man standing in front of me had a point.

But I'd like to think pretending to be happy when you're in pain shows how strong you are as a person. Because you're trying.

I'm trying.

It took me five minutes to contemplate whether or not to take the glasses before I closed the drawer, got my contacts out, and put the mask back on the girl I think the world would like better.

And while it's obvious that Austin believes that girl exists, I can tell already that Sebastian doesn't.

He sees too much. "I need to set my stuff inside before we go. Do you want to come in for a minute? I'd like to change out of these clothes."

Go in, go in, go in.

I'm tempted to listen to that voice in my head but decide against falling for temptation. The bathroom was one thing, and his apartment is another opening to way more opportunities that I've always had trouble saying no to.

Back when sex was the answer.

Now it might just be our demise.

I peel off his jacket and pass it to him, my eyes looking away from the twisted expression he's giving me. "I'll wait out here."

I know he wants to say something, but his silence prevails as he pulls out his keys to undo the lock on the front door before slipping inside. My

shoulders sag in relief when he disappears from sight. I listen to every creak of his footsteps until they're faded into his apartment and count to ten.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Tension coils in my chest as I walk away from the door. Running my hands through my hair, I dig through the small pockets of my dress to find a hair tie and pull it back.

It snaps the same second I hear the front door open and close. Keys jingle. Shoes approach me. From the corner of my eye, I see two shined dress shoes stop at where the broken elastic is laying pitifully on the ground among the pebbles and dirt.

"I like your hair down anyway."

I know, I want to tell him. I used to fall asleep to the feeling of his fingers combing through the strands and massaging my neck whenever we'd go to bed. The nights we'd find ourselves together, there wasn't a second when we weren't touching each other—whether innocently or not.

We couldn't help ourselves.

Touch was our love language.

The frizzy mess he's currently inspecting feels messier than normal under his gaze. I know he'd never tell me I looked bad even on days when I had horrible bedhead, glassy eyes, and morning breath. I could sniffle from the allergies Sweet Potato triggered with a red nose and he'd tell me I was the cutest Rudolph out there.

My fingers absently go to my hair, touching the split ends that desperately need to be trimmed. "I don't know what I'm doing here," I finally admit, as if he hasn't pieced that together by now.

He hums, gesturing toward his car and opening the passenger door. "I gathered as much when you didn't text me back," he answers, waiting for me to climb inside. When I don't, he cocks his head. "We could take two different cars, but we're both here and going to the same place. Throw me a bone here, Bree. I'm trying. I need you to meet me halfway this one time."

Meet me halfway.

I choke on a bitter laugh. "I always met you halfway. It was *you* who wouldn't walk the distance."

His tongue drags across his bottom lip. "I want to make that up to you. I'm trying, like I told you I was."

We stare at one another for too long, a gust of wind blowing my hair into my face. He reaches forward to move it, careful not to brush my face in the process.

He's not touching me, but I feel it all the same. All from one little movement. One act of kindness.

No contact, and it still curls my toes.

"Please let me make it up to you," he pleads quietly, his eyes glazing with sincerity.

It's the only reason I find myself sliding into the passenger seat and letting him close the door behind me. He drives us in silence, not forcing a conversation. Not listening to music.

When we get out, he opens the door for me. He moves me to the opposite side of him when we walk down the narrow sidewalk away from the busy street backed up with traffic.

Not once does he touch me.

Pressure me.

But I feel it building.

Something.

We're seated in the back again, where nobody besides the wait staff can bother us. It's quiet when we're served our drinks, my fingertips wrapping around the glass of water in front of me. My eyes are focus on the condensation sweating down the side and creating a ring around the bottom of the glass.

"We could have gotten you a glass of water at my place," Sebastian points out, leaning forward as he watches me study my drink when minutes pass in silence like on the way over. "We could have sat in awkward silence there too. At least it'd be more private."

"You're the one who wanted to talk."

He makes a noise. "I'm surprised, is all. I didn't expect you to show up at my apartment."

When I finally look at him, there's doubt in my gaze. It's been a long time since he made me second guess myself. "I shouldn't have come," is how I respond, shoulders tightening.

The man across from me shakes his head, a heavy sigh escaping his lips. "That isn't what I meant. After how we left things at the restaurant, I didn't expect you to come over. I figured you'd be mad."

I was. "I can't stop thinking about it."

There's cockiness in his tone when he replies, "Neither can I." Then something in his voice shifts. "But I'm guessing the reason you wanted to come here is because you're afraid to be alone with me after that."

Afraid isn't the right word. Given the circumstances, there are far worse things to fear after what we'd done. "I'm not afraid. I'm confused. I'm..."
Lost.

"If it makes you feel any better, I didn't plan what happened in the bathroom. But the second I had you pressed against me, I knew I couldn't help myself. If you'd asked me to stop, I would have. But I fucking prayed you wouldn't, and I'm far from a religious man."

It's hard to look at him. "We always did that. Fell into the same pattern. I shouldn't have let you do that."

"Probably not, but you did. That means something. Which is why I wanted to see what you were like with him. I needed to see if it was going to be a fair fight."

My head starts moving back and forth. "I don't understand."

An odd smile curls his lips. "You don't have to. I saw all I needed to see to determine that winning you back will be the best thing that ever happened for the both of us."

"What makes you so sure?" I challenge, piercing him with a look that he returns with just as much heat.

"You know why." That dark look is back.

The one he had when he saw my arms.

I'm thankful I have sleeves covering the faded marks. Only someone who knew they were there would pay any attention to them.

Like Sebastian.

"I've second guessed myself when it comes to you time and time again because it seemed like any time I thought we were on the same page, we weren't. So, no, Sebastian. I don't know why. I don't know why you would want to torture yourself with seeing me with him. I don't know why you would pull me into the bathroom. And I sure as hell don't know why I let you make me cum where anybody could have caught us."

His jaw ticks. "You want to know why? Fine, sweetheart. It's because I had to see if you were torturing yourself the same way I have been."

I balk at him, unable to fathom a reply.

“And you were,” he concludes, eyes hardening into dark pits that I hate. They dull the beautiful color. Maybe I should appreciate it because then I wouldn’t be so captivated by his stare. But it’s never that easy. “I don’t care how much that fucker does for you, what he buys you, what he says, there’s no reason for anybody to leave marks on a woman. No number of gifts can be given, or money can be spent to buy somebody’s love or forgiveness.”

Rubbing my lips together, I sit back into the booth. “This is all I think about. You. Us. The past. I think about how much I liked it when you—” I stop myself, evading his eyes.

“You liked it when I what?” he pries.

I shake my head.

“Say it.”

“Sebastian—”

“*Bash*. It will *always* be Bash to you.”

My eyes meet his. They’re full of challenge. Fierceness. Determination. I wish mine were the same. “I’ve always liked it when you were rough with me. When you took control. It made me feel sexy. Like there was nobody else in the world you wanted but me. I’d been submissive in all the ways that felt good to me, knowing they felt the same to you. But no matter how much I was willing to give, it was never enough.”

I have to refrain from letting my jaw quiver as I inhale slowly to flood my painful lungs with oxygen. “When I let myself believe I was ready to move on, to put myself back out there, I didn’t expect Austin. I didn’t expect anything because I was too afraid to. I’d lost myself so easily in everything you gave me that I refused to do it again. But it happened anyway. I lost myself in a man who seemed like he wanted me and would do anything to keep me. I’ve become submissive in...different ways.”

There’s a deep breath coming from the person across from me. “I need you to be honest with me, Breena. Does he hurt you?”

The words are there.

Jammed in my throat.

Wrapped around my tongue.

It takes me a second.

A minute.

Two.

Sebastian waits, tension coiling his shoulders as his eyes roam over my face when I lift it.

I say, "It's not how you think."

An excuse.

"And what do I think?" he presses, clipped tone telling me he's no longer playing nice over this.

"That...that he lays his hands on me."

"He *does*. I saw it myself."

"He doesn't mean to. Not like that."

Another excuse.

When his eyes close, I know I said the wrong thing. Suddenly, I feel smaller. Unsure. Like I want to slide out of the booth and make an escape before he can voice the reason that I know is there waiting for me to see.

As if I could make him understand, I dig myself a bigger hole. One I wish I could jump into the second his eyes crack open. "I wanted to end things with him when he told me he loved me. I'd never...heard it before. He knows it. I'd told him that I never had anything serious like that because I thought being honest would help me. Would help *him* understand me. I wanted to believe that those words meant something because those words are *supposed* to."

"Breena," he whispers, eyes glazed.

"What does that say about me?" I ask in nothing more than a whisper.

His hand extends out to peel mine away from my glass. Flipping my palm up, he traces the lines along my skin, letting the water seep into the crevices. Once upon a time he used to pretend like he could read palms. We'd spend hours laughing at the mediocre things he'd tell me my future had in store. My favorite of all the predictions he gave me was the one where he saw himself in it.

My fingers curl instinctively when he presses on the center and begins massaging the muscles I didn't know were so tense.

"I think it says a lot," he replies. "But most importantly, it says you're human. You've been hurt. By me. By..." His touch makes my skin overheated. Does he know what he's doing to me? Is he doing it on purpose? "By somebody who should have let you know what love really feels like. Because that? What he's doing? That's not it. There's a difference between him and me. A big one. Because no matter how much control you

gave to me, you had just as much of it in return. One fucking smile was all it took to bring me to my knees. I would have done anything to see it on your face. I pushed your body to places it hasn't been because I needed you. Needed you to feel good. Needed you to give me one more moan. One more plea. I need you as badly as you needed me, which is why you let go. I laid my hands on you because I knew *you* wanted it. But assholes like him lay their hands on you because *they* want it for selfish reasons."

Selfish. Selfish. Selfish.

I stare at our hands—at the calluses on his palms from all the physical work he does in the summertime when he's not working on campus. The roughness to his fingertips. The gentleness of each strategic caress that I know contradicts his years of rough sportsmanship.

Closing my eyes and giving in to the blind sensation, I murmur, "I'm flawed, Sebastian. I have been since I walked away from you, and I don't know what to do with that. I don't know how to be happy. I don't know how to figure out what I like anymore. If I wasn't enough before..."

His fingers stop. "It was never about you not being enough. It was about me being too damn stupid to see it." His head slowly shakes. "I think that our flaws are always going to be perfect to the person that's meant to love us. Because they won't judge them. They'll simply be there. Understand. Anybody who wants to change you will never love you the way you need to be because they'll never see the real you."

Eyes opening, I let out a shuttered breath at the words he seemed to deliver so casually despite them carrying a world's worth of meaning. "How could you say that?"

To him it's simple. "Because I mean it."

Finally, I pull my hand away from his and drop it into my lap. "Once upon a time, I thought I had control of my life. Knew what I wanted. Now it's hard for me. Harder than it ever has been to figure out. So how come it's suddenly so easy for you?"

His contemplative silence comes with furrowed brows and downturned lips. Maybe he's never wondered why our roles reversed. Or maybe he doesn't care because he's set on what he wants. A second chance. Or is this our third?

When he shifts in his seat and lifts his hand at the waitress who took our drink orders, I'm wondering if he's going to ask for the check for his coffee.

Instead, he turns his body toward the middle-aged woman who looks like she's had a long day and says, "Can we get two of the all-American breakfast plates, please? She'll take her eggs scrambled, not sunny side up, and she loves chocolate chip pancakes over regular. No sausage on either plates because she'll probably make a face the whole time I'm eating it."

The woman's lips waver upward in amusement. "What about bacon?"

Sebastian chuckles, putting on the same charming smile he always does. I'm not sure he even knows he's doing it, but everybody falls for it all the time. "We'll definitely need plenty of that. A little on the burnt side if you could. Thanks."

She jots down everything before walking toward the kitchen to put the order in.

I'm gaping. "I said I wasn't hungry."

"Your stomach growled ten minutes ago. And considering you didn't bring one of the hundreds of bags I know that you own, I'm sure you don't have any money on you either which is why you only ordered water."

"Sebastian—"

"Let me feed you. If you've already eaten then you can take this home for tomorrow. But something tells me you haven't had dinner and I know you like eating breakfast food any time of the day."

His brows raise in challenge, waiting for me to refute him. When I don't, a victorious glint flashes in his eyes.

I sink into the bench seat. "I didn't ask to come out so you could pay for my meal."

"I know." He slides his coffee mug closer to him before picking it up to blow on the steam rolling off the top. "You came here to talk to me. See me. Maybe just be around me. I'd like to think all three are true, but I never know with you. I'm as confused as you are because despite how wrong this may be, it still comes effortlessly. It's not as easy for me as you think it. Seeing you with someone else. Watching you like this. Empty. Pretending. I stayed away for too long trying to figure out if you were better off, but you and I are too much alike. We always have been. Which is why we've both just become a little too good at faking happiness all this time."

"We're both fucked up then."

"I don't disagree." A small smile quirks his lips like he finds our situation amusing when it's anything but. "You've become quite a mystery

to me.”

That’s laughable considering he used to call me an open book. “I’ve become a mystery to myself too.”

His smile disappears. All I manage to do is shrug it off, my leg bouncing underneath the table because sitting still is impossible. Especially when I can feel his eyes on me as I train my focus on the glass of water still sweating from the warmth of the room.

I don’t touch it.

Don’t clean up the condensation.

“Why don’t you really wear glasses anymore?” he asks, drawing my attention upward despite myself.

Haven’t we been over this before? “I needed a change.”

“The hair wasn’t enough?”

My fingers pull at one of the strands trying to shield my face. “I thought you said you liked it.”

The color has definitely faded, and I’m tempted to go back to the red that I’ve missed since making my hairdresser get rid of it. I think she was as sad as I was to see it go, even if there was some sense of relief when I saw the purple and wondered what else I could change about myself so I wouldn’t recognize the person staring back at me in the mirror.

“I do,” he says, “but that doesn’t mean I understand why you wanted to change. Your hair. Your glasses. You’ve lost weight. You were perfect the way you were before.”

My defenses kick in. “What you think shouldn’t matter.”

His tongue clicks as he bobs his head once. “You’re right. My opinion shouldn’t matter at all. That doesn’t stop me from worrying you changed for all the wrong reasons.”

My eyes narrow. “What reasons would those be?”

“For that tool you call your boyfriend.”

I blink, taking in those words carefully before laughing. It’s a short, bubbled laugh of surprise. *Boyfriend.*

All my life I wanted a label.

Security.

To know that a man wanted me as his as much as I wanted him as mine.

Validation.

But not once had I had that talk with Austin. We never talked about labels. We fell into something that he dictated the entire way, and I went with because...

Because why?

Because he made me feel special. For a while. Like maybe I could be loved.

But not only that.

I settled for what I thought I'd never have.

Somebody who would do anything to be with me—to plan our future and mean it. Sebastian used to be the man I pictured in every scenario until I forced myself to try imagining Austin in his shoes.

I never could though. “I didn’t make these changes for Austin.”

He leans forward, piercing the bubble I’ve created for myself. “Then who did you change for?”

I sit back, arms crossing over my chest in a guarded posture as I look out the window we’re next to. “I wanted to change for *me*. I had to. It was all I could do to take back what little control I could. Whether you believe it or, I never knew I had any effect on you like you said I did.”

His eyes pin me to my spot. “Why did you want to come here?”

Swallowing, I shift in my seat and stare down at the scratched tabletop. “I don’t know. Because I am scared. For a lot of reasons. I’m scared of myself more than anything. Scared I’ll keep making the wrong choices. No matter how many times I’ve tried convincing myself that things with us have ended, that I need to move on, it never feels right.”

Sebastian’s arms cross on the table, causing me to peek up through my lashes at him to see a guarded expression on his face. “Have things ended between us? It sure as hell doesn’t feel that way to me.”

The waitress comes over and places our plates down in front of us before I can answer. It only feeds the anticipation of whatever words are about to escape my lips, making the air around us tenser until it’s hard to breathe.

Tell the truth for once.

I say one word. “No.”

Grabbing the little syrup bottle that the waitress placed between us, he pours it over the pile of food on his plate before setting it beside mine.

As if he can read the confusion swirling in my mind as to why he's okay with this, he decides to enlighten me before I ask. "I'd never get in the way of you being happy. Whether it's with me or somebody else. But I'd have to believe you are first, and I know you're not. You wouldn't be sitting here if you were. You say you're scared of yourself, but that's not entirely true. You're scared of a lot more."

I don't know what to say.

So, he keeps going. "You've always wanted to write about things that people can relate to. Why not write about this?"

"This?" I repeat, taken aback by the suggestion.

He cuts into his pancake stack. "The only way you'll be able to relate to people is by being honest. With yourself first. I'd know."

"You'd be okay with me writing about us? Because honesty doesn't always get people the results they want."

His lips kick up. "We both know that I'm not a bad guy. No matter what narrative you take on, I won't be the villain. Never to you."

I swallow my words.

His egg yolk leaks into his syrup, the mixture creating an ugly color that I let my eyes lock on so I don't have to look at him. "And even if I was the villain, I think a lot of people secretly root for the bad guy in the end."

"Why?"

There's no hesitation. "Because they're the most compelling character in the story. Not that the heroine would probably admit it, but even she wants them to win sometimes."

"What kind of fairytales are you reading?"

His chuckle is light. "The realistic ones."

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

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SEBASTIAN SAYS I wouldn't have liked him in college, and I wonder if he's right. He was a ladies' man, and there's nothing particularly staggering about the information considering he's...him.

I'd like to think I'm not an unreasonable person—that I can see why women would chase after him even if it makes my eye twitch.

He was the star quarterback of the football team and one of the best shooting guards that Mountain Ridge University's basketball team had seen in years. Which meant he was popular without trying.

None of those women vying for his attention matter now because they aren't here fawning over the former athlete while he folds construction paper on the floor of his apartment.

I am.

It makes me smile.

Sweet Potato bats at the pair of scissors on the floor next to the scrap pieces of colored paper littering the carpet, causing me to pull the orange Tabby away before she hurts herself.

"You really don't have to do that," I muse, watching the pure concentration on Bash's face. He works slowly, meticulously on folding the fragile paper in his fingers.

His tongue darts out and eyes narrow at the project before another piece tears and makes him curse. "I don't back away from a challenge," he tells me, determination coating his eyes when he looks up at where I sit cross legged on the floor with Sweet Potato on my lap. His face instantly softens before reaching over and scratching the rumbling feline between the ears.

I sit back, propping myself up by my hands and study the mess of papers he's gone through in the past hour and a half. "I bet you never thought you'd be spending your Saturday hanging out with me and my cat

while trying to perfect origami. What exactly are you trying to make anyway?”

“It’s a surprise,” he informs me with a smirk on his face that has me eying him with suspicion.

But I play along because whatever he’s got up his sleeve seems to excite him. Ever since he woke me up with breakfast in bed, the 30-year-old has been on the go with a wide, secretive smile on his face. Much like the one I had on mine when I told him about the surprise of my own that I’d planned for his birthday.

Getting him a massage booked to relieve the stress he piles on himself every day had been a huge risk because I was afraid he’d read into it, as if one thirty-minute session with a masseuse Trinity recommended had ‘love’ written all over it. Because, in a lot of ways, it did.

Thankfully, the risk paid off. As soon as he opened the envelope holding the certificate, his eyes had glazed as he read the little note I’d attached. He’d gotten quiet, and something soft smoothed over his face as his throat bobbed with silent emotion.

Then he’d carefully put the certificate back into its holder, set it down on the table, and pulled me on top of him for the tightest hug he’d ever given me.

No words needed to be said after seeing his reaction, but he pressed a gentle kiss against my head before whispering, “*Thank you.*”

And the day he’d made the appointment, I could see a difference in him. He’d been carefree.

Boyish.

That night, he’d shown me exactly what he could do with his knot-free body by bending my own across different pieces of his furniture.

Breaking from the thoughts quickly turning me on, I ask, “Does it have to do with wherever you’re taking me this afternoon?”

All he does is wink at me.

Sighing, I stroke Sweet Potato’s soft fur because there’s no way he’s going to give me any hints. “If we did this at my place, you’d have a big table to work on instead of sitting on the floor.”

It’s a gamble considering I’d brought it up once or twice before without much luck. He’s been to my place before, but we spend far more time here.

Even Sweet Potato is used to being lugged around in the carrier she hates so much.

My apartment in center city is down the street from Somerset University, mixed in with the other student housing. I'm the only post-graduate staying in the house that was recently renovated into four different apartments, which I've been looking into moving out of because of how loud the other tenants are. Unlike Sebastian, who was a self-proclaimed party boy in college, I've always preferred a quieter lifestyle. That hasn't changed since graduating.

The way he shifts uncomfortably on the floor has my mouth twitching downward. "You have to admit that it'd look a little strange for a college professor to be seen walking into a student rental. Especially someone like me who's one of the few younger faculty on staff."

There's only a moment of hesitation before I find myself nodding slowly at the concern. "But I'm not a student at the university anymore and you're not my professor. My landlord may cater to the off-campus student population, but that's not the only people they rent to. There used to be a 52-year-old divorcee who lived above me before the new lease started in January."

My apartment is nothing special to look at, but it's mine. It's a small two-bedroom that is narrow and cluttered with furniture I proudly bought myself and had my family help move in.

Even though I haven't re-signed my lease for another year yet, I still love the tiny place that Sweet Potato has made her own with toys thrown around every which way. Rent is reasonable, there's food in the fridge, and money left over for takeout. Plus, the location is convenient. It's not a far drive to work or to any of my favorite places to eat. I don't have to go more than ten minutes to get groceries, and it's safe to walk around without being hassled by anybody.

"It's a short walk to the campus," I offer lamely when his silence stretches. I know how much he loves walking, but it'd be a far shorter trek than it is from his place considering he lives on the city's steepest hill.

"I promise we'll spend time at your place, but I'm trying to get on stable footing on campus. There's a lot of students who live nearby your place that may get the wrong impression if they see me. People talk, Breena. I can't afford to risk my job because of gossip."

Gossip.

He hasn't told me he's ready yet. Ready for me. Ready for more. But, in a lot of ways, it doesn't feel like he's had to. It's always been his actions that spoke louder than words.

In the ways he's been willing to communicate. In the ways he's cooked for me when I've been too busy to do it myself. He's always feeding me, pampering me, and showing me that he cares by the smallest tasks.

So why does my heart sink right now?

Evading his eyes, I focus solely on the cat who's napping contently in my lap. As if she senses my growing tension, her soft rumbles slowly unknot my shoulders as I stroke her fur.

Giving myself a moment to think, I offer him the only thing I can. "The best ammunition against gossip is the truth. It's not that hard to talk about it when you accept it."

Accept me, is what I don't say.

Accept what's in front of you.

His eyes meet mine and there's something different in them. Warm but not. Hesitant and struggling. "Bree..."

I shake my head and fight off the sudden burn of tears in my eyes knowing he's still not letting himself cross any lines. "Sometimes I wonder why I stayed," I whisper aloud.

"What?"

Throat bobbing when I look up at him, I debate my options. The truth or something close to it. A white lie. But I don't want to keep walking on eggshells around Sebastian to save face. "You told me you wanted me in your life," I remind him, voice thick from the swell of emotion trying to suffocate me.

His brows furrow, genuine confusion on his face as if he can't see how much his reluctance to our situation kills me. "I do."

I give him three words in reply. "Then prove it."

They're not the three words I've wanted to tell him for a long time. Because just when I fear the real ones will bubble out of me, he does something that makes me question just how valid they even are. It silences me. Numbs the feelings.

Maybe it's better that way. I've never been in love before, so how could I know with certainty that's what this is?

Because you can't fight it.

"The day I saw you at the Espresso House," he begins quietly, his focus on the paper that his fingers nimbly move over to fold and bend, "I saw a butterfly on the window. I hadn't even planned on going in. But the butterfly landed right there, right next to the profile of your face. Something about it made me walk inside. Made me want to talk to you."

My brows pinch at his randomness. "A butterfly?"

He hums. "A butterfly."

Confusion clouds any other feeling I previously had.

His lips quirk up as he keeps working on the paper that he seems to be getting somewhere with. A shape is taking form that he eventually smiles at before holding it out in his palm toward me to take.

I gape at the fragile, paper butterfly in his hand, carefully taking it and studying each little detail. Each crease and fold are so precise even the imperfections look intentional. "It's beautiful."

His eyes aren't on the paper butterfly when he says, "Yes. It is."

Blushing, I show Sweet Potato who sniffs the paper and nudges it with her nose. "Why a butterfly?"

He picks up one of the colored pieces of paper, a thick purple one, and starts recreating a second version in my favorite color. "My grandmother used to say that butterflies are reincarnated souls. When my grandfather passed away a few years ago, there was one that followed her around everywhere. She swore it was the same one no matter how far she traveled. That it was my grandpa making sure she knew he was there for her no matter what."

Warmth spreads from my chest to my fingertips at the sweet thought. "Do you believe that?"

He pauses for a moment, his eyes trained on the craft in his hands. "I'd like to believe that the kind of pure love they shared could cause a phenomenon none of us ever really knew existed until them. Like anything is possible if you have that kind of bond." Glancing in my direction to gauge my reaction, he lifts a shoulder. "I suppose I've always been a bit of a romantic."

His lips part to say something else before hesitating, his eyes going back down to the paper he's holding. "I never really wondered if my grandmother was right before about the butterfly. But seeing the one at the

café... It made me confident that my grandfather is still around and guiding us. Showing us what we need in life even if we don't know we need it."

My breath catches in my throat.

He doesn't elaborate as we lock eyes.

And he doesn't need to.

He leans forward and kisses me. "Happy birthday, baby."



MY BODY STIRS awake when I feel something hard press against my ass as smooth, warm hands travel sensually underneath the T-shirt I stole. Loosening a shaky breath as those palms curve around my bare breasts and tweak my hardened nipples, I arch my ass back and let out a quiet moan when he starts kissing my neck.

"Need to be inside you," Bash says against my skin, nipping at the sensitive spot below my ear before moving beneath the blankets until he's settled between my parted legs and lifting the shirt off my otherwise naked body.

Thighs parting to welcome him between them, he swoops down to kiss me the same time I move my hand between us to wrap around his twitching cock. He groans into my mouth as I pump him once, twice, then guide him to where I'm ready for him. It never takes much. One kiss, one soft little touch, and I'm there.

He pushes in slowly, the sound coming from him enough to make me clench around him until he's panting my name into my neck.

My fingertips thread into his hair as he pulls out and pumps back in slowly. But gentleness is not what we need.

Not him.

Not me.

We need hard.

Fast.

Rough.

Slow and soft makes me feel too much.

Things I'm afraid he never will.

That means expectations.

Disappointment.

I refuse to ruin everything by letting my emotions get the better of me, so I change gears. Let my body take over so my mind is silenced.

My lips find his ear, nip at the lobe, and whisper, "Remember when you said you don't play fair? I think now's the time to put your money where your mouth is."

He draws back and looks me in the eye, a dark, hungry look dilating his own before those perfect lips start to curl at the corners. "You're going to wish you hadn't told me that."

My fingers curl around the back of his neck and squeeze once. "I highly doubt that."

The feral noise slipping past his lips isn't one I've heard yet as he rips the blankets from my body and pulls out. I'm about to protest when he stands at the end of the bed, grabs ahold of my ankles, and drags me to the end of the mattress.

"Arms up," he commands, reaching for something on the floor.

A spark shoots through me when he picks up one of his ties and starts winding it around each of my wrists in skillful knots and then positions them above my head.

"If you move them," he informs me, trailing his fingers down my arms, torso, and abdomen until they tease the arousal between my legs, "I will stop, and you won't cum. Do you understand?"

Shivering from the anticipation makes it hard to speak, so he slaps my pussy before surging two fingers inside of me. "I asked you a question. Do. You. Understand?"

"Yes," I rasp. "Yes, yes, yes."

The beastly smile he gives me is the only warning I get before he positions my ass to hang from the edge of the mattress, spreads my legs, and plunges inside of me over and over again, fucking me with an untamed hunger that has my mouth wide open from the silent screams wanting to escape my throat but can't.

He bends forward and inserts two of his fingers into my mouth, forcing it open as I pant out his name in muffled moans. My eyes roll back at the sensation I didn't know I could feel from each harsh thrust he enters me with. Sex has always been good with him, but this is an entirely different level.

It's desperate and needy and selfish.

Selfish because I know he can't deny how he feels when he's inside me. Because I know he feels the trust I hand to him the second I let him strip me of my clothes and give him my body.

Here I am. Have me. All of me.

Here's my heart. Take it.

He makes me feel loved with every touch.

Every move.

Every noise.

Every look.

My senses scream from the overload, but I embrace every tingle, prickle, and ache he creates with his hand, mouth, and dick.

Selfish, selfish, selfish.

I don't care.

"Going to fuck you so hard you won't be able to walk straight," he all but growls, crushing our lips together as he moves his hands around my thighs and spreads me even farther apart until my knees are bent near my shoulders. The new position hurts my hips, but I don't want him to stop jackknifing into me. The sting of pain only makes the intensity of his cock fucking me into the mattress that much hotter.

He's present in the moment.

It's him and me.

Only us.

Nobody else.

Nothing else.

I try grabbing ahold of his arms out of instinct, but he quickly slams my arms back and pins them to the mattress on either side of my head with a strength I can't break even if I wanted to. "I thought you were going to be a good girl and keep your hands to yourself. Don't think I won't tie you to the bedpost and make good on my promise. Do you want to come?"

Thrust.

"Answer the question, Breena."

Thrust.

"Yes," I tell him again, the word seemingly the only thing I'm capable of saying.

He rolls himself into me, circling his hips to make me feel all of him. "Then keep your hands above your head and watch me take you."

So, I do.

Because his words are spoken with a possessive authority that gets me off. He doesn't let go of my wrists as he drives into me until his mattress creaks louder and starts covering the sound of my cursed moans, and desperate pleas for him to keep going, to never stop.

I couldn't care less if his neighbors hear us from the other side of his bedroom wall. I want them to know just skilled he is. How he knows exactly what to do to my body. I want them to know he's *mine* and I'm *his* and that nothing else, nobody else, matters in the moment. I want them to hear the rawness of my voice—to wonder what position I'm in that makes my throat so raspy and my begging so loud.

The bedroom is the only place I'll ever let a man control me.

Sebastian pulls out abruptly and flips me onto my stomach, causing me to yelp when he angles my ass up and starts fucking me from behind. Between his low grunts and the loud sounds of my arousal filling the room with each slap of his hips against mine, it becomes too much and not enough all at the same time.

Because I don't want him to stop.

I never do.

When he stops, reality comes back.

He'll be unsure again.

Distant when he starts to feel too much.

And what will I be?

I grip the sheets in front of me and bite down onto my bottom lip as his hand comes down and slaps my ass. Hard.

Then he does it again.

And again.

And again.

The burning pain from each imprint against my cheek has me biting harder onto my lip until I taste blood.

His cock doesn't stop.

His hand doesn't stop.

Without any warning, my head is yanked back by a fist full of my hair setting off an orgasm that blasts through me within seconds from the pleasure coursing through my body by each punishing stroke. My pussy pulsates around Sebastian until he's following suit, kneeling onto the bed,

and fucking me even harder than before until he buries himself deep and empties himself inside of me.

He stays like that, letting me take all of him until there's nothing left to give.

When he pulls out, I wince and feel our mixed cum dripping down my thighs and onto his white sheets.

A pair of lips carefully press against the cheek he spanked, caressing the sore skin before he moves his mouth up my back, shoulder blades, and neck, and adjusts me to my side where he hooks his arm around me and pulls me into him.

It's comforting.

Secure.

Loving.

He won't admit it though.

"How are you feeling?" he asks against the crown of my head, working to undo the knots of the tie still around my wrists.

Sad.

Because it's over.

Happy.

Because he's holding me.

Scared.

Because I never want this to end.

I hum out a sated, "Sore."

It's better than the full truth.

"Does that mean round two is out?" His playful tone has me melting into his hold, silently reassuring me that we're fine. For now. For a long time.

Peeking over my shoulder, I give him a subdued smile. "I may need some Motrin and a nap before we explore that possibility."

He chuckles, pecking my head before sitting up. "I need to get to work anyway for an early meeting. Shower with me?"

I'm disappointed we don't get more time together. To cuddle. To hold each other. To just be in one another's presence. My soul is content whenever we're together. It's after we're apart that the worry grabs ahold of me and doesn't let go.

When he stands from the bed, I can't help but give him a thorough onceover, noticing his glistening cock still standing at attention as if he really can go another round already. Knowing him, he probably could. He's always been insatiable.

If we can't stay in bed, I'd take the shower. Because it's time. Time with him. Time together. And time is valuable.

"I could definitely use one."

Maybe the water will wash away the sickly feeling creeping into the pit of my stomach that says, *protect your heart*.

But even as the warm water sprays down on each of our bodies, it doesn't wash away at the hardening exterior slowly bricking up my heart.

A wall.

A warning.

Selfish, girl, that voice chides snidely in the back of my head. *Silly, selfish girl*.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

September 2022

TODAY I SIT on the couch, not the chair, and let the sun beam into the back of my head as I do a thorough scope of Dr. Barnett's office feeling like something is different today.

My eyes stop at the wall by her door where three new frames hang. Encased in brown sculpted wood that looks like it could have been handmade are three different pictures of dogs.

One black.

One brown.

And one yellow.

"Your dogs," I realize, standing up and walking over to examine the new addition to her space. Studying each stacked photo makes my smile widen. "They're cute."

I'm playing with the hem of my sweatshirt sleeve while I smile at each of the pictures. "I've gotten compliments all week on them since I asked my husband to hang them up. I'm glad I listened to your suggestion."

Husband.

"A lot of people are taking my suggestions seriously lately," I murmur, turning on my heel and walking back over to the couch.

"How so?" she asks, still sitting behind me in her usual spot.

I debate on answering, but find myself asking, "How long have you been married?"

My eyes go to her empty hands.

No tan lines.

She must see what's caught my attention and lifts her hand. "I like to keep my personal life out of most my sessions for privacy reasons, so I take my ring off each morning. David and I have been together for almost twenty-five years this October."

My eyes follow her hand as it lowers back down to her lap, folding around her teacup. I wonder what kind of other patients she sees that she feels the need to hide her personal life from. Or why in the world she'd be willing to share it with me out of everybody who passes through her office door. "Twenty-five years is a long time."

"It is," she agrees, nodding once with a faraway smile as she stares at her empty finger. Does it feel weird for her? Does she miss the sensation of the gold on her skin when she's at work? I would. I'd never take mine off. "Have you ever thought about marriage?"

Clicking my tongue, I find myself fighting to look out the window. "I thought it was in my future once."

"Not anymore?"

"No."

"Why?"

Why? I laugh. It's quiet. Barely audible. There isn't anything humorous about the question, yet I can't help but curl my lips at the three-letter question. Why?

"Because I don't deserve it," I tell her simply. It's not the first time I've thought it, but it is the first time that I've ever said it aloud. My throat thickens as I repeat it again, like I need to hear myself say it for clarity. "I don't deserve the happy ever after."

Dr. Barnett blinks at me, clearly surprised I said that. "Everybody is deserving of a happy life, Breena. They deserve love. You included."

Love doesn't exist in my life right now.

Not in the way it used to.

There are feelings, but not *the* feeling. The one that's been void from my chest since I left Sebastian in the rearview mirror.

Trinity told me it doesn't matter anyway because that tingly feeling you get when you like somebody is your common sense leaving.

Considering I've let Austin leave beer in my fridge and socks on my bedroom floor despite the doubts I've voiced to him, she might be right about that.

"Why do you feel that you're undeserving of love?" my therapist presses when I don't elaborate.

Because I let another man get me off in the bathroom of a public restaurant while Austin was waiting for me at our table.

I don't share that with her for obvious reasons. It may be her job to judge me, but that doesn't mean I want to hear it.

I know I fucked up.

I know that I keep wanting to.

I know I'm going about this entire thing the wrong way.

She doesn't need me to throw money at her to tell me as much.

Playing with the hoodie drawstring that I chewed the plastic off of, I say, "My boss told me I was selfish." Drawing my legs up and hugging them to my chest, I rest my shin on my knees and think about the conversation. "He said it like a compliment."

Dr. Barnett goes with the subject change, though I can tell there's a lot she wants to press me on. She's heard about Shawn before. About work. My aspirations. My coworkers. In the beginning, I'd talk about everybody *but* me.

"What do you think about that?"

I'm starting to think that it doesn't matter what goes on in my head because it's obvious that my thoughts are skewed. "I want to believe that people like Shawn and people like me are different. He thinks the only way to be successful in life is by being selfish. But..."

I pause for a moment, reflecting on all the excuses I can make to justify anything that I've done. In the past. In the present. What will I be capable of in the future?

I *am* selfish.

I always have been.

I take and I take until karma finally catches up with me and gives me a taste of the medicine I've dealt out for years.

Taking a deep breath, I squeeze my arms tighter around myself. "I *have* been selfish. I've made decisions that I regret, even if I know they were the right ones at the time. But I keep making them. I keep—" I hiccup, feeling my lungs constrict to the point it hurts to breathe. "I keep going back to them. It's a cycle."

Dr. Barnett sits forward to reach for the tissue box and pass me one, hearing the edge to my tone. The shake. "Going back where, Breena? Tell me about the choices you regret."

I clench the tissue in my hand until it wrinkles under my vicious grasp. "I regret letting Trinity take me out to the bar when I didn't want to go. I

regret allowing her to dress me up and make me introduce myself to Austin. She thought it would help, but it didn't."

"It didn't," she repeats.

For once, it's not a question.

"It's made it worse," I mumble, shredding the tissues into tiny pieces. I don't look at her, but at the fragile fragments of nothingness in my lap that I can't make any smaller.

So, I grab another tissue and start again.

"How did it make it worse?"

"Austin always sees *that* girl when he looks at me. He sees the mask I put on when I pretended I was fine. The façade. He remembers the girl who was buzzing with tequila and rum cocktails until she had the liquid courage to approach him. But that girl isn't me."

"You don't think he sees any other version of you since you began dating?"

"How could he?" I whisper.

"The people who truly love us see everything, even the things we don't want them to. There's nothing, not one single version of ourselves that we can hide."

Sebastian said the same thing.

It makes my jaw tick.

My fingers stall on the tissue that I'm destroying. "Then he's only seeing the version he wants to because he certainly doesn't acknowledge what's right in front of him."

"And what is that?"

Who is that is what she should ask. "A broken girl he'll never be able to fix like he wants to. He's trying to mold me into something that I'll never be."

Never. Never. Never.

Am I that naïve?

"You are not broken, Breena."

That's the first lie she's told me. "Maybe being a selfish person isn't so bad in comparison," I think aloud, my eyes going across the room to stare absently at the pictures of her pets. "Sometimes the broken version of a person ends up being the best version they can become."

Dr. Barnett is quiet.

Too quiet.

"I don't agree," she finally informs me.

My smile is weak. "Of course you don't. You'd stop getting paid if you did."

She's quiet for a moment, not willing to comment on how much she makes from these one-on-ones. "Is there anything else you regret? Things you want to get off your chest?"

Too much.

There are too many regrets.

My eye twitches as I pick up one of the bigger pieces of tissue and stare. "I regret ever meeting Sebastian Kennedy."

I hear Dr. Barnett shift. "You don't really mean that. You're speaking from the hurt of the choices you had to make."

I shake my head adamantly, trying to make myself believe the truth in it. But she's right. I don't regret him. I regret everything that came after.

"You're supposed to tell me that it's understandable I feel the way I do. Isn't Bash the reason I'm here?" I challenge, nostrils flaring with irritation.

"I don't know, Breena," she counters, knowing he's only part of the reason. "Is he?"

I stare at her.

She stares back.

My jaw ticks.

Her eyes soften.

"You called him Bash."

This time, I blink.

Think.

Blink again.

"I did?"

She hums. "What is your biggest regret?" I hear through my ringing ears.

I'm still reeling about what I called him.

It's been a long time.

It will always be Bash to you.

Nausea rises up my throat until bile threatens to make an appearance all over Dr. Barnett's pristine beige rug.

"Don't make me say it," I plead.

I feel a hand on my own, but the flood of sudden tears blur the image of her delicate fingers squeezing my own. "It's time."

It's time.

It's time.

It's time.

"What is your biggest regret?" she asks again, this time so soft that the words are nothing more than a feather light touch against my cracked soul.

I let out a shaky breath until my entire body is quaking from the reality I'm finally opening up to.

The one I've been hiding from.

Broken.

Broken.

Broken.

My chest caves into itself when I finally whisper, "I regret having to get rid of the baby before ever telling him."

In that moment...the floodgates open.

Because it's not Sebastian that I regret.

It's the future that I had to give up because of him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

May 2020

SPRING ARRIVES. APRIL turns into May. Sunshine melts the remaining snow and pushes away the cold, unwelcome temperature for something warmer.

Sweet Potato is curled up by my feet soaking in the sunlight that peaks through the thick curtains. Her stomach slowly rises and falls, her little noises bringing comfort to me since she stopped eating.

Her wet nose nuzzles my hand when I reach over to brush my fingers along her aging face, silver hairs peppering her orange fur more and more as each day passes. “Are you going to eat for me today?”

The purr she responds with eases some of the tightness balling itself up in my chest. Last time I took her to the vet, they told me she had a UTI and gave me antibiotics for her to take. She hated every dose I made her swallow but within days seemed to bounce back to her normal self.

Last week I noticed her sleeping more and eating less again. Her toys are untouched despite me trying to get her to play and her food and the water level barely goes down whenever I obsessively check the bowls.

Not even Sebastian trying to handfeed her has gotten her attention like the spoiled feline usually enjoys. He even bought her toys and yarn as bribery to play with. Nothing.

It’s made me worried considering she’s been the one consistent thing in my life for so long.

Letting myself wander from the thought when I see Bash’s name flashing on my phone, I pick it up and am greeted with, “Have you eaten yet?”

My brows pinch when I glance at the tiny clock on the right corner of the computer screen to see that it’s already 12:30. “I didn’t realize it was lunchtime. I haven’t, but—”

There’s a knock at my door, followed by an amused, “Open up then.”

Sweet Potato doesn't hop down and race to the door like usual. Normally when he's around, I have to nudge her away to let him in because she gets excited to see him.

I peek out the curtain hanging in the little window at the top of the door to see Sebastian shooting me a wink from the other side while holding up a pizza box.

When I unlock the door and pull it open, he quickly swoops in with a brush of his lips against mine before kicking the door closed. "I have the afternoon off, so I figured I'd stop by since you said you're working from home. I know you don't eat when you're worried, but I picked up your favorite. How's your four-legged roommate doing?"

Spring semester finals has left him busy prepping each of his classes for the projects, exams, and papers due, which means more grading for him and less time for us to see each other. Between our busy schedules and Sweet Potato not feeling well, it's left me run down too.

"She's still not acting like herself. I left a message for the vet's office, but they haven't gotten back to me yet. They have emergency hours first thing in the morning, so I may call in to work to take her."

"Tomorrow?"

He grabs a piece of barbecue chicken pizza and puts it on a plate before passing it to me. Although it looks good, my stomach twists from the sweet scent of the sauce. "I'm not working tomorrow. The next three days are study days for the students, so I can go with you."

His offer has me staring at him in awed speechlessness for a few moments. My heart does a little pitter-patter in my chest before I feebly ask, "You'd come with me?"

"Of course. I'd do anything for you."

Anything. Those words go straight to my heart, pumping it wildly as we stand side by side. I've been wondering about us lately. Even though logic tells me work is what's keeping us from talking as much, it doesn't mean I don't worry we're distancing ourselves for other reasons.

Both of us afraid of this becoming something bigger before we're ready.

The problem is, it already has for me.

Because he offers to come with me to the veterinarian.

He cares in so many ways.

He just won't tell me how much.

His arm brushes mine, his shoulder nestling against mine until his body heat sends little sparks down my arm and into my chest.

I whisper, "Thank you."

He doesn't need me to tell him how much it means to me because he already knows.

One look.

That's all it ever takes with him.

His hand finds my bicep and squeezes once before gesturing toward the couch. Carefully moving my laptop onto the coffee table, he sits down on the middle cushion beside Sweet Potato, who he's careful not to disturb, and sets his plate on his lap as I settle in beside him.

I pick off a piece of the chicken from the melted cheese and study the crispy coating. "I'm a little surprised you're here," I admit.

"It's almost time for the students to go home for the summer anyway," he answers, folding his pizza and taking a bite without noticing the downward twitch to my lips.

His response makes my heart drop. "So that's the only time you'll see me? When they're not here?"

He's come before when the college kids are too hungover to be up before noon. I never let myself think about it for long. "It's the principle, Breena. We've discussed this before."

While I understand that he needs to hold some sense of professionalism, that doesn't stop me from saying, "Then it probably wasn't a good idea to do what we did in your classroom. You know, out of principle."

He gives me a cheeky grin with no sense of apology on his face whatsoever over how he took control of my body the night he invited me to campus.

His texts had been direct. No nonsense. And I didn't argue with him about it because I knew exactly what I was walking into.

I wanted it.

The connection.

The intimacy.

Because when Sebastian touches me, nothing else matters. Not the doubt. Not the fear of rejection. Everything else fades away until it's just him and I.

Bash: *MIC room 3 at 7 tonight. Wear the green dress. Don't bother with any underwear.*

The only green dress I own is tight and short, hardly giving anything away to the imagination. Which is exactly why he wanted me to wear it.

Easy access.

Access I didn't fight him on even once as he picked me up and bent me over every surface he could while my dress had been hiked up my hips and exposing me.

"You're feisty today."

"I'm stating facts. If you're that worried about people looking at you badly with who you associate with—"

He cuts me off quickly. "I never said that. All I'm asking is for you to put yourself in my shoes. Having a faculty member from a college be seen walking into an area heavily populated with students from that university could potentially lead to unwelcome assumptions. That's how rumors start."

But rumors are only that.

Not facts. Not truth.

We've been here before.

At an impasse.

One I never seem to win.

Irritation bubbles under my skin, masking the worry-induced nausea Sweet Potato's health has caused me. "It wouldn't look good getting caught bending me over a desk with your pants down either, yet you seemed perfectly fine risking that."

His eyes flare with lust. Deep down, I feel it too. What the taunting does to me. What that hungry gaze does. But I won't acknowledge it like he wants me to because then we'd be ignoring our food and recreating that scene over my kitchen counter. "I knew we wouldn't get caught if that's what you were worried about."

I hum, playing with my pizza. "Wasn't the idea of getting caught part of the fun, *professor*?"

Those dilated eyes move to my lips, the alpha side of him that I typically only see in the bedroom starting to come out based on the shadows taking over his face. "Keep it up and you'll be calling me that next time I bend you over, baby girl. And I won't be using just my tie to gag you this time."

Baby girl.

A ghost of a smile tilts my lips as I pick up my pizza, look him straight in the eye, and say, “You’re only allowed to call me that if I’m *actually* yours.”

His head cocks to the side as he studies me taking a bite of my pizza and reaching for the remote control on the table. I hope he doesn’t see just how much his words affect me as I absentmindedly flip through the channels until I put it on a rerun of an old sitcom.

Because if he did, we definitely wouldn’t still be here eating pizza while the bulge in his pants grows from the memory of every noise he drew from me in the lecture hall.



TRINITY GROANS, SLAMMING her textbook shut and tossing it onto her bed. “This is ridiculous. How am I supposed to pass this exam if I can’t even get basic definitions right?”

I pick up the notecards she made and skim them with a frown on my face. “Don’t beat yourself up. There are over one hundred terms on these. It’s a lot to soak up for anybody.”

“Remind me again why I want to be a psychologist?” she whines, grabbing the notecards and scowling at the sharpie scribbles on each one.

I sit on the end of her bed and cross my legs under me. “Because you want to make a positive change in people’s lives.”

She smirks. “That and the money.”

Sitting back, I pick up a pillow and hug it against my torso. “You’re going to make an amazing counselor someday. You’re so close. Don’t give up now because of one class.”

She stares at the cards for a few more seconds before nodding. “You’re right. I won’t let this be my demise. Plus, if I give up now I won’t be able to fulfill my dream of getting paid to be a part of people’s drama without getting into trouble for it.”

An unattractive snort of amusement comes from me. “There’s my best friend.”

She puts the notecards down and swivels her desk chair toward me. “Speaking of drama and counseling, I want to know what’s going on

between you and the sexy professor you scored. Don't think I haven't noticed the glow you have again." Her Sharpie cap points at me. "You're obviously getting laid on the regular."

A not-so-subtle warmth creeps into my cheeks despite me pushing it away. "We're spending more time together before he goes away for the summer."

"Away?"

"To Connecticut. He coaches at a summer camp for a couple months. You should see the pictures of the place. It's gorgeous."

"Did he ask you to go with him?"

I hesitate, not liking the look she's giving me. "No. I wouldn't be able to even if he did. My job is here. Shawn is only letting me work from home because of Sweet Potato. I can't push my luck by asking to go remote so I can spend time with my—" I almost say boyfriend, but that's not right. Because anytime a conversation starts turning in that direction, Sebastian gets antsy.

"Oh my God," Trinity says slowly. "You haven't had the talk with him, have you?"

My shoulders drop. "Not since last time."

"That was in *January*, Bree."

I know. I've counted the days.

The months.

Not ready are two words still ringing in my head, holding me back from pushing my luck. If I bring it up again, would I sound desperate? Clingy? Would I be turned down? Pushed away?

"You're afraid," she surmises.

My shoulders lift lamely. "Nobody likes being rejected."

Her eyes sadden as she ditches her chair for the spot beside me on her bed. "Girl, you can't think like that. It's the fear talking. That man wants you in his life. If he hasn't made his mind up by now then—"

"Don't," I rasp quickly. "I don't think I want to hear what you're going to say. Because I don't want to think about him not being in my life at all. I'd take him as anything if it means he's around."

Trinity frowns, reaching for my hand and squeezing my fingers. "But what about what you want? Just because you want him in your life doesn't mean he has a right to be unless he's there for you how you need him to be."

He can't keep tugging you along hoping you'll follow blindly until he makes up his mind. That isn't fair to you, and you know it."

I do. That's the problem. I learned with Christopher that waiting around out of comfort got me nowhere. This is different though.

I never felt this way before.

Like I wanted to fight.

Like I needed it to work.

Because if it doesn't...

My heart aches at the thought. "What if he says he still isn't ready?"

She wets her lips. "Only you can decide what to do. But if you want my advice, I think you already know what it would be."

Walk away.

"I don't know if I can," I whisper.

Maybe it's not the sex at all that gets a person hooked, but the intimate, emotional connection that makes it impossible to walk away even when it's time to.

"Just remember something," my friend tells me, pulling my focus to her. "Moving on doesn't mean that there wasn't any love to begin with. It doesn't invalidate your feelings. Sometimes moving on is about having the strength to say that you love him, but you can't endure any more heartache."

My throat tightens with emotion thinking about the possibility of him letting me leave. Because if he does, then it didn't mean as much to him as it has to me.

Every little thing he did. The way he'd feed me. Hold my hand. Move me away from traffic. Take me on little adventures. Endure all the movies I know he's hated watching.

He's told me he's grateful.

That he's happy we met.

Because of Sebastian Kennedy, I know what love is.

Or do I?

"That," I say through my hoarse voice, fingers wrapping around hers. "That's why you're going to be an amazing marriage counselor someday."

Her lips tug up.

"Do me a favor though?" I ask weakly.

"What?"

“Remind them that life isn’t a fairytale,” I say, eyes roaming to our hands but not truly seeing them past the swirling thoughts that blind me. “Remind them that it doesn’t matter how beautiful something is. It can go away in an instant if they don’t fight for it hard enough.”

When I lift my eyes, I see her own watering from the cracked tone of my voice.

“I will,” she promises just as quietly. “But I think it’s important for you know to know that happy ever after isn’t part of the fairytale. It’s a choice. One we all have to make. Including you.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

October 2022

F_{LATTENING MY POLKA} dot sundress out, I click the heels of my black wedges together nervously and give myself another quick onceover in the little mirror I keep in the top drawer among the paperclips, highlighters, and sticky notes organized by color.

Quinn walks over to me, blowing on the fork full of steaming vegetables that's part of some new diet she's trying out. "Is Austin coming for lunch?" she asks, shoveling the pieces of cauliflower into her mouth.

"No. Why?"

Her eyes go over the length of me, covered in a dress that's a respectable length for work, heels that aren't too high but make my legs look slimmer, and makeup that isn't too obvious but not completely dull.

I tried this morning.

Tried to cover the puffy skin under my eyes. The dark bags. My red nose. I spent all night crying while ignoring Austin. He sent me two text messages.

One asking if I was still up.

One telling me to sleep tight.

I was grateful he didn't show up.

"Well, I'm assuming you didn't dress up for me. You're not my usual type. I'd feel way too short standing next to you."

She's nearly an entire foot shorter than me, and the power heels she keeps under her desk barely help her when she slides them on. "Maybe I woke up and decided to dress up for *me*. Self-care is important."

It's also bullshit.

Her hip leans against the divider as she shakes her plastic container and rolls her eyes at me. "That's what vibrators and chocolate are for. Two things that I've been spending a lot of time with since Jack and I split, so I'd know. I don't buy your little happy-go-lucky thing."

I glare at her when a few of the women near us giggle at her remark. Grabbing my water bottle, I uncap it and take a swig. “I don’t have lunch plans, and I didn’t dress up for anybody.”

She watches me, eyes narrowing like she’s trying to read me the way Trinity does.

I relent. “I asked to have a meeting with Shawn, Dakota, and Abram this afternoon.”

My coworker gapes at me. “How come you didn’t say anything sooner? No wonder you’ve been so fidgety all day.”

“I have not!”

She points at me with a piece of broccoli still on her fork, a few pieces falling to the floor and making my lips twitch into a scowl. “Bitch, please. You’ve been looking over your shoulder since you got here. Which, by the way, was way earlier than normal. It’s obvious you’re trying to kiss ass if you didn’t even stop to get your normal coffee.”

I haven’t been to the Espresso House in over two weeks, though I thought today would be the day. When I passed by the café and saw the line was out the door. I knew there was no point.

Tomorrow, I promise myself.

Flattening out a wrinkle in my dress, I admit, “So, I *may* have tried looking a little extra presentable today. I want to pitch an idea outside of the monthly meeting.”

She sets her container down on the edge of my desk. “That’s ballsy, girl. I’m both impressed with you and scared for you.”

“Don’t say that.” I groan loudly.

Quinn laughs at my expense. “It’s smart, actually. Shawn likes you, so you’ve got an in with him.”

I haven’t told her about my conversation with him before, and I don’t plan to change that. Just because I have an in with the boss doesn’t mean people would appreciate it.

Selfish.

“He didn’t give anybody room to talk at our last staff meeting, so I figure today is as good a day as any.”

She gestures toward my chest. “And you think *that* outfit is going to convince him?”

My hands go to the material hugging my body, cupping the B-cups on my chest. My dress isn't tight but it's not loose either. The collar doesn't reveal anything scandalous, but the bra I have underneath definitely makes me look like my boobs are bigger than they really are. Perkier.

But it's not for Shawn. "I'm not trying to convince him with my looks. It wouldn't work even if I did. I'm trying to be taken seriously."

"If you wanted that you were better off channeling your inner Hilary Clinton. Think pantsuit and a short, styled bob. Not flirty dress and curled hair. I'll give you this, your legs look bomb, and your boobs look massive."

I frown, second-guessing my attire choice for the day. I dressed for a purpose, and when I looked in the mirror this morning I wasn't entirely sure what purpose that was. All I knew was that I wanted to go back to the girl who strived to be better. To try. So, that's what I'm doing. Curled hair. Nice outfit. Decent shoes.

"You're making me feel self-conscious. I figured if I dressed to feel good, I'd be more confident about the meeting."

"Solid thought," she praises, picking up her food and not seeing the way my nose scrunches at the water left behind on my desk.

I try ignoring it. "And so what if I was trying to convince him with a little extra something-something? Have you not seen the blonde bombshells we work with? They definitely don't wear those tight pencil skirts for themselves. Amber had to shuffle in the leather one she wore the other day."

Quinn snorts. "That was pretty funny."

I eye her. "Be nice."

"I am! She rocked that outfit. I questioned my sexuality a little when I saw her pair the outfit with those red stilettos. I think they were Louboutin."

Amber has been the fashion editor for over a year now, but the promotion didn't come with the kind of raise that could help her afford designer brands. "There's no way she was wearing red bottoms unless she has a sugar daddy we don't know about."

We're quiet, contemplating the idea. It's Quinn who waves it off. "Forget about Amber and her potential sugar daddy. I want to know why you decided on that outfit for your meeting when you could have worn those cute black pants that make your butt look bigger."

“Quinn!” I warn, tossing a balled-up sticky note at her. “The goal isn’t to make my butt look good. The goal is to look and feel confident, so I get Shawn to listen to me.”

Her shoulders lift. “All I’m saying is that sex appeal might help you. Even if Shawn doesn’t go after any of the women here, he definitely likes to watch them. And I hate to break it to you, but you’re one of the women his eye catches.”

The only reason he watches me is because he’s waiting for my inevitable breakdown. “Stop. That’s not true.”

She smirks. “You’re adorable when you’re naïve. For the record, I think you look great. I’m sure Shawn will appreciate the effort you put in for him.”

Quinn never means to take things too far, but she does. Often. If the wrong person hears her, they’ll probably think I’m trying to sleep my way to the top. “Please stop talking like that. I’m trying to impress him with my wit. I don’t want to be his assistant forever. I’d like him to give me a shot to write something good for the next issue and then ignore me again so I can focus on it. I know I’m capable of more than scheduling meetings and getting him to calm down before he fires everybody when he’s in one of his moods.”

She puts her hands up in surrender before grabbing her lunch again. “Fine, I’ll let it go. You know I’m only teasing anyway. I hope the guy listens for once in his life.”

I sink into my chair. “Me too.”

“Want to go to The Jug tonight? You should invite Trinity. We can all celebrate your victory when Shawn gives you the greenlight.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

She grins. “Then we’ll all drown our sorrows instead.”

I snort.

Caution molds her features as she pokes at her lunch. “Unless you have plans with your boy toy tonight? How are things going with you after the last time we talked about it?”

It’s not Austin who pops into my mind when she asks that question, making my neck burn. “No plans with Austin. We’re...” I don’t know what we are, so I lift my shoulders.

She wiggles her brows. “Remember that advice I gave you when you two first started dating? If you want to make things work you could try that.”

I shake my head. “The trench coat thing won’t solve our problems.”

Quinn nudges my leg with her foot. “I’d like to think most things can be fixed with a little bit of sexiness.”

My eyes go to the pieces of broccoli on my carpet, and my mind goes to being pressed against a bathroom stall in Toscano’s bathroom.

Blowing out a breath, I murmur, “Trust me when I say that sex only gets you into trouble.”



SHAWN WATCHES ME walk into the small conference room, making my clammy hands ten times worse when I see the amusement on his face. It’s only him and I, so I give a cursory glance behind me to see if Dakota or Abram are on their way in.

“Dakota couldn’t be here today,” Shawn informs me, sitting back and tapping his pen against the notepad in front of him. “And I told Abe not to bother.”

I stand straighter as I approach the seat opposite of him. “But I wanted to speak to all three of you since you’re all part of the approval team for this.”

“I’m aware, but I’m the one who told you to take your shot. You’ll pitch to me. My opinion is the only one that matters.”

I don’t think either Dakota or Abe would agree, but I’m smart enough not to say so. “Well, I want to talk about an idea I have since you cut our staff meeting short.”

“I give out article topics based on previous performance. The numbers *you* help run determine what those topics are, so this better be interesting. We’ve been over this.”

Pulling out the seat in front of me, I sit down and square my shoulders. “I know we have, but you told me to fight. I know the pieces I’ve helped work on in the past haven’t gone viral like some of the other writers’ work here has,” I begin cautiously. “But I *do* have a skillset that I think would help me get a permanent seat in the writer’s room one day. I know the

numbers and see the patterns every month, which means I know the people who subscribe to us don't want to read about new fads in diet and exercise. They want to read about social trends made famous by influencers and celebrities and take silly quizzes that make them feel good knowing their crush likes them."

Is it trivial? Sure. But I think once the new virtual quizzes are coded into our website, Shawn will see I'm right. "Since the quizzes went solely online, engagement has more than quadrupled on our main social pages. It's also gotten our sponsored ads more exposure, which means more people are being drawn to our website."

There's a positive side to being his assistant which I'm sure he's realized based on the twinkle in his eyes. I know the backend of this magazine better than the people focused solely on writing and editing.

"Our readership is a group of women who don't want to be told that they should lose weight to feel pretty. They're a group of individuals looking for advice they can actually learn something from, not feel judged over."

His head cocks with interest as his pen-tapping stops. "I suppose you're going to tell me what kind of advice they're looking for."

I nod once. "Women want to feel like they can relate to other women about real life things. Like dating and relationships. What kind of dating apps produce results and which ones are for the hookup culture we're stuck in. They want to know they're not alone struggling in everyday life. Work. Looks. Men. Motherhood. Personally, I think *Women's Monthly* could triple our readership and engagement if we focus on the right conversations. Any magazine can tell women what they want to hear—that losing five pounds is easy with 30 minutes of work a day and the newest diet pill. Or that love is easy to come by if you follow five ridiculous dating tips. But if we want to stand out, we need to give our readership what they really want."

To my surprise, there's interest flaring in my editor's eyes. The pen he's gripping is set down on his notebook before he leans forward and crosses his arms on the edge of the table. "And what is it that our readership really wants, Ms. Murphy?"

Two words. "The truth."

He blinks.

I blink back.

He's silent.

I let him process. If he listens, it wouldn't be just me who'd get an opportunity to write content for the magazine that people would want to read. If he gives me the chance and it does well enough, the business his father gave him to turn around will be a benchmark in his career.

I'd call that a win-win.

Based on the look in his eyes as he stands up and runs a hand down the silver tie he's wearing with his black button-down, he's thinking the same thing. "It's about time. You've had that glazed look about you for the past few months that made me wonder if you'd ever bring up writing after what I proposed. You get one shot to impress me with whatever truth you feel like women need to read about. Dazzle me."

My eyes widen at his approval. "Really?"

His eyes grow skeptical. "Don't sound so shocked or I'll take the opportunity away before you can even lift a pen."

I press my lips firmly together.

His eyes drift out to the office floor where something sparks in his eyes. "I have a feeling your article is going to be interesting."

He leaves me with that comment, making my brows pinch. I stare at the empty whiteboard hanging on the wall, then at the door behind me in disbelief. There's a giddiness building in my chest that I want to celebrate, but I know I can't do that too soon in case this blows up in my face.

When I walk out and head over to my desk, I pause when I see something resting there that wasn't before.

A single rose.

White not red.

Thornless.

It's Quinn who says, "Austin dropped it off. I told him you were in a meeting. He seemed...off."

My eyes lift toward the front doors before lowering back down to the flower.

She says, "It's pretty."

Throat bobbing, my eyes start to itch.

My nose twitches.

I sneeze. "I'm allergic."

"Does he not know that?"

Handing her the flower from over the half wall between us, I murmur,
“He must have forgotten.”

I don’t have to look up to see her frown, but I know it’s there.
Ignoring it, I pick up my phone and debate on what to say.
My fingers glide over the screen.

Me: My editor is giving me a chance to write an article for the magazine

Biting my lip, I watch as the message to the number I have yet to save
to my contacts goes from DELIVERED to SEEN within minutes.

If Austin sees my phone, I don’t want him to ask questions. Because
then I’d have to explain why my heartrate picks up when I see the replies
from the one person I shouldn’t be excited to get them from.

Unknown: Proud of you, Breena

Unknown: Always have been

Quinn pulls me away from the guilty little tap dance my heart is doing
to say, “I guess I was wrong about the outfit. But can you imagine what
Shawn would have said yes to if you wore the pants that made your ass look
fantastic?”

I look both ways before lifting my middle finger up at my coworker,
making her laugh.

I didn’t wear this dress for him.
But I did wear it for someone.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

October 2022

THE HALLWAY LIGHT of Austin's apartment isn't on, but I knock loudly on the door and wait for the telltale sign of the soft click of the deadbolt anyway.

I don't know why I made this choice.

But here I am.

Desperate for some form of happiness because I want Sebastian to be wrong about Austin. I want to know that he's wrong about *me*.

Right person, wrong time.

When the door cracks open, I'm greeted by a sleepy gaze from the pretty blue orbs as he rubs them with a yawn. "It's late."

I may have had one too many glasses of wine after I got home from work. When I bought the bottle, I convinced myself that celebratory wine is fine. I had a victory at work. It's not bad. But then two glasses became three. Then four. And now I'm shaky on my feet when I tell Austin, "I'm a tiny bit tipsy and wanted to see you."

A sleepy smile tugs up his lips. "I like hearing you say that."

"That I'm tipsy?" I hiccup when he pulls me inside and locks the door behind us.

"No," he muses, wrapping his arms around my waist. They don't feel right. "That you wanted to see me."

"You act shocked."

Austin's hands slide over my hips. "Is it wrong if I am? We've both had a lot going on lately that's kept us busy. You've barely reached out."

I move my lips to his and kiss him hoping it'll stir something that we can enjoy, that we both can feel, but he pulls away with a chuckle. It's been weeks since we've had sex. I'm glad. But I need an answer.

One that I think sex could get me.

But he turns me down. “I’m really not feeling it tonight. Maybe in the morning? Come to bed with me.”

Rejection sours my stomach, but I try hiding the hurt by putting my hand in his and following him into his tidy room. There’s not a single thing out of place. There never is. His dress shirts are hanging, his T-shirts are properly folded, and everything on his dresser is organized carefully by size and brand.

All expensive brands. Nothing generic.

Not a speck of dirt on the carpet.

Not a tie left unhung.

And for some reason it...bothers me.

Because he’s too perfect.

But not perfect at all.

When he sits down on his side of the bed and pulls back the covers on the other side for me, I hesitate to get in. “Is it okay that I’m here?”

His brows furrow. “Why?”

Because I don’t think it is.

Why am I here?

I find myself shrugging. “I don’t know,” I murmur, sitting down and tucking my feet under the thin comforter that he steals more times than not during the night. He never gives it back, not even when I find myself fighting for it.

When we lay down facing each other, I bury my hands under my pillow and let out a tired sigh. My skin crawls as I take in his scent. His warmth. It sets off alarms in my head. “Shawn is letting me write my own story for the magazine.”

Austin’s eyes are closed, but he mumbles out a garbled, “That’s cool.”

Two words is all I get.

That’s cool.

I frown. “If it does well I’ll have more opportunities to write, and I may get a seat in the writer’s room for their meetings. I could participate more like I’ve always wanted to. Grow in my career to be where I want in the future.”

All he does is nod absently.

Settling into the mattress, I turn onto my back and stare up at the ceiling. It wouldn’t be fair to get upset that he’s not more enthused when I

showed up at his place in the middle of the night. But that doesn't stop me from having a sinking feeling weighing down my chest that I was hoping this conversation could somehow fix.

"Hey," he says, his hand finding mine over the blankets.

Hope blossoms. "Yeah?"

"Do you mind brushing your teeth? I can smell the alcohol from here."

Any hope I felt drains from my body as heat settles into the back of my neck. Anger. Embarrassment. Sadness.

Heart dropping, I move my hand away and pull off the blanket. Biting down on the inside of my cheek as I head to the bathroom across the hall, I see the frizzy hair I haphazardly tied into a messy up do and examine the redness to my eyes when I glance into the mirror. Instead of grabbing the spare toothbrush that Austin bought for me a while ago, I splash water in my face, walk out of the bathroom, and peek into the bedroom to see Austin still in bed.

I see the comforter shift. "Breena?"

My palm runs down my leg. "Yeah?"

"You smelled like men's cologne," he says, voice deathly calm. "At the restaurant."

Suddenly, I'm glad I'm not in bed with him because I don't know what he'd do if I were beside him. And I don't like that dreadful feeling building in my chest.

He hasn't said anything before now.

Why has he waited?

Before I can say anything, he adds, "I saw you at work. With your boss."

With your boss.

The white rose.

He seemed off, Quinn had told me.

"I was in a meeting," I tell him.

I get nothing in reply, and I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not. Either way, I take a step away from his room. Then another.

He doesn't get out of bed when he calls out, "That doesn't explain the cologne at the restaurant."

A second goes by.

Two.

Three.

It's my moment to tell him. Cut ties. Leave and never look back.

Before I can rip the Band-Aid off, Austin speaks once more. "I will not be made a fool of. Be very careful what you're about to say."

The admission gets stuck in my throat.

Something in my brain tells me to leave.

Walk out. Figure out what to do.

His words are almost too calm.

But there's a storm brewing behind them.

Pulling out my phone, I order my second Uber of the night and wait outside for it.

It starts to rain.

Slow at first.

Then the sky opens up.

Not enough to wash away any of my sins.



MY WET HAIR is sticking to my face and my shoes and socks are soaked. With every step I take, they squish. I hate the feeling.

But I don't want to be at my house alone.

I'm shivering when I knock on the door, knowing the chances of it being unlocked are likely because it always used to be. He has more trust in people than I do.

He'd laughed once when I told him it'd be safer to lock his door and said, "*It isn't like there's anything worth stealing.*"

But whenever I was over, he'd lock it.

For me.

I don't bother touching the door handle though because I'm not sure how he'd feel if I walked in like I'd never left.

A light is on upstairs despite it being after one in the morning. He always stayed up late with things to do that kept his mind too busy to sleep. He was restless. An insomniac.

Workaholic.

So, when I hear footsteps descending those narrow sixteen steps, I hold my breath.

Sebastian stands on the other side of the open door, eyes wide when he sees me standing in the rain. He doesn't say a word as he pulls me into the warm apartment that smells exactly as I remember.

Birthday cake candles.

A hint of tobacco.

It hits me.

Everything.

My lower lip quivers as I start rubbing my chilled arms. "I went to Austin's place. I don't know why. I don't know what's wrong with me."

He closes the door and does a quick scan of my body likes he's looking for something specific. Marks. Bruises. Anything.

I hug my arms around my torso. "He didn't touch me."

Sebastian's shoulders instantly loosen as he squats down and begins tugging off my shoes. First the left one. Then the right.

Then my socks.

Left.

Right.

When he stands, he reaches for my hand and threads our fingers together before pulling me up the stairs behind him.

He leads me to the bathroom, where he's got clothes scattered on the floor. His favorite blue button-down. My favorite olive green one. A pair of black pants. His belt is in the corner, next to the tipped over laundry basket.

I know that belt well.

Too well.

Sebastian is quiet as he turns the shower on and adjusts the temperature. Only then does he turn to me, walk up, and slowly start peeling off my wet clothes.

First my shirt.

Then my leggings.

My bra.

My panties.

There's nothing sensual about it.

He looks at me with only respect in his eyes, not lust. Not heat. His fingers move my wet hair from my cheek before his thumb trails over my bottom lip.

It leaves my breath shaky as I take a deep one and watch him watch me. His eyes are dark, tired, and there's something else in them. Something I can't read.

He leads me to the shower where he tests the water and helps me in. "I'll get you some warm clothes," is all he says before walking out of the room.

I'm naked in his shower, and he hasn't even looked at what two years have done to the body he used to know better than anyone.

There was not one second look over his shoulder. No once-over down my naked body to see the narrower trim of my waist or the smallest change to my boobs.

I hear him shuffling through the dresser drawers in his bedroom across the hall as I stand in the warm water. It takes a few minutes before I stop shaking. I close my eyes as I run my fingers through my hair and hear footsteps creaking in the hall nearing the bathroom.

He doesn't ask why I'm here.

He doesn't ask about Austin.

He watches me turn off his shower, accept the towel he hands me, and slowly start to dry off. A second towel appears in his hands before he helps dry my hair.

I hate sleeping with wet hair.

He remembers.

Once I'm out of the tub, we're face to face. Inches away. Our faces close. Our eyes locked on one another. His bare toes touch mine. I see his chest rise and fall. His Adam's apple bob.

It's me who steps into him until my lips are on his.

It's me who backs him out of the bathroom and into his bedroom.

It's me who pushes him backward until he's sitting on his unmade bed.

I straddle his lap.

I wrap my arms around his neck.

I let the towel fall.

His hands go to my hips, his fingertips gentle but firm as they knead my skin. "What are you doing, Breena?"

My answer is honest. "I don't know."

Then I kiss him again.

He doesn't kiss me back.

Not right away.

Not until I kiss him once.

Twice.

A third time.

When I bite his lip and roll my hips over his growing erection, he finally groans and crushes his lips against mine.

It's not the same as it used to be because he lets me have all the control. I dictate the pace. I choose how long we kiss and where he touches me. His hands don't roam up unless I move them.

I cry out when I grind down on his lap, wanting him to take over. "Please," is all I say.

His tongue dips out and touches the seam of my lips, his teeth nipping my chin. Pressing his lips against the same area his teeth were, he says, "If you want it. Take it."

Take it.

Take it.

Take it.

He told me the ball was in my court.

He'd meant it.

So, I move the waistband of his sweatpants down until his cock springs free. He sucks in a breath when my fingers wrap around him and pump him from base to tip, stroking him twice until he hardened in my palm.

My lips tease his, barely kissing him as he groans from my tightened hold. I squeeze him, trail the pad of my thumb underneath the head of his cock, and then lift up to guide him to me.

Take it.

My other hand winds around the back of his neck as I slowly start to sink down onto him. It stings, my body ready enough to accept him inside me but not enough for it to be smooth.

But I want the bite of pain.

Need it.

So, I lift up again and sink back down.

Inch by glorious inch I take him in until he's hilt deep.

I watch his face twist.

His eyes tighten.

His lips part.

I see pleasure on his face.

Desire.

Lust.

He wants this as badly as I do.

Using my palm, I guide him to lay on his back before gripping fistfuls of his sweatshirt as I start fucking him the way I need to. The noises he makes as his bed creaks from each roll of my hips only has me getting hotter.

I tilt backward to let his cock hit me in the perfect place each time as I circle my hips over him.

Deeper.

Deeper.

Louder.

Harder.

His fingers grip my hips and start to move me up and down him. Tightening, loosening, and tightening again as his head tips back on the mattress until he arches his hips to fill me when I slam down on him.

We both gasp at the sensation.

The fullness.

Does it feel as good for him as it does me?

Effortless?

Like old times?

We get lost in the momentum.

In the movement of our bodies.

The sounds created between us.

Our pants.

My arousal.

His groans.

My moans.

It builds and builds and builds until—

I tilt my head back and let myself go, breaking apart from how amazing he feels inside of me. From every noise. Every touch. Every sensation tingling down my body.

Sebastian never finishes with me on top.

He always takes lead.

Flips us.

Fucks me into submission.

But not this time.

This time he breaks apart with me.

His loud curse is barked into the otherwise silent room until I can feel him inside of me. Twitching. Emptying. Pulsating.

It's only then do I realize what we did.

Accept it.

Feel it.

I move off him, stumbling. Shaking.

His cum trails down my thighs as I press myself against the wall. It's been a long time since I've had sex without protection willingly.

Sebastian sits up and quickly slides off the edge of the mattress, but I can't stop shaking my head when he approaches me. "Breena—"

"No."

"Bree—"

"No."

My body slides down the wall, still feeling him inside me. On the inside of my inner thighs. In my chest. Everywhere.

Take it.

Take it.

Take it.

A sob escapes me as Sebastian kneels down to where I'm curled up with my bent legs pressed against my naked chest.

"Shh," he hushes calmly, his fingers stroking my hair and brushing out the knots. "I got you. I got you."

He doesn't understand. "We shouldn't have done that."

He doesn't answer.

"We made a mistake, Bash."

More silence.

I'm hyperventilating.

Sebastian takes a few moments to pull me into his arms until I'm pressed against his warmth. Those strong arms squeeze me into him, his sweatshirt absorbing my tears. His hand circles my back, gliding in gentle strokes until I find myself sinking into him.

Melting.

Melting.

Melting.

"I'm sorry," is what he finally breaks the silence with.

Sorry. Shouldn't I be the one apologizing?

"I'm sorry," he repeats again, "for everything. For the past. For what I put you through. For making you feel like you weren't enough. Because you're everything, Breena Murphy. Everything to me. Austin doesn't deserve the light you offer. He doesn't deserve you."

His voice gets choked up as he holds me tighter against him. "I'm so fucking sorry for not letting you know how much I needed you."

Need you. Need you. Need you.

"One day," he whispers against the spot of my head he kisses briefly. "One day we'll have it all. We'll have everything we've ever wanted."

One day.

Those two words do something to me.

One day.

My chest tightens.

One day.

It's hard to breathe.

One day.

Three words are spoken next.

"I love you."

One day.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

October 2022

BAND-AIDS ARE WRAPPED around three of my fingers where I chewed on the nail and surrounding skin until they bled. I hadn't known I was doing it until I tasted the iron in my mouth.

Bitter.

Warm.

"Breena?" Dr. Barnett says again.

I snap out of it. "What did you say?"

Her watchful gaze goes from me to the clock, where over fifteen minutes have passed already. "I asked if you were all right. You look a little pale today."

I'd woken up wrapped in Sebastian's arms this morning, snuggled tightly into his warmth and the feeling of déjà vu. A pleasant ache had settled between my legs that I haven't felt in a long time, and it pulled my lips up in a content smile until I remembered everything.

The crying.

The panic.

We made a mistake, I'd told him.

We made a lot of them the past few months, but me the most. For letting it drag on. For letting it get so far. But do I regret it?

I go to bite my nail only to be met by the adhesive barrier. "Do you believe that the world has bad guys and good guys? Heroes and villains?"

She seems surprised by the question but looks thoughtful for a moment. "I suppose there are people whose intentions and actions make them veer toward one or the other. Why?"

"Because we're all supposed to be the heroes in our own stories, right?" I move my focus from my bandaged finger to her. "But what happens when you become the villain in your own love story?"

The contemplative silence has me blinking in wait while she processes my question.

Eyes traveling to the window, I see a butterfly flapping its delicate little wings and remember the paper creation in my nightstand. Once, when Sebastian had been drinking, he'd pulled me into his side and stared at the little butterfly he made me for my birthday like he was trying to figure something out. I'll never forget the dread in my stomach when he'd said, *"My grandmother once said that love is like a butterfly because it's a beautiful and delicate thing. If you truly care about it, you'll do anything to make it happy. Even if it means letting it go."*

It'd been the first sign of the end for us.

Peeling my gaze away from the insect, I turn my body toward my therapist. "I told myself that there must be something wrong with me because my relationships never worked out no matter how much effort I put in. And then when I stopped trying, I met Austin. And he made me feel like...like I should be lucky that somebody was finally paying attention to me like I always wanted. Somebody who was willing to love me even though I wasn't perfect."

Dr. Barnett remains quiet as I sort through my thoughts, picking at a piece of lint on my jeans.

They're old.

Too big in the waist.

Holes in both knees.

Austin hates them.

I put them on because of it.

Spiteful.

Selfish.

Broken.

"Perfection is nothing more than an opinion," is what she finally responds with. "I've found that striving for progress is far better than trying to be perfect all the time."

"That's probably a good thing," I murmur, tucking my legs against my body. "Because I slept with Sebastian last night."

The silence causes me to look at her.

She blinks slowly, clearing her throat. "I think we need to unpack that."

Of course she says that. “What’s there to unpack? I’m a cheater. It’s as simple as that.”

“I’d hardly call that simple.”

Rubbing my lips together, I shake my head. “I read somewhere that love makes people do crazy things. I cheated on Austin because I’m in love with Sebastian. I never thought I’d be capable of that. But I did it. I made the move. I chose to be that person, just like Austin chose to be—” I stop myself.

Dr. Barnett perks up. “What did Austin choose to be, Breena?”

My nostrils twitch open. “I tried breaking up with him a few months ago. I tried ending things a few times. I didn’t tell you because he wouldn’t let me. He said that I was just stressed.” Licking my lips, I tilt my head. “I *was* stressed. I was overthinking everything with him because I wasn’t used to someone like him being in my life. Then I started wondering if I was being as silly as he said I was. Because Austin hasn’t done anything to hurt me. Not really. Not...not at first. He buys me things and tells me he loves me, and that should mean something.”

My therapist sits up a little straighter, her face showing an ounce of alarm that’s not usually there when we talk. “When you said he ‘hasn’t really’ hurt you, what do you mean by that?”

I think about the way he’d grab me. Not too hard but not soft. How he’d pull me in and hold me there like he wouldn’t let me go until he was ready. I think about the basement couch, which I haven’t sat on since that night with him.

Then I think about Sebastian’s reaction to the tiny bruises on my arms.

That’s not love.

That’s not love.

That’s not love.

“I took one of those pamphlets,” is my reply, chipping at another nail. “From the bulletin board, I mean. The one about...about what kinds of abuse there are. I don’t know why I took it.”

Lie.

“But I read it.” I read it in my car in the parking lot at work when everybody except Shawn had gone home. I was afraid of bringing it back for Austin to find. Would he ask questions? Throw around accusations? I didn’t want to find out.

So, I read the pamphlet under nothing but the lights in the lot before throwing it out in a garbage can on the corner of Main Street and Caliber Ave, buried under a newspaper and some coffee cups.

“And what did you learn?”

“I’m not abused.”

“Breena,” she says softly.

All I can do is shake my head. “Austin is a lot of things, but he isn’t capable of that. He’d never do anything to hurt me. I’m smarter than to let somebody treat me like that. I...”

Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic.

What she says next is something I already know. “There is more than just physical abuse in the world. Emotional and mental abuse exist too. Intimidation tactics, manipulation, these are all facets of an abusive relationship. And if you’ve tried breaking up with Austin and he wouldn’t let you by making you question your reasons, that fits into those categories. Has he ever threatened you?”

A pause. “No.”

“Has he ever physically harmed you?”

I think about his harsh grip.

His cold kisses.

My throat tightens. “No.”

“Has he ever forced himself on you?”

I think about the basement.

That night.

The couch.

I didn’t want it.

But I didn’t fight it.

This time, I don’t answer.

Dr. Barnett stands and walks over to me, sitting beside me on the couch. “Breena, I know this is not easy. And I wish you would have told me about this sooner because there’s a lot you’ve held back. But what’s important is that you’re telling me now, which means I can help.”

Sometimes I wonder if I’m beyond that.

“I’m supposed to see him tonight,” I admit, remembering the text I got from him after I’d snuck out of Sebastian’s bed and into the bathroom.

I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a blurry girl. Blurry from tears. Blurry from my stupid contacts that I'd taken out before falling asleep. Messy hair from lack of upkeep. Pale skin. Flushed. Chapped lips.

There isn't a lot about me that I liked when I studied the reflection, and that was when I knew I had to do something.

I'd told Sebastian that I refused to change for anybody but myself. Maybe it's time I finally backed that up.

"I'm going to end things."

Dr. Barnett is quiet for a beat or two. "Do you think you can do that safely on your own?"

Safely. "He'd never hurt me."

"But will he twist your words? Make you feel uncomfortable? Make you second guess your decision? I've seen this before with other patients, and I know it can be difficult. All I'm saying is that it may benefit you to have somebody with you, or perhaps have the conversation in a public place if you don't want to ask Trinity or your parents—"

"My family doesn't even know about him," I inform her, feeling my cheeks heat. It was a red flag from the start, I suppose. "So, I'd never be able to tell them. How could I broach that topic? By asking my little brother to come with me to break up with a guy who I've been afraid of for months?"

The words are out before I can stop them.

Afraid.

Afraid. Afraid. Afraid.

Internally, I gape at myself.

Dr. Barnett's hand finds mine. "What about him makes you afraid?"

It takes me a moment to process my own words, much less her question. When I come up with an answer, it's one of the most honest things I've ever said to her.

Maybe even to myself.

"Settling for him," I whisper. Sebastian told me I shouldn't settle for somebody I think I deserve. I didn't want to believe that's what I was doing until this moment. "I don't want to be stuck with him, Dr. Barnett. I don't want what he wants. I don't want to be molded into the perfect girl for him. I don't want..."

I bat my lashes rapidly to fight off the oncoming tears. “I don’t want his love.”

That’s the first time I’ve ever said that.

I don’t want his love.

“Why did you sleep with Sebastian?” is her next question, spoken so softly it feels like nothing more than a caress against my conscious.

My watery eyes meet hers. “Because I don’t want Austin’s love, but I want Sebastian’s. I needed to see if it was still there.”

“And was it?”

One day, he promised.

One day.

One day.

One day.

“Yes.”



THE CHINESE RESTAURANT smells like oil and fried food, making my stomach rumble despite the nerves that have settled into it as soon as we walked in.

He guided me in with a hand wrapped around my hip, squeezing, holding me to him.

It made me uncomfortable.

Just like him ordering for us did when one of the women came up to us with two menus. He didn’t order my favorite—shrimp and snow peas. But I told myself that was probably a good thing because I wouldn’t have the appetite for it.

Not after what I had to say.

It’s quiet at Foo Chow tonight. Quieter than I expected. College kids usually come here for cheap Chinese food, but apparently this is fates cruel joke on me.

Or maybe it’s a blessing.

Less of an audience.

I’d taken Dr. Barnett’s advice and texted somebody before Austin came and picked me up. I tried telling him I’d meet him here, but he told me not to be silly.

That word again.

Silly.

Stressed.

New to this.

The text had been simple.

Me: I'll be at Foo Chow tonight at 6

It'd gone unanswered, making me wonder if it was in vain.

"You're quiet tonight," Austin says, sipping the water he'd grabbed from the cooler. I absently grabbed a diet Coke. I'm not much of a soda drinker, which is why it's been left untouched on the tabletop dripping with condensation from the warm air.

"Thinking," is how I respond, almost too quietly for him not to pick up on it.

His head cocks. "Does this have to do with your little article for work?"

Little article. He always makes everything sound so unimportant. "Can I ask you something?" His silence makes me take a deep breath. "Who would your best man be at your future wedding?"

Not *our* wedding. His.

One of his eyebrows lift. "That's an odd question to ask. I've never thought about it before."

Sebastian would choose his dad.

"How do you feel about pets?"

His other eyebrow lifts. "Is this some sort of test, Breena?"

"It's a question."

There's a moment of pause. "Pets are demanding and messy."

So are relationships. "Did you know I had a cat?"

He scrubs his face, sighing. "What does that have to do with anything? Is this what you wanted to talk to me about? Because we have far more important things to discuss and we could have done that somewhere less..." The face he makes as he scopes out my favorite Chinese restaurant only makes the sour feeling in my stomach curdle.

"I like it here."

From behind the lip of his water bottle, I hear, "Of course you do."

And I don't know what that's supposed to mean. All I know is that it isn't good. Not when he looks so unimpressed. He doesn't even bother

hiding it anymore.

Swallowing, I decide to sit taller. “I’m going to be writing an article for work about my past experiences. Probably about my current one too. Which means talking about Sebastian.”

It’s the first time I’ve said his name to Austin, and instantly the man across from me locks up. “You’re going to write about your failed relationship for work?”

Failed.

My nostrils twitch.

Failure is all about falling forward.

“Is it failure if you learn from it?” I question him, fiddling with the napkin I unwrapped from the silverware on the table. “I’d like to think not. Plus, writing about personal experience entices readers because they can relate too.”

Austin scoffs. “Be honest with yourself, Bree. You can’t even talk to me about your past. What makes you think you can open up to the public about him? There’s a reason he’s in your past. It’s because he’s meant to stay there.”

“He wants a bulldog,” I blurt. “Like what my parents have. And he wants his father as his best man at his wedding. I doubt that’s changed.”

I swallow, forcing my hands still when I see Austin’s eyes narrow. It doesn’t stop me from saying my piece. “He’s always wanted to work hard to build a future for himself, and he sacrificed me to do it. The reason he’s in the past is because I knew I deserved better. It hurt, but that doesn’t mean people can’t change. It doesn’t mean our experiences aren’t worth talking about or writing about.”

“You talk like you still have feelings to hold onto.” His words are careful. “But don’t you think the feelings you have at this point are residual?”

Residual feelings? If he’d asked me that question a year ago, maybe I would have been open to the possibility. Maybe I would have considered that I was holding onto feelings for nothing more than a reminder of the pain. A reminder of what not to do again.

That’s not what happened though.

Instead, I remembered everything.

Too much. Too well.

Every detail.

Every moment.

Every comparison.

And Bash does too.

Austin would never live up to Sebastian.

“Sometimes we need closure,” he tells me, reaching out and taking my hand and holding it so tight I can’t move it away. “You’ve got to be willing to let go of those emotions you’re holding onto for the life you wanted so you can move on to the one you have.”

With me, is what he doesn’t say.

I try wiggling my hand out from under his until he finally let’s go. “Trust me, Austin. You don’t want a life with someone like me.”

His fingers clench, bending into a tight fist that rests on the tablecloth. “You’re not as broken as you think you are.”

He’s wrong, and he’s about to find out just how much. Because what can I do to prove that to him besides be myself?

“I go to therapy,” is what I tell him. “It’s been months. Almost a year. Basically, the entire time I knew you.”

All he does is blink.

“I tell her about Sebastian. And you.” I pause, looking anywhere but at him. “I go to therapy because of how *much* I feel of the wrong things. You think my feelings for him are baggage, that they’re residual? They’re not. I learned as much when I talked to Dr. Barnett about them.”

He slowly sits back in his seat. “Why haven’t you mentioned therapy before?”

That’s what he’s focusing on? “Because I didn’t know what you’d think of me if you knew. You seem to think moving on in life is as easy as breathing, but it’s not.”

He shakes his head. “It could be if you let it, but you clearly don’t want to move on. What does this guy have that keeps you holding on so damn tightly to him?”

If I could, I’d laugh. *All* I’ve wanted for the past two years is to move on. To have the ability to be freed from the man I promised misery. When, in reality, I was dooming myself with the same fate.

What does this guy have that keeps you holding on?

That’s easy.

My heart.

He never gave it back.

My unborn baby.

A future as a family.

“Everything,” I find myself whispering.

Austin is deafly silent.

I can hear the workers in the kitchen talking loudly in their native language. I hear food being fried in the fryer. I hear traffic outside driving by.

“Everything,” he says slowly. “Whose Red Sox shirt is in your dresser, Breena?”

I don’t answer. It’s not at all what I’m expecting him to say. How does he know about that?

“Who are you up late texting with? Because it’s not with me. I doubt it’s Trinity either.”

Nothing.

He leans forward, capturing my hand and dragging it toward him until his grip pops one of my finger joints. I wince when he hisses out, “I have been more than patient, but I already told you that I will not be made a fool of. Do you understand?”

The breath I let out is harsh. “Let go of my hand, Austin.”

He doesn’t. “Make me.” I try moving it, but his fingers only tighten around mine. “Did you have sex with him?”

My lip trembles. “Austin—”

“Did you *fuck him*, Breena?” he asks, loud enough for anybody inside to hear. I’m sure plenty of people will stare at me when I leave, but I’ll deserve the scarlet A on my chest when I scurry into the night.

Because, in a lot of ways, I deserve it.

His grip hardens, making me wince. “Did you cheat on me?”

I hesitate.

Austin finally let’s go, pushing off the chair with a loud cuss and standing up. “Cheating doesn’t start with sex,” he says, eyes hard as they meet mine. “It starts with a conversation. So, let me ask again. Except this time, answer the goddamn question and put me out of my misery. Did. You. Cheat?”

This time, I don't hesitate as I cradle my sore hand in my other one. "Yes."

He makes quick work around the table, and I have no idea what he's about to do when I hear a familiar voice say, "That's enough."

We both look at the man stalking over to us with a hard expression shadowing his features, but my eyes quickly shift to the person quickly walking beside him to catch up with his long legs. "Trinity?"

She makes it to me first, putting herself between me and Austin, who's still seething. When she sees me holding my hand, her eyes do a quick scan at the red skin. "Did he do something to you?"

Those words have Sebastian standing even taller, towering over Austin. "What the fuck is going on here?"

Austin isn't smart enough to keep his mouth shut when he steps up to Sebastian. "I could ask the same of you. Who the hell do you think you are to barge in here?"

Trinity gently touches my hand. "Is it hurt?"

I'm still processing how she's here with the man currently about to knock Austin out. "I don't understand... What are you doing here?"

Her cheeks turn red. "I was at The Jug with Monty when Sebastian came in and told me we had to come here."

I blink. "Monty?"

Her eyes go to mine. "Apparently, we both have a lot to explain." When her eyes trail over to Sebastian, she shakes her head. "Not here. It's not worth it."

Austin turns to us then, his eyes glaring at my best friend before moving to me. "Is this him? Did you really call for fucking back up?"

I'm about to answer when Trinity does for me, "Clearly there was a reason considering her hand is swollen. Who the hell do you think *you* are?"

Sebastian's face morphs with rage as he ever so slowly looks down at the hand still resting against my chest.

His nostrils twitch.

His jaw moves.

Then so does his fist.

The second his elbow moves back I know what he's going to do, and I know I have to stop it because it's not worth it.

Violence.

An endless cycle.

He wouldn't hurt me.

But he did.

And I won't stoop to his level.

Launching forward before Sebastian can make impact with his intended target, I grab ahold of his arm and watch as Austin flinches.

"Don't," I whisper, shaking my head when Bash looks at me. "Please don't."

Something in my voice must break through to him. He loosens his fist before lowering his arm, letting me move it back down to his side.

We stare at one another.

Trinity puts her hand on my shoulder.

Austin moves back.

"He would have deserved it," Sebastian tells me, not bothering to look at the man he was willing to hit.

Licking my lips, I limply lift my shoulders. "But then we wouldn't be any better."

Trinity's hand squeezes.

There's not much that can be said, especially when the owners of the restaurant start flooding the dining room speaking loudly in choppy English.

But I do say those two words to Austin for the only thing I can be apologetic for. "I'm sorry for wasting your time."

I'm not sorry for not loving him.

I'm not sorry for cheating.

I'm not sorry for a lot.

I told him I couldn't do this.

I told him I was broken.

I warned him.

So, when he says, "I don't care," it doesn't hurt me. Doesn't sting. If anything, it makes me relieved to hear those cool words whipped at me. "You're going to realize just how badly you fucked up by whoring yourself out while you had me."

Before he can say another word, both Trinity and Sebastian walk me out, one of them on either side of me to keep me away from the man

currently spewing God knows what after us.

The second I'm greeted by the cool October air, I realize this is the last time I'll ever see Austin Charles again.

The man I deemed safe.

The wrong man.

Trinity whispers, "Are you okay?"

We keep walking down the sidewalk as I process, Sebastian moving both Trinity and I to the other side of him so we're away from the cars going well past the speed limit down the street.

"What's today's date?" I ask.

Sebastian answers, "October 30th."

I blink.

Blink again.

One year ago, I met Austin at a bar.

Talked to him.

Danced with him.

He never introduced me to his friends.

Never told me about his family.

His dreams. His passions.

One year.

How did it go so wrong, so quickly?

Trinity must know what I'm thinking because she says, "I'm sorry," as if it's her fault.

It's not though. "Don't be." When I look at her, there's a sad smile on my face. "I'm not."

Sebastian watches us as we near his car, curiosity clear on his face. He opens the back door for Trinity, who doesn't slide in right away. Instead, she looks back at us.

First him.

Then me.

Then the two of us together.

"It's always been him," she remarks.

My throat bobs.

Before I can reply, her eyes go to the man beside me. "Remember what I told you."

Then she gets in and closes the door behind her, leaving me confused as I twist toward the person who didn't answer my text.

"I didn't think you'd come."

His words are soft. "I always will when you need me. Always."

There's something unspoken in those words, something I can't figure out. But I don't let myself because I'm tired. So tired. I can feel the prickle of tears in the backs of my eyes as he guides me around the front of his car to the passenger side and opens the door.

"No more," I tell him.

His brows pinch.

"No more pretending."

He leans his forehead against mine for only a moment, our noses brushing but nothing else. "No more," he agrees.

It's a promise.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

May 2020

A HEADACHE FORMS in the back of my neck, making it hard to think. It throbs in my temples and makes my eyes blurry as I stare into the dark room.

My body overheated.

My stomach churns.

Fingertips dancing along his bare chest, I take in the coarseness of his hair and whisper a nearly inaudible, “What are we doing?”

Sebastian is awake, his breath hitching for a moment or two before answering, “I don’t know what you mean.”

It’s a lie.

Because he’s as scared as me.

So, I ask, “Where are we going?”

Love is like a butterfly, he’d told me.

Let it go. Let it go. Let it go.

His chest stops moving, like he’s holding his breath. I am too without realizing it. We always do that. Sync. Does he know? My heart reacts to his—my lungs. My whole body.

That means something.

I’m not sure it means enough.

Finally, his voice rips through the dark of his bedroom. “I don’t know.”

The truth.

I’m quiet.

He’s quiet.

I hear the wind outside.

An owl.

I close my eyes, heart *thumping* against him until he undoubtedly feels its panic. “Do you love me, Sebastian?”

Now it’s his heart pumping wildly.

His breath catching.

One second.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Fifteen seconds.

Love is like a butterfly.

He's said it without saying it.

Shown it without verbalizing it.

Why can't he say the three little words?

They'd change everything.

They'd mean security.

I'd stay. Doesn't he want that?

Twenty seconds.

Twenty-five.

When thirty go by, I know my answer.

Tears burn my eyes, making my headache even worse. "I don't know what I'm doing here."

The arm settled around me, the one holding me to him, tightens. As if he doesn't want to let go. But it's too late.

Too late.

Too late.

Too late.

"You're here because you want to be," he answers, voice thick with emotion. "Because *I* want you to be. You're special, Bree. You always have been."

I blink back the tears, trying not to feel anything for his warmth, for how his hand moves against my skin or how his embrace is full of the emotion he's too afraid to feel.

I try and I fail.

My jaw quivers. "What are those words worth if you don't love me? If you don't prove it?"

"Breena." His voice is choked. "I never said that I didn't love you."

I'm glad we're having this conversation in the dark because I don't want him to see me.

To see the hurt.

The heartbreak carved into my face.

Maybe he'd change his mind if he did, but it wouldn't be for the right reason. It'd be for pity. Because he doesn't want to hurt me.

The truth is he'd hurt me more if I stayed.

"But you didn't say you did," I state, heart cracking with each passing second. "Without actions, words are mean nothing. I thought you showed me your love, but something is stopping you from admitting you feel it. I can't get stuck wondering if I'm enough for you, Bash."

More silence.

A ragged breath.

From the distance, a car horn blares.

A tree branch scratches the window.

I shudder a breath. "You didn't say you did," I repeat to myself, pinching my eyes closed.

Suddenly, something lurches in my stomach that has me throwing his arm off me and darting out of bed and to his bathroom.

I barely make it to the toilet before emptying my stomach.

Two hands pull my hair back.

Tears stream down my face.

Sebastian says, "I'm sorry."

I'm sick of those words.

I'm sorry.

They mean nothing to me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

November 2022

THE LECTURE HALL is packed when I peek through the slim opening. Muffled words come from the middle-aged woman standing at the bottom with a laser pointer directed at an image of a DNA strand on the large screen.

I remember this room a little too well. I know what the scratchy table in the front feels like underneath my bare ass and how hard the theater-style seating is against my hips when I'm bent over them.

"You'll need to be quiet or else the custodial staff will hear you. If you're not, I'll take off this tie and gag you with it. Understand?"

A shiver races down my spine at the memory. I bite my inner cheek and ignore the ache settled between my thighs from everything we'd done where anybody could have heard us. After two rounds in the room, Sebastian had to make good on his promise and use his tie.

First on my mouth.

Then my hands.

I think *it* happened in there.

What changed everything.

Pushing the thoughts away, I walk through the building until I come to the glass doors that lead to the academic offices on the other side. The walkway between the buildings is freshly paved, with new flowers planted along the building's doors.

Bright.

Beautiful.

I freeze when a butterfly lands on me.

I stare down. Eyes hard. Heart racing.

When I blink, it's gone—flying away.

Forcing myself to walk inside when I no longer see the beautiful monarch, I approach the double set of elevators. Instead of taking them to

the top floor, I choose to take the three sets of steep stairs. It helps busy my head. Pumps my heart for a different reason.

When I make it to the narrow hallway that I've only been down once before, I realize how real this is. I think about what I'm risking by being here.

Then I think about the butterfly.

It's what I'm still obsessing over when I stop at the door that has a different name on the plaque than it used to. My lips part as I read the unfamiliar letters.

"Can I help you?" I hear from behind me.

Turning around, I see an older man with a kind smile and bright rainbow bowtie watching me. "Oh, uh..." I point toward the door I thought I'd be knocking on. "I'm looking for Professor Kennedy's office. I thought he used to be in this hall."

The man's smile brightens. "He moved to the other side, right beside the director's office. That young man is going places. We all know if he stays here long enough he'll take charge of the entire department one day."

He hasn't said a word about that. How could he keep that quiet when his job is the reason why we ended?

"Oh." I clear my throat and look in the direction he's pointing to. "Thank you."

"You're her," the man says as I started to step away.

I blink.

"He's talked about you. Has for a couple years now. Poor sap has had it bad, but we've all told him he could fix it if he gives it time."

Another blink.

His smile remains. "I can see what the fuss is about. You're exactly as he describes."

I'm silent as I get directions from the man who's obviously one of Sebastian's coworkers and find myself gripping my bag a little tighter wondering if this is a good idea.

But he's talked about me.

You're her.

That does something to my chest.

I'm rounding the corner and debating on turning around and leaving out of fear when I hear, "Breena?"

My name. That voice.

Closing my eyes, I stop mid-step and let my shoulders pull back. When I peel one of my eye lids open, I see Sebastian in his usual professional attire. That damn olive shirt. “Hey.”

Hey. Like he hadn’t been inside me days ago. Like he hadn’t been at the restaurant to save me from my own demons.

Like he hadn’t been willing to throw a punch for me after everything.

Hey. So casual.

So...*him.*

Wetting my lips, I force myself to take a deep breath and reply with a weak, “Hello.”

The office beside the one we’re standing in front of is dark, and there aren’t any other ones around us. It’s secluded here. Quiet. For him, it’s probably a good thing—a symbol of all the hard work he’s put in over the past couple of years.

“Your office moved.”

His lips twitch upward from the obvious statement as he peeks down at my right hand. The redness went away within an hour the night he brought Trinity and I back to my house. I could tell he wanted to stay, but he didn’t.

Didn’t ask.

Didn’t insist.

He walked us to the door, made sure we got inside safely, and told us both goodnight.

“*Lock the door,*” he’d said to us.

His voice is even. “It did.”

“You didn’t tell me that before.”

“Haven’t exactly had the chance.” He pauses, his smile softening. “I figured we’d have time to discuss that.”

He sounds so sure.

One of his hands travels to his pocket, his stance casual. Eased. “You’re here.”

I fidget with my bag strap, saying the only thing I can think of. “I saw a butterfly outside.”

Cringing at my awkwardness, I let my shoulders drop. It used to be so easy. Conversations. Being near him. The problem is that so much has happened. So much in the past. So much now.

“A butterfly,” he repeats slowly.

I nod.

Sebastian hums. “Interesting.”

My weight shifts from one foot to another as I contemplate my next words carefully. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said. The thing about realistic fairytales.”

Interest flares in his eyes.

“What if the bad guy is mislabeled?”

His hand reaches behind him until it wraps around the doorknob of his office. Turning it, he gestures for me to follow him inside. He doesn’t wait for me to deny him, he simply knows I’ll follow.

And I do.

He sits behind his desk, and I hesitantly sit down across from him in the nice, upholstered chair. He’s got more space here, better furniture. The view looks over the campus. I bet it’s beautiful in the fall, seeing all the leaves change colors on the hills in the distance.

Sebastian brushes his fingers along his jawline. “Why do you think the bad guy is mislabeled?”

My eyes go to the shelf where he’s got pictures of his family—his mom, dad, sisters, brother, and their children—all lined up in matching frames by thick textbooks and bright green plants. He’s decorated.

Made it his own.

Settled.

When I find the courage to look at him, there’s nothing but calmness surrounding him which somehow helps me say, “What if the real bad guy is the main character?”

He scrubs his fingers along the trimmed stubble of his jaw thoughtfully. “Is the main character ever the bad guy?”

I shrug loosely, posing the question that I’ve been thinking about since the diner. “What makes somebody a villain? I asked my therapist about it. She says it’s what they do that makes people look at them a certain way. People can be a good person with bad intentions. The people they hurt are the ones who give them that label.”

He watches me closely. “You told me you saw a therapist at the diner. I wanted to tell you then that I’m happy for you, but we had other things to discuss. But I am. Happy for you if it helps. You deserve that.”

Swallowing, I bob my head up and down nervously. Is he going to look at me differently? Think of me differently? “It helps a lot. It makes me think. Sort through my thoughts.”

But he replies with, “That’s good. Real good that you have somebody to talk to. One day, I’d like to be another one of those people for you. I’d like to be that person now, even, if you’ll allow me.”

Those words help me breathe.

In. Out. Again. In. Out. Again.

“You’ve been thinking a lot about this. Is that why you haven’t been answering any of my text messages?”

I haven’t answered anybody’s messages besides Trinity’s because I knew she’d keep her word and break into my house if I didn’t stop ignoring her after my embarrassing public breakup.

She’d asked me that night how long I’ve been seeing Sebastian. I finally told her the truth—everything. From the day I ran into him at the store, to the time I climbed onto his lap and claimed the feeling I’d been missing for so long.

Every detail was spoken between us.

And when I started crying, she hugged me. Not because she felt bad. Not because she was disappointed. Because she was there. Always. My friend. My family.

And anything you’re too ashamed to admit to your best friend is a choice you should never be making to begin with.

I was done holding back Sebastian.

Because I want to keep making the same choices if it means he’s part of it.

“I didn’t answer your messages because I was embarrassed after what happened. I’d just ended a relationship where you had to witness the worst parts of.”

He leans back and cocks his head, resting his arms casually over his chest. “The important thing is that you’re out of it. I would intervene a hundred times over if it meant you sitting here.”

My eye twitches. “But you shouldn’t have to show up to begin with. I should have been able to handle it myself. I shouldn’t have had to text you.”

That has him shaking my head. “If I hadn’t shown up, what would have happened? I don’t want to even think about it. I know you’re strong,

Breena. But you don't always have to be strong alone."

Lowering my eyes to my lap, I breathe in for ten before exhaling slowly. I know he's right. I've heard it before.

From Trinity.

From Dr. Barnett.

From my parents.

So, I tell him, "You're right."

He's getting that look again.

The one he used to give me when he wanted to control me right before tossing me down and ripping off my clothes.

It makes me shift in my seat.

Squirm for all the wrong reasons.

"If I hadn't shown up," he prompts confidently, that cocky smile on his face, "you wouldn't be here trying to convince yourself it's a bad idea. You were going to run when I saw you in the hall. Admit it."

If he already knows I was going to run, why bother confirming it and giving him the gratification? "Do you feel any remorse?"

There's no hesitation. "For hurting you? Yes. For trying to take back what I should have never let go of? For almost breaking that asshole's nose? Absolutely not."

I blink.

Blink again.

His smile widens. "So, tell me again what you were saying about the bad guy. Let's suppose the main character can be the antihero. Who would that be here? You or me?"

It takes two people to cheat. "We both are, but I feel like the villain. Because all I do is pretend. I pretend around my family. Around Trinity. I pretended with Austin like you said. I never let anybody see me for me because the last time I did that..."

You saw everything.

Glancing down, I fiddle with my hands. "No matter what I do, somebody gets hurt because of me. If I pretend, I'm lying. But if I give up, I'm not being fair. There was a man out there who wanted to love me and all I could wonder the entire time was...*Why me? Why now? Why not...*"
Then, is the word I don't say.

I can't lift my gaze, but I hear every single movement he makes after the words are out in the open. I hear the wheels of his chair move on the floor, him stand, and his shoes—polished and professional—walk over until they're suddenly in my line of view.

My breath catches when two strong fingers brush my chin and move my head upward to meet his eyes.

He doesn't let go as his honey-colored orbs set on my face. "I want you to listen to me very carefully, Breena. You're never going to make everybody happy in life with the decisions you make. There's always going to be somebody hurt by the choices of others. That doesn't make you the villain."

I shake my head, but his fingers don't move an inch despite the movement. "But wanting you, sleeping with you, when I was dating somebody else does."

Sebastian kneels down so we're eye level to one another. "Then let me be the bad guy. Let me carry that burden so you don't have to. Because we both know that there's a reason you let me touch you. There's a reason you let me back into your life. Back inside you. It's not to say goodbye. It's not for closure. It's for this."

I'm not sure what he means until he moves my face toward his until his lips are on mine. The kiss is soft, barely a brush of our mouths, but even the gentlest touch of his lips jumpstarts my heart like it used to do.

The past doesn't matter.

The present doesn't matter.

Nothing matters but this.

This, this, this.

I tell myself not to, but I kiss him back.

I let my mouth open to invite him in and shiver when his tongue caresses mine. I let him hear the sharp inhale of breath that leads to a subtle moan, causing his fingers to thread into my hair in response.

He tastes me.

I taste him back.

Mint. Coffee. Sugar.

He had his favorite mint chocolate.

His favorite vanilla iced coffee.

The taste brings me back.

Makes it hard to think.

Only feel.

And I know instantly that what I'm feeling is only the beginning.

My hands find his face, my shaky palms scraping against his jaw and feeling the skin that sparks something to life deep inside of me. I don't want him to pull away because I miss this.

Miss him.

Miss his kisses.

Miss his touches.

He's right, I realize. Partially.

I let him back into my life for a reason.

Maybe the reason is this.

But maybe it's more.

More, more, more.

He pulls away first, creating an instant ache in my chest, and rests his forehead against mine. I can feel the strangled breath he releases against my lips. It sounds like a chuckle. One of disbelief. As if he knew we both wanted it, but he didn't know if I'd let him have it.

"I've fucking missed you," he whispers, his lips pressing against my forehead for a long stretch of time until he moves them away and nuzzles our noses together. "So much, Bree. You have no goddamn idea how sorry I am."

There's that word again.

I squeeze my eyes closed because I'm afraid of what he'll see in them.

The truth.

That I've missed him all this time too.

He looks up at me through his thick lashes as the light touch he teases me with scorches me from the inside out. "Do you trust me?"

Trust.

I look him straight in the eye. "I don't even trust myself."

He pauses, his eyes scanning my face. My right eye. My left. My downtrodden lips. Does he see the fear? The hesitation? Does he feel it too?

Trinity says that it takes a single lie to create doubt in every truth spoken. But the thing is...Sebastian has never lied. He'd just never cared. Not enough. Not the way I needed him to.

So, do I trust him?

No.

Not like I used to so blindly.

Does that make me stronger now?

Or more pathetic for letting him in a second time. "I don't want to fall into the same pattern we were in, Sebastian."

"I'll make sure that won't happen."

Doubt is the reason tears blur my eyes, making it hard to see him. "How?"

"Because it's always been you."

I'm silent.

"Ask me if I dated anybody after you."

I shake my head.

"Ask me if there was anybody else."

My head keeps moving back and forth.

"There wasn't. Not once. I didn't even entertain the idea because I knew they'd never live up to what I let go of," he says fiercely. "And you've only dated Austin. One man. Two years later. Ask me how I know that, Breena."

My lip quivers.

"I know that," he answers even when I make no move to say a word, "because I always checked in. I knew who you saw and who you didn't. I knew which store to go to and which not in order to give you the space you were so desperate to keep between us. I stopped going to the Espresso House until I knew when you went, so you'd never feel uncomfortable by having to see me. Just because I wasn't in your life physically doesn't mean I wasn't around. I saw everything because I needed to know you were okay. I needed to know after what happened that you were going to live, not just exist. But you never did that, and it fucking killed me."

After what happened.

"You don't know everything," I tell him.

"But I do, baby." A single tear trails down my cheek, which he swipes away with the pad of his thumb. "I know more than you think I do. Which is why I'll be the bad guy in every storyline if it means getting you in the end. No matter what, Breena Murphy. No matter what."

It's hard to think. "What do we do now?"

"Whatever we want."

I look down, fiddling with my fingers. “I think we need more help than either of us could offer. Would you be okay with that? Because I think if we’re going to make this work, we need to see somebody.”

“A therapist?” he asks. He doesn’t sound opposed, which is a step in the right direction. Before I can confirm, he nods. “I think that’s a good idea. We clearly need to work on things. If that’s what it takes to be together, I’ll do it. Anything, Breena. Like I said before.”

Slowly, so slowly, I’m starting to think there really is hope.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

June 2020

I'D WOKEN UP vomiting again, which is why little red splotches cover my cheeks, giving my otherwise pale skin some color that normally isn't there. The glaze to my eyes is highlighted by the sheen in my glasses when the sun hits them, making me squint and lift my hand as I study the building.

Sebastian asked me to come.

He's never asked me here.

To talk.

It's public.

Too public.

I wonder if he did it on purpose.

It takes me ten minutes to find his office, not because I was lost in the narrow hallways filled with bulletin boards covered in college flyers, and Greek life invitations, but because I know what meeting him means.

And each step toward the door that has his name on it is another step toward the end.

I walk into the room and watch him blow a plume of smoke out his open window. "I thought you quit."

He turns to me, somberness in his eyes as he quickly distinguishes the end of his lit cigarette on an ashtray that he leaves by the windowsill. "It's a work in progress."

He is willing to work on something.

"You hate it when I smoke," he notes. I don't recognize the tone of his voice. It's distant.

I don't like it.

I shake my head, gripping the back of the chair in front of me. "Hate is a strong word. I just want what's best for you."

I'm not talking about the smoking, and he knows it. Because he says, "I want what's best for you too."

I wait for it.

The inevitable.

My stomach churns again, and I cast my gaze toward the wastebasket by his desk.

“Breena, I don’t know how long I’ll be here for. They’re offering me more money to teach higher-level classes back in Connecticut.”

Fingers tightening around the chair until they sting, I ask, “You’re leaving?”

“I don’t want to.” He pauses, scraping his hand along the back of his neck before blowing out a heavy breath. “But I need to advance my career, and this is my opportunity to do that. Plus, I’ll be closer to my family. So, I’m considering it. I’d be in a more stable position if I was on a tenured track, but until I collect the proper paperwork and put in the hours that takes, I need to work my ass off.”

I feel pathetic standing in the office that’s feeling more important than me. Isn’t that the truth? He’s choosing work. His career. “And you think I’m somehow going to get in the way what you’re working toward? I want to support you in whatever you do.”

Sadness dulls his eyes. “That’s not what I’m saying. I want to support you too, but there are some things that we can’t do right now.”

“What *are* you saying then, Bash?” My voice is choked, throat raspy from the amount of stomach acid its seen overnight. My nausea only gets worse with each passing second, sweat dotting my forehead as I hold it back.

Sebastian watches me, his lips furrowing at the corners as he gestures toward the chair I’m white knuckling. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“Why don’t you rip the Band-Aid off?” I counter, nostrils flaring with emotion.

“Bree—”

“Say it, Sebastian.”

His jaw ticks. “I’m not trying to hurt you. That’s the last thing I want.”

Every excuse, every delay of the truth, is hurting me. Doesn’t he see that? “Was this ever going to be enough?”

His eyes close.

A second passes.

Two.

“I can’t give you what you want,” he finally admits, pinching the bridge of his nose as he sits forward. “Not right now. I wish I could. But if I’m going to focus on moving upward, it could mean traveling. Getting experience that I can’t get here. Earning more money. Being in a place that I could provide for you. I need to put myself first in order to do that.”

A dry laugh bubbles from me. It’s better than the tears that are threatening to appear. “So that’s it? You’re going to leave me behind and pretend none of this mattered for a bigger paycheck?”

He stands when he hears the pitch of my voice getting shakier. “Don’t you see? It matters too much. That’s why I’m doing this. Your job is here. Your family. Your friends. It doesn’t matter if I want you to come with me. I could never ask that of you. Your life is here.”

But what about our life together?

I stare at him. “Did you ever see a future with me in it or was that all a lie?”

He quickly shakes his head, rounding the desk for me. “Nothing was a lie.”

I don’t believe him. “You said you were all in,” I accuse. “So don’t keep feeding me bullshit or else you would be fighting for me. You would be fighting for *this*.”

Sebastian’s eyes go to the floor, where he shifts on his feet. “I’m sorry.”

My teeth grind. “No, you’re not.”

The next thing he says strikes a crack through my heart. “I told you I wasn’t ready. That doesn’t mean I wish it couldn’t be different. I thought I would be. I thought I could be.”

I reply with the only thing I can think of.

“You’re making a mistake.”

He nods once. “You’re right.”

The sudden illness rising up my throat is hard to ignore as my heart begins pumping harder and harder in my chest.

“You’re going to regret this one day,” I promise, backing out.

To which he replies, “I know.”

But he doesn’t stop me from walking away.

I make it to the hallway when the bile rises up my throat.

I lunge for the closest trashcan.

Except I don’t make it in time.



I SIT IN my car staring up at his apartment debating on my next move. The logical one would be to put my big girl panties on and face this final goodbye.

But there's still a glaze in my eyes that highlight the bloodshot, red-rimmed orbs and a burning sensation in my throat that I can't seem to swallow. The last thing I want is for him to see me like this after he was the one who called a custodian to clean up the mess I'd made by his office.

Before I can change my mind, his front door opens, and it doesn't look like I have any other option but to be strong when we lock eyes through my dirty windshield.

He walks out in bare feet, each step meticulously cautious, opens my car door, and kneels down beside me. He rests his elbows on his legs and looks at me with eyes that hold their own tears before he extends those long, strong fingers across my lap to unlatch the seatbelt still holding me against the gray upholstery.

He sent one text.

Bash: *Come over*

And because I knew it'd be the last time I ever got that text, I did.

My throat bobs with a thick swallow that only makes the emotion balled inside it get stuck further in my windpipe. When I try clearing it, a pathetic, choked sob escapes my lips.

Sebastian's hand reaches for me, squeezing our fingers together and resting his forehead against my arm. He whispers, "Please come inside."

His voice sounds hoarse, as hoarse as I'm sure mine will sound the second I open my mouth. But I don't do that. I let him grab ahold of my hand and carefully move my body out of the car, bend down to get my purse that's sitting in the passenger seat, and guide me inside his apartment.

We're silent the entire time, but there's something brewing between us.

Something big.

Something intense.

I can suffocate from it if I'm not careful, so I have to take deep breath and do my best not to let it as Sebastian shuts the door behind us, brings me

upstairs, and gently pulls me over to the couch that we've spent a lot of time on together for the past month.

My eyes stay focused on the carpet rather than the man who sinks down beside me. Our hands are still connected, our legs are brushing. If I listen carefully, maybe our hearts are even in sync still.

Drumming with nerves.

Beating with anticipation.

It smells like tobacco in here, like he was trying to cover the scent of his cigarettes before I arrived by the lit candles on his table. His balcony door is open. His living room window is cracked.

It's cold, which he loves.

He usually cranks the heat for me.

When I find the courage to look up at the man beside me, I don't know what to expect. Sadness? Pity?

But then he smiles.

Tugs me into his front.

And wraps those strong arms around me.

As though we share the same set of lungs, we both exhale a weighted breath at the same time. I wonder if he feels the pressure ease from my chest the same way I do.

Like his presence is all it takes.

I feel his lips press against the side of my skull as he whispers, "I want you in my life."

Six words of reassurance. Yet, I don't know how they could come true. Not with the distance he's already put between us or the distance he'll continue wedging there when he leaves.

Leaves me.

Leaves this.

All the memories.

All the moments.

He pulls away first, both his hands coming to my face to cup my jaw and my cheek before those magical fingertips trace a steady line up my cheek and around my ear to move hair behind it. Every little movement makes my heart *thump, thump, thump* harder in my chest.

Sebastian's eyes pierce mine in a dangerous way as he rests his forehead against mine. I feel his breath on my lips, his nose nuzzling mine, and a

crackling between us that I know will lead nowhere good.

The tears start to burn my eyes, glazing them the longer we stare at each other. I know he feels this unraveling. How could he not?

“Why do I want to cry right now?” he rasps, scrubbing his face with his palms to hide the fresh glaze behind them.

I take a deep breath to even my tone, so he doesn’t hear the crack in it. “Because we love each other whether you can admit it or not.”

“Then what is happening to us?” He picks up his head to stare at me.

I swallow down my emotion. The second I show him how much this hurts he’ll know I want to stay. But I can’t. Not anymore. “What should have happened months ago.”

He stares in disbelief.

I stare in forced indifference.

“You can’t have it both ways, Sebastian,” my words thick with heartache. “So, I’m making the choice for you.”

He blinks back tears, his fists clenching and unclenching in his lap. “I’d be an idiot for letting you walk away.”

Yes, I think to myself. *You would.*

That isn’t what I say. “You’d be cruel to make me stay.”

Those arms wind around me as he moves backward, laying down and pulling me with him so I’m draped across his front. My ear is to his heart. It’s beating fast. Faster than mine. His lips press against my head again like he can’t help it.

We lay there together, legs and feet tangled up and chest to chest until our heartbeats sync in a drumming pattern that makes my eyes close.

His fingers find the back of my neck, massaging the tense muscles until I let out a tiny noise of appreciation, then they move upward until they thread in my hair, his palm cupping my skull as he holds me as close as he can to him.

It’s innocent.

For a while.

I don’t know who makes the first move.

Or if it’s made mutually.

My lips find his neck and his hips roll upward until his hard length presses against my soft center.

There’s a brief pause.

A moment of awareness.

Of hesitation.

Of silent inquiry.

Do we or don't we?

It's me who kisses him.

But it's him who takes over.

We're a mixture of teeth and tongue and heavy petting before he sits up and circles my legs around his waist and starts moving me over his cock to create the perfect friction that sets off a desperate need I can't control.

My skin is on fire.

My blood is boiling.

My stomach hurts.

Alarm bells are going off.

I don't listen to them though—don't stop.

It's me who tugs off his shirt, beginning the flurry of stripped clothes, hurried kisses, and heavy moans. My fingers roam over his taut muscles as his move over my soft curves, and suddenly I'm being moved up so he can slide down his sweatpants enough to expose his cock.

I move off him to peel down my leggings, before being guided back with sure hands on my hips until my left leg straddles one side of his lap and my right one winds around his waist. It's me who grabs ahold of his hot, hard length and guides it to my entrance.

It's me who sinks down on him.

It's me who makes the final move.

His eyes widen as his head tips back to rest against the back couch cushion, a heady groan rising up his throat as I pick my hips up and drop them back down. The fullness this angle gives me tugs on a need to move faster, harder. My body angling back until his dick is grinding against the perfect spot has me clenching him so tightly his hands fly to my hips.

"Fuck, that's it, baby," he coaxes, eyes desperate when he lifts his gaze back to mine and watches me get myself off on him. I can feel the impending orgasm building quickly, tickling the pit of my stomach, and sending shocks up my spine. I bend forward and capture his lips, kissing him hard and finding his hands to thread our fingers together as I roll my pelvis into his and swivel my hips. The noise he makes into my mouth sparks a version of me I didn't know existed, causing me to do the same

movement over and over again until my legs are shaking and he's grabbing a fistful of my hair and pulling.

Sebastian crushes our lips together before pulling back enough to tease them with, "I'm going to fuck you so goddamn hard."

My eyes roll back as his hands pick me up by my hips and slam me back down until our skin slaps together with every thrust. I can't keep up with the pace he's creating or hold back from breaking apart around him.

My arms wrap around his neck and squeeze, my face burying itself into my bicep as I clench him in an explosive orgasm that has him quickly flipping us until I'm on my back and he's settled between my legs and fucking me with rigor.

His eyes are dark as he repositions my legs to rest on his shoulders and pins my hands to the couch. Each time he drives into me, my back slides, my head hitting the arm of the couch and the pillow wedged into the crevice. The piece of furniture creaks and shakes and the noises coming from me with every thrust of his dick has Sebastian's breathing getting choppy.

He bends down and kisses me, fingers moving from where they pin my arms and moving up, up, up until he's fingering my hair and pulling to expose my neck. When his teeth graze the sensitive skin, I tremble underneath him. And when he bites down, my hips arch instinctively, making him go deeper than he already was until a choked noise escapes him.

His hands go under my ass, picking me up to angle me higher as he continues to fuck me as hard as he said he would, my thighs quaking and breath catching in my throat until I see the telltale sign in his own expression that he's about to break around me.

When he does, it's powerful. His arms pull me into him, crushing our chests together as he spills inside of me. Our sweaty bodies stay like that, catching our breaths as our heart rates come down.

My eyes are closed as I breathe in his musky scent and shiver when his lips gently press against the top of my head, then my temple, then my cheek.

I wince when he pulls out, the tenderness settling between my legs a reminder of whatever boundary we just burst open between us.

The last boundary he'll ever cross.

Sebastian curls into my side, guiding my head to rest on his chest as his fingers comb through my hair.

I close my eyes and listen to his heartbeat caressing me like a lullaby. Unfortunately, it doesn't stop the inevitable from happening.

My palm flattens against his chest. "That is the last time you'll ever be inside of me unless you're begging me to be." Pushing up off of him, I collect my clothes from the floor and start redressing.

"Breena—"

"You already made up your mind about our future by not fighting for it." I pull on my sweatshirt. "This is me making up mine. You will never see me again. But you'll definitely think about me, and I hope you'll be miserable knowing you had a chance and never took it."

"Breena," he rasps, sitting up and looking like he wants to stop me this time.

I won't let him though.

I pull out the paper butterfly from my bag and set it on his table. "A reminder of everything we could have had."

As I walk away, I hold my head up high.

Even though it hurts.

Even though it kills me.

Because I know with every fiber of my being that Sebastian Kennedy is supposed to be in my life.

But it's clear our time was always limited.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

June 2020

I'VE LOST EIGHT pounds in the past week because I can't eat. I can't keep food down. I can barely focus on anything. I've called out of work three times in a row claiming a stomach bug, but I don't know how much longer I can blame that.

Trinity walks into the room I've occupied for days holding two bags, her eyes dim with worry as she sees me in the fetal position on my bed.

Walking over, she sits on the edge of the mattress and says, "It's time." Her hand extends the bag from the pharmacy. "I know you don't want to but humor me."

"It's stress," I reason.

"But what if it's not?"

What if it's not.

I stare at the bag, unsure of what it would mean if I'm wrong. Would it change anything? No. It couldn't. Because if Sebastian doesn't see a future with me, there's nothing I can do to change his mind. Nothing I would want to do.

She shakes the bag. "I love you, Breena, and we'll get through this together no matter what the result is. Please?"

I blink, eyes dry and sore from the tears that have leaked from them over the past seventy-two hours. "This will change everything."

Her hand finds mine. "Yeah, but we'll deal with that a day at a time."

I sit up and take the bag, unraveling it to peek inside at the three tests she bought.

To be sure, she'd told me.

Two things happened after my short trip to the bathroom with the sticks I never thought I'd have to use anytime soon. Things that flipped my life upside down—that reminded me anything can happen when you least expect it.

That loss comes in all forms.

Because three different pregnancy tests came back positive, taunting me with their double lines, plus signs, and one-word answers across the tiny screens.

And that night...Sweet Potato passed.

Life and death.

Two ends of a spectrum.

Trinity held me while I cried on the bathroom floor during both events.

And Sebastian, the man who swore he was all in, who promised he'd be there no matter what, wasn't there for any of it.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

November 2022

SHAWN'S VOICE SNAPS me out of my empty train of thought as I stare at my blank screen. The blinking curser taunts me, making it easy to look away from it at my waving boss.

Quinn whispers, "I heard he's on his man period today. Might want to bring some of that chocolate I know you keep stashed in the bottom of your desk drawer."

My eyes narrow. "Are you the one who keeps taking them? That drawer is locked."

The innocent look she gives me doesn't fool me. I've seen it one too many times. "Better not keep Boss Man waiting."

Sighing, I push off my desk and walk toward the back office where Shawn is waiting for me. I'm not greeted with a warm 'good morning' or anything other than, "I'll need the first draft of your piece by the end of the week. Preferably by end of workday Thursday."

Instant anxiety ripples through me. "I thought everybody had to get you their work to you by next Tuesday before the meeting."

Shawn sits back. "That deadline is for the writers whose work I'm familiar with. I don't know what will need to be done to your article if we choose to run it. I'll need time with Dakota to go through it."

Although it makes sense, it doesn't stop the uneasiness from settling into my bones. "I'm having a little trouble with it."

One of his eyebrows quirks up. "Close the door and sit down."

My heart drops, but I do as he asks.

I catch a few of the women working by the copy machine looking at me with curious eyes before the door clicks into place. Turning on my heel, I sit down stiffly in the chair and fidget with my thumbs.

"I don't think you're a terrible writer," he informs me pointedly.

Blinking slowly, I answer with a hesitant, "Thank you?"

“You edit Ms. Hurley’s articles frequently. I’ve seen you do it even when you play dumb when anybody asks. I’ve caught onto the creative flare you’ve given her otherwise one-note work. I won’t lie, Ms. Murphy, I’ve been waiting for you to step up instead of living in everybody else’s shadow.”

Eyebrow twitching, I murmur, “I don’t live in anybody else’s shadow. I’m simply putting the work I’m paid to do first before going after anything else.”

“Excuses.”

I balk.

Shawn crosses his arms on his chest. “I’d like to think I know you well enough by now to know when you’re making piss poor excuses out of fear. You’re forgetting that I’ve been around for a handful of years now, and even if my mind is preoccupied with running this business, it doesn’t stop me from seeing what my employees are up to. Especially the ones who sell themselves short.”

Is that what he thinks I’m doing? “If you’ve always been so sure I’m shortchanging myself, why not step in sooner?”

“Because forcing people to believe that they’re capable of better things in life doesn’t get them anywhere. They have to believe it on their own and fight for it.”

Why does it feel like I’m at one of my therapy sessions? *At least this one is free.*

Shawn leans back. “Did you know that I graduated from Columbia University with high honors in business? I was in the top three of my class by the time I got my degree.”

“No, I didn’t know.”

His head dips once. “After I finished my first degree, I thought it’d be enough for my father to show me a semblance of respect. Being part of the empire that he’s built has always been in my future, but I wanted to do it the right way. My father likes to hire the middleman who he can control like a puppet to do his dirty work, but I’ve always wanted to run a business fairly. Give people a fair shot. Build something worth being proud of. But Carlton Briggs is a man impossible to please, no matter what you do.”

Why is he telling me this? “You’ve proven plenty by turning this magazine around. Our numbers have more than quadrupled since you took

over.”

“Precisely my point. It’s not about proving to anybody else what you’re made of. If I spent my life dedicating my time to impressing my father, I’d die a miserable man.”

I don’t point out that his mood swings make that a questionable statement because he gives me a knowing look that tells me not to state the obvious.

“We’re the only ones who have control of our lives and what makes us tick. If we live in our own shadows, we’ll never be able to achieve the things we’re truly capable of.”

Now he’s really starting to sound like my therapist. “It’s not as easy as just believing that I can do better. I have ideas for this article, but they’re not translating onto paper.”

“That’s because you’re holding yourself back,” he counters casually. “You used to have a different energy to you when I first arrived. You seemed determined to grow here. I still believe that’s in there, buried somewhere. But then you changed. Anybody here could see it. I even asked Ms. Hurley about it thinking she could give me insight as to why you were calling out so often or why you’d show up looking like a ghost.”

My throat bobs as I swallow.

I don’t want to think about the week of vacation time I’d used to heal. To cope. To grieve. To this day, I refuse to take more than a day off here and there unless Shawn makes me.

He grabs a red pen and points it at me. “You told me during your pitch meeting that you wanted to offer women the truth. What is that? What are you holding back from yourself? Because something tells me that’s what’s going to make the best article.”

Shawn’s eyes travel past me, narrowing as he watches something happening from the other side of the glass wall.

His pen jabs in that direction. “That.”

My brows pinch. “What?” When I twist around to see what’s captured his attention, my eyes widen. “Oh my God.”

Sebastian Kennedy is at my desk.

And he’s holding something in his hands.

My abrupt jerk upward to standing peeks my boss’s interest. From behind me, I hear Shawn say, “I don’t know what your truth is, but I have a

feeling that man is part of it based on your reaction.”

Breath catching, I keep staring at the man who Quinn is making conversation with. I can only imagine what’s being said knowing her eccentric personality. “That’s the man who I promised would be miserable without me.”

An amused sound comes from him. “And do you think you were right?”

I think for a moment wondering the same thing before whispering, “He’s here, isn’t he?”

When I turn, Shawn’s lips are curled upward at the corners. “That he is.” His eyes go back to the man in question. “Write about it.”

“What?”

“Take it from somebody who knows how damaging holding back the truth can be,” he says, gesturing toward my desk. “Being honest with yourself is a powerful tool in life. Maybe the most powerful one. Trust yourself if you can’t trust anybody else. Write your story, Ms. Murphy. You’re not the only one out there struggling in this way, and something tells me your piece can open many doors for many different people.”

It’s hard not to look at Sebastian as he entertains a few of my curious coworkers. He’d told me the same thing. To write about us. So, why am I having such a hard time with it?

“What truth are you holding back then?”

He smiles coyly. “You and I both know the answer to that already. But let me put it this way. My father’s disapproval stems far beyond the realm of my choice in business ethics.”

I frown.

“Piece of advice?” he asks, his lips widening as he stares at the office visitor. “Make him beg for it. If he doesn’t, he’s not worth it.”

Make him beg.

He already has. “Maybe the reason you and I are both so miserably cynical is because we don’t give people a chance to prove that good guys exist in the world.”

His tongue clicks. “And I suppose that man out here is one of the good guys?”

For once, my smile feels effortless. “For a while I wasn’t so sure for selfish reasons, but he is. He’s one of the rare ones.”

My boss tries to hide a smirk with his palm as he strokes his jaw. “Well, then. I suppose I was right about money not being able to buy affection considering the other tool isn’t here.”

I start backing out of his office. “Love can never be bought. Only earned.”

Walking out of the office, I approach the man who must sense me coming before I even get close. He turns, holding onto something that has me stopping a few feet away.

Is that...?

“Paper flowers,” Sebastian offers, holding it out to me. “You hate the real kind.”

People are staring.

But I don’t seem to care.

Sebastian asks, “Dinner?”

My eyes don’t leave the fragile flowers when I take a hold of the hard stems. “Did you make these yourself?”

There are words on them. Printed from magazines if the font is any indication.

“Yes,” he admits. “I’ve gotten better at origami over the years. Say yes to dinner, Bree. Please?”

The smile on my face grows as I stare at the paper petals that look like they’ve been made from previous editions of the magazine I work for. “Yes.”



IT’S RAINING EVEN though the forecast only called for sun today. There are dark clouds blanketing the sky and fat raindrops smacking into the diner window.

Plaza Diner.

He chose it this time, not me.

“Are you cold?” Sebastian asks, tugging at the hoodie of his alma mater. It makes him look younger, especially since he shaved his beard.

There’s a stain on the gray material that I focus on until he’s peeling it off and handing it over to me. As soon as I accept it his scent tangles around me until it’s everywhere. “It’s not going to go with my outfit.”

He lifts a shoulder. "You look beautiful in anything you wear."

I slide the hoodie on and then flatten out my frizzy hair. If I were to stand, it'd go to the top of my thighs. I know because I used to wear this exact sweatshirt around his apartment.

Only this sweatshirt.

"I wish you wouldn't tell me that," I finally say, playing with the frayed end of the drawstring. Once upon a time, he used to try lure Sweet Potato into playing with it. If I look closely, I'm sure I could see little teeth marks from how often my cat would chew it.

But then I'd think about her death, and it would spiral downward from there.

Sebastian pauses for a moment. "I told myself I wouldn't hold back anymore. So, I'm going to say whatever I mean."

That's what I'm afraid of.

"I never claimed to be a smart man," he adds, almost humorously. "But they say men in love are stupid creatures because they'll do anything to sabotage something real."

I grip a handful of his sweatshirt when I hear him say that four-letter word again. "What are you saying, Sebastian?"

His lips move up, but the smile holds nothing but wary sadness. "I gave you space. I gave you time. I looked after you and hoped that you wouldn't find somebody else. But I knew if you had, if you were truly happy with whoever you found, then I'd leave. Leave New York. Leave you. Leave everything I still wanted. That's not what I saw though. You might have found happy moments with him, but you didn't love him like you did me."

Love. Love. Love.

I always wondered what that word would sound like coming from his lips. "One could argue that you were no different with me. We had happy moments. So many moments that I truly believed I loved you."

That smile melts away slowly. "Don't say it like its past tense. I was a fucking coward back then. I thought a career was what would make me happiest—that if I could find stability in my job, I could finally find it with you. Give you what you wanted. I made myself believe that I couldn't balance two things at once."

"All I wanted was you. And you didn't even try to balance things before cutting me out. That's what hurt the most. That's what scares me now. I

would have done anything to be with you. Go as slow as you needed. Supported you. Celebrated all your victories no matter how big or small. All I wanted was an equal. A partner in crime. I never asked you for much of anything. Just you. Only you.”

His throat bobs. “You’re right.”

We’re quiet.

I hear thunder in the distance, rumbling with an oncoming storm. It’s somehow fitting for the brewing tension between us. “You really didn’t go to Connecticut?”

“I visit my family there. My friends.” A small smile comes back to his face. I remember the photos on his social media of him with his nieces and nephews. Of him roughhousing with his siblings and taking cute selfies with his mother and grandmother. “But no. I didn’t go back to work there.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re here.”

Three words.

I stare at him.

“Because no job is worth losing you.”

My bottom lip starts shaking.

He reaches out and touches his fingers against mine. It’s a ghost of a touch, but I feel it everywhere. “Because I love you. Always have. Always will if our situation is any indication. We need work, but I’m in if you are.”

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

“How can I believe you now?” *How can you convince me to, like I so badly want you to?*

His hand moves over mine, encasing it, squeezing it. “You told me a long time ago that I’d have to beg. This is me doing that. I’ll get on my knees, Breena. I’ll do just about anything you want except leave you alone.”

Is that what this is about? “I told you that you’d have to beg to be inside of me again. If this is about sex—”

“This has nothing to do with sex.” He leans forward, eyes hard with certainty. “Make no mistake, Bree. I want to be inside of you again. Badly. But not just physically. I want to be everywhere. I want to be on your mind.

In your conscious. Buried under your skin.” His finger taps my chest, above my beating heart. “I want to be here. Always.”

My head starts shaking. “You never left there. That’s the problem. That’s how all of this happened.”

“I know.”

“And you don’t know what I did.”

His throat bobs. “There’s nothing you could do that would make me change my mind. How could it when I’ve waited this long to tell you what a jackass I was?”

Closing my eyes, I tug on the material of his sweatshirt as if the baggy article is somehow suffocating me with his scent. “Sebastian, you don’t know everything.”

“Breena,” he says softly. “Look at me.”

I do.

His eyes are glazed. “I’d been planning to talk to you after the day you walked out. I wanted to so badly, Breena. You have to believe that. But Trinity found me at work after you ended things and told me I was the biggest asshole and if I cared about you, I’d leave you alone until I figured things out for myself that way I could be there for you, how you needed me to be.”

Trinity did what?

She’d been angry. So angry for me when she saw the pregnancy tests. She’d been even angrier when she took me to the doctors to get it confirmed because I was in denial. Three false positives. That’s what I insisted.

I told her not to go to him.

She said she wouldn’t. Promised me.

But Trinity has always marched to the beat of her own drum. She’s always been protective of me.

“What did she tell you?” I find myself asking, voice inaudible.

His jaw moves, processing. “She told me that I needed to make a decision. Not for me. For you. If I couldn’t step up and be the man you deserved, to plan a future with you, then I needed to step back.”

But he never did. Heart thumping, I ask, “What else did she say?”

He slowly shakes his head. “Nothing. Is there something that she left out?”

She kept her promise.

When I made the decision to book an appointment at Planned Parenthood for the procedure, I made her pinky promise it'd be our secret forever. Nobody had to know. I barely even wanted to remember.

It's why I turned to alcohol.

It numbed the reality of what I'd done.

What I'd given up.

Selfish, selfish, selfish.

Suddenly, I'm shaking. My hands. My arms. My whole body. Because maybe if I'd just told him about the baby, he would have tried. It could have been a sign.

Or maybe we would have been doomed.

There would have been too much pressure. Too much uncertainty. Too much fear. Because if we couldn't work without a child, how could we with one?

"Bash," I rasp, choking on my words. I know I need to tell him. One day.

One day.

He's in front of me in a second, cupping my face and gently pulling it down until my forehead rests against his. "Let it out."

And I do.

The first sob is masked by the loud rumble of thunder that shakes the diner windows, and the others that follow are masked by the pounding rain against the glass.

When the lightning strikes, the power goes out, and we're basked in darkness as the storm brews around us.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

December 2022

PUSHING MY NEW glasses up my nose, I adjust to the thick lenses and blow out a breath. “You can do this, Breena.”

Stepping out of my vehicle and into the cool air, I pull the zipper of my winter jacket up and adjust my purse strap over my shoulder.

Snow falls steadily from the sky. The thick, circular flakes dissolve in my hand when I stick out my palm to capture them. Usually, I can’t stand the cold. But something about this year feels different.

As I walk down the sidewalk, I hear the telltale sign of salt crunching under the soles of my boots. I see the Espresso House from where I stand by the crosswalk, waiting for the light to change and traffic to stop.

When I push open the doors to my favorite café, I’m greeted with the same warmth from the heat and the scent from the drinks.

Coffee beans and bacon.

My mouth waters.

As soon as I stand in line, a body sidles up to mine and asks, “What’s good here?”

Lips kicking up, they travel over toward the tall, stubble-faced man with a charming smile that he’s shooting in my direction. “Depends,” I return, still smiling. “Are you a breakfast fan?”

“For you, I could be.”

I can feel Diane watching us as we approach the counter. “Your usual?” she guesses, looking between Bash and me.

It’s Bash who hands her the money and says, “Can you make the sandwiches and coffee to go? We need to make one more stop.”

That’s how we walk out, hand in hand carrying two cups of coffee and a bag of breakfast food that smells like bacon, cheese, and ketchup.

Sebastian stops us at the corner where he holds open the door to the bookstore and guides us in toward the magazine rack on the right.

That's when we see it.

He picks up the newest copy of *Women's Monthly* and instantly opens to the page where my first ever article is published.

Then he puts an arm around my shoulder, tugs me into his side and kisses the crown of my head. "I'm proud of you, babe."

I take a deep breath and stare at the words that Dakota, Shawn, and I edited. Not that there were many. They told me I should make it a monthly series. I'd get first dibs on the content based on how it did.

After we pay for the copy, we walk back into the cold where it finally hits me.

I'm proud of me too.

Because three years ago I walked into a café never expecting to meet the love of my life, much less go through hell to get him.

But here we are.

Trying.

Living.

I feel a speckle of something heavier than a snowflake land on my cheek, causing my eyes to look up until little raindrops dot my glasses.

It's raining, yet the sun is beaming down on us for the first time in years.



DR. BARNETT'S OFFICE doesn't seem so daunting today because I've got Sebastian by my side. It's our fourth session together. Four weeks. One month. He said he'd try, and he is.

My therapist—*our* therapist—looks between the two of us. After our last session when Bash went to go start the car, I told Dr. Barnett that I wanted to tell him about the baby.

"*It's time*," I'd whispered.

My drumming heart nearly gives me away when I turn to Sebastian like Dr. Barnett tells me to, take his hands like she directs, and look him in the eyes.

"The conversation you're about to have is not going to be an easy one," our therapist begins softly. "But it's one that's necessary in order for the two of you to move forward in a healthy relationship. You're each allowed your

own feelings, your own opinions, but I ask that you hear the other person out before expressing them. Remember what you said your goal was during your first session.”

Forever, we’d each said.

Our goal was forever.

I hope that sticks.

We both agree to her terms.

Our hands tighten around each other.

My breath catches. Mouth dries.

Then I part my lips...and tell him my biggest secret. The last big obstacle.

It’s not easy.

There are tears.

From him.

From me.

His face turns red.

He tries letting go of my hands when he hears the word *baby*.

Then he tries hugging me when the words become too much. Too hard.

We cry together for what feels like hours.

We sit in silence for what feels even more hours.

And slowly, together, we figure out how to heal from the damage the past three years has caused us both. Because when we said forever, we meant it.

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LOVE IS A JOURNEY

*T*HREE YEARS AGO, a stranger asked me if I believed in love at first sight.

Until him, I hadn't.

It took one singular smile from the man I met after a failed dating app meet-up for me to know my life was going to change forever. One look told me I was in for a journey. One smirk told me my heart was at risk. One conversation told me I could trust him.

I hadn't known at the time if that change was for the better or for the worse, and I'd like to think that's because love isn't a singular feeling.

It's not waking up to butterflies every day because you're so enamored with the person you believe is yours, or the prickles of awareness you get on the back of your neck whenever they're nearby. It isn't solely about the spark of every touch you share or the warmth in your chest with every laugh you draw from them.

Love is an anxiety of making mistakes.

Love is a fear of losing them even when you think you never will.

Love is a lifetime of trial and error.

And sometimes, true love means letting them go when it gets to be too much.

I used to think you never forgot your first love because of the impact they have on your past. On how you grow as a person in the present. On whom you become in the future. But the real reason is because you never stop loving them at all.

So, you make mistakes. You become selfish for all the wrong reasons. You self-sabotage because you know you chose wrong by walking away. And when you least expect it, the love you lost suddenly comes back whether you want it to or not. Sometimes life gives you what you need before you even know you need it.

Three years ago, a stranger asked me if I believed in love at first sight.

I told him no.

But I lied.

*Because neither of us were ready for me to tell him the truth.
And I've spent the last three years pretending I was better off without him.*

Love is messy.

It's ugly.

You become someone you never thought you would and do things you never thought you could. You lie and you cheat and you fake happiness to justify every choice you make.

When it's real love, it always come back. And you wind up exactly with who you're meant to be with in the end.

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AUTHOR NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All of my books hold a piece of me in them, but *When It Rains* is based on a lot of personal things that I needed to work out. Past relationships. Present ones. Old trauma, trust issues, and insecurities. Triggers I didn't realize I had until diving into Breena's story. This story became therapeutic for me because it made me realize how important it is to heal yourself and know your worth, so you never get lost in the wrong kind of people.

This story stemmed from my own questions about relationships and love and what's worth it and what's not—when to hold on and when to let go. *When It Rains* is for the people like me who wonder what love really is and question if they'll ever truly get it because of the hardships they've been put through in search of something beautiful.

I wrote Breena and Sebastian's story because of somebody in my life that made me realize what having something worth fighting for is like. What feeling like meeting your person and equal feels like. For the first time in my life, I found somebody who is the male version of me with some of the same fears, but also the same large aspirations and dreams. And maybe it won't work out, or maybe it will, but it's given me inspiration to explore things I've never been able to before.

Love.

Hopefully his family doesn't read this since they've already read at least one of my books. But if they do...*hi*. *insert cringe face*

Long story short, I owe a big part of this book to him. The good. The hard. The in between.

I also want to thank my beta readers who helped me shape this story because of its heavy intensity that made me question if it was good enough. The drafts changed drastically from start to end and I'm really proud of this story.

Thank you to Cat Imb for the stunning cover that screams angst and emotion. It's the perfect representation for Breena's story.

And as always, thank you to my readers for giving me a chance no matter what I write. This isn't an easy book, but it's one I truly believe is going to make an impact.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste is a new adult and contemporary romance author that gives voices to raw, realistic characters with emotional storylines that tug on the heartstrings.

She was born and raised in Upstate New York where she still resides with her four-legged feline sidekick Oliver “Ollie” Queen. Her love for reading and writing began at an early age and only grew stronger after getting a BA in English and an MFA in English & Creative Writing. When she’s not writing, she’s working out, binge-watching reality game shows, and spending time with her friends and family.

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