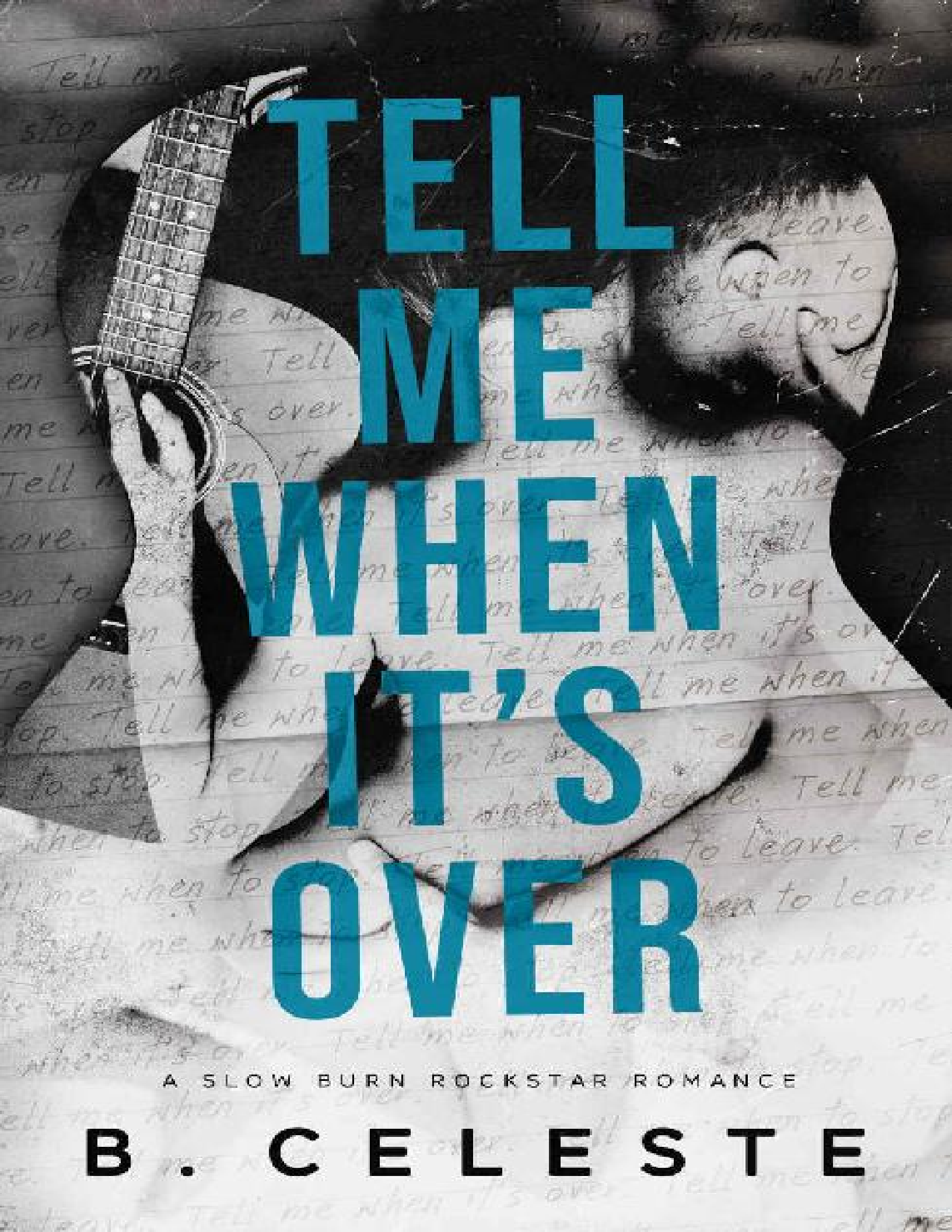

TELL ME WHEN IT'S OVER

A SLOW BURN ROCKSTAR ROMANCE

B. CELESTE

TELL ME WHEN IT'S OVER

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To those who have stuck it out with me, and those who are giving me a shot.

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PLAYLIST

“If Our Love is Wrong” – Calum Scott
“Lose You To Love Me” – Selena Gomez
“Waking up Slow” – Gabrielle Aplin
“I Don’t Dance” – Lee Brice
“Ocean Eyes” – Billie Eilish
“Please Don’t Leave Me” – P!nk
“You Found Me” – The Fray
“When You Say Nothing at All” – Alison Krauss and Union Station
“Everything Has Changed” – Taylor Swift ft. Ed Sheeran
“I Wanna Make You Close Your Eyes” – Dierks Bentley

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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

Where the Little Birds Go

Where the Little Birds Are

Into the Clear Water

Color Me Pretty

If I Could

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PROLOGUE

"ARE YOU GOING TO LEAVE AGAIN?" I ASK HIM.

There's a small pause that feels like it stretches an eternity as my heart *thumps* loudly, rattling my ribcage. Then, from the bed before me, there's a quiet, "No."

"Are we going to talk about it?"

He rasps, "No."

There's thick tension permeating the air, but it hasn't suffocated us yet. "Can I sleep in here tonight?"

I wait for the inevitable "no" to follow the hesitant silence, but it never does. After waiting a few long heartbeats, I walk into the room, toward the lump under the thin sheet he sleeps beneath.

Even though it's dark, I see his eyes moving in my direction, feeling them piercing my face until my skin tingles. To my surprise, he says, "Okay."

I toe out of my shoes and slide into his bed, keeping plenty of distance between us. We don't touch or talk, only breathe until another eternity passes.

I turn onto my side, back facing him, and whisper, "I think I may break up with Chase."

No answer.

No sound.

Is he even breathing?

Then there's a tug on my hand as nimble fingers wrap around mine, then a palm, and I swallow down my words. He pulls me closer to him,

both of us facing each other now, his mouth dangerously close to mine, and stays there.

He doesn't move.

Doesn't speak.

Throat bobbing, I press a kiss against the corner of his mouth. *I* do that. *I* become that person, and I don't think about the consequences when his breath hitches or when he moves enough where our lips line up like he's daring me to do it again.

And I want to.

I crave it.

Both of us breathe hard, making it the only sound in the dark room. His hand tightens around my palm, his nose caressing mine, his lips so close I can practically taste them.

I close the distance, kissing him lightly, slowly, unsure, but wanting. Neither of us moves to deepen it, we just breathe into each other like we're giving one another life. As if, in this moment, the faintest touch of our lips is all there is.

Nobody else matters.

Nothing else could get to us.

In that moment, I realize something soul crushing.

Maybe I'm not so different than Mom after all.

And when I wake up in the morning, he's already gone, the sheets on his side of the bed cold.

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CHAPTER ONE

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

"JESUS FUCKING CHRIST." I watch all the assholes crowding the gate with their cameras flashing at the tinted windows waiting for their money shot. I have no intention of giving them one. "How did they know, Gordy?"

My manager straightens, tugging at the t-shirt with my name across the chest. "I don't know."

The thing about Gordon Fuller is that he's a terrible liar. But the son of a bitch is my oldest friend, so I won't fire him even if I'm tempted to sometimes. "How. Did. They. Know?"

He visibly swallows, yanking at the collar of the tee again before wincing at the pointed glare I cast in his direction. "Don't be angry. I'm only doing what Mia—"

"*Mia*?" Fucking hell. "What exactly did my sister tell you to do?"

His hesitation as the driver gets through the gates that the paparazzi are trying to break past has me closing my eyes and pinching the bridge of my nose. I don't know what my devil worshipper of a sister told him, but I know it had to be good for him to go behind my back. "When she called about the rumors that you were coming to visit, she made me talk. Said it was about time you came home."

Closing my eyes, I lean back against the leather seat and hold in the string of creative curses. Leave it to Mia Casanova, formally known as Pop Princess Mia Bishop before marrying Dylan Casanova, to make a scene. I

haven’t been to the Hills since I left almost three years ago. This shit show, the one of strangers yelling my name and questions outside the property, reminds me why.

“I’m sorry,” my best friend says. “You know your sister terrifies me. She said she’d find inventive ways to castrate me if I didn’t confirm your arrival, and your mother wasn’t speaking up about it when Mia asked her.”

“And I suppose Harry wouldn’t even return her call,” I pry, referring to our father. It would be a cold day in hell before I’d call him one. We’ve been on a first name basis since he sold me off as a child star and took all the money I made to put toward my “future” as a national singing sensation like he was doing me a favor. It isn’t like I hated the job. Singing feels freeing, strumming my acoustic is a passion, and seeing people sing along to every song fills my chest with a hell of a lot more love than Harry Bishop could manage. Our biggest problem is that he never saw me as a son—simply an employee. Someone to make him money, and I learned a long time ago to stop expecting anything different.

As suspected, Gordy clears his throat and rubs the back of his neck as the car parks in front of the massive stonewashed mansion that’s five times too big for my sister, her husband, and our mother that moved in with them last year. Then again, if what the tabloids are saying is true, I’m going to be an uncle soon. Not that a baby, three adults, and two annoying as fuck corgis need a 9,000 square foot house.

“She didn’t say,” admits my clammy friend. He wipes his palms down his thighs, letting the denim absorb the sweat that he’s producing in record-breaking time. People told me not to hire him to manage me, but I ignored them. He knows his shit, and better, he knows me. That comes in handy when he’s brokering deals on my behalf. “I have to warn you, though. Mia mentioned that she had a surprise for you. I know you’re not a fan of—”

“A surprise?” I groan, palming my face. The last time Mia surprised me it was a going away party I strictly told her *not* to throw. She decided to invite all my “friends” who actually hated my guts after I spilled some gossip to a few reporters. I still don’t feel bad about it considering they fucking started it. You can’t sleep with another guy’s girl and expect him to be cool with it.

“If it makes you feel better, she said you’d like it. I couldn’t press her for any details, not that she’d give me them anyway.”

He’s got that right. I love my egotistical big sister. She’s the only one who stands up to my father for me and encourages me to do whatever the hell I want. When she found out that I was leaving California and taking a hiatus after turning down a huge role that would have “cemented my title as the next James Dean”, at least according to Harry, she only questioned me a little before giving me a hug anyway. After all, her acting career started after she built herself as a music icon. She thought I could do the same. Better, even.

Turning down the role took no hesitation, though. I don’t want to act. I want to write music, maybe do a gig or two, and breathe. Being a Bishop is suffocating. Living in my father’s and older sister’s shadows is like a boot to the chest that never lets you up.

Mia only pushes when she thinks someone is making a big mistake, and she let me walk away into my own slice of peace for a few years. Still working, just behind the scenes. If I disappeared altogether I’m sure she’d have more to say—probably would have shown up at my place just outside New York City to give me a piece of her mind that I definitely did not want to hear. Then or now.

“Somehow, I don’t believe her,” I grumble, sliding toward the door. Looking over my shoulder at the mayhem behind the gates, I shake my head. “I wish she would stop with her theatrics. She’s always trying to make a point.”

The point being that I hide too much—that people are interested. Of course they are. Me surfacing means more money in the pocket of those vultures calling out to me right now. They want the scoop. The scandal that’ll buy them a new house, Lambo, and wife. As far as I’m concerned, they can go fuck themselves.

Gordy chuckles lightheartedly. “She wouldn’t be Mia without her theatrics.” He would know. He’s been my friend since we were in our early teens. We went to the same prep school and had the same classes, except we come from very different families. His may be rich, but they are the biggest assholes on the planet and treat him like trash for no reason other than they can. His father is some investment banker, his mother comes from old money involving a shoe line, and Gordon is their only child after spending years struggling to have any at all. You’d think they’d see him as royalty then, spoil him rotten, but some people just aren’t meant to be parents, and they’re at the top of that list.

He knows what my sister can be like, aka a pain in the ass when she's determined, or how my mother is when she gets into her wine after a "long day" which is always on days that end in "y", and what a dickhead my father is. All in all, Gordy knows my secrets. But unlike most people, I trust him with them.

Opening the back door, I slide out with my head down and instantly hear people shouting my name. I know Gordy is right behind me, ushering me toward the front doors like he can protect me from the paparazzi even though he's five-eleven to my six-three and a solid fifty pounds lighter thanks to my incessant need to work out and weight train.

Almost as soon as my body surfaces, the loud inquiries start from behind me.

"Kyler! How does it feel to be home?"

"Kyler, why did you decide to come back?"

"Who's the girl inside, Kyler?"

The girl inside?

I almost turn but hold myself back, not having much time to think about the question before the front door opens and my sister greets me with her arms stretched wide. "You made it, little brother! My god, you must really be eating your vegetables over there."

I roll my eyes and give her a one-armed hug. It isn't like she doesn't stalk my Instagram whenever she can. I've seen her comments, which are usually annoying albeit hilarious roasts on some of my pictures. I make sure to post so I don't become a "Where Are They Now" special down the road like she and my agent fear. There isn't anything exciting on my feed. Some selfies, a few candid shots of my workout routine at the gym, and a couple of some dates I've been on that never went anywhere but the bedroom. I have no qualms with admitting my one-and-done way of "dating" since half the people I go out with only want one thing from me anyway. To say they bagged Kyler Bishop. So, whatever. It's equally beneficial. We both get off, and they go home.

"Can you let me inside now?" I ask, unwinding my arms from her slim body. She doesn't look pregnant, but who knows. Mia has always been obsessed with staying a size zero, dieting to new fads, modeling couture fashion that looks like it belongs on prostitutes, and wearing a face full of makeup that ages her. She got used to the lavish lifestyle early on when her first single went to the Billboard Top 100 and her agent insisted that she

wear makeup to make herself look older than the fifteen years she was when she hit instant stardom. Clearly, she's still living in the fantasy world where she isn't in her late twenties. Not that I would remind her. I like having my balls attached to my body.

"Of course." She walks in, all but dragging me along with a strength I forgot she has. My sister always asks me if I'm the one doing 'roids, but her freakish grip makes me wonder if she slips something extra into those weird ass shakes she loves. "Mom is out back with Dylan and the boys, and we'll join her in a few minutes."

We stop in the foyer and I look around to see nothing much has changed. There are new pictures hanging along the walls of her and her husband Dylan and their two dogs, or "the boys" as she always refers to them. My mom is in one of them and she looks thinner than I remember, but healthier than the years she was tied down by Harry. Happier. Off to the side is a massive white marble staircase that leads to the second and third floors, carpeted by a hideous white that never made sense to me considering everything here is monotone. Too bright. Too boring. Too fucking clinical. It makes me miss my place on the east coast. It was nothing special, a lot of wood and stone, but nothing like this museum where I could talk and hear my voice echo.

"Before we go any further, I have a surprise. I'm sure *Gordy*—" She pins my friend with her eyes until he shrinks back. "—already told you because he can't keep his mouth shut, which is why I wouldn't tell him what it is. But you're going to love it."

I eye her doubtfully until I hear light footsteps coming from behind me, then a soft voice call out a hesitant, "Ky?"

Spinning around so quickly my vision blurs for a second, I'm met with a heart-shaped face wrapped in a tan complexion from the brutal west coast sun, big hazel eyes that I know from the past lean more toward gray than the other colors they're mixed with, and that button nose she said people used to pick on her for because it made her look "too young" despite her being just that. Young. Real fucking young.

"Jesus Christ." I don't even think before I'm in front of her, arms wrapping her up in the tightest damn hug I've ever given anybody. Her head lands just under my chin, which means she's gotten taller over the last couple of years.

“Hey, Lele.” The nickname feels foreign on my tongue as it passes my lips. I squeeze her tighter like I don’t believe she’s really in my arms before stepping back, giving her a quick once over to see what time has done to the girl I once believed was family.

“I wish you’d stop calling me that.” Her cheeks blossom with pink as she kicks the carpet with a sandaled foot. Yep. Still loves those ridiculous strappy things that leave ugly ass tan lines on her feet.

I grin. “Never.”

Leighton Grier. Lele to me, but we all mostly call her Lenny. She must be close to five-eight at least. Tall. Long legs, short torso. Lean. Grown up. Her ebony hair falls well past her shoulders in tight curls I know she hates, and the strands have lighter highlights now to make the dark color less intense. I know for a fact she loathes keeping her hair down, so it wouldn’t surprise me if, by the time I leave today, it’s in one of those braided over-the-shoulder ‘dos Mia always helped her with.

“You’ve grown up, kid.” I whistle and smile when she rolls her eyes at me. I’m not used to seeing her wear makeup, but her eyes are rimmed with black and her lashes look abnormally long, like Mia’s been helping her style her face even though she doesn’t need it. At least it’s not caked on like her mother’s used to be. The woman who gave birth to the purest fucking girl in front of me looked so fake it pissed me off every time I had to see her.

The thing about Leighton is that she could be passed as a Bishop. When she and her mother showed up on Harry’s doorstep with paperwork saying Lenny was his, it wasn’t hard to imagine. Same hair color, though Harry’s has since turned gray over the years, and same wide eyes favoring gray like Mia and our father. Except, Leighton’s tends to change colors depending on the day, her mood, or what she wears. The color is almost always melted lead, but sometimes it turns blue-gray, and on rarer occasions, the orbs will be a light brown. None of our eyes do that. But the papers, which were checked over carefully, on top of our classy sperm donor’s admission that he had had an affair with Leighton’s mother Katherine on more than one occasion, made it certain. Leighton Grier was our sister. Except, the tale became far more complicated than that as time went on.

“I hope so,” she murmurs, flattening out the purple blouse she’s wearing. The color always made her eyes pop, and they look as beautiful as I remember. “It’s been a while since you saw me.”

My lips twitch. She still sounds like the Lele I know, but older. More mature, I guess. Mia doesn't give me a chance to say what I should have years ago before cutting off contact with her. "Leighton is in need of our help, so it's perfect that you're here, Ky."

I blink. "Me? Why?" Lenny stares at the floor, making my brows pinch at her unusual silence. It'd taken her a while to warm up to us, but she ended up being a talkative kid. Though, maybe kid wasn't the right word considering she'd shown up when she was twelve. Twelve is certainly not how she looks now, makeup or not. The tight, fitted clothing covering her body emphasizes that point in a brutally painful way. "You're not in trouble, are you?"

Mia snorts. "Lenny? No. Come on, Ky, I know it's been a while, but our little Leighton wouldn't dream of stepping into your shoes."

I flinch, though she's not wrong. Growing up, I tended to be known as a grade A prick. Still am, at times, even at almost twenty-five.

"It's nothing like that," Leighton says quietly from beside me. She still won't look up, and I know it's a tell. When she's worried about what someone thinks, she can't meet their eyes.

It's Gordy who says, "Maybe we should go sit somewhere?" He must sense this is more serious than Mia is letting on. My friend has had a soft spot for Leighton as soon as she stepped into our fast-paced world. Coming from nothing to being related to a household of celebrities, *the* Bishops, wasn't easy for her. We all saw how her mother treated her, and I think Gordy felt for her, related to her. To be honest, it made me nervous at first. I wasn't quite sure what his intentions were when I'd see them talking alone or catch them laughing at something, especially as she got older. I know my friend, though, and knew he wouldn't do anything to my little— Well, to Lele.

We end up in the dining room, around Mia's expensive designer table that I'm pretty sure she and Dylan never actually use for more than show. "What's going on? I'm getting nervous."

Mia waves her hand in the air. "Don't be such a worrywart. Lenny called me a few days ago asking if it was okay if she came to talk to me about something. I, of course, was excited to see her." She beams at Leighton. "I missed having you around."

My sister liked having another sibling she could torture and look after. Not that I would ever admit it, but she used to paint my toenails when I was

a kid to debate which color she wanted to do on herself and don't get me fucking started on the makeup. With Leighton, I didn't have to succumb to the shopping trips and makeovers anymore. I let her take over that torment.

"Anyway, I got Lenny a plane ticket to fly out here and—"

"Wait, hold on." I stare at the two of them in confusion, settling my gaze on Lenny. "Why would you need to fly? Where were you?"

She shifts in her chair, which is between me and Mia. "I thought you… Uh, my mom moved us back to Arizona."

"When?"

Her shoulder lifts.

Mia sighs. "Honestly, little brother, when do you think they moved?" Her thinly plucked eyebrows dart up expectedly until I get what she's not outwardly saying. *Oh*. They moved after the truth came out, and that happened shortly before I left.

Squeezing my eyes closed for a second, I scrub a palm down my face. I need to shave the stubble that scratches my skin. "Shit. Sorry." I think Leighton apologizes too, and I wish she didn't. It was hard getting her to break that habit the first time. Knowing she reverted to it makes me twitchy.

"*Anyway*," my annoying ass sister continues pointedly, "she arrived yesterday morning. Len, do you want to…?"

My eyes go toward the eighteen-year-old squirming next to me with her hands perched in her lap. She's probably twiddling her thumbs, fidgeting like she always does under pressure. After a shaky exhale, she nods once. "I don't know if you heard, but my mother passed away a few weeks ago. Car accident."

Shoulders locking, I sit straighter. I hadn't heard that, and I glare at my sister in accusation knowing she probably retained that information on purpose. It's no secret that I didn't like Katherine Grier. Doesn't mean I wanted to see her dead even when she talked down to Leighton like her daughter was an inconvenience. "I didn't," I say sympathetically.

Mia smiles tightly. "Maybe if you actually picked up the phone when I call, you'd know more things."

My jaw ticks, but I don't have the right to argue with her. She's right. Avoiding California and the people in it didn't earn me the right to know everything that's happening in their lives.

"It's…" Lenny shrugs. "It is what it is. Um, anyway, I wouldn't have bothered anybody here after what happened, but my mom's family sort of

disowned her and me a long time ago, and I still don't know who my father is." When she winces and dares to peek through her lashes, I see the fear in her eyes. What does she think I'll do? Judge her? It was never her that I had an issue with, it was always her mother. Maybe if I'd gotten past my issues with Katherine, I would have found time to thank her for bringing Leighton into our lives—into *mine*, because she was the best thing in it after so long of thinking there was nobody like her out there. Kind. Genuine. Innocent. She didn't cling to the lifestyle we lived. If anything, she repelled it. "I don't have anywhere else to go," she whispers.

My heart shatters in my chest, the tiny pieces sinking to the depths of my ribcage. All eyes are on me when I hear those seven words, probably seeing the pain threaded into my deep frown. Mia finds my eyes and nods slowly, reaching out to grab one of Leighton's hands. My sister says, "You have us, Lenny. No matter what."

I cuss to myself. "She's right. You're always going to have us backing you. Shit, Len, I should have stayed in touch. Tried harder to make sure you were okay."

Again, she shrugs. Shrugs like it isn't a big deal when it is. She loved her mother even though she saw her faults, and now she's gone. How could she lift her goddam shoulders like me not being there for her isn't huge deal? Fuck, it's unforgiveable.

I curse again.

When I reach out, I try not letting the way she slightly flinches away soak into my conscience. I hurt her. I get it. I feel worse than she probably knows, but I felt like it was better to rip off the Band-Aid when I went away. She had her life and I had mine, and we'd caused her enough scrutiny when the press got ahold of the shit her mother created. I wanted her to have a fresh start—had *hoped* her and her mother would be better off anywhere but here.

"Len, look at me," I say softly. I'm surprised when she obeys, gray eyes dull from the thoughts in her head. "I'm sorry. For everything. Truly, I am. Whatever you need, I'm here for you now. Okay?"

Her throat bobs, then she finally nods. I don't think she believes me, but I'm determined to prove myself. I was there for her before, and I want to be the person she can depend on now.

Mia says, "Good. Because I think there's something you can do that would benefit the both of you." I eye her skeptically, hearing the plotting in

her tone. What the hell is she up to? “You need to move back to California and let Leighton live with you.”

Leighton and I both snap to attention, saying, “What?” simultaneously.

Mia’s smile widens. Gordy chokes out a laugh and tries covering it with a cleared throat when I shoot him a look. “It’s perfect. You’ll come back home and give Lenny a place to stay. You two were always closer than the rest of us.”

I blink at her, gaping most likely. It isn’t like I wouldn’t give the shirt off my back for Leighton, but moving back here right now? Moving someone in with me after all this time of having my own space? It doesn’t seem like the best idea, not that my sister has had many of them. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I have my own life back in New York. Why wouldn’t you offer one of your rooms here? You’ve got plenty of space.”

From the corner of my eye, I notice the black-haired girl in question wince and sink into her chair. I realize what she must think of my response and flinch myself. “Lele, it isn’t that I don’t want you in my space. I promise I’m not trying to be a jerk.”

“To answer your question, I’m starting season three of my show in two weeks. You know, the one where they follow me around everywhere? The producers already have a solid narrative and adding Leighton to the mix will change everything. Last I checked, you’ve been all about Lenny’s privacy. I agreed to that then, and I still do. So, unless you’re both interested in being permanent features on my TV show—”

“No.” The snap from me is instant. The last thing I want to do is become some damn pawn for reality TV, and that doubles for Leighton. No, fucking thank you. Mia’s show *The Casanova’s* started over two years ago as a new venture for her “acting” career. Her husband and my mother may be fine with being followed around and asked questions but I’m not. Never have been. So, when she invited me to be part of it, even just to make cameos here and there, I almost always refused. It’s one of the biggest reasons I stopped visiting on holidays because they’d shoot specials with the family to see how they spent them together and get into everyone’s business.

Hard pass.

“That’s what I thought,” she concludes.

Moving here though? Making Leighton move in with me? She’s technically an adult in the eyes of the law, which means she can make her

own decisions and I won't force her to choose something based on me. Wait — "Did you graduate high school?" My mind storms with a list of to-dos thinking about what I'd have to do if she moved in. I'd have to put her back in Saint Michael's, get her new uniforms, probably help her with homework like before—

Lenny nibbles her bottom lip. "Sort of."

I cock my head, eyes narrowing into inquisitive slits to study her. "What does 'sort of' mean? How can somebody 'sort of' graduate high school?"

There's a pause, a hitch in her breath, before her body gets tight. "I got my GED last year. Mom needed my help, so I missed a lot of classes and they were threatening to hold me back. I didn't want that, so I dropped out."

She *dropped* out of high school?

"Christ," I murmur for the millionth time, combing my fingers through my hair. It's a good thing my late grandmother, a very catholic woman, isn't here or I'd have brain damage from her smacking me upside the head over taking the Lord's name in vain. *Sorry Nana.*

Leighton's smart. When she moved here the first time, she was sent to a prep school not far from our place. Saint Michael's had it all. Uniforms. Rich pricks. Admittedly good food. The works. I also know she hated every second of it, and if nothing else, she was probably glad moving away meant not being forced to keep going. Though both Mia and I had offered to help her out if she wanted to stay.

Saint Michael's is a great school for people who want bright futures like Lenny always did. It would have been worth her while sticking it out, dealing with the assholes, and getting the kind of recommendations she would have needed to move onto bigger and better things.

Leighton didn't accept the help, though. Not the money, the support, not anything. The thing about Lenny is that she's blindly, stubbornly loyal. That loyalty became faulty. There has never been a doubt in her mind that she'd follow her mother anywhere even if it meant sacrificing everything she had going for her. It makes me hate the woman, dead or not, even more, and I don't care what that says about me.

I blow out a breath. "What do *you* want?"

She seems taken aback by the question, so I let her think about it. *Really* think. I'm not sure she's ever had the opportunity to choose for herself, so I want her to have a say.

So, the words that come out of her mouth don’t surprise me. “I don’t want to be a burden.”

Mia sighs dramatically. “I’ve told her like a million times that she’s never going to be one, but she won’t listen.”

“Again, I agree with Mia.” Though it physically hurts me to say.

“Which doesn’t happen often,” Mia points out cheerfully, as if reading my mind.

“And won’t happen again,” I warn. My sister doesn’t seem to believe me, but I ignore her for the time being to focus on the person who does matter right now. “So, what is it that you want? Don’t worry about being a burden to anyone. You never were.”

I’m sure some people, namely her mother, would dispute that. Maybe even Harry when she first showed up. It’s not my fault he sank his dick into so many women he couldn’t figure out if he’d fathered any other children besides us. Leighton grew on him, though. Even after asking her and her mother to leave, he’d ask Mia about her. The old man barely asks about me. That means something.

The way her eyes stay locked on her lap tells me she isn’t sure what she wants. I get it. Her life has been derailed more times than she can count thanks to her mother—hell, thanks to us too. It’s sad she died, but Leighton is better off, not that I’ll ever tell her as much.

“Do you plan on attending college?” I pry, eyeing the way she jerks like I slapped her. I used to help her study for tests, proofed her assignments, and quizzed her before exams. She’s far smarter than I ever was in school. There’s no reason she shouldn’t go to college with the grades she used to get, especially considering she’s mentioned her interest in getting a degree a time or two in the past.

“I still want to go,” she murmurs, rubbing her arm. “I’m just not sure it’s in the books for me anymore.”

“That’s bull,” my sister pipes up. “Come on, Lenny, you used to talk about going to Stanford all the time. Remember? We even took you to tour the campus. It’s all you talked about for months afterward.”

When she remains silent, I know something is wrong. “Mia, Gordy, can I talk to her alone for a few minutes?”

They both share a look before nodding at me, scraping their chairs back. My sister says they’ll be out on the back deck when we’re ready, though I

can see the wheels turning in Leighton's head like she's planning her escape. Serious talks have never been her thing, but too damn bad.

"Talk to me," I say softly once we're alone, tapping her arm until she peeks at me through her thick lashes. "Mia is right, you were set on going to Stanford. What happened?"

"Kyler, it's—"

"And *no* excuses," I cut her off knowingly.

Her cheeks turn red. Sucking in a long breath, she closes her eyes and admits, "My grades dropped. I missed too much school and had two options. Retake my junior year and get setback a year or drop out and take my GED to stay on track." When she opens her eyes, I see sadness willowing in the dark depths staring back at me, the blue-rimmed orbs glassy from an onslaught of embarrassed tears. "The grade point average when I chose to drop out was under a three, and then every time I tried studying for the GED exam, something was going on with Mom that I had to fix. I barely passed it."

The heavy exhale that escapes my lips is accompanied by a "Fucking Katherine" that, thankfully, doesn't seem to offend Leighton. She loved her mother unconditionally because that's just who she is, but I know she's probably screaming inside.

"You shouldn't have to give up your dreams because of her," I tell her.

"Sure, but it doesn't work that way. Stanford is picky about who they admit." She leans forward and shakes her head. "Maybe I should take a year off. I'll work and—"

"Absolutely not," I cut her off, standing.

"Ky—"

"Leighton, you've worked your fucking ass off for this opportunity. What if you take time off and decide not to go at all? Then what will you do with yourself?"

"I'll figure it out."

"You don't have to do that alone."

She doesn't answer right away. "I know I don't, but I'm used to it." Her words are muffled under context we both understand.

I kneel beside her chair and pry her small hands apart to squeeze one. I've done it before, forced my way into the fort she built around herself. "We're going to fix that, okay? You shouldn't have to do it on your own when there are people to help you. It's going to be different."

She tries pulling her hand away, but I latch onto it. “You’re only saying that because you feel sorry for me, Kyler. You don’t have to.”

Owning up to it, I shrug. “I do feel bad, but that doesn’t mean it’s the only reason I’m going to make sure you get the education you want and deserve.”

Slowly, she blinks at me. “What other reason could there be?”

Oh, Lele. Sighing, I say, “Just because we aren’t blood like we thought doesn’t mean I don’t care. You’re my friend, one of my *best* friends, and I failed you once. I’m not going to do that again.”

Her throat bobs again.

Then her head.

“Good.” I stand and peck her cheek, tugging her up from the chair until she’s standing directly beside me. I drape an arm around her shoulder. “Guess we should do some house hunting then, huh?”

She chokes out a, “What?”

“If we’re going to be roomies,” I say with arched brows, “then we’ll need to find a place that works for the both of us.”

The look she gives me is humorous, but I hold back from laughing. Ignoring her gaping lips, I pull her toward the sliding doors where everyone is waiting.

Neither of us says another word.

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CHAPTER TWO

LEIGHTON / AGE 12

THE WROUGHT iron gate surrounding the property tells me we shouldn't be here. I've never seen a house so big in my life, not even the others we've passed in our old jalopy of a car that sticks out like a sore thumb compared to the expensive, polished looking ones driving by us on the way here.

My mouth goes dry when I study the huge house set back from where we're parked. I try to pay attention to the things Mom says to the man in a black uniform standing outside, but the mansion staring back at me is too stunning. It's a mixture of dark wood and glass, sleek and vibrant, and reminds me of the modern-styled homes I saw in the magazines hoarded in our two-bedroom apartment back in Phoenix, Arizona.

According to Mom, the landlord kicked us out because he had family moving to the city and needed a place for them. Even though Mr. Navarro always gave me the creeps and never smiled, I don't think that's the real reason. The envelopes all stacked up on the counter were never opened on time and I was always home from school before she was from work to see the letters taped to our door. Warnings, final notices, and then the eviction statement in big, embarrassing bold letters.

I'm still not sure why she packed what little we owned—all which could be fit into our beat-up 1999 Lexus—and drove us to California. What confuses me even more is why we're in a fancy gated community trying to get access to the intimidating home. We don't belong here. I may be young,

but I know that people who have nothing of value shouldn't be at a place like this.

"Ma'am, for the last time—"

"*Ma'am*!" My mother's shrill shriek makes me wince in the passenger seat. "Do I look over the age of forty?"

The poor man sputters. "Well, no, of course not, but—"

Mom nods once and gives him a look that makes me feel sorry for him. "I thought so. Now, I'm asking *you* one more time to make sure you heard me correctly. Tell Harry Bishop that he's going to want to see Katherine Grier. Understood?" The man's sigh makes me brace for whatever argument Mom is about to retort with, but before he can even speak, she says, "I have something he's going to want to see, you can be sure of that. Leighton, pass me the folder."

The folder. The pristine manilla folder that she practically made me death grip since passing the faded "Welcome to Los Angeles" sign. I do as she says, passing it to her and watch her tilt her head at the man. "I do believe this will make him *very* interested. And don't think you can just say you'll give it to him so you can get rid of me and that paper. I have the original *and* other copies."

It's my turn to stare at her, confusion contorting my face. In the five hours we've been on the road—well, six and a half after a bad accident that blocked traffic and the many pit stops for pee breaks and food—I've asked her twice about where we're going. Not once did she enlighten me on anything involving our spontaneous road trip. Knowing better than to ask a third time, I remained quiet and listened to whatever the radio had on, usually classic rock since Mom hates the Pop100 station I love, or her rants about life that made me want to roll my eyes because most of it was about the last guy who dumped her.

"Well?" the determined woman sitting beside me presses, crossing her arms on her chest. She's wearing one of those shirts that makes her boobs look really good, which is something she tells me is important. *"You may not have them yet, but trust me, Leighton, they're going to be assets when you're older."*

Right now, the small sports bra I'm wearing makes my tiny boobs look nonexistent in my favorite band tee. It's faded from so much wear and stained with who knows what from over the years, but I love it. It's my comfort shirt when Mom drags us places, which I'm not unused to.

The man sighs again and starts talking into some sort of earpiece. He lifts a finger and tells us to wait there while he walks into a little booth-like building and picks up a phone.

When Mom finally looks at me, it's with a smirk I know too well. She gets it when one of our former neighbors comes to the door after ten o'clock at night and says he needs to borrow something. She thinks I don't know what they really do when she lets him in, but I know a lot. More than I want to.

She reaches out and brushes a loose piece of hair behind my ear and caresses my cheek like she used to do when I was little. I can't help but lean into her touch and absorb the few seconds of warmth her palm offers because I don't know when I'll get the comfort again. "Today is a big day for the both of us, sweetie."

Sweetie. When was the last time she called me that? It's usually just Leighton, sometimes Lenny if she's in a good mood. Oftentimes, it's nothing. She'll tell me what to do, maybe ask me how my day is, and otherwise not address me at all. The thing is, I don't mind. I've never thought that maybe I *should*.

"Why is it a big day?" I find myself asking, pushing away the nerves that creep up my spine. They're the same ones I get when she tells me about a new guy. Bill was the first who always looked at me funny, then there was Mike, who I actually didn't mind until he started drinking and saying weird things to me when Mom wasn't around. I'm not sure where she found them, but they all seemed to be the same.

Before she can answer, the man begrudgingly says, "Mr. Bishop will see you. He has a busy day ahead of him, so…"

I swallow when the gates begin opening inward after the man waves at something on the other side, and Mom's lips stretch into a scary looking smile. One of victory. She flips her hair, wiggles her fingers at the man, and drives down the wide paved driveway that circles around a huge flower garden and fountain leading to the house's entrance.

"Mom, I'm not so sure—"

"Hush, Leighton," she chides, putting the car in park. It looks so out of place considering what's surrounding us, and I know we do too. I look down at myself, my cheap Walmart jeans that are too short since I've hit a growth spurt, and the t-shirt that I love but suddenly feel self-conscious

about. My feet are covered with knockoff clearance rack moccasins that are about a year old, and the soles have started coming undone.

Mom, of course, looks beautiful. She always dresses to impress, which she says is force of habit because of her former career as an actress. Though this is my first time in California, it's not hers. She did commercials as a teenager, and eventually did a few small acting gigs in B-rated indie films in her early twenties that led her to Hollywood. She never talks about the career she misses so much because it involves me as the sole reason for it failing, something I wonder if she resents me for when she stays out and leaves me alone more than I like. She got pregnant at twenty-three, abandoned by my father by the time I was born, and left to care for me with no help from her family.

I should have known that something big was happening when Mom put on her skintight shirt with the deep V-neck and her extra slim jeans that hugged her hips. They're the same black jeans that have men catcalling her when we're walking somewhere. She's next level pretty, something I aspire to be, because her confidence makes her glow.

I examine the way her dark brown hair lands in loose waves past her shoulders. It's only a shade or so lighter than mine, more a dark brown than black, and I can only imagine my curls come from the other person I share my DNA with. She rarely wears her hair down because of the Arizona heat this time of year, but it's styled to make sure not one frizzy strand is out of place. The makeup on her face isn't so different than any other day, contoured with skill I don't have, lipstick bright red, cheeks a pretty pink, and brown eyes shaped with black liner and mascara to make her already long lashes look longer.

It makes me touch my hair, split into two fluffy pigtails that rest over my shoulders, and itch to pull down the visor to look at my naked face. Sometimes I'll put on cherry Chapstick and a little eyeliner, but I always manage to make one eye darker than the other, and by the time the day is done, the makeup melts off me from the awful heat anyway.

Mom takes the keys out of the ignition and grabs her purse from the floor by my feet. It's one of her expensive ones, the ones she tells me she gets at thrift shops even though the price and brand logo clearly states where she really bought it. It makes me wonder why she keeps it on the dirty floor even though it cost more than our utility bills combined, but I never ask.

“Our lives are about to change,” she says, excitement in her tone. Setting the purse on her lap and digging through it until she produces a tube of Ruby Red lipstick, she applies it carefully while checking herself out in the rearview mirror. She caps it, rubs her lips together, tosses it in her purse, and turns to me. Her eyes look almost like the milk chocolate candy I keep stashed away, firm and steady. “I need you to be on your best behavior. Do you understand?”

When am I not? I nod. “I understand.”

She opens the door. “Come on.”

I wet my lips. “Who is Harry Bishop?” She gets out of the car, leaving me sweating a little. Not knowing what else to do, I get out too and walk around the front. “Mom? Who is Harry Bishop?”

When she stops, I nearly plow into her. “I don’t want you asking a million questions, Leighton. Just follow me. You’ll know soon enough.” Her change of tone is one I’m used to, like those Sour Patch commercials, except she’s sweet and then sour instead of the other way around. One of her ex-boyfriends told her it was why he was leaving. He couldn’t handle her mood swings.

My stomach hurts as we near the house. Fidgeting with my shirt, I notice the cameras by the big white door, then the summery flower planters lining the sides full of pink, purple, and white plants. Mom doesn’t have to lift her hand before the door swings open. I jerk back from the abrupt motion and almost trip over the mat on the ground. It doesn’t say “welcome” it says “Bishop” in fancy script letters.

The middle-aged man standing in front of Mom has a stoic expression painted across his face. Thin lips pressed flat, narrowed eyes that look dark, and a squared jaw that’s clean-shaven and set like he’s unamused. Swallowing, I look at Mom to see her unfazed by his lack of welcome, taking it in stride in a weirdly smug way like she’s not sorry at all to barge into his life.

When I start to shift in obvious discomfort, the man’s eyes dart to me, pinning me to the cobblestone beneath my dirty shoes. For a microsecond there’s a change in his features. His eyes widen and his lips part and I’m not sure what he’s thinking, but something tells me it isn’t good. Before I can even blink, his face goes slack of emotion again. It’s…unnerving.

Mom says, “Hello again, Harry.”

The man, Harry Bishop I presume, huffs under his breath. Not a good sign. “Can’t say I expected to see you after all these years. A bit surprised by it, actually.” *Definitely* not a good sign. I swallow.

A soft hum rises from Mom’s throat, as if to say, *I bet you are*. “Are you going to let us in to discuss things?”

I part my lips to tell Mom maybe we should go, when Harry says, “I guess we should get this settled.”

Settled? I want to protest, to tell Mom I’ll wait in the car, when she grabs ahold of my wrist a little too tightly like she knows I want to run. Instead, she steers us into a huge foyer painted beige, pictures lining all the walls of people, mostly young kids that look vaguely familiar, and big expensive furniture that all matches unlike the mix and match stuff I grew up with.

Once the door is closed, I turn to face the man because that’s what Mom is doing. He’s older, but I couldn’t guess his age even if I wanted to. Based on the wrinkles by his eyes when he narrows them, and the streaks of gray in his otherwise dark hair, I’m guessing forties. Maybe fifties. Older than Mom’s thirty-five, though she can pass for thirty.

He’s looking at me from head to toe, making me squirm at the twitch of his lips as they form into a small scowl. I don’t know what to do or say, so I play with my shirt hem again to busy my fingers.

“Christ,” he murmurs, swiping a palm down his face.

Mom finally let’s go of me, crossing her arms over her chest. The movement pushes her boobs up, but for once, the unhappy man doesn’t notice. “Did you see the papers?”

He hesitates only a moment. “Yes.”

“And?” she presses impatiently.

The man looks between us, his dark eyes skimming over me again quickly. I shift on my feet and gnaw on the inside of my cheek. He curses again, his fingers going through his short, peppered hair. He’s wearing pressed dress clothes, no wrinkles, or stains to be seen, and they’re fitted to his tall, lean build. I bet he pays a lot of money for them to be like that. “I think we should sit down and talk with some of my people about this.” He pauses and glances down at the shirt I’m fidgeting with. “And you should probably get rid of that.”

My jaw drops. “W-What?”

Mom sighs in exasperation. “I swear, Leighton, you need to learn to listen.”

My cheeks blossom with a fiery heat as I quickly stare down at the floor when Harry’s eyes come back to me. I hear him repeat, “Leighton” like he’s testing it.

Wanting an answer despite Mom preferring I stay quiet, I ask, “Why do I need to get rid of my shirt?”

“Because,” Harry answers in a tone not quite hard but not soft either, “we don’t like supporting the competition here.”

Competition? Before I can even dare to look at him with curious eyes, I hear footsteps coming down the stairs from somewhere behind me, followed by a young guy’s gruff voice asking, “Who the hell is this?”

I turn and feel my heartbeat drum loudly in my ears when I lock eyes with a dark haired, dark eyed boy that I recognize instantly. How could I not? He’s all over the media, grocery store tabloids, and TV. More than that, he’s constantly playing on the radio.

Kyler Bishop, formally from a boy band known as Single Division before they broke up years ago after the person standing in front of me decided he wanted to go solo. And a division it was, according to the gossip magazines.

He’s taller in person, even though he was one of the shorter ones in the band. I think I read somewhere that he’s six-one or six-two. I don’t remember. It’s certainly taller than my five-five, though Mom’s old coworker at the last diner she worked, Rodrigo, told me he thinks I have some more growing to go.

Mom gives the former boy bander her typical sugary sweet smile, which he glares at like he sees right through it. He may be the first person, young or old, to do that and I have an odd respect for him even though I’m struck speechless to be standing this close to someone who I’ve only ever watched on YouTube before.

It’s Harry who says, “Son,” which nearly makes me choke even though the Bishop connection should have given me a clue, “this is Katherine and your…and her—and Leighton.”

I blink at the man’s struggled introduction, blinking between him and his son when Mom adds, “She’s your sister.”

My heart drops into my stomach, shock icing over my body until I’m frozen when all their attention turns on me.

Kyler Bishop looks at me with wide eyes, seemingly as pale as I am, thoughts unknown considering I can barely gather my own. He does the same thing as his father, studies me, his eyes going to my shirt before his expression goes completely lack.

The competition.

Oh crap.

"You have got be fucking kidding me."

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CHAPTER THREE

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

IT'S TOO BIG, I think. I don't say the words because we've already seen eleven other properties and Kyler and the agent are getting tired. Plus, it's a dry 94 degrees and not even the cutoff jean shorts that land a little too high on my thighs paired with a loose tank top is helping me keep cool.

The house we're looking at is a cute modern villa, but the perky brunette with big boobs who's been showing us estates said it's 5,500 square feet. I'm not sure why we'd need so much space, but Ky seems interested in the property. Or, at least, he's interested in the woman who's telling us about it in great detail.

I'm a little queasy seeing them interact because it reminds me of the way Mom acted with guys. The flirting, hair twirling, subtle touching when it's not necessary. Weirdly, that makes me miss her more than I already do.

"What do you think?" The question pulls me out of the daze I'm in, drawing my attention over to where Kyler stands with his hands in his pockets. The agent, Alice if memory serves, stands a little too close to him but I shrug it off because it doesn't really concern me.

I look back at the gray house in front of us, examining the huge windows, red door, and full shrubs lining the pathway. I know nothing about keeping up with things like that. When I was younger, I tried keeping a few plants alive that the sweet old lady next door gave to me. They died in a month. Even the cactus.

“It’s nice,” I admit, eyeing the bushes again like they’re enemy number one. “I, uh, don’t know if I’ll be able to keep up with any of the flowers or anything though.”

Alice, our agent, laughs, waving a manicured hand in the air. I complimented her styled pink nails when we shook. Sometimes, Mom would take me to the salon with her and get them done. It stopped me from my biting habit that I evidently still have today since I gave up keeping the acrylic tips in favor for my natural, botched nails that I coat with dollar store polish. “You can easily hire someone to keep up with maintenance. I have plenty of contacts I could pass along to you.”

Inwardly, I cringe at the thought of hiring anyone to do work around the house that I can easily get done myself. Ky must know that because he decides to move along. “Want to see inside, Leighton?”

I nod, basking in the idea of getting out of the sun even if it’s only for a few minutes. Alice takes lead and Kyler matches my short strides as we follow her close behind. My body eases in the cool air when we step into the entryway. Eyes roaming over the interior of the house, I take in the subtle decor that isn’t flashy like the other places we’ve seen. Even though the open floorplan is still larger than we need, it’s a cute setup. Right off the entryway is a living room and dining room, with a huge wall and archway that looks right into the kitchen. There’s a sliding door on the back wall that leads out to a yard, and huge windows bathing the room in natural light.

Alice points out each area we pass as we tour the two floors. Everything is white, with brick and wood accents in each room that tie it all together. The second floor has a huge space that Alice says the previous owner used to entertain people. I can’t help but picture bookshelves lining the wall, all filled with my favorite literature and silly signs I’ve collected over the years, and a reading nook in the corner with the kind of chairs that you sink into and lose hours in while you escape into nineteenth-century romance novels.

I stop myself from fantasizing about what kind of Pinterest ideas I can use to decorate the house because it’s not right. I started the board years ago when I thought about running away until I could build up to the future I deserved. One where I could afford a reading nook without anybody’s help. The problem with that is my bank account currently has $116.05 in it, which is barely enough to get groceries. If I can’t afford more than a month’s supply of food, how am I going to afford anything else?

Ky walks up to me and bumps our shoulders together. “What’s wrong?”

Shoulders dropping slightly at his knowing tone, I let out a soft exhale and say, “I think maybe we should rethink this whole thing.”

His eyebrows jump. “What?”

I glance at Alice, who’s typing away on her phone a few feet away, before settling my gaze back on his confused face. “It’s a really nice house and I like it, but I have nothing to offer.”

He blinks. “Okaaay.”

Tipping my head back, I look at the white ceiling. Maybe it’s because the places I grew up were always small, dark, and dirty, but I love how light, bright, and open everything here is. It makes saying this that much harder. “I didn’t come here to be like my mother, Kyler. I’m not interested in using people for their money. Honestly, I don’t know why I agreed to do this whole roomie thing with you to begin with.”

His deadpan expression doesn’t make me feel any better. “First of all, you didn’t agree because I didn’t give you a choice.” He pins me with a look that tells me not to argue. “Secondly, I never want to hear you compare yourself to Katherine. You are not your mother, Leighton, and you never will be.”

“Our situations are—”

“*Not* the same. Listen, I agreed to help you because I want to. Not because I felt obligated, because no matter what, we *are* family. So, get out of your stubborn little head.”

My lips twitch. “My head is not little.” Then again, do I want to be told I have a big one? Not really. “And I appreciate what you’re doing, but I just think that this is all a little…too much. Not that I don’t love the house, but __”

“Alice,” he says, cutting me off. I frown at him. She appears by his side in impressive record-breaking time. I bet five bucks, because I can’t afford to lose more than that, that she’ll try slipping him her number by the time we leave. “Can we think about this before agreeing to anything? I think there are some things Lenny and I need to discuss.”

Swallowing down my words when his pointed, no nonsense tone fills the room, I watch as Alice nods. “Of course, Mr. Bishop. There’s nobody else looking at this property right now, so you should take all the time you need.”

I don’t miss the way Kyler’s face shadows over. He hates being called that because it reminds him too much of his father, someone he never got along with or aspired to be like.

We’re on our way out, Kyler and Alice in front of me, when she rests a palm on his bicep and bats her lashes. “I just have to say that I’m a big fan.”

Here we go. Biting the inside of my cheek to stop from smiling when Kyler’s face flushes, I examine the shrubbery again, feigning interest in them, so I don’t have to witness whatever is bound to happen. I’ve had to watch Ky get hit on all the time and it hasn’t gotten any less awkward. Alice giggles, says her cell number is written on the back of her card, and asks for a picture.

Dang. I’d be five dollars richer. $121.05. Missed my opportunity.

Once we’re in our separate cars, Alice honking as she leaves the driveway first, Kyler loosens a sigh. “Don’t say it,” he grumbles, making me grin.

Taking my thumbnail out of my mouth, I stifle a laugh. “But she’s *such* a huge fan.” I bat my lashes at him in mockery, which makes him roll his eyes in return.

“Don’t do that. You’re better than them,” he chastises. Then, “And don’t pretend you aren’t like that with people you admire.” He eyes me before turning onto the road. “I haven’t forgotten about your encounter with the guys from *Violet Wonders*.” He spits out their name like it’s bitter in his mouth, making me crack up.

“Why do you still hate them so much?” He’s the one who got me backstage passes to meet them, which is still a favorite memory of mine, despite his old rivalry with the opposing band. I own all their music, even their comeback albums since they got back together a year ago and have the picture of me with the five group members in a frame tucked away for safekeeping.

“They’re assholes.”

“You say that about everyone,” I point out, looking out the window. “And aren’t you sort of friends with a couple of them? You used to text with Zayne and Manning.” He just sort of grunts an incoherent reply that makes me shake my head. “They were perfectly nice to me. Plus, Garrick even let me have a beer when we all hung out in their dressing room!”

Kyler shoots me a daggered glare. “He did *what*?” I see the spit flying from his mouth and make a face.

“Gross. Calm down. It was just one beer.” It was technically half a beer, maybe less, because it tasted disgusting. The guys even laughed at the apparent dislike on my face when I passed it back to Garrick who finished it off in a few chugs.

“You were *fifteen* when you met them!”

He has a fair point, but I don’t back down because I know he’s done far more at much younger ages. “It isn’t like he invited me in to have an orgy with them.”

The groan he responds with is loud and burdened as his cheeks tint pink. “Never again. I never, in my entire life, want to hear you say that word again. Especially in relation to those dickwads.”

“What? Orgy?” I make sure to say the word slowly so I can be sure it’s the one he’s referring to.

His glare intensifies. “I swear to God, Leighton, if—”

My phone rings, and I hold up a hand at his useless rant when I see his sister’s name pop up on the cracked screen. “Hey, Mia.”

“Lenny Lou,” she greets cheerfully. I can’t help but smile at the old nickname, given to me once she found out my middle name is Louise. “How is house hunting with the little bro going? Any potential?”

Nibbling my lip, I give a quick glance at Kyler, who’s back to focusing on the road. “We need to talk about some things before we make any decisions.”

From the profile of his face, I see a brow arch before he gives a quick look as if to argue with me. I ignore him. “Can you believe your brother doesn’t want me saying the word ‘orgy’?”

Mia’s laugh is abrupt and loud, making me giggle at the string of curses Ky makes. “That is both random and not surprising whatsoever. Do I even want to know how that came up?”

“Violet Wonders,” is all I say.

She snorts. “He still has his panties in a twist over them, huh? Ridiculous. Kyler always hated how much you loved them. Said you were wasting passion on ‘tragically untalented people’ when he realized you were a fan, but I think he’s just jealous you never liked Single Division as much.” Considering the shirt I wore the day we met, it sounds like he’s been irritated over it for the past six years. I’m not even a little sorry though. His band was good, but they weren’t my favorite. Plus, he’s way better as a solo artist.

One of my brows quirks as I study Kyler inquisitively. “Did he say that now?” That captures his attention, his eyes questioning what his sister is telling me. He wiggles his fingers at me like he wants the phone, but I shake my head and point to the road, silently reminding him that he’s driving. “I guess that makes sense. He found out Garrick gave me alcohol when I met the group that one time.”

“Wait,” Ky blurts out. “Did my sister know about that?”

Mia must hear him because she says, “Put me on speaker, would you, Len?” I do as she says, holding the phone in my palm. “Of course, I knew. I gave her a high five. Who better to share your first drinking experience with?”

Kyler spits and sputters, curse words flying out, rants that don’t make any sense, all while his sister and I laugh at his outburst. He’s always like this. Overprotective to a fault. It’s kind of nice though, like no time has passed at all. It gives me the sense of belonging that I never felt with Mom, because she also would have high fived me if she knew I drank with someone like Garrick.

“Anyway,” Mia pushes on, “I don’t see what you two have to talk about. If you found a house you like, take it. Properties don’t last long on the market here. There’s always someone rich ready to fork over a shit ton of cash the first chance they get. Don’t miss out on something nice by overthinking.”

Kyler just shakes his head, though he’s probably thinking about how Mia’s right. Again. Instead, he says, “The last house we saw would be perfect. There aren’t any neighbors directly nearby and the garage is behind the house which means people can’t see us getting in and out when they figure out where we moved.”

I rub my arm, thinking about how nice that perk is considering what’s happened in the past with paparazzi always being close by to snap a picture and yell obscurities. “It’s not like it isn’t a great place, but I’m not sure it’s smart.”

“Smart?” he repeats dryly. “Mia, she’ll call you back.” Before I can argue, he grabs my phone and ends the call, flinging it behind us until it lands in a thud somewhere in the back.

“Hey!” I protest, twisting around and trying to figure out where it landed.

“Your phone is a piece of crap anyway,” he tells me bluntly. “Surprised you haven’t sliced your fingers open on that damn screen.”

“It’s old,” I defend. Not seeing it, I sigh and turn back around. The cell is also an old one of my mother’s. It’s one of the few items of hers I have left. Cracked screen and all, it still works relatively well. It took forever to get a new number because the original one kept getting suggestive texts and pictures that my eyes did *not* need to see.

“I’ll get you a new one.”

“No, you will not!”

“Leighton.”

“Kyler.” Does he not understand my problem? He’s never had to struggle with money or the pride in earning something when you come from nothing. I palm my eyes and lean back against the seat to collect my thoughts. “This is my problem. I’m aware I’m the one who reached out first and asked for help, but I shouldn’t have. I appreciate everything you want to do for me, but it’s not necessary. I’ve been searching for jobs, and—”

“You need to search for schools,” he argues in disapproval, “since you’re so dead set against going to Stanford now. Your focus needs to be getting into college and doing what you’ve always wanted. UCLA has a good Public Relations program and it isn’t far from any of the places we’ve seen. Half an hour, forty minutes tops depending on traffic.”

Gaping at him with parted lips, I slowly blink and consider the information. “Did you look that up?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

He hums.

“Well…” I don’t know what to say. He’s always done research for me, but this seems next level. “I’ll still need to work, Ky. College obviously isn’t cheap, even with loans. And if I take out a loan that’s more than it costs to attend just so I can afford books and food, then that means more debt later. It’s a lot to think about. Plus, there’s housing costs, and—”

“Don’t worry about housing.” His lips flatten for a moment. “Unless you’d *want* to live on campus.”

Truthfully, I always considered living in a dorm room when I was younger. The ones at Stanford that we saw on tour were nice and I imagined the built-in shelves lined with my textbooks, trinkets, and pictures of my family—of Mom, Kyler, Mia, and even Harry because he made Mom smile.

I liked to pretend my future roommate would be my best friend and we'd go everywhere together and experience what it's like to be college students. Parties. Drinking. Boys. The works.

I find myself smiling. While it took a long time adjusting to the move and my new life with the Bishops, I managed to hold onto a part of me that wanted simplicity. The houses we saw aren't that, and the Stanford dream isn't either. It's too costly. "I don't know. I used to want that, but things have changed. What I know for sure is that big, flashy, expensive things make me uncomfortable. They always have and I don't see that changing anytime soon. My clothes are all from Walmart, what little items I own are all second hand, and I'm fine with that. I prefer it."

He's quiet for a moment, taking in my words. I appreciate that he does because not many people would give my thoughts the time of day. Finally, he breaks the silence with, "What happened to things you had when you lived with us? The clothes and whatnot."

Glancing down at the hands folded in my lap, I peel them apart and touch the frayed hem of my shorts. "I grew out of most of them. The ones that still fit were a little too fancy for my life and I ended up selling them to get money for food and bills that Mom couldn't pay."

His hands grip the steering wheel harshly, but he doesn't say anything. I won't tell him about the one thing I feel horrible about to this day—the thing that got me the most money on eBay. I'm not sure he'd understand.

"We didn't really leave with much else," I tell him cautiously. "At least, I didn't. I think she hocked some of the jewelry Harry gave her to get us a new apartment, but I don't know about anything else."

"The car?" he all but growls.

Closing my eyes, I let the A/C cool my suddenly tight, overheated body. Hand going to the necklace tucked under the collar of my shirt, slicked with sweat, I whisper, "That's what she was driving when she…" My voice cracks under the pressure of the words, memories flooding of crime scene pictures plastered in the papers.

"Fuck me," he murmurs to himself. He takes a deep breath. "I shouldn't have asked, Len. I'm sorry."

All I do is shrug. What else can I do? Can I say? What's done is done. My mother is never coming back. I've had to come to terms with that and figure out where to go from there.

I feel his eyes on me. "Is that…?"

When I look over, he dips his chin toward the piece of silver in my hand. I manage to smile, knowing what he's asking. "It is."

The necklace was a gift from him for my sixteenth birthday, right before all hell broke loose. I could have sold it, I'm sure it would be worth a decent amount since it's real silver. But it's special to me, a gift from the boy I could confide in about anything, and I never once thought to sell it for extra cash even if I needed it because it meant the world to touch it when my mind wandered to bad places. Ky grounded me.

His hand reaches out and takes mine, threading our fingers and squeezing once in comfort. "Let's go to dinner and talk about it some more. UCLA. Dorms. A house. Everything. Okay? It's Kyler and Lele, remember?"

I remember when he first told me that.

"We're Kyler and Lele, right? It's us against the world." So why did it feel like it was us against each other the day he let us walk away?

I swallow, clamping my palm around his for a few seconds longer before letting go with a quiet, "Okay."

RINGING my hands in my lap, I look around the semi-familiar warehouse renovated eatery and loosen a quiet breath. "Are you sure—"

Kyler doesn't give me a chance to finish before cutting in, in exasperation. "I'm the one who suggested dinner out."

Biting down on the inside of my lip, I give him a single nod. Anytime we went out in the past, he'd be tense, always looking over his shoulder or grumbling when people came up to him. It was something we rarely did, and I was okay with that. Less attention on him meant the same for me.

Dominick's still has the same private ambience as it did all those years ago. It's a quiet place for people like Kyler to come without too much hassle. I was surprised when the man outside looked at me and said, "It's been a minute, Ms. Grier," despite how forgettable I find myself compared to the guy sitting across from me in the same black booth we used to occupy.

Leaning an elbow on the edge of the table and propping my chin on the palm of my hand, I scope out the open space. There's only one other table occupied across the vast dining area with a couple who are deep in conversation. Doing my best not to stare, something I've been trained in

since becoming a would-be Bishop at twelve, I glance back at Kyler who's already watching me intently. "What?"

His lips press together as he shakes his head, but his brown eyes don't stop from roaming over my face. One eye, the other, my nose, my lips. He studies every single inch of me until I'm squirming in my seat. "Quit it," I grumble, feeling my face burn as I toy with my messy hair that's pulled back into a ponytail. When he doesn't, I mock glare at him. "I mean it. Staring is rude."

His lips twitch upward. "When did you become so…"

"What?"

He's searching for the word, head cocked, eyes still trained on my features like he finds them intriguing. "Forward."

I snort, unable to help myself. "I don't know." That's not true. I grew into the fight or flight response when I was given no other option thanks to the woman I let myself have one full night to cry over. That's all I allowed myself before peeling my head off my flat, stained pillow back in Arizona, and thought about my next step. The step that brought me here. Learning to be forward, to channel my inner Mia Bishop, was my way of fighting, on being heard without anyone misunderstanding my intentions.

"Maybe it was all the years of being around Mia," I joke halfheartedly. Mia has always been the straight-to-the-point type even if you don't want to hear it. It's why I reached out to her when I ran out of options because I knew she wouldn't let me chicken out of asking for help. I needed her, even if I didn't want to need anybody.

Kyler cracks a smile, leaning back and crossing his arms over his chest. "Something tells me you picked up a thing or two on your own."

As much as I want to frown, to show the twinge of pain that settles in my chest, I don't. I refrain from telling him that the only reason I learned on my own is because I didn't have him or Mia for the past few years. I had nobody, not even the shell of a woman my mother became before she died.

It may have been the cards I was dealt, but it's not the ones I show now. "Maybe," I reply instead, voice victoriously steady. We fall into a thick silence, one that never used to be awkward between us.

He says, "We should talk about the house," the same time I say, "What have you been up to?"

We stare at each other, blinking.

Eventually, it's me who shifts on my seat and gives him a hesitant smile. "The house is nice."

He deadpans. "You already told me that. I want to know where your head is at with getting one."

Does he really want to know?

When I rub my lips together hesitantly, his eyes narrow. "You never used to hold back from me."

"People change, Kyler."

His jaw ticks. "Yeah, they do."

More silence.

Then, I sigh. "I already told you where I'm at with a house. Just because you say I'm not like my mother doesn't mean I don't feel like it by letting you buy us a house. A house. It's not like you're lending me twenty bucks or filling up my gas tank or something."

"Do you even have a license?" he comes back with, making me want to roll my eyes.

I'm this close, but I blow out a calming breath instead. "Yes. I taught myself." I drove illegally to pick up Mom more times than I can count before I even had my permit. I knew what to do—had watched her, Kyler, and Mia enough times to figure it out. Thankfully, I never got pulled over or got caught after forging my mother's signature to sign off on mandatory driving hours before my road test. I passed with flying colors, no thanks to anybody but me.

"That's not the point and you know it," I tell him, turning the conversation back to what really matters.

"Enlighten me then," he challenges.

There's a playful cockiness in his eyes that I recognize from the past, but it's shining here. He's teasing me, and for some reason, I don't like it. "You've had money your whole life. A home to come back to every single day. A job that you love. People who adore you. I only had that for six years out of the eighteen I've lived. I will never be used to somebody saying they can drop money on a house in a matter of seconds. I'm grateful you're willing to help, but seeing those places…"

My throat tightens. "Seeing those houses reminds me that I have nothing. Not even a fraction of the plans I made for myself when I was younger so I could do better than Mom, or the people I lived in apartment complexes with. I'm determined to work and pay my way in any way I can,

but that won't be enough for college or even for my own apartment. I have to depend on somebody else and that feels like failure."

His eyes harden as he leans forward. "I don't know everything you've gone through since…since that day, but one thing I know for sure is that you will *never* be a failure. Do you hear me, Leighton?"

Yes. No. I swallow. "I'm not mad at you, but I am mad at the world for giving me this life. Because I think I deserve more."

He pales. "Of course you do."

Then why do I have to fight so damn hard to earn it? Haven't I done enough already?

"I'm sorry," he tells me, almost so quiet I barely hear the words. "I know I already said it, but you deserve to hear it again. What happened should have never… It should have been different."

Staring down at my lap, I shake my head. I hold onto his apology because those words are foreign to me, especially by the people who should have told me them in the past.

Mom the most.

Emotion choking me, I count to three before allowing myself to say anything. "Yeah, it should have been. But we can't turn back time. All we can do is move forward." Wetting my lips, I sneak a peek at him through my lashes. My skin buzzes when he reaches across the tabletop and covers my hand with his.

"What do you say?" he asks softly, fingers interlocking with mine. "Move forward with me, Leighton?"

I can tell him no, but the tug in my chest pulls in his direction as his thumb skates over the back of my hand. Back and forth. Back and forth. Caressing. Lulling.

Giving him a small nod, I offer him the only smile I can manage right now. Timid, hurt, but willing to push past it. For me. "I won't be my mother. I will have a future."

His hold tightens. "You're not the Lenny I remember," he tells me, almost mystified.

I shrug. "She was weak."

I pause.

"I'm not weak anymore."

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CHAPTER FOUR

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

DROPPING A BOX LABELED *KITCHEN SHIT*, thanks to my extra moody sister who won't admit she's pregnant just "in need of a good diet", onto the nearest table, I look around the small living room and smile at the mayhem. My focus is aimed at the wide gray cobblestone fireplace that's surrounded by haphazardly placed matching furniture, all lighter gray tones. There are two couches and a love seat, with two armchairs on the opposite side of the room near the wide bay window that will undoubtedly need blinds and curtains since they face the road.

This house is much smaller than all the others we saw a few weeks ago, which is exactly how long it took to finally convince Leighton to settle in while she applied to a few local colleges. I know her concerns, heard her out, and reassured her that I knew what I was getting into. I even let her choose the house, so it shouldn't have surprised me that she opted for a three-bedroom, 1,800 square foot home that was perched a little too close to the neighboring houses for my liking. But it's in a decent subdivision outside of the L.A. city hustle, has a fence, a good security system, and most importantly, it makes her happy.

She walks in and drops the last box onto the floor, cringing when whatever inside rattles loudly. By the sounds of it, it's glass. "Sorry, I lost my grip."

I tell her it’s not a big deal because there isn’t anything that can’t be replaced here. All the items I value are at my home in New York, locked up and safe, and even those valuables are limited. Mia expected me to sell my place, but I opted to keep it. I happen to know my sister has three properties —one here in California, one in New York, and a third in Florida that I’m fairly sure she keeps for the sake of saying she has real estate there. She has no room to talk.

Leighton wipes her hands off on her leggings, which I notice a little too quickly mold to her toned legs in ways clothes like that never used to before. She either works out or has been graced with the right kind of curves, because her ass is highlighted in the tight black material that she’s got to be hot in since it’s almost 100 today. I suppose her shirt, if that’s what you want to call the scrap of material practically painted on her body, is keeping her from passing out.

She frowns. “Why are you glaring at me? Once I start working, I can pay for whatever I might have broken.”

I shake myself out of it, not addressing my distaste in her wardrobe, or the fact my eyes have taken in how well she wears the material nowadays. I know I’m being an ass, playing an old role like I did years ago, but I’m always going to look out for her. If that means not approving of the skimpy shit she wears, so be it. I know how guys looked at her then, and I know damn well they’ll look at her differently now that she’s grown into those lanky legs and lean torso. “Like I said, it’s fine.”

While she doesn’t seem to believe me, she nods and examines our new place. The first floor has one of the three bedrooms, which she said she’d claim that way I could have the upstairs to myself, but I told her it’d be better if we were both on the second floor just in case. That conversation made her pale because she’s heard the horror stories of break-ins I’ve had in the past, even though most were just girls who were a little too obsessed and wanted a real-life sneak peek at a full frontal that they couldn’t buy online from one of the many photoshoots I’ve done. Best to be safe than sorry.

A giddy look crosses her face as she turns to me, her contagious smile spreading that I can’t help but return. “I can’t wait to start unpacking. Is that weird?”

“I don’t think so.” I can’t say I feel the same. Usually, I just hire people to do this shit for me, but Leighton refused. Her exact words were, “We are

perfectly capable of doing this on our own, Kyler Casey! Don't you dare throw money at others. It's lazy." And shit, how could I argue when she pulled out the middle name?

"We need music." Fumbling with her new phone, an old hand-me-down Mia gave to her that she didn't use, she thumbed through her playlist until she wiggled her brows at me.

"If you play what I think you're going to, I may have to reconsider this arrangement." We both know that's bullshit. We signed papers and made everything official days ago. There's no backing out now, not that I'd ever do that to her. We're moving forward.

Together.

Instead of the rival band I thought I'd hear come from the small speaker, I'm surprised to hear my own music. Rolling my eyes when she starts mouthing along dramatically to my first solo single, I can't help but chuckle. She pretends to hold a microphone as she attempts to mimic my dance moves from the video, but she nearly trips in the process, making me catch her arm to stop her from cracking her skull open.

I laugh harder. "You're going to kill yourself, then this whole thing would be for nothing."

She puts a hand on her hip, sticking her bottom lip out. "Wow. You think I'll die trying to dance and all you'd think about is how you'd have the house to yourself?"

I shrug. "I'd miss you…after a while."

Her eyes narrow, but a playful tug of her lips ruins her attempt at looking offended. She changes the song to something from the recent Billboard Top 100 charts before setting her phone down on the table. "You're mean and a liar. I don't think you'd survive another day without me in your life, Kyler Bishop."

She doesn't give me time to reply before turning her back and walking over to one of the many boxes piled in the room and undoing the tape. It gets me thinking, though, that she's right.

I missed Leighton all the years we weren't together. I survived, and thankfully she did too. But what would have happened if we never got separated? It's a scenario my mind has wandered to way too many times, and all I want is to be sure we're not pulled apart again.

And before I know it, my eyes travel back down to the cloth-covered ass bending down to pick up a different box.

I peel my gaze away quickly.
Fuck me.

I KNOCK on the open door and look around the pale-yellow bedroom that's only a room away from mine. "Pizza's here."

Lenny is flattening a black and white comforter across her bed that has some sort of floral design on it. It's nothing like the "plum purple", which is *not* regular purple as I was corrected by her once before, that she used to have when she lived at Harry's with us. She's always been into HGTV and home magazines and obsessed with paint samples and interior design. There's a shade for everything, and she'll almost always know it.

The room is half-empty. Barely any decorations, and only a few pieces of furniture, take up the space. Nothing matches. The bedframe is made of aged wooden bars bent into random ass shapes, the nightstand is black plastic and looks like it's missing the handle, and the dresser is brown wood with marker and stickers all over the side. If I hadn't known Leighton before, I wouldn't think twice about the naked walls bearing no posters or pictures, or how there's a lack of books stacked in the corner that would be taller than her if they were piled up.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asks sheepishly, sitting on the edge of her bed. At least that's new. I bought us both queen-sized mattresses much to her dismay.

I walk in and study the one frame resting on the top of her dresser. The glass is cracked, and the photo looks faded, but it's Katherine and Leighton from when she was younger. Younger than when she first came here based on the braces I don't remember her having in the big smile she's showing off.

Leighton walks up beside me. "Wasn't I just adorable?" she asks sarcastically, picking up the frame and making a face at it.

"Yes," I answer without a second thought, taking it from her. In it, her hair is in two braided pigtails that fall past her shoulders like they always were before and the dress she's wearing has a picture of the sun on it and "be happy" printed in block letters. Putting it back, I trace my fingers along the marker-drawn pictures on the side of the dresser. "What's all this?"

There's a lapse of silence. "It's from home. Used to be my mom's, but then we had to share it. That was hard because she had a lot of clothes that

didn’t fit in her closet.”

My face screws. “You had to share a dresser?”

She shrugs, not giving me a direct confirmation, and it bugs me. “Anyway, whenever I’d get mad at her for something I’d draw on it. I’m not sure why because I always cried when she yelled and put me in time out, but…” Her lips rub together as she stares solely at a picture of two stick figures holding hands. “I guess I just wanted her attention in any way she would give it to me.”

I back up, looking around at the boxes left. I’m not going to push her on sharing what happened between her and her mother. The heaviness, the longing in her tone warns me she’ll tell me when she’s ready. “If you need help finishing up, I can give you a hand after we eat. Pizza is getting cold.”

Scoffing, she elbows me in the side as we exit her room. “Like you care. I remember you eating cold leftover pizza from the fridge. Mia and I would always tell you how gross it was.”

Grinning, I let out a soft chuckle. “Our mom eats it the same way. Anytime we’d get pizza for dinner, she’d have a leftover slice for breakfast the next morning. Cold.”

She says, “I remember you telling me that. Do you two still talk a lot? She used to call every other day to check in.”

I haven’t spoken to my mother in a few days because she knows I’ve been busy. When I left California, she praised me. I think she was genuinely proud of me for walking away like she was afraid to do for so long. Since telling her I was moving back when I saw her at Mia’s the first day, things have been…tense.

“Not as often,” I admit carefully. The last thing I want is her blaming herself, which she’ll undoubtedly do. Truth is, I’ve been thinking about buying a place around here for when I visit that way I don’t have to stay at Mia’s. This just pushed that decision along faster. “She’s doing well. Dating some retired actor that you didn’t get to meet the other day. They’ve been together a long time. He seems nice. Better than Harry. Treats her well.”

“I’m glad.” I know she means it to, making me smile down at her. She knows family is the world to me. While I may not be on good terms with my sperm donor, I’ve always looked out for my mom and sister. Their happiness is mine.

I serve us pizza in the kitchen, and we carry it to the living room to eat, taking opposite sides of the couch. Her bare feet are tucked under her while

she eyes mine sprawled out on the coffee table. I get the hint and drop them to the floor, chuckling when she nods in approval and bites into a boring plain cheese slice.

She's never wanted anything different. I made her try pepperoni once and she all but spit it out. Even her mother, who I hated agreeing with more than I did Harry, told her she was a picky eater and needed to expand what she tried.

Not wanting to buy more than one pie, I suck it up and split a large plain cheese with her. It isn't often that I eat this kind of thing. My trainer would probably skin me alive if he knew I scarfed down three pieces tonight.

Lenny reaches for the glass of water on the table and takes a sip. "We could watch TV or something if you want. I know you hate eating in silence."

I lift a shoulder. "Then talk to me."

She blinks, the pizza slice frozen halfway to her mouth. "About what?"

"Anything, Lele. We still have a lot of catching up to do." Even though we've seen each other every day the past few weeks, we haven't gone into details about what we've been up to over the years. She admits she still follows me on social media, so she sees the basic shit I post to stay relevant but doesn't know anything else. I don't even get that curtesy with her because she has no accounts anymore. "Start with why you got rid of your social media."

Setting her pizza onto the plate, she turns her body toward me. "I didn't really have anything to share that I wanted people to know. It isn't like I had many friends to keep in touch with when I left, and I wasn't sure if you…"

Putting my food down, I say, "You weren't sure you had me." Watching her nod made my chest tighten. "Yeah, I can see why you'd think that. But I need to clear something up with you here and now. Me leaving had nothing to do with you. Not really. I was always planning on getting out of here. I'd had enough after seeing things go down between our parents."

Katherine was exactly what I made her out to be from day one. A gold digger. She was always after my family's money and the fame that came with being attached to the Bishop name. The affair she had with Harry when she was younger was her golden ticket, and she cashed it in when shit got tough. Leighton was a pawn that she used like the rest of us and I wished she hadn't been. Honest to God, I wish I could go back and change how her mother's choice impacted her. But then there'd be no Lenny, no

friendship, and I'm not sure I'm selfless enough to say goodbye to that again.

I still don't know how Katherine did it, but the game she played got her a lot of expensive crap. Fuck, it got her a diamond ring after only a few months of living with us. Mom divorced Harry's cheating ass long before Katherine showed up, and the gold digger used that opening to implant herself into our lives. I never liked her, and Mia only tolerated her for Harry and Lenny's sake.

"I'm always going to feel bad about what Mom did to you guys," she admits softly, drawing her knees up to her chest. "I know you and Mia have told me not to, but I should have known. She was always up to something."

I nudge her foot with mine. "You couldn't have truly known because you saw the best in her. I don't know how, but you see the best in everybody. It's refreshing."

"It's clearly faulty."

I chuckle. "Nah. You could be cynical about everyone like I am. Trust me, that's no fun. Be grateful you have a sunnier outlook."

Her head tilts. "Why not try trusting people more often? I'm not saying be like me but give people a chance."

No matter what, she hasn't grown up like me. It's what makes us different. She's only experienced a taste of what it's like to come from Hollywood royalty. People see the last name and associate it with fortune—money and material things. I never want her to know that being cynical comes with this lifestyle.

"Are you finally going to tell me what you've been up to the past few years?" Changing the subject makes her bite into her bottom lip, but she indulges me with tales of working at a local fast food joint for minimum wage while attending school before having to drop out. That still makes me twitch, but I try not to let her see it. At least she's telling me something. I can tell the other times I've asked, the look she gave me in return was one of shame and hesitation.

Apparently, she spent the two years following our parents' separation flipping burgers and taking people's orders. The money went toward bills and groceries because Katherine didn't stick with a job long enough to make ends meet every month on her own. They got evicted from three different apartments in the span of that time, with no help from her family because they refused to acknowledge her "troubling past". I remember

Leighton telling me that her mother came from a religious family. Not only did Katherine laugh at their beliefs, she walked all over them. She partied, hooked up with men, then ran away to Hollywood the first chance she got, where she ended up meeting Harry for the first time during a commercial for some product he sponsored. Getting pregnant out of wedlock years later sealed their fate.

"I can't say I miss them," she explains long after our pizza is gone. She's lounging on her back, her legs propped on the back cushions and her hair waterfalling over the front of the couch. "I didn't know my grandparents all that well, except that Grandma always smelled like moth balls and sugar. I'm pretty sure I heard through the grapevine that my grandpa passed away last year but I don't know."

"Sorry to hear."

"Like I said," she murmurs, rolling her head to look at me, "I don't remember them. I mean, it's sad, but I have no real relationship with them. Mom always made them out to be bad people, but I think they just wanted what was best for her."

I want to point out that they could have tried to have a relationship with her, but I don't. I'm not about to squash any decent thoughts she might have of them.

"Mom and I lived out of the car your dad bought her for a little while. Only a couple weeks, but they were bad. It was hot, cramped, and embarrassing. A cop knocked on the window once and told us to move."

Rage fills me in an instant. "How come you never reached out sooner, Leighton? I know I made it seem like I didn't want to talk, but you had Mia." I hate that I shut her out. If I'd known…God. If I'd known, I would have done something that might never have led to this.

She nibbles her lip and looks back up at the ceiling in avoidance. I don't say anything else until she answers me. "I did talk to Mia. Not often, but sometimes I would use Mom's phone to check in. Before you get upset, I never told her about my situation. Like I said, it was embarrassing. The last thing I wanted to do was ask for help because my mother couldn't be a responsible adult. I only reached out when I did because I couldn't figure out what to do. I didn't have Mom, money for my own place, or friends I could ask to crash with."

Blowing out a harsh breath, I scrub my face with my hands and try to ignore the burning in my chest. "Why didn't she tell me that you two

talked?”

“I asked her not to.”

“What?”

She presses her lips together.

“What the hell, Leighton!”

Swinging her legs around and sitting up, she hugs them to her chest. “What? I always looked up to you, Kyler. I saw you as my best friend for a while and I was glad when you went away. It made me think about all the things you said you wanted to do if you ever got to leave.”

Jesus Christ. She didn’t reach out because she wanted me to live my life. She let me go for the same reason I let her go.

Now look where we are.

Back in each other’s lives.

Facing off.

Together.

Where we should have been the whole damn time.

“One of these days, you’re going to let people take care of you without a fight.”

Her head shakes slowly. “I never want people to take care of me.”

My eyes narrow. “Why the hell not?”

There’s a small pause, a darkening of her gunmetal gray hues, before, “I want to be strong enough to take care of myself without depending on anyone. And one day, one day real soon, I will.”

I stare at her like she’s a stranger, which is absurd. She always had sheer determination when it came to living her life. Leighton never wanted to be like her mother, but now more than ever I can see the fire in her eyes that her mother’s death has ignited. It makes me wonder what she isn’t telling me, and that need to know is an incessant ball of nerves in my gut.

Knowing the conversation needs a pick me up, I stand while Lenny gives me a weird look. “I think I know how to turn this night around,” I tell her.

Her nose scrunches when I walk over to one of the remaining boxes in the corner and dig through the remnants inside. When I find what I’m looking for, I grin and turn with it in my hands.

The laugh I get is exactly what I hope for. “No way! You still have that?”

I walk over with the Mario Cart game and pass it to her. “We used to play this all the time. I wasn’t going to get rid of it.”

“Did you play after I left?”

No hesitancy. “No.”

“At all?”

I shake my head.

She watches me for a moment, almost like she can’t believe it, then a slow smile spreads across her face and melts away the emotional conversation leading up to this. “Then fire it up. I’m about to kick your butt.”

I laugh but do as she says knowing it’s not possible. Leighton has always sucked at video games no matter how hard she tried.

Twenty minutes later, she’s shoving my shoulder, jumping onto her knees on the couch and pointing her controller closer to the TV like it’ll somehow improve her chances. “That’s cheating! You can’t do that, Ky!”

Snorting when she tries shoving me off the cushion again, I fight to stay upward and keep focused. “How is what I’m doing cheating when you’re trying to distract me?”

“Because!” is all she returns with.

She’s glowing. Carefree. Smiling. Laughing. All the things I want her to never stop doing or being. This Lenny is the one I want to see win at life, no matter what life throws at her. And I know she will, even if there’s doubt settled into the back of her mind that tries to hold her back.

When I least expect it, she jumps on me, her body latching onto my back and making me drop the controller onto the ground. “What are you doing?” I bellow, my lungs hurting from how hard I’m laughing at her tactic.

And she says *I’m* the cheater.

Her long legs wrap around my torso as she giggles, her character passing the finish line. She goes to cheer, her hands thrown in the air in victory, when I shift to the side and watch her tumble forward. I think I can stop her from eating carpet, but only manage to pull myself down with her. Falling into a heap on the floor, half on her, half beside her, we both start cracking up.

“You cheated,” I tell her, lifting myself up to glance at her unabashed expression as she flops onto her back. “Where was the girl who used to read the game instructions online?”

She grins, sitting up on her elbows. “Like I said, Kyler Bishop, people change.”

This time when I look at her, I see a girl I haven’t before. Aged. Wiser. More confident. I don’t know where the old Lenny is who would lecture Mia and I when we were sore losers after losing at board games, or how playing fair is the only way to claim a real victory if one of us tried bending the rules. Clearly, that girl is long gone, and in her place is one biting her bottom lip and watching me with a tilted head.

“Ky?”

I hum, but all I can look at is the way her top teeth nibble into her bottom lip. It’s fuller. Still makeup free. Chapped. All Lenny, but somehow…not.

Her legs go to move from under mine where we’re tangled on the floor, and I eventually move away so she can get up. “As much as I want to beat you at another round, I should probably finish unpacking.”

I want to tell her to stay down here. Play the game so I can watch her smile. Listen to her trash talk and try to distract me.

Be with me.

But I don’t do any of those things, because suddenly it doesn’t feel like the reason is the same it would have been six years ago.

“Yeah,” I murmur. “That’s probably a good idea.”

Brushing off her clothes, she looks down at me with a softness on her face. “I’ve missed this.”

My answer is instant. “Me too.”

“Game night tomorrow?” she asks.

I manage to grin. “You’re on but prepare yourself. I won’t let you distract me this time.”

Biggest lie ever.

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CHAPTER FIVE

KYLER / AGE 19

MIA SWATS my chest and gives me an amused smirk as we pull away from the door where we're lurking. "Quit glaring at her. She's going to think you hate her, and I happen to think she's lovely."

I cross my arms over my chest and counter, "Which one? The gold digger or the gold digger's daughter?" I feel a little bad for saying it, but ever since the two showed up, Harry has been worse than normal. Snappy. Pale. Irate. If they're who they say they are, then he has nobody but himself to blame.

"Come on, Ky," my sister chastises. I'm not sure if it's because she's always been the mother hen or just because she likes our father squirming, but for some reason she's taken a liking to the *lovely* pre-teen sitting at the table with her mother, Harry, and a few lawyers. "If the papers are right, she's our sister."

"Half-sister," I correct begrudgingly. I'm being a dick, but it isn't unwarranted. At least, not to me. While my sister dreams of everything she can do with our new family addition, all I can wonder is what's in it for them.

Her eyes roll. "Whatever. I mean, Ben wouldn't even bother to see them if he didn't think the paperwork was legit. You know him. Plus, she kind of looks like Dad. Look at her."

I am looking. She's not totally wrong. The girl, Leighton, does share some signature features of the Bishops, but they're basic enough that it isn't solid proof. Nobody in our family has curly hair, and unless her mother styles hers the way she does, it doesn't come from her either. "I think they could be faking it. Her mother looks like she's full of shit."

"True," agrees my usually argumentative big sis, "but *really look* at Leighton. She's uncomfortable, like this is the last place she wants to be. And if what you told me is right, she had no idea who Harry was when they showed up."

My eyes go back to the room, where Leighton stares into her lap and avoids all eye contact with Benjamin Rockefeller and his partner Eric Gurney, Harry's attorneys. Her mom, whose name I couldn't care less about at the moment, looks smug as she rattles something off to Harry that's probably bullshit. The men all stare open-mouthed at her while my possible half-sister flinches.

"What I would do to be a fly on that wall," Mia whispers, shrugging and walking away from the room. "Come on. I think I saw cookie dough in the fridge downstairs."

Following her down the hall, I plant myself on a stool at the island. "This really doesn't bother you?"

Her shoulders lift as she digs through the fridge and produces a container of dough and a gallon of milk. "Nope. Now get off your ass and grab us glasses. We can't eat this plain."

I roll my eyes, but I do as she asks. She's older than me and insists that justifies her bossing me around, which she's done my whole life.

When we're seated across from each other in the middle of kitchen, she spoons out a hefty amount of dough. "I don't think it's right to be angry at her, Kyler. It's not her fault that our parents slept together."

Lips twitching, I wrap a hand around the glass of milk in front of me. "Yeah, I know."

Mia points her now-empty spoon at me with an amused smile on her face. "You're just angry she's a fan of Violet Wonders. Dad told me about the shirt." Her giggle comes when I glare.

"They're a fucking ridiculous band, and I'm not just saying that because Garrick and I have problems. If she has any passion about music, she's wasting it on being their fan."

The noise she makes is in disbelief. “I don’t believe that for a second. You can be pissed at Garrick all you want for hooking up with Kylie, but she was a willing participant. You never liked her that much anyway. He did you a favor.”

Garrick Matthews, the lead singer of Violet Wonders, a horrible name for an overhyped band, has been after me for as long as I can remember. It started as friendly competition between our bands when I still entertained in that industry, then turned into something different right before we broke up. “You’re only saying that because you think he’s hot and feel the need to remind me every fucking two seconds.”

I swear she murmurs “drama queen” under her breath, but I can’t be sure. Still, I glare for good measure which she ignores. “All I’m saying is that we need to give her a shot. I’m sure they’ll do a paternity test and then we’ll have our answer. If she’s really our sister, then you need to suck it up and get past whatever is pissing you off because I have a feeling it isn’t her.”

The unspoken truth pertaining to my sperm donor is left between our knowing gazes. I drop mine first, scooping out more cookie dough. “Hopefully the test comes back negative and we can move on with our lives. I’m sick of people trying to take advantage of us all because Harry can’t keep his dick in his pants.”

There have been accusations like this before, but none that showed up at the door with papers in hand that actually showed any truth to the matter. I’m not sure it surprises me that it’s happened, but I don’t want anyone else to be subjected to the kind of drama being attached to us will bring. Especially not the doe-eyed girl who squirms every time she steps foot into this house. She won’t survive here.

I consider the possibility that it’s an act. We are in L.A. with some pretty convincing people. “You can’t tell me that the girl doesn’t know what her mother is after. Wouldn’t surprise me if she’s in on it. They’re both pathetic as far as I’m concerned.”

Mia clears her throat loudly, causing me to look up with pinched brows. She’s looking over my shoulder. When I turn, I wince when I see the girl in question standing at the doorway, her face bright red when we lock eyes. She quickly drops her gaze. “I was trying to find the bathroom.” I don’t miss her broken tone, full of embarrassment thanks to me.

“Two doors to the left,” Mia tells her softly, probably with a comforting smile on her face to undo what I just did.

She begins to turn before stopping, her palms running down her legs. “I…” Glancing up, I notice how red her cheeks still are and feel a little bad. To my surprise, she says, “I’m sorry. My mom should have never come here and intruded on your lives.”

Shoulders squaring off when I hear my sister’s deep sigh, I wet my lips and give Leighton a single nod in acknowledgment. She isn’t a bad girl. Seemingly shy. Quiet. Definitely uncomfortable. I’m an asshole.

When she turns and walks in the direction of the bathroom, I turn to see the disapproval on my sister’s face. “That was cruel, Ky. Even for you.”

Fuck. “I know.”

Hours later, Harry finds Mia and me in the theater room watching some shitty movie from the 70s with an ashen look on his face. He doesn’t have to tell us the news, it’s clear in his eyes what isn’t spoken.

We just gained a new sibling.

Mia pinches my arm, causing me to jerk and cuss her out. “You owe Leighton an apology.”

Harry eyes me. “Why?”

“Playing the protective father already,” I muse dryly, not buying it. He’s probably going to give them money and send them on their way. If it’s anything like his other problems produced by the appendage behind his designer pants, it’ll go away in no time after a check is written. From what I can tell of the mom, it’s what she’s here for anyway.

For some reason, I want this time to be different. Maybe because it’s obvious Leighton comes from nothing and deserves to be compensated for who she shares blood with, but also because I want to see Harry twitch—lose the composure he’s heckled me to keep for years. Something tells me the gold digger will make him do just that.

He grumbles out, “They’ll be over tomorrow night for dinner.” Then walks out, leaving his first two kids behind him.

Mia and I share a look, but there’s excitement in hers and indecision in mine.

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CHAPTER SIX

LEIGHTON / AGE 12

IT'S STIFLING hot in the dining room, but I think it's just me that's sweating through my clothes. Mom told me to dress up because this dinner is important, but none of my clothes are nice enough for a home like this. The room is huge, the table even bigger, and everyone is spread out and tense. It's uncomfortable.

Mom says I need to get used to dressing up. I'm not sure what nice clothes she expects me to don on our weekly dinners at the Bishop household, something that they agreed upon until we all got to know each other better. The nicest items I own are what I'm currently wearing—black tights that have a run in them and an olive-green button dress. My shoes are cheaply made ballet flats that are bound to give out any day because I've had them for a long time now. I think I found them used at a thrift store.

The chair at the opposite end of the table—polished maple according to Mr. Bishop—is void of the fourth body that's supposed to be sitting in it. The placemat has an empty plate with silverware placed on both sides.

Trying not to notice the blatant absence of Kyler, or his words from yesterday that echo in my head, I stare at the two different forks and spoons lined neatly in front of me. Confusion sweeps over me until I remember a movie I watched once that explained each piece had a purpose. What were they though? The silverware at our old apartment were cheap finds from

Walmart, and most of them were bent, or slightly rusted, from all the use. They certainly weren't a set.

Mia softly clears her throat when soup is placed in a small bowl in front of me. When I glance up, she's tapping one of the bigger spoons before shooting me a wink. Grateful, I pick it up and watch as she dips it into the soup.

Harry Bishop, who I think has a few more grays since the first time I saw him only days ago, sighs loudly for what seems like the tenth time in the fifteen minutes we've been sitting here. "We might as well start. It's clear Kyler couldn't follow simple orders to be back in time."

Pathetic. As much as I try not thinking about the words, they ring in my head over and over. Am I pathetic? He must think so since he's not here to give me a shot.

Nibbling my lip, I stare down at the creamy green liquid and pick out a piece of broccoli. My nose scrunches. I hate broccoli, but I don't want anyone to be offended if I don't touch it. So, hastily, I begin eating with the rest of them.

"So," Harry turns his attention to me. My spine straightens, trying to mimic the straight posture of him and Mia. "Tell me about yourself. What do you do?"

Mia giggles and looks between us. "She's probably a student, Daddy. She's only twelve."

A noise rises in his throat. "Of course." He shifts and studies me a moment, making me slightly uneasy. "I suppose you're transferring here then. What grade are you in?"

Mom and I haven't discussed transferring schools, but I should have known that's what would happen. If Harry really wants to get to know me, then will this last longer than the summer? I have friends at my old school. People who understand me in ways I'm not sure any of these people can.

"I-I just finished sixth grade." Licking my lips, I cleared my throat. "I'll be in seventh…sir."

Mia laughs and shakes her head. I blush, not knowing what to call him. Dad seems too strange, and Harry seems safe but too familiar.

I sip more of my soup for a distraction as he says, "My children went to Saint Michael's Academy. It's well known for its reputation."

My lips press together at his carefully chosen words, and I wonder if he meant to clarify that his children and I are not in the same category. Right

now, I feel more like the ugly stepsister than his biological daughter. Hurt shouldn't lace through my chest because he refers to Kyler and Mia as his own, but it does. We haven't known each other long at all, so I shouldn't be upset that he acts like I'm not his. If I were in his shoes, I probably wouldn't warm up to the fact either.

Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic.

Mom dabs her lips with the cloth that has a fancy B stitched into the material. Gone are the dollar store napkins, I guess. "We haven't had the time to talk about it, Harry. It's been quite an adjustment trying to find a place to settle in."

My eyes dart to her, frowning. She hasn't looked at any places here, so I assumed it was a sure thing we'd be leaving. When I asked when we were going home, she'd never said, only laughed, and told me to let her handle it. I'm not sure what it is she's handling, but it gives me a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Mia clears her throat. "Saint Michael's is a nice place, Leighton. Do you enjoy school?"

My throat feels dry. "I guess so."

She smiles. It's a nice smile. White. Straight. Bright. It's strange sitting here in front of her when I know the lyrics to her songs. Not all of them, but some, and I've sang along when I've been alone. The weird thing is, she isn't as mean as people make her out to be. There's nothing about her that makes me scared or intimidated. In fact, she's been the nicest person to me since I showed up. "Kyler and I made a lot of friends there. People we still talk to. You could find that too."

I offer her a timid smile in return. "That sounds…nice." It does, but it's not my old school or friends. I'm not sure if I'm allowed to say so, so I opt to stare down at my barely touched soup.

Mom laughs, rubbing my arm like she used to during thunderstorms when I was little and crawled into her bed. "Leighton is being humble. She *loves* school, don't you? In fact, she was the top of her class last year. Her teachers all told me they'd be surprised if she wasn't valedictorian one day."

My cheeks heat when they all turn to me with raised brows. Mia's face is light. "Really? That's impressive."

Harry huffs clearly not as impressed as his oldest daughter. "Saint Michael's has students who are academically gifted. It's a competitive

school.”

I sink into my seat over his indication that I wouldn’t be considered impressive or gifted if I go there. Not in that crowd. The school sounds like the kind of challenging atmosphere that the guidance counselor back home told me I needed. Mrs. Petrel said that my academics could allow me to graduate early, but the school wasn’t hard enough. She even called Mom and told her as much, but Mom shut her down saying we couldn’t afford to go anywhere else.

Guess she changed her mind.

“My Leighton would beat all of them,” she insists despite Harry’s doubt. “She’s always been too smart for her own good. Isn’t that right, darling?”

I’m not even sure what that means, so I don’t say anything.

It’s Mia who cuts back in. “If you two are staying, maybe I can show you around the campus. It isn’t that big, and the uniforms aren’t so bad. They’re white and green.” She gives me a comforting smile. “You’d look great in one.”

Harry turns his focus to her. “Perhaps we shouldn’t plan too far in advance. We don’t know what will happen.”

Mia frowns. “Dad, if they’re staying, they’ll need to enroll her into school, or she’ll get behind.”

He sighs and puts down his spoon, pushing his soup away. I don’t think that’s a good thing, so I remain quiet while Mom chooses to intervene. “She’s right, Harry. If you want to get to know your daughter, we should talk about the next steps. I think I’ve found a job nearby that would allow us to move out of the hotel we’ve been staying at and into a place not too far from here.”

My eyes widen at the news. “What?”

She ignores me. “I’d hate for her education to be delayed after everything she’s done to keep her grades up. She has dreams of attending Stanford, you know.”

I gape at her. I had no idea she even remembered that. Sure, I told her at least three times whenever I would hear people talk about college at school, but I never thought she actually listened to me.

And what job is she talking about? She only has experience waitressing, and I doubt any of her previous employers would give her good references

because the longest position she held was a year and a half. She bounces around too much to make likeable connections.

“Stanford, huh?” Harry sounds a little interested in that, which makes my tense shoulder ease a little. He wipes his mouth off and leans back in his chair. “What are you considering studying?”

I only hesitate a moment. “Well—”

The front door opens abruptly, and slams shut, echoing in the large foyer. All our attention is drawn to the noisy entrance of Kyler as he appears in the archway.

His eyes instantly land on me for a moment, unreadable, before turning to everyone else that’s staring at him. “What’d I miss?”

Harry’s eyes narrow. “I asked you to be home half an hour ago. Where have you been?”

Kyler smiles and walks to the seat on the other side of the table. “I’m here now, isn’t that what’s important?” He plops down onto the chair and ignores the glare from his father and frown from his sister.

Mom says, “Leighton was just about to tell us what she’s interested in studying at college.”

His eyes go back to mine, narrowing slightly. “Isn’t it a little early for you to be thinking about that? Shouldn’t you be having fun while you’re young or something?”

“Just because you were never keen on having your life together doesn’t mean she can’t,” his father snips coolly. My eyes widen at the harshness to his tone, making me sink further into my seat. Isn’t that unfair? I know as much as any fan of Single Division does—Kyler Bishop is a huge name, with sold out tours everywhere even as a solo singer. He’s hardworking, seemingly always busy. What more could his dad want?

Kyler is quiet for a stretch of time, bathing the room in awkward silence. Nobody is eating, and even Mom is watching the former boy bander with raised brows until he chooses to speak again. This time, his eyes are on me in a way that doesn’t make me completely uncomfortable, feeding into the conversation his father approves of. “So, what *do* you want to go to college for?”

An apology is ready to escape my lips, but I know it wouldn’t be wise to say it in front of his father, who’s clearly still fuming over his son’s remark. “I’ve been thinking about public relations or journalism.”

I’m not sure why surprise colors Kyler’s features, but his brows arch. I’d be self-conscious over his thoughts if the corners of his lips didn’t curl up slightly, like he was entertaining the idea. Maybe even impressed like his father is over my Stanford dreams.

“PR, huh?” Mr. Bishop asks, his focus no longer on his son. His eyes are still sort of hollow, so I don’t hold them for long. “What makes you want to study that?”

Mom answers for me. “Oh, we used to have a neighbor who talked about working PR for some big child actor back in the day. Personally, I think she made it all up, but Leighton ate up every story.”

Face heating, I grip my spoon tighter. “I don’t think Ms. Wynona was making it up. She had pictures and everything.”

Mom sighs in exasperation. “Yes, but what was the actor’s name? Nothing memorable, certainly.”

Mr. Bishop chuckles, but it isn’t in amusement. I recognize the condescension in his tone when he says, “Clearly, she wasn’t very good at her job then. Hardly someone to aspire to be like.”

When I glance up, I notice Mia’s frown directed at her father. Her eyes find mine and fill with sympathy, but I don’t want it. She shouldn’t feel sorry for me because of his opinion. I’m used to people not approving of me.

It’s Kyler who cuts into the conversation again, his voice surprisingly comforting. “If there are any colleges that offer great PR programs, you’ll find it here.”

Blinking, I offer him a grateful, yet surprised smile. Maybe he doesn’t hate me as much as I think he does. Or maybe he’s just telling me that to get to his dad. That seems more likely. Smile slipping, I refocus on my soup.

“Well, maybe it *is* too soon for that,” Mom relents, shifting the conversation. “We should really think about where she finishes her schooling here first. I’ve looked into some of the public schools, but I’m not impressed.”

I don’t even bother looking at her. Since when does she care where I go? I know the answer to that—she doesn’t. But she knows Mr. Bishop will, which is confirmed based on the gruff noise coming from him. “If she’s staying, she’ll get into a private academy like the others. I’ll even pay.”

She. Not Leighton. Not Lenny, not that Mom has even called me by the name, or even Leigh. Does Harry Bishop actually *want* to know me or

spend his money on me? I'd want to know my child, figure out her likes or dislikes. But unlike him and Mom, I wouldn't put them in this situation, where dollar amounts are being tossed around in the form of education tuition and uniforms. It's unsettling.

Mom leans toward me. "Would you like that, Leighton? I'm sure that pushy counselor of yours would be happy to hear you're finally challenging yourself."

I swallow, knowing I have no choice in the matter either way. If I did, I'd ask to go back to my old school and life in Phoenix where I can pretend to be happier there a lot easier than I can here. "She would be," I agree quietly, watching as our soup disappears from in front of us as new food takes its place. "But maybe—"

"It's settled," Mom says.

The older man hums. "Well…good."

Mia claps. "You'll love it, Leighton. I'll show you around and tell you everything you need to know. I highly doubt it's changed since I attended."

"Eons ago," Kyler murmurs.

I don't need to look up to know the sound of flesh being smacked is Mia hitting her brother. He grumbles something under his breath, their father sighs, and I…just remain silent like a good girl does.

Pathetic.

IT'S LATE when Mom disappears into Mr. Bishop's office with him to talk further about my tuition for school. I'm waiting by the door hoping they'll be done soon so we can go back to the hotel. It may not have much, but it's nicer than some of the apartments we've lived in and it's much simpler than here.

Mia finds me huddled by the large double door, with Kyler close behind her heels. They seem to get along well, and I wonder if they'll get along with me if this becomes as regular as Mom wants it to. "What are you doing out here?"

I'm not sure why I can only stare at her like I don't know how to talk, but it seems strange that she's talking to me. I don't know much about Mia, just that she had a few hit singles that topped the charts when she was younger and became a huge star with a massive following. Now she's in her early twenties and acts. I think I saw a gossip magazine talk about her

possibly getting her own show. Some reality gig. I should ask her what she's doing, if she's enjoying whatever it is, but I don't want to seem nosey or like I'm fishing for information. They don't know me yet, and if the roles were reversed, I'd probably be suspicious of me until I could be trusted.

It doesn't help that Mia is strikingly beautiful. The kind that money can't even buy. Long luscious wavy brown locks, dark eyes that look almost gray like mine, and the kind of face photographers always want to capture. Full lips, defined cheekbones, small nose. I wonder if she takes after her mom because she doesn't look much like Harry or Kyler. They're much darker—hair, eyes, demeaner. Closed off. Intimidating, like one look from them could change your life.

The smile that tilts her lips is soft. "If you'd like, we can show you around the house. I'm not sure how long our parents will be."

Our parents. It makes a shiver rack down my spine. I don't know when, or if, I'll ever get used to that. Mr. Bishop doesn't seem like the fatherly type, even though he seems like the kind of guy who would tell Mia yes to anything she asks. I'm not sure that'll ever be us.

My eyes go to Kyler, who's leaning against the wall with his hands tucked into the pockets of his holey jeans. They look artfully ripped and faded in the perfect spots. One of his ankles is crossed over the other and he watches me with an unreadable expression on his face again. At least he doesn't look angry. I wouldn't blame him if he were. His father wasn't very nice tonight, and it had to do with me. I don't want him to get yelled at because Mom butted into business that isn't hers.

Mia touches my hand, startling me, peeling my gaze away from her brother. It's only then I realize I was blatantly staring at Kyler, whose songs I know every single lyric to. Anna, my best friend from Phoenix, and I know most of the dance moves to the music videos his band dropped. Though, our skills were never as eloquent in comparison to the vigorous training I imagine the guys of Single Division had. "Come on. There's no sense in you standing there. Plus, it looks like you'll be around a while. Might as well know where to go when you're here."

She has a point, and that's the only reason I let her guide me away from my little safe space. I'm surprised when Kyler follows silently, keeping a few feet between us like he expects me to bolt toward the exit. I don't, of course, but the way I feel his eyes tempts me.

The tour lasts over half an hour because there's a lot of rooms to see. Some Mia just points at because they're off limits to everyone but their dad—*our* dad. The thought makes my face twist, like something foreign and bitter on my tongue. I mean, this is a lot to take in for me. I'm a girl who's used to living in less than stellar conditions where mold, mice, and creepy men are common occurrences. Here, there isn't a speck of dirt, insects, or anybody creepy—only powerful, authoritative, and a bit scary in terms of the eldest Bishop.

Their life is daunting. I've read stories. Watched celebrity gossip shows that talk about the hottest dating updates and scandals that sometimes feature my two tour guides. I feel like I should tell them I don't believe the things I've seen, or at least give a disclaimer to being a fan, otherwise I'd feel dirty. Like I'm keeping some not-so-well-kept secret.

I'm still quiet as a mouse as I follow them along, deciding my silence is smarter than speaking up.

Their house is intimidating too. There are pieces of décor that I'm afraid to even look at much less touch, and furniture that is so clean I don't want to sit on it. When we end up in the den downstairs, Kyler drops over the back of the couch with one leg propped on the back and the other stretched out over the brown leather cushions. I'd bet anything it's the real kind, not the fake.

Hesitantly, I sit on the matching love seat while Mia leaves the room for something to drink. Heart pounding when Kyler looks over at me, my mouth goes dry. "I'm not always an asshole, you know."

My eyes widen.

Half his lips quirk up. "Maybe that's a lie. I *try* not to be an asshole. Harry makes it hard."

I find my voice. "Harry? You don't call him Dad?"

Snorting, he repositions himself so he's sitting up and facing me, an ankle resting over his opposite knee. "No. Don't plan to either." His tone challenges me to ask him why, but I don't. He sees that and lets it go. "Mia is right, though. My beef with him shouldn't involve you. I don't want you to think I'm a total prick."

"I don't." My voice is hoarse, making me flush and stare down at my lap. "I don't blame you for being upset with me and my mom. I'm going to ask her if we can go back home."

"And home is…?"

“Phoenix, Arizona.”

“No shit. Played a show there once.”

All I say is, “I know.” And I do. When his band booked one of the stadiums, the city became chaotic with fans swarming and selling out the show in a matter of hours. I know because I tried getting tickets with money my friend Anna and I saved up together. The seats would have been bad with how little we had, but it still would have been worth it. Her mom even offered to take us as long as mine agreed because Anna is a huge Single Division fan.

“Do you not want to know Harry?” His question startles me. It isn’t full of judgement, just curiosity.

Rubbing my lips together, I lift my shoulders in uncertainty. Truthfully, I’ve gone twelve years without knowing my father and have done fine for myself. Mom and I have a routine. One I’m content with. I guess she wasn’t though. “I don’t know. Maybe?”

His head cocks. “You don’t want to be here.” It isn’t a question, so I don’t oblige him with an answer. “Huh. Your mom seems like she wants to be. Did she tell you why she decided to show up after all this time?”

I shake my head, feeling sorry I don’t have a better explanation for him. He’s fishing for one, I know as much. “Mom and I don’t talk much about stuff like this. I’ve asked her about my father before but gave up when she wouldn’t tell me about him.”

His lips twitch.

Mia appears with two bottles of water. Walking over to me, she extends one with a smile still on her face. “Thought you might be thirsty.”

“What about me?” Kyler cuts in, frowning.

“You have two legs and the capability of getting to the kitchen just fine,” she replies, sitting beside me.

He eyes my legs. “Funny. It appears our little sister has two as well. But, fine. I’ll burn a few extra calories and walk all the way to the kitchen and back.”

Standing up, he shoots me a wink and then disappears from the room.

Mia says, “And people say *I’m* the drama queen.”

All I can focus on is what he called me.

Their little sister.

I smile to myself.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

PASSING the application to the assistant manager, I offer a wave goodbye after she tells me she'll leave it on the desk for her boss to look over tomorrow. The café is booming with just about everyone you expect to see in the outskirts of Hollywood. A listers. B listers. People you'd normally only see in TMZ posts and on Instagram.

Normally, that sort of stuff would freak me out. I'd think about how my clothes aren't as nice as theirs, or how my hair is a frizzy, curly, mess instead of every strand being styled to perfection in wait of a photograph being taken. For them, that sort of thing is inevitable. Mom would be no different, making sure she looked picture ready every time we went out, even before she strolled into the Bishops' lives and ruined everything.

Now, I look at the people surrounding me, those who I may have seen on TV, heard on the radio, or read about on those trashy websites that usually only post lies, and don't get nearly as affected. I've learned from living with the Bishops that they're people too. Some of them like the spotlight, others don't, and most people fall into the latter category like Kyler.

When I walk out into the blistering hot sun, I slip my shades over my eyes and look at the busy sidewalk. I almost get walked into by a couple that's too focused on taking a selfie to watch where they're going, and side-step them only to bump into someone else's back.

I’m about to apologize when the tall figure turns around and looks down at me with a lopsided grin. My lips part when I realize who it is, heart somersaulting in my chest over the signature dark stubble, whiskey-colored eyes, and tussled sandy hair. *Oh my God.*

“Do I know you from somewhere?” he asks, cocking his head.

My reflection in his sunglasses looks almost comical. *Now* I’m judging myself. Messy hair in need of some touched-up highlights thrown up into a ponytail, sweat dotting my tan forehead, wide eyes, and pink cheeks. Seems about right considering I’m being stared at by Zayne Gray, drummer for Violet Wonders. *The* Violet Wonders.

Tongue tied, my lips part but nothing comes out. He chuckles and gives me a slow once over, thoroughly taking in my shorts and blouse, something halfway presentable while I job hunt, and down to my sandaled feet. My painted toes curl as his eyes travel back up the length of me and land on my face. Specifically, my lips. Yeah, he is totally staring at my gaping, fish-like lips right now. *Oh God*, I repeat, forcing myself to close them so I don’t start drooling.

“We’ve slept together, haven’t we?”

I nearly choke on my spit and sputter out a semi-coherent, “W-What? No!”

His “huh” is low. Before he can say anything else, a silver car that looks like it costs an arm, leg, and a kidney combined, pulls up to the curb and honks. A guy yells out, “Get in, mate. We’re already late as fuck.”

I recognize that voice. Rather, the accent. Australian. Husky. Sexy. It’s been a feature in many of my dreams before. If I didn’t learn to control myself over the years of being a Bishop, I would have peed myself right here on the sidewalk.

Garrick frigging Matthews is leaning down to peer out of the passenger side window that’s rolled down. His eyes land on me and widen a fraction. “No shit. That you, Little Bishop?”

Little Bishop. The first time he called me that I was fifteen and still struck stupid, except, I had a backstage pass around my neck. He remembers me? *Holy shit!*

Garrick Matthews remembers me.

Zayne turns to me with sudden recognition lighting his face. “Fuck me. Yeah, now I remember. Kyler Bishop’s little sister, right?”

Before I can answer, Garrick does. “Not blood related. You need a ride somewhere, sweetheart?”

I try calming my racing heart over his pet name for me. Normally, it makes me squirm in discomfort, but considering I used to have a poster of him—of all of them—on my bedroom wall for years, it’s different. “Uh…” I look between the two and then at the time on my phone. I don’t have any more places to go and planned on waiting until Mia was free to see if she could pick me up because I don’t know the bus routes well enough yet.

But… “Didn’t you say you were late somewhere?” I don’t want to be a pain, and I also don’t want to make a fool out of myself if I get into their car. Plus, does Kyler really want people knowing where we live? Especially *these* people? I may not understand his dislike for them, for Garrick, but I want to respect his privacy like he does mine.

Zayne laughs and opens the back passenger-side door. “Might as well make it worth it. The guys will get over it.”

I assume they’re referring to the others in the band. Weighing my options, I decide to climb in so they’ll stop staring at me expectantly. Not to mention bystanders are probably wondering what’s going on. I’ve seen the model-like girls, some who are *actual* models, that normally appear in pictures with their arms around these men, and I don’t look like them. My legs are long and lean, but my body is lacking of any real curves besides the weight in my butt and thighs from the cheap junk I could afford to feed myself, and my face is absent of makeup except for the mascara and liner I’ve learned to apply with precision over the years. I think of the last girl I remember Zayne dating, some Victoria Secret model, and know for certain we’re polar opposites in every way.

Once we’re all in, Garrick pulls away and looks at me in the rearview. “Where to?”

Swallowing, I shoot off the address and watch them exchange a look. Too nervous to talk, I run my sweaty hands down my legs and glance out the small window at the semi-familiar surroundings. I could tell them I like their car, or their newest album, but I’m sure they get that a lot. Maybe I could even ask them how they’ve been, just to be nice. My tongue is too heavy in my mouth though. I mean, how many people can say they get car rides from people they idolized growing up? Not many.

Garrick breaks the silence, turning down the radio that’s playing some pop song I sort of recognize. “So, Little Bishop. What brings you back

here? Last I heard, you moved away with that fine mother of yours."

Fisting my hands, I take a deep breath and try ignoring the burn in my chest. It still hurts to talk about her, to think about her. Mia says it will for a while before the pain eases. She watched her husband experience the same loss. Though, Dylan was closer with his mother. More so than me, so I imagine our grieving periods will be different. "She passed away." Voice cracking, I clear it. "It's just me now, so I moved back for school."

Not a total lie, but I'm not about to admit I moved back because I had nowhere else to go. That seems embarrassing given who I'm talking to. Even though I've watched the documentary on the beginning of Violet Wonders, our situations are different. Some of them came from nothing, from foster homes, while others happened to be in the right place at the right time before forming VW. We may share certain similarities, but it's still different. They're huge. Wealthy. Famous. Popular. And I'm…me.

Little Bishop.

"Shit," Zayne says. "That sucks."

That it does.

Garrick slows down when we hit a long line of backed up traffic. "So, you're back with the Bishops then?"

I'm pretty sure they don't remember my name, but I don't tell them either. Would they remember it even if I did tell them? "Sort of." Not wanting to go into details, I let it drop. "Um, thank you for the ride by the way."

Garrick eyes me again. I can see his lips curve upward until that dimple I know well pops in his cheek. Girls go crazy over that dimple, me included. "I'm never upset about giving a pretty girl a ride home, sweetheart."

I blush. He chuckles.

Zayne looks over his shoulder at me. "If you aren't with the Bishops anymore, who are you here with? No offense, darlin', but you don't exactly look like you have the money to fork over the kind of home where your address is."

The blush intensifies. "I, uh…" My eyes shift downward to the outfit I'm wearing. It isn't the nicest, but it doesn't scream *poor* to me. Especially because Mia leant me the top, and she definitely doesn't wear Walmart brands like I tend to don daily.

Garrick wallops Zayne before giving me another look in the mirror. “What my idiotic friend is trying to say is that the neighborhood you live in has a reputation. You know, rich dicks who have more money than they know what to do with.”

Oh. I didn’t know that. When we found the house in the cute little neighborhood, something about it felt…safe. Welcoming. There wasn’t anybody outside when Alice showed us the space and she said the reputation is well perceived from other neighbors she’s worked with. Neighbors that I still haven’t met because Kyler and I stay in nine times out of ten.

“And, well, yeah. People have talked about the shit that happened at the Bishop home. Surprised more didn’t leak online, but I guess Harry and the others paid a large sum to make sure you and the MILF—er, your mum, stayed out of the media scrutiny. Trust me, sweetheart, that would have been brutal if they hadn’t.”

Swallowing, I stare at my hands and try figuring out what to say. When nothing passes my lips, one of them chuckles. Probably Garrick, but I don’t dare peek to find out.

“We know what the place is like,” Zayne tells me. His eyes must be on me because the top of my head burns like a pair of eyes are willing me to look up. “Because we live there too.”

My head snaps upward. “What?”

They’re both grinning, though Garrick’s is obscured by what little I can see in his reflection. “Not too far from your place,” he confirms.

I blink. I’m not sure Kyler will be happy knowing that unless he suddenly got over his rift with the guys. Namely, the one driving right now. To my knowledge, he’s friendly with Zayne, Jax, Cal, and Manning. I even remember him and Mia telling me about a few parties they all went to together shortly before he left. Then again, I’m sure they attended a lot of the same events considering the social circles they run.

When they know I won’t give them the answer they want, they move on. They ask why I’m out and about, what I’ve been doing, things I should have asked them first out of kindness. I manage to answer without stuttering or sweating through my shirt, which I take as a victory. “Job hunting. I think I may have found something that will work for me.”

“Job hunting?” Zayne makes a face. “At that place? Surely you can ask one of the Bishops to find you something nicer if you’re that bored.”

Bored. I suppose they don't remember what it's like to have to work out of necessity. I'm glad they made it out of their circumstances, Zayne especially from the stories he told on their docuseries, but I won't know what that's like anytime soon. Maybe never.

"It seems like a good place," I respond quietly, seeing the gate that surrounds the neighborhood we're apparently all in.

"Good tippers, I suppose," he relents. I admit, I considered that when doing a Google search on where to apply. Anywhere where people had money to spend was a good pick. Plus, it's somewhere in the middle of the house and campus, which means getting there and back won't be bad.

Garrick fills the lulls in silence by asking about school. UCLA seems like my best option, but I haven't heard back since I'm applying for late admission. He mentions that his younger brother was accepted to Stanford, UCLA, and a few schools on the east coast but he opted not to go. I vaguely remember seeing pictures of him years ago, but don't remember his name. He's not in the spotlight like Garrick.

I'm surprised when the attractive Aussie suggests, "Maybe you two can meet sometime, yeah? I'm sure he'd like that. Lives a few neighborhoods away with Mum. Could use a friend or two that isn't some hairy man online that he games with."

Um…

I give him a hesitant reply, something that sounds like "yeah" before going silent again. It's a sweet thought, I guess, since I don't have any friends here besides Kyler and Mia. Maybe it'd be nice to meet other people before college. Practice socializing since I'm seemingly bad at it. Plus, it sounds like I could have things in common with his brother since he's only famous by association. I know what that's like.

It isn't long before we're outside the house I call home now, where Garrick asks for the keycode to drive me in. My hesitation has them both looking at me in wait. Zayne with amusement, and Garrick with a quirked brow.

"I don't think I should give it away," I murmur in embarrassment. They've been nothing but kind, so I don't want to offend them, but I'm trying to think of Kyler. "I can just walk in from here. But I appreciate the —"

"Come on," Garrick says. "How about you enter it and we'll drive you in? We're not going to do anything."

My eyes go to the driveway, where Kyler's car sits. *Oh no.* He was supposed to be with Gordy and a few of his old producers meeting about new songs he wrote until at least four. I think he mentioned an old country artist was coming out of retirement and wanted to cover a song he wrote as his come-back single.

Neither of the guys in front of me seems to notice whose car it is, though, because it's new. As in, Kyler just bought it the day after agreeing he'd stay here for me. His old one, the pretty red Mustang he's known for, is parked in the garage, which fits three vehicles. Ridiculous because we only have two, despite Ky telling me he'd help get me a "cheap" one for before school starts. His version of cheap and mine are vastly different, so I informed him I'd take the bus. An argument we still fight over because he insists that "public transportation is for murderers and rapists looking for young girls" which doesn't scare me as much as he probably wishes it did.

"I get it. Don't want us to meet your sugar daddy, right? We're not going to judge you. You have to do what you have to do." My stomach churns over Garrick's assumption, even though his tone is teasing I can't help but wonder if that's what they really think.

"I'm not living with…I don't have a…" Flustered, I close my eyes and inhale slowly. I usually handle myself better with flirts like him, but it's hard knowing who he is. Not feeling like continuing this conversation, I ask to get out and punch the code in myself. To my surprise, they don't fight me.

When the gate starts to open, the front door does too. I pale when Kyler comes storming out of the house shirtless with his running shorts on, directly toward the vehicle I'm still standing beside. Sweat slicks down his chest like he just finished his run, even though it's late and hot.

From inside the car, I hear, "Well, this just got interesting." Based on the lack of accent, I know it came from Zayne.

"What the hell, Leighton!" Ky booms, stopping just short of me. His eyes are narrowed at the people inside. "I knew when I saw the cameras, I wasn't actually seeing you get out of Garrick's car."

Uh-oh. "Well—"

"It's nice to see you too," Garrick cuts in with a smartass smile on his face that provokes Kyler more. "We saw your little friend here walking and decided to give her a ride."

"*Leighton*," Kyler corrects like a slice to my chest, "could have called me or my sister to pick her up if she needed a ride."

I can't help but stare at him with pitiful eyes and a rip in my heart. Does he not consider us friends anymore? Or does he just not want others knowing we are? Either way, it's a cut to my heart that I can't ignore. I know my mother caused a lot of bad press for them, but I didn't think he cared. Usually, he liked seeing Harry pissed off, and Katherine's bigger-than-big lie did just that.

Unable to pretend that our questionable friendship doesn't hurt, I grip the cell phone in my hand and turn to the men having a stare off with Kyler. "Thank you for the ride."

Garrick smiles brightly at me. "Anytime, sweetheart. You know, if you give me your number, I could—"

"No." Kyler shuts down that train of thought quicker than I can blink. "You can leave now. Leighton and I have some things to discuss about getting in vehicles with people."

"Is this a stranger danger talk?" Garrick asks with amusement flashing in his eyes. "Because I'm fairly certain that I'm not stranger to anybody at this point."

I've heard that he's cocky, but I've never really saw it firsthand. I can't say I blame him for being this way though when Kyler is giving him a death glare like he just picked up a ten-year-old off the street like some perv offering me candy. And that thought, well, it's three times more embarrassing than what I already feel building inside my hollowed-out ribcage.

Tugging on Ky's arm, I murmur, "Come on. Let's go inside." When he doesn't budge right away, I whisper, "Please?"

Garrick and Zayne leave shortly after, both bidding me goodbye. When the front door closes behind me, Kyler starts in on me. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Flinching, I sit down on the couch and peek at his angry expression. "It was just a ride, and I didn't give them our gate code."

"You should have never gotten in the car with them. Garrick is—" He shakes his head, running his fingers through his hair. "Did you know Zayne got into a car accident and paralyzed someone? He was speeding and wasn't paying attention. I don't want you around them."

I *hadn't* heard that. "Zayne wasn't driving though." It's not a response that eases his anger, so I add, "It really wasn't a big deal. Garrick even did the speed limit." *Mostly.*

I don't bother adding that they live somewhere around here because that wouldn't go over well when he's already fuming.

"Call me next time."

"You were busy!"

"Then call Mia." I'm about to tell him that I was going to, but his phone goes off and he grabs it with a curse before pressing it to his ear and growling, "What?"

The way his body goes rigid makes me have a pretty good idea of who is on the other end. He always gets like this when Harry reaches out. Some things never change.

"No. Why would we do that?" His nostrils flare as he gives me a quick look, then starts walking toward the kitchen. "Absolutely not. She owes you nothing."

She? I stand and follow him, ignoring the privacy he wants. When he sees me, he shoots me a disapproving look but doesn't move again. "I don't really give a fuck what you want."

A pause, then Kyler curses and hangs up the phone, setting it down a little too hard on the countertop.

"So…what was that about?" I kick at the floor with my tip of my shoe.

He wets his lips, looking away before exhaling loudly. "Harry would like us to come over for dinner. He says he wants to catch up."

"Catch up?" I repeat doubtfully. "Like, with both of us? Because I can just stay here if he wants to—"

His glare is back. "You honestly think he and I want to have dinner together one on one, Len?" The shortened name gives me hope that he's not as angry. "Try again. Yes, he wants us both there. If for no other reason, to have you as a buffer so I don't chew him out."

"Why would you do that?"

He deadpans. "Why wouldn't I?"

I'm sad their relationship hasn't improved over the years. Did they even try? I know Kyler and, to some degree, Harry. Neither of them is particularly fond of being the bigger person.

"What do you want to do?" I ask lamely.

He studies me before dropping onto a stool and sighing into his hands. After cracking his neck and rolling his shoulders, he finally looks at me again. “What do *you* want to do?”

I blink. “Me?”

He nods once.

“I…” I’ve never been a fan of dinners with Harry. We haven’t done it in a long time. Not since the night before the truth came out. But I want to see them talk. How long has it been since they sat face to face? It could do them good. “Maybe we should go. Just for a little while.”

I can tell he doesn’t like my answer, but he doesn’t shoot me down either. That’s a step in the right direction. Eventually, after another sigh and soft curse he must think I can’t hear, he grumbles, “Great. Dinner with *Dad*.”

I want to remind him that he’s not my father. Not like we thought he was. In my mind, I liked thinking Harry was upset by it. That maybe, just maybe, he wanted another child—I liked the idea that he may have even liked *me*.

Not wanting to think about it, I give him a reassuring smile. “It won’t be that bad, Ky.”

He gives me a disbelieving look that I have to brush off with a smile. One of us has to be optimistic, and I can see it isn’t going to be him.

“Are we friends?” I ask, trying to hide the doubt in my tone. Apparently, I don’t do it well because his eyes cut to mine in narrow slits.

“Why would you ask that?”

My lips rub together. “You didn’t want Garrick to know we were friends back there.”

When his lips part, I expect something, anything, but he closes them instead. He tries again, this time, his Adam’s apple bobbing before hefting a long sigh. “We’re more than that, Lenny. So much more.”

I blink. “We are?”

Looking away for a moment, his gaze scrapes across the floor before he nods once. “We never stopped being family.”

I blink.

Then again.

A third time.

“Oh.”

He looks up, his eyes distant, his jaw ticking, and I have no idea what he's thinking. He doesn't sound like he believes it himself, and that crushes me inside.

Because if we aren't friends or family, then what are we?

"OUCH!" My head is yanked back a little too hard as Kyler fumbles with the color brush. He curses and loosens his grip, and I don't have to look over my shoulder to guess he's making a face over the box dye fumes.

"Shit. Sorry." He dips it in the mixture I helped him prepare, coating the bristles before moving back to the strands of hair currently in his palm. "Remind me why I'm doing this again," he grumbles for the third time.

I didn't entertain him with serious answers before, just the basic "because you love me" and "because you have nothing better to do" which, at least for the latter, is a total lie. I'm sure he'd rather be anywhere but crammed in my bathroom wearing plastic gloves while helping me touch up my hair and simultaneously getting high off the chemicals. "Because Mia backed out," I say instead.

Technically, Mia's busy getting ready for her "event" that is "not a party" even though it totally is. I just hope it's a small one because I've seen the crowds she brings. It's the only reason I spent the money on the hair dye, and why I'm forcing Ky to help me look halfway presentable. Whoever is going to be at her house tonight will undoubtedly look put together. It's bad enough the best outfit I have is an old dress of Mom's that isn't *too* short or tight, and that's only because I don't have the curves or boobs to fill them out like she did.

"I don't see why you even do this," he tells me. He probably only says that because it means he'll get stuck helping me the next time I need to recolor. I know he'll do it though. He rarely tells me no if I ask him for something, mostly because I rarely ever do.

Since moving in together, I've done everything I can to avoid asking for his help. Unfortunately, that didn't go over well when it involved Garrick driving me home instead of calling him, so I've been cautious. Still, I don't like bothering him more than I need to. Sometimes, he'll cook us dinner, but more times than not I'll make myself something to eat so he doesn't have to. When he goes out to meet with Gordy or other people he's been

working with to sell some music to, he'll tell me to call him if I run into any problems. Do I? No. Does he expect me to? Probably not.

"It makes me feel good." I want to say 'pretty' instead, but I know the second I do he'll tell me I don't need to put chemicals on my hair to achieve that. It goes back to when Mom used to tell me to put makeup on before we all went out together. Ky bit her head off saying I was too young for makeup and didn't need anything "caked on my face" like her. Harry scolded him, Mia sighed, and Mom just rolled her eyes and gave him the basic "I'm her mother" retort. To which Kyler would always say "could have fooled me."

This time, though, the man who agreed to the hair-care torture doesn't give me any crap over my answer. There's no Pinterest-worthy advice or *Full House* moment telling me I could feel good without all this. I'm grateful.

"So, about Mia's thing," he starts, carefully moving onto the last section of hair. This time, he doesn't tug. "We won't stay long. God knows what it'll be like when we get there."

He's obviously thinking the same thing I am, which isn't unusual. We're usually on the same track when it comes to everything. Both homebodies. Both hate being out. Sometimes, I wonder why Kyler ever agreed to be part of Single Division in the first place, much less going solo when they split ways. He was always in the spotlight with some story attached to his name. I remember reading about a fight he got into where he punched a guy that was following him and broke his camera…and his nose. *That* made national news. Ky hated the attention, which only earned him more.

"Promise?" I ask even though I know he isn't just saying that to appease my worries. It's no different than the dinner with Harry tonight. He tells me he'll get us out as soon as he can because neither of us wants to be around him longer than necessary. Unlike with his dad, he loves seeing Mia and his mom, and gets along well with Mia's husband Dylan too—he even likes the guy. They have a lot to talk about considering they both grew up in similar circumstances. Though I never listened to the band Dylan was in, I know they were good. Popular, even. Just not as popular as Single Division or Violet Wonders. Even though Kyler prefers staying out of big crowds, I know he'd stay as long as Mia wanted because they're family.

I used to know what that kind of dedication felt like.

Suddenly, my chest gets tight and a piercing throb stabs at my heart. I don't want to feel jealous. It feels…dirty. Ridiculous. I'm not part of the Bishop circle the way I used to be, and it's hard to accept that even if Mia and Kyler treat me like nothing has changed. Because it has. Everything has changed, and I have to fight the stinging in my eyes when the realization hits me.

A nudge snaps me out of my isolated pity party, table for one. "What are you thinking about?"

Of course he would notice. "Nothing." The lie slips out easily but tastes sour in my mouth.

He notices that too. "Since when do we bullshit each other?"

I could give him the exact date, down to the time on the stupidly over ornate grandfather clock that Harry probably still has in his foyer, as to when the last time we bullshitted each other was, but that would probably be petty. It isn't his fault that my mother lied, or that his father told us both to leave and never come back. But the day that I walked out will forever be cemented in my mind, because for once, I didn't want to go with Mom. I wanted to stay. With Kyler, Mia, and even Harry. I wanted to pretend everything would be okay, even if it wouldn't.

I wanted Kyler to tell me he'd take care of me.

I wanted Mia to promise me everything would be fine like she usually did.

What I wanted was too much to ask.

It was all bullshit.

Instead of dredging up old memories, I loosen a sigh. "I'm thinking about how much has changed. Mom…" Hesitation takes over my ability to verbalize my rampant thoughts, so I force myself to take a deep breath before continuing. "With Mom being gone, I feel like I don't belong anywhere. And before you tell me that I have a place with you and Mia, I know I do. But Mom was my only family left. We had…a lot of problems, but I loved her a lot. Down to the last day."

The last day is one that stays prominent in my mind. We'd gotten into another fight. One that left me wanting to scream "I hate you" as she walked to the door. She'd been through another episode because she wasn't taking her medication. *Again*. After she promised she'd be better at it. All I wanted was her to take her condition seriously, to consider me in her choices. Instead, I got a bitch slap to the face, followed by a half-ass

apology, onslaught of tears, a kiss on the same cheek she struck, before a “I’ll see you in the morning” like nothing happened at all.

She didn’t see me in the morning because she wrapped her car around the tree two blocks away from our shitty, roach-infested apartment.

I never got a ‘goodbye’.

Or an ‘I love you’.

As always, I received nothing from her.

I don’t realize Kyler has stopped messing with my hair until he’s kneeling in front of me, tipping my chin up to meet his gaze with an ungloved hand. “Hey,” he murmurs softly. “Do you want to talk about it?”

It. My mother. The elephant in the room that I refuse to address. Because it hurts. Because it physically pains me that I didn’t get to say goodbye to her even though she made me angry more times than not. My stomach churns every time I think of our last encounter, and I feel the sting of her hand against my cheek before her mood shifts back to the doting mother she sometimes could be.

So, no. I don’t want to talk about her. Or her depression, that was oftentimes manic, that nobody officially knew about when we lived here. I hold onto the fact that, instead of screaming my hatred at her when she left that day, I said “I love you” instead. I like to think she heard me, maybe even believed it.

I know she didn’t repeat it back. She rarely did, and I tell myself it was because of her condition, when deep down I know it wasn’t.

Throat thick, I shake my head slowly.

I think he’ll drop it, but instead he surprises me with, “Tell me when it’s over.”

Blinking, my lips part. It’s hard to find my voice after hearing those words. “When what is over?”

“You shutting me out.” He stands, going back to my hair. “I don’t like it, kid. Never did.”

An apology is on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it. “I don’t like when you call me kid. I’m not twelve anymore.”

The noise coming from him sounds like it’s in disagreement, but he doesn’t say so. No, he has to lodge the knife already in my heart a little deeper. “I get that you miss your mom, and I won’t even pretend to know what that kind of loss is like, but you *do* have me, and you’ll *always* have me. Even when you force me to do this stupid hair shit or buy me things

when I tell you strictly not to. I go with it to prove that you may have lost Katherine, but you won't lose me." His *not again* is stuck in his throat, but I hear it loud and clear.

Tears prickle my eyes when he adds, "I love you, Leighton. You know that, right?"

I don't think about it. Or did I? "I know."

"And one day you're going to tell me whatever it is that you're not saying before you combust. You will, Lenny, and I don't want the shit you're keeping from me to hurt you anymore than it already is. I've never judged you. I'm not going to start now."

Closing my eyes, I suck in a quiet breath and count down from ten in my head before I trust myself to speak again. Licking my dry lips, I offer him a small, "I'll tell you."

I don't say now.

I don't say when.

He understands.

Even gives me a gruff, "Making Mia do this shit next time though," before tugging on my hair again for good measure.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

THE DINNER with Harry goes about as bad as expected. He got up throughout the meal to answer his phone, barely paid attention to anything I said, and half-assed his questions and answers to Leighton. So, I got us the hell out of there when his phone rang for the fourth time before the dick could come back.

Thankfully, the days following are uneventful. He doesn't bother calling or texting. His assistant doesn't send an email that apologize on his behalf. Leighton and I go back to settling in, but I can tell it bothers her even when I tell her not to let it. She isn't programmed to think little about people like Harry because she wants his respect. I don't have the heart to tell her that she'll probably never get it. That's just who he is. Even after doing everything he wanted of me, I barely got any praise from the man.

When I pull into my sister's driveway, I curse at the number of cars lined around her place. There's barely an open space left for us. Lenny locks up beside me, gripping the seatbelt over her chest, probably counting all the vehicles she sees and wondering what she can do to convince me to stay out here. There's nothing.

"Fucking Mia," I grumble, parking away from the rest so we can't get blocked in. Something tells me it'll be a shorter night than planned because I have no intention of making Leighton deal with the people inside who will no doubt try butting into our business.

“I thought it was just going to be us and a few others,” she whispers, eyes darting to me. Panic has settled into her dark eyes, making me silently curse my sister.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay.” I unbuckle and turn to her. “You know Mia, she doesn’t know what ‘small gathering’ means. We’ll make an appearance, hear what she has to say, and then leave. No big deal.”

She shakes her head, staying silent. We both suspect the news that we were summoned to be part of. Her mood swings and growing midsection tells me exactly what the rest of the world has been speculating since she made the cover of every tabloid announcing the rumored pregnancy.

Lenny briefly adjusts the strands of her hair, which look damn good considering who she trusted to dye them, before running a hand down the dress that I would have rather she not worn tonight because she looks way too grown up for my liking. Far older than eighteen, which I push in the farthest pits of my mind, because I’m not sure what to think about how her appearance tugs at my chest. Maybe it’s the looks she’ll garner from people that has my fists twitching, ready to fight if I need to. Ridiculous. I didn’t lie when I told her she looked beautiful. The dress falls mid-thigh. Nothing scandalous. There’s a deep V, but it’s not too revealing, or too tight but also not loose, and the color against her darker complexion makes her look… well, like Katherine. Except classier. *Sexier.*

Swallowing, I abandon that thought quickly.

Her eyes are staring intently at something out her window, so I lean forward to see what’s gotten her attention. The van is one I’ve seen before, but the markings on the side make it obvious to Lenny who hasn’t been around the camera crew filming *The Casanova’s*. Her voice is quiet when she peels her gaze away from it. “They can’t put me in the show, right? They’d need my permission or something.”

I swipe a palm down my face. Mia knows better than to put Leighton through this. Me? I don’t like the reality TV bullshit, but I can handle five minutes with a camera in my face if it means that much to my big sis. It’s part of her job. I get it. I just wish she would have warned me first.

“Right,” I tell her. Sighing, I reach for her seatbelt again and give her a comforting look so she’ll let go. “I’ll talk to Mia and the producer, okay? I know you want to stay under the radar but…”

“But what?” The uncertainty rivaling with the panic in her tone just about shatters my loyalty to Mia. I want to turn the car back on and leave,

but I know that'd upset my sister and that's the last thing I want to do. Plus, the rumors would start, and her fucking show would turn it into something it isn't like it has before. Then I'd have another headline saying I'm on the outs with my family and Gordy would have to deal with the shitstorm that followed, which isn't fair to him because he's been working overtime with countless meetings for me since I've been back.

I hate to tell Len this, but she needs to hear it one way or another. "Whether you like it or not, you can't be the wallflower anymore while you're here. People know who you are from before, and if they don't, they *will* find out. That's the price you'll pay for being near me and Mia. I'm sorry for that, truly, but it's something you need to come to terms with."

We've had a similar discussion once before, but she's not the timid thirteen-year-old anymore who looks like she's going to vomit and then bolt. Well, maybe she still looks like she's considering both, but living with her now makes me see she's different. Able to handle a lot more than she was before thanks to what her mother's put her through over the years.

I pin her with my eyes because she needs to know I'm not giving her an option to back out of this.

Her eyes go to the lit-up house. "I'm doing this for Mia," she tells me, letting the seatbelt retract before reaching for the door handle with a somber sigh.

I get out and meet her around the front of the car with a proud smile on my face. One arm draped around her shoulders as I walk us toward the front doors, I say, "That's my girl."

I swear she shivers as she settles into my side, then blushes when she catches me looking at her. Smiling, I tug her closer and assess our surroundings, feeling her tense when we grow nearer to the noise.

"You ready?" I ask softly, dropping my arm to reach for the doorbell.

She chokes out a "no" but does her best to pretend otherwise when the door opens. We're greeted by my sister and two different cameramen. When Leighton's default is stepping back, I don't let her, keeping her close and cocooning her in my safety.

"You guys made it!" Mia greets happily, kissing both of our cheeks.

One of the camera guys narrows in on a stricken Lenny. Someone asks who she is. Another person tries getting a shot of the three of us together. I know how this works. They'll need Len to sign a waiver among a shitload of other things to air any film they get tonight. Usually, there's a meeting

about this shit before they shove cameras in our faces, but I guess they're doing whatever the hell they want nowadays without the writer to explain the narrative they're shooting. I guide the two of us in, ignoring the cameras and tell her to do the same.

It's going to be a long fucking night.

I WRAP my sister in a tight hug after battling through the throng of people giving her their congratulations. The announcement came to nobody's surprise, but the story attached did, and it makes me feel like a damn tool for not knowing how bad she and Dylan struggled all this time. I know my sister's fake tears, seen them a time or two, and the ones she shed while holding her rounded stomach were real.

Before I can apologize like she deserves for my absence over the years, she does first. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you it'd be filmed."

Squeezing her gently, I rest my chin on the top of her head and murmur, "It's not me you need to apologize to."

She backs away first, bottom lip sticking out for a moment. "I know. And I'll speak to Lenny Lou before you guys leave. The producers just wanted to make sure everyone was here and if I told you guys—"

"I get it." We both look at Leighton, who's talking to Dylan and his parents. They're getting along which is the only reason I broke away from her. "Leighton looks up to you, sis. Even if you mentioned they'd be filming, she'd want to be here for you. You know her, though. She's not comfortable with the way we live." Drawing her bottom lip in, I can see the flash in her eyes like she has something to say. I press for what it is. "What?"

Slowly, she meets my eyes. "I'm worried about her, Ky. I can tell she misses her mom, but she won't talk about it. I'm glad she reached out to me, but I know she didn't want to. I feel helpless when it comes to her."

"She's stubborn," I agree lightly.

"She has nobody else," Mia states sadly.

My shoulders square, but she won't let me say anything before she says what we've both been thinking. "You have to admit it. If Leighton had anybody else, she wouldn't be here right now. You heard what our father said that day, and neither one of us stopped them from leaving. We hurt her,

and I know she's forgiven us because it isn't like Lenny to hold grudges, but I can't help but feel how badly she wishes there were a way out."

Cursing, I rub the back of my neck. I've picked up on the same things, her hesitancy, her need to refuse the smallest aid, and I know it's her way of drawing the line. Of being as independent as she can in her situation. "She can't go back now." Even if she wanted to, tonight was proof that people took notice. As soon as she walked in with me, was hugged, and pecked by Mia and Dylan, people knew.

She was one of us.

The questions came periodically throughout the night. Some more casual from partygoers. Others directed by the producers trying to give more depth to their show.

"Is this the same Leighton who lived with your family for four years?"

"What have you been up to, Leighton?"

"Where is your mother?"

"Does this mean Harry is claiming you again?"

The last question made something deep inside me want to lash out—to tell the idiot that *I* was claiming her again because I never should have stopped. But I bit my tongue and played nice so nobody would have to clean up after my mess. This is Mia's night and I don't plan on ruining it by hitting anybody. And, frankly, swallowing that retort would be in everyone's best interest anyway, or more people would ask questions.

I found ways to avoid every inquiry thrown our way, keeping Lenny close to me as we walked through the crowds. Mom even engaged with her in friendly conversation, and I'm glad that Leighton talked back without much hesitation. We tried sticking near the people we knew wouldn't be in the camera's spotlight, but someone always found us hiding out and bombarded us with questions.

"Where are you staying?"

"How long are you here for?"

"Is it true…"

I feel for Lenny. I do. I never wanted her to have this life because she hates the attention, but it's too late now. It's on her. People want to know more about the raven-haired girl whose smile has the power to wrap anyone around her finger in a heartbeat. I'd know, I've been wrapped there for fucking years.

"I'm not saying she wants to back out," Mia tells me quietly.

“What *are* you saying?”

My sister sighs heavily and wraps an arm around mine. “I’m telling you to talk to her, little brother. She may have always looked up to me, but she idolizes you.”

Before I have a chance to argue, she walks us over to the girl in question and drops my arm to give Leighton a hug. I hear her say, “I’m very happy you’re here to celebrate this with me, Lenny Lou.”

It’s when Leighton tells Mia, “I know how much you’ve wanted this” that I remember they’ve kept in touch over the years.

How can someone as good as Lenny idolize a dickhead like me? She catches my eyes from over my sister’s shoulder and…smiles.

I can’t fight the familiar lightness in my chest that the small smile brings. Part of me wishes she didn’t idolize me. The other is eager to make it worth it.

Fuck me. I’ve been wrapped around this girl since the day she apologized for being in our lives after I called her pathetic.

Gone. That’s what I am.

And I’m not sorry at all.

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CHAPTER NINE

LEIGHTON / AGE 12

TUGGING on the hem of my pleated skirt and flattening the off-white button down covering my torso, I glance at the horde of students packing the hallways. For the first time since being enrolled at Saint Michael's, I'm glad that uniforms are required. Nobody stands out because of the price tag on their clothes.

Memorizing my schedule, I head toward the hallway that leads to my first period class, homeroom, that Mia and Kyler showed me last weekend. A few others linger outside the door and pay me no attention. Considering my lack of sleep from obsessing over what people would think of me, the results are blissfully anticlimactic.

Roll call offers me no strange looks, and I learn by third period that I'm the fourth new student in the seventh grade this year. According to the gossiping redhead with freckled cheeks who sits in front of me, two of those new students are on scholarship. Based on the twisted expressions of her and her friend, I think that's a bad thing and I'm sort of grateful that Mr. Bishop is paying my tuition in full. I don't tell anyone that when they ask me about myself. As far as they know, I'm Leighton Grier with no connections that are worth a semblance of popularity and no special traits worth becoming friends over.

I'm walking down the hallway toward the south wing where the cafeteria is when I see a group of girls surrounding another one by a set of

lockers. I know from the two seconds I focus in on the dark-haired one in the middle that they're not friends. Swallowing, I pause and consider my options. I don't want any trouble, especially not on the first day. I'm not the kind of person who likes confrontation, even if I've been where that girl has.

The girl being surrounded looks at me with wide eyes behind her thick glasses and I…I walk away. It doesn't sit well with me the rest of the day. I don't eat anything, I barely focus in my afternoon classes, and I go back to the nice condo Mom and I live in wondering what happened to her. If she's okay. What would have happened if I'd stepped in.

Mom asks me about my day once I set my new messenger bag down that Mia bought me. It's black leather and looks more expensive than everything in my closet combined, so I plan on taking good care of it. "I saw the pictures online, Leighton. It's a beautiful school."

"It is." The architecture is all very gothic and old, and I love it. Just not enough to forget about the rest of my day. I don't tell her about the girl, only about the classes I'm in. Some, like English, that I like more than others. She seems to listen to me, nodding every once in a while as she lays an outfit down on her bed.

I could ask her about her day, but I don't want to listen to the same thing. How it's hard to find a job, which I doubt since I saw at least ten help wanted ads in the paper that was delivered, how she's excited to visit the city, which she's done every day with or without me, and how she and Mr. Bishop have been "catching up" more. I don't know what to do with that, so I leave it be.

Instead, I go to my room and change out of my uniform. I have three identical outfits, though Mia told Mom I should have at least five just in case. I know we can't afford it because Mr. Bishop told Mom she'd have to pay for them herself. I know I'm lucky to have three and not one that I have to be careful not to dirty.

When the phone rings sometime later, Mom tells me it's for me. There aren't many people who know our new number, so I walk into the living room where she's holding the phone out impatiently with a look of confusion across my face. I expect her to tell me it's someone from home. Maybe Anna asking how Saint Michael's is.

So, I'm surprised when Mom shoves the phone in my hand and says, "It's Kyler Bishop."

I nearly drop the receiver. Why would Kyler be calling *me*? There must be other people who would be a lot more fun to talk to.

Wearing a green wrap dress and nude heels that make her look at least three inches taller, Mom grabs her purse and heads toward the door. “I’ll be back later. There’s food in the fridge you can heat up.”

She doesn’t tell me goodbye or ask me to lock up before closing the door behind her. I’m used to it though. Just like I’m used to the frozen food that I make myself, or the leftovers from the dinner she attempts to make that I sometimes throw out.

“Hello?” a voice says from the phone dangling from my hand. Snapping out of it, I bite into my bottom lip and press it to my ear.

“Hello.” My barely audible voice cracks and I wince at myself, but I’m not sure what else to say. Kyler Bishop, a well-known singer, is calling me. I try again. “Hi, Kyler.”

“Figured I’d see how things went today.”

I blink. He…what? “You want to know how school was?”

The pause is hearty. “Yeah.”

I look at the door my mother just exited before slowly sitting on the couch. It’s a lot nicer than the ones we used to have. Suede, I think. This one is a light brown, almost beige, and doesn’t have any stains, cigarette burns, or funny odors coming from it like our old one. I’ve taken naps on it after falling asleep watching TV, another first. We haven’t always had cable, so I’ve been watching shows I never got to before.

“It was…good.” I want to tell him about the girl like my guilty conscious demands or else I might burst, but what would he think of me? In the few short months that I’ve been here, we haven’t become that close. He hasn’t been late to another Sunday dinner, and sometimes him, Mia, and I meet in the middle of the week and watch movies in their huge media room. He’ll make popcorn, Mia will argue about the movie choice, and I’ll pretend like I fit in. I don’t. Neither of them says that though. Still, I wouldn’t consider myself best friends with either of them, not that I expect to gain that title anytime soon. Or ever, even.

“Lenny?” The name brings me back to the current conversation we’re having, and a small smile plays on my lips. They called me Leighton the first few times we hung out because it’s all they heard Mom address me as. But I admitted I preferred Lenny, so they don’t call me Leighton as much unless they’re scolding me for something. Like the time I stayed in the

kitchen when they had a few people over because I wasn't sure if they wanted me around. Turns out, they did.

My hand flattens on the cushion. "I'm here. Um, how was your day?"

His chuckle is low and I'm not sure what I said that amused him. "Forget about me. I want to know what you thought of Saint Michael's."

Sinking into the couch, I prop my feet on the edge and think about the day, absently staring at the little puppies on my socks. Classes here seem more intense than my old school, the kids aren't very friendly but not totally rude, and their food is way better. I find myself telling him all of those things, only lying about lunch, saying I had a sandwich from the mini deli station to make it seem believable, and mentioned two different girls who'd spoken to me in the afternoon. Neither asked for more than my name and where I moved from.

Kyler tells me it's a start.

After a while, he asks, "You going out to eat with Harry and your mother? I overheard him tell Mia he was seeing Katherine tonight."

I lick my lips and feel the sting rise in my chest over the new information. Nothing she told me indicated I was invited along, and I've learned not to ask. Most times, I don't want to be with her when she's meeting up with people. Especially not a guy. "Uh, Mom asked me, but I figured I'd stay in tonight because of school tomorrow."

The silence I'm met with lasts too long. I think he swears, but I'm not sure. It sounds like the phone is pulled away from his mouth when he does it. "Tell me your address."

My eyes widen. "What? Why?"

He sighs. "We're grabbing dinner. I'll pick up Mia on the way. We know a place that's off the beaten path. Nobody will bother us there. Sound good?"

For a moment, I wonder how he knew I was lying. I've never been great at it, but he hardly knows me enough to tell. That's when I realize that Kyler Bishop is a wallflower like me.

He sees everything.

THE RESTAURANT, if that's what you can call it, is more than off the beaten path. According to Mia, it's invite only. Few people know about it, which

makes it peaceful. It's tucked away on the outskirts of the city, taking up an entire ground floor of what looks like an old warehouse.

I almost pass out when the older, bulkier man at the door stares me down when he sees me tucked between Kyler and Mia. Both vouch for me, the man stares a little longer, and then lets us in after a head nod.

Everything looks industrial and clean and it smells like grease and onion rings, making my stomach growl. Mia says I need to try their special burger and homemade malt, but only if I dip the fries into it because apparently that's the best way to eat the meal.

We're seated in the back within minutes, giving me a chance to look around. There's barely anybody here, so it's quiet. Dull conversation from a few people across the room but you can't hear what they say, giving a sense of privacy. I can see why they like it here.

"How did you find this place?" I ask, adjusting in the black booth. The fabric is slightly torn, so I trace the tear with my fingertip to distract myself from how close Kyler is sitting beside me.

"Dominick," they say at the same time. The name means nothing to me though, so Mia explains. "A friend of the family. He's like our uncle, but we're not really related. Him and his brother opened this place years ago for people like us to escape to for a decent meal without being bothered. It's named after him. Dominick's."

Huh. My eyes go to the long counter where a bunch of stools are lined up. There's a window that peeks into the back and two men are walking around what I assume is the kitchen. "I bet you guys come here a lot."

They share a look.

"Not really," Kyler answers cautiously. "I think the last time we ate here was last year. Right, M?"

She nods.

"Why has it been so long?"

The pause makes me wish I hadn't asked, but they don't leave the question unanswered. "It is tradition to come here to celebrate," Mia says slowly, eyeing her brother with a soft look in her eyes.

I turn to him the same moment he looks down at me. The side of his lips slowly rise. "We only come here when it means something worthwhile happened in our lives."

My throat thickens with a strong sense of emotion clogging my airways. Looking down at my lap where my hands are twisted, I force myself to

inhale and fight off the sting of tears burning the back of my eyes.

I startle when a much larger hand peels mine away from each other and drops it onto the table between us. “So, littlest Bishop,” Kyler begins, squeezing my hand. “Tell us about yourself.”

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CHAPTER TEN

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

THE STATE of calmness that I feel as I settle into my new routine at Delmar's Café, despite Kyler's protests, makes me nearly forget about the things that led me here. Almost. It's during my final fifteen minute break of the day when I'm sitting alone in the employee breakroom that I remember why I'm back in California, serving people who barely give me a second look after I call their order for pickup.

Mom.

I'm not sure what subconscious thought loosens the old memories, but suddenly I'm flooded with the image of her Mercedes reduced to nothing but scraps of bent debris. The newspaper that reported the accident slapped it on the front page. Slow news day, someone had said. I still can't wrap my head around why they'd make something so tragic a frontpage story even without more tantalizing news to report on. If you looked closely, which I had, you could see the body still twisted in the driver's seat.

Maybe that's why I decided against studying journalism like I'd considered in the past. To spite the people who decided against any form of morality. I know better than to believe reporters live by some moral code, but I thought there were rules—like how you have to pick and choose which battles to face, they'd have to decide when to let their morals win or not as the story calls for it. Posting a picture that shows something so horrible for an entire city to see seems heartless. Maybe they didn't care

because I’m the only family left who would give a crap. The article made the point crystal clear that Mom’s recklessness left her only child an orphan, and that’s another reminder that she was in the spotlight long before her death. Everything chasing us back to Phoenix trailed close behind, waiting for her to mess up again.

And when it did…

My throat gets tight from emotion.

Thumbnail snapping under the pressure of my teeth, I wince at the ache radiating up my finger and frown when I see the uneven nail that Mia would scold me for like she did when I was younger. It’s a habit I’ve mostly broken, but there are times like this when I’m trapped in my head and end up punishing my nails.

“Get it together,” I tell myself.

The door to the room opens and my manager walks in. He’s mid-forties if I’d have to guess. Not very friendly. Quinn, the girl who’s been training me for the past two weeks, says it’s because he’s balding and going through another divorce. I try to avoid him because he always gives me a judgmental look like I shouldn’t be here, but it’s tough when there aren’t many places to hide in the small facility. “Lauren,” he greets in a gruff voice.

I don’t opt to correct him on the name. At least he got the first letter right this time. Last time he called me Ashley, which apparently was the last girl they hired before me. She left to pursue a career in modeling, but there’s been talk that she’ll be back by the end of the summer with her tail tucked between her legs. Not my words. In fact, I hope she proves everyone here wrong and makes a living from it.

“Mr. Warren,” I murmur. The clock tells me I still have six minutes left. If I walk onto the floor before my break is up, I’ll be reprimanded and sent right back here.

Mr. Warren turns to me, his slight rounded belly hanging over the waistband of his slacks that he’s got belted. He always dresses to impress, but nobody has the heart to tell him that his shirt is too small for his gut and leaves the buttons gaping. “How’s it going? I hear you haven’t screwed up the orders like the last one did.”

I try not frowning. I really do. But Mr. Warren always talks about his employees like we’re numbers. If I had to guess, I’d say he doesn’t remember *anybody’s* name. Why would he? He’s only around a few days a

week to snap at people and do whatever he does in his small office. So, while I know “the last one” is Ashley, it makes me twitchy that he doesn’t, nor does he seem to care.

“It’s going well.” Nobody has yelled at me yet. I made a coffee too strong the first day, but the customer didn’t even ask for a refund before glaring at me and storming out. Last week, I mixed up an order and gave a caramel macchiato to some guy in a suit instead of the girl beside him, but they just exchanged drinks—and numbers—and went their separate ways.

Quinn is more talkative than some of the other baristas who’ve worked with me. I know that she’s envious of my natural dark hair, which is only slightly lightened with the new highlights, because she told me about her many failed attempts at getting hers the same shade of black, that white is her favorite color even if it’s “not really a color”, and that she hates California. When I ask why she stays then, the dubious look she gives me makes me feel ridiculous for asking.

It’s not the money. While Delmar’s pays us decently, the tips aren’t always that great, and we share them with whoever works the same shift. I doubt it’s the customers either, since a lot of them seem to ignore us or make condescending comments under their breath that makes her sneer when they turn their backs. As it turns out, people with money like to cheap out on tips and manners. Another reason why her staying makes no sense, but she never enlightens me on any real reason.

“I like it,” I add to Mr. Warren, painting a smile on my face. It’s not hard to do when I’m being truthful. I’ve had worse jobs in the past and don’t mind the steady workflow that the café brings. It passes the time and helps me save up. My bank account is looking a lot stronger than before, and it makes pride swell in my chest.

My boss’s eyes travel down me again, only going as far as he can see where I sit at the table. We all have to wear the same forest green t-shirt with the Delmar’s logo on the pocket and some sort of black bottoms. Today I’m in leggings, which I know his slimy gaze would pay too much attention to if they could. His attention when I wear them doesn’t give me the same flutters that Kyler’s does when I catch him looking, but I never let him know I do.

Mr. Warren conveniently didn’t have any other t-shirt sizes other than extra small, so the material clings to my body and boobs. He doesn’t make

it subtle that the full C cups trying to poke their way out of the dipped collar have his interest.

Squirming, I cross my arms over my chest and clear my throat. “Quinn says I may be able to pick up extra hours in a few weeks. Something about peak time for tourist season?”

When he finally lifts his eyes to meet mine, they’re widened in surprise. “You want to work more? Usually the others are asking for less hours to go chase after some unreachable dream.”

Cringing over his crudeness, I nod. “I’m saving up for fall semester at UCLA, so I need the money.”

His dry laugh fills the room. Goosebumps rise on my arms as he dumps the rest of his drink in the sink and turns to me. “*You* need money? I know who you are, girl. Background check tells me that you’re not hurting like the rest of the people here you’re pretending to be like.”

Ice fills my veins as I process his words and tone, neither which are friendly or understanding.

Chuckling again, he walks toward the door like he isn’t being a complete dick. “If you need money so bad, ask the Bishops. I won’t allow you to pick up more hours that the others could actually use when you’ve got the resources at your fingertips.”

With that, he leaves. If everybody else is out chasing their “unreachable dreams” that should leave plenty of hours for me to pick up, shouldn’t it? The sour feeling I get when I’m stuck in a room with him intensifies, ruining the good high I’ve been riding since Quinn told me I could get more hours if I asked.

I’m gaping at the door until my time is up, silence suffocating me until I trudge back out to the serving station. Quinn sees me and instantly rambles on about some up-and-coming celebrity who she got a ten-dollar tip from after serving her a white chocolate frappe. I think I’m smiling, but I don’t know.

She keeps talking and serving and bustling, while I stare at the clock and hope my shift ends quickly so I can go home. My mood only worsens when Mr. Warren comes out and does his usual end of shift spiel that leaves Quinn rolling her eyes, Harmony muttering under her breath, and me avoiding all eye contact with him. Especially now.

Can he really refuse me hours based on prejudice? Between Kyler’s and Mia’s careers, people know them and the dollar sign that one simple Google

search tacks onto their last names. So, I get it. He thinks because I lived with them once upon a time, I share their wealth. But if his background searches are that thorough, he'll know that I have nothing to my name besides shame and embarrassment over my mother's scandal. The most my bank account has seen at one time is $525, and that was after I sold a few items on eBay for bills. It didn't take long for that number to drop, and eventually overdraft.

It's almost time for us to close for the day when the front door opens. Quinn is on her break since she couldn't take it during her scheduled time, so Harmony groans from where she's cleaning the counter off. There are always a few people who wander in right before we shut down, usually making us stay later than necessary, especially when we have to service all the machines and clean them before the morning shift.

When she looks over her shoulder, her expression sobers, shifting from irritation to awe. I recognize it because it's the same way I looked when I saw—

"Hey, Little Bishop."

Harmony squeaks out an incoherent noise to the accented voice behind me. I'm holding a damp rag that I've been using to dry a few of the freshly washed coffee pots when I turn around to face Garrick. He's leaning against the pickup counter with a smug smirk on his face, eyeing my coworker before trailing his focus back to me.

Maybe it's the echo of my boss's comment in my head, or the way he continued to ogle me like a prized horse throughout the rest of the afternoon, but my patience snaps. The frayed ends of the rope keeping it together gives out as I eye the Aussie flirt. "I'm *not* a Bishop."

His brows lift and amusement takes over his blue eyes. I have the nerve to feel a little bad for my reaction even though he's unfazed by it.

"Not from what I hear." Once again, his attention turns to my coworker as she gapes at him like a floppy-mouthed fish out of water. "As much as I love to be looked at, I'd like a moment alone with *Leighton.*"

It's the first time he's said my name, taking me off guard. I think Harmony nods but I'm not sure. Next thing I know, it's just Garrick and me staring at each other. Well, I'm staring. He's grinning.

"Not a Bishop, huh?"

Shaking myself out of it, I try to find the best way to approach his unexpected visit. "I'm simply stating a fact. That was never my last name."

Garrick’s head cocks. “I think Mia would see that differently. After all, she asked me to pick you up from your shift today because she didn’t want you taking public transit or hitchhiking with some probable serial killer.”

Ignoring his ridiculous comment, my mouth goes dry. “She what?”

His lips kick up at the corners. “She heard your roommate had to deal with some last-minute business tonight, so she wants you over for dinner. Lucky for all of you, I’m going to be there as well. You happened to be on my way.”

All I can do is blink.

He pushes off the counter. “Before you pass out on me, we won’t be alone. My little brother is waiting in the car for us. Don’t worry, I cracked the window and gave him water.”

“I’m sorry,” I blurt in confusion. “But I didn’t even know you and Mia talked, much less hung out.” I don’t know how to even broach the brother topic. When he mentioned him before, I didn’t realize he was serious about us ever meeting.

He points to my pocket. “Your not-blood-related-sister and I have business together as well. She said she texted you about it, but you didn’t answer. Must be that good employee ethic. I’ll make sure to drop a note in the suggestion box that tells them to make you employee of the month.”

“We don’t have a suggestion box,” I murmur dumbly. Or employee of the month, last I knew. Neither of that seems important now.

He winks and rests against one of the tables like he’s really waiting for me. It takes me a few more seconds to wrap my head around the fact he’s here, willing to drive me around for a second time. I make sure Mr. Warren isn’t around before pulling my phone out of my back pocket and checking my messages to be sure this isn’t some prank.

Mia: *You’re coming to dinner at my house tonight. Sending someone to get you.*

Mia: *No filming. Promise.*

The second text lessens the tension in my chest, but it doesn’t stop me from glancing up through my lashes at the guy I used to crush on hard when I was younger. Full on, kissed the poster of him on my wall kind of crush.

“Oh God,” I groan to myself. Not quietly enough, though, because he laughs.

After the party at Mia’s, there was some speculation about me online. Not a lot because the episode hasn’t aired, but a few pictures surfaced of my

profile talking to Kyler and Dylan. Some people mentioned who I was because they remembered my stint with the Bishops from my early teen years, others asked why I'm there along with other not so nice words. Mia told me to ignore the posts and Kyler insisted that I not read everything I see online or I'd just get upset with the "greedy assholes who have to know everybody's business". It's hard though. I never liked being the center of attention, but I know since signing all the forms stating that I agreed to be shown on *The Casanova's*, that I will be.

It's for Mia, I remind myself every time nerves bubble in my stomach over it.

Harmony eventually comes back out and keeps looking between me and Garrick while we finish closing. Her eyes are big, and her hands are twitchy, making me think she's a fan. Who wouldn't be? Mr. Warren left already according to her, thank God, because I don't want him to have more ammunition against me. Even someone like him would know who Garrick is. He has daughters who are probably obsessed with the thirty-year-old Australian.

It's another fifteen minutes before my apron is hung up in the backroom, my timecard is punched, and I'm saying goodbye to Harmony and Quinn. Quinn waves, but Harmony is too busy on her phone doing who knows what to even acknowledge me.

"Can we please go?" I whisper, keeping my eyes on the ground as we walk toward a black car with tinted windows. It's the only one in this section of parking lot, so I can only assume it's his. I don't question where his silver one is as he opens the back door and gestures for me to slide in. Kyler has two different cars, Mia has at least three, and they've both told me I could borrow one to get to and from work, but I still refuse.

My attention is instantly drawn to the brown-haired boy in the passenger seat. His curly hair is weighed down with a pair of bright red headphones. Beats, I think. He must sense me staring because he looks back at me with a curious look on his face, as I silently gape at him for way too long.

Garrick is rounding the front of the car and opening the driver's side door when his brother says, "You're not what I was expecting."

I don't know why his lack of accent has my lips parting, but it does. "You're American."

Both men chuckle at my obvious commentary. But it's the brother who replies, "Would you believe I get that a lot?"

Blushing, I feel like a ditz. Of course, he gets that a lot. Duh. "Sorry, uh…"

"Chase," he supplies, offering me a lopsided smile that looks boyish. I realize in that instant that he's young. Well, younger than Garrick—probably my age.

Garrick pulls out onto the road, ignoring the car that's honking at him as he speeds into a different lane. "Chase, this is *Leighton*. *Leighton*, my little brother Chase."

"Why are you saying her name like that?"

"Can you…" I look into the mirror to see Garrick glancing back at me for a moment before returning his eyes on the road. "Can you maybe not tell Mia about what I said? It's nothing against her or Kyler."

It's silent for a beat too long. "Give me one good reason why."

His brother is curious as to what's happening because he studies his sibling's profile before looking over his shoulder at me.

I don't want to hurt Mia's feelings, so I go with the truth. "It's my boss." Their lack of response tells me I need to offer more than that, so I explain what happened today. It may be nothing to them because their world is all about connections, but they aren't the kind I want.

After I'm finished, Chase blurts, "That's bullshit. He can't really do that, can he?"

I shrug.

Garrick nods in agreement, grumbling under his breath about *dickish Americans*. "The guy sounds like a Drongo." I have no idea what that is and don't ask. I make a mental note to look it up later. "But you can't let people like that make you feel bad about who cares about you."

Chase stares at Garrick before sliding his headphones off his head and draping them around his neck. "He's right. People are going to say and think whatever they want once they know who you're tied to. Doesn't stop me."

I nibble my bottom lip. "It wouldn't bother me so much if he didn't hold back hours just because he thinks I have easy access to money."

"You do," the man in the driver seat says to me pointedly. The casual statement doesn't sit well with me.

"It's not *my* money."

“Doesn’t matter, kid.” I blanch at the new namesake from him, which reminds me of Kyler. It’s better than sweetheart, though, since that makes me the stupid kind of speechless. “They would give you anything you needed if you asked. Mia cares about you. Kyler, too.”

Chase turns his body toward me. “Why don’t you get a new job? Who wants to serve coffee to pretentious assholes anyway?”

Garrick smacks his brother’s shoulder. “Hey, now. One of those pretentious assholes is in control of this vehicle.”

His threat doesn’t seem to bother Chase because he simply grins. “Like you’d kick me out of the car. Mom would never forgive you. I’m her favorite.”

A surprised laugh bubbles out of me. Their banter seems so…normal. It reminds me of Kyler and Mia.

“She can’t possibly mean that,” Garrick counters, looking in the side mirror before merging onto the exit lane that leads us toward Mia’s neighborhood. “You’re still living at home, mate. Cramping her style.”

Chase snorts. “Whatever.” He smiles at me and shoots me a wink, something very Garrick-like, except more playful. “My brother thinks he’s the favorite because he makes the big bucks, but he’ll be singing a different tune—” The pun makes said brother groan. “—when I start showing him what programmers bring home.”

Programmers? “Like computers?”

Chase’s smile widens. “I dabble in all programming needs. Know my way around most technology. The basement I’m currently taking residence in doubles as my office. Garrick thinks because he has like four houses, which I still think is excessive, that he can mess with me for living with our mom still.”

My brows lift. Wow. “How, um, old are you exactly?” He seems kind of young to be running his own business, which sounds like what he’s insinuating.

“Nineteen years young.” His prideful answer makes Garrick chuckle, but he doesn’t say anything. “Before you ask, I was homeschooled and graduated two years ahead of schedule. I’ve been doing my own thing since.”

“Since you were sixteen?” I gape.

He nods.

I blink at him. “That’s…impressive.”

He beams.

Garrick slows down when we near a group of homes that all start blending together. They're practically identical, minus a few features that differ based solely on décor. A flower bush here, a small tree there. All the same big, splendid houses that a lot of people would envy to have. It's a full on *Pretty in Pink* moment, except I'm nothing like Andie in her desire to live in one of these.

When we pull into Mia's driveway, Garrick shuts off the car and says, "I won't tell her. But in her mind, you'll always be a Bishop. Embrace it."

With that, he gets out.

Chase unbuckles and smirks at me. "He's right, you know. Plus, Mia is cool. I wouldn't mind considering her the big sister I never wanted."

I want to ask him his story because it seems like it'd be an interesting one, but I don't. Instead, I climb out of the car and glance down at the phone that has five new messages.

Mia: *Garrick is bringing his brother*

Kyler: *Mia told me your plans tonight*

Kyler: *If Garrick tries anything, I'll hurt him*

Mia: *Chase is cute, Lenny Lou!*

Kyler: *I have connections. The kind you don't want to use unless necessary*

"You've got to be kidding me," I mumble to myself, face flaming. Chase sidles up beside me as we walk toward the front doors Garrick is already pounding on.

"What?"

Turning the screen off, I ask, "Do you know if the mafia still exists?"

He blinks. Then laughs. "You're weird, huh?" I freeze at his words, uncertain if I should be offended or flattered. "I think we're going to be good friends."

A new text draws my attention down.

Mia: *You guys can hang out after dinner while Garrick and I do some work ;)*

Is that what this is? I pale. Mia is trying to set me up.

When she opens the door, she grins at the three of us. Ushering us inside, she wraps an arm around mine and whispers, "He's cute, right?"

I groan again.

The boys both look back at us.

My face turns pink. “Please stop,” I plead under my breath.

“I’m just trying to help a girl out.”

I don’t admit that Chase is cute, which he is, because then Mia will go out of her way to try matching us up. It’s bad enough she’ll head off with Garrick and leave me alone with Chase. He seems nice, but I’ve never been great at one on one conversations with people I don’t know. Guys especially.

Mia squeezes my arm. “Give it a shot, Len. For me?”

Frowning, I relent. “Fine.”

She pecks my cheek. “You’ll be fine.”

I’m not so sure I believe her.

TURNS OUT, Chase isn’t bad. Unlike his older brother, he’s not a flirt. He’s awkward and a little dorky, which is great because he reminds me of me. I’m also pretty certain he doesn’t know Mia’s intentions or else things may be awkward in a whole different way.

After surviving dinner, which included a lot of banter between Garrick and Mia about babies, Kyler, and everything in between, everyone broke away. There’s a surprise collaboration in the works from them that they’re going to be recording this summer and releasing in the fall. I try acting like I’m not too excited, but I am, and I’m a bad actor, so they know it.

The few hours following the meal leaves me and Chase in the living room watching YouTube videos about hacking. He tells me about being accepted to Boston’s MIT and choosing not to go and how he got started doing independent coding for different software systems.

“It’s not what I wanted to do.” He kicks his feet up on the ottoman and grabs a handful of popcorn Mia brought us. “Remember that group Anonymous? I used to want to be one of them.”

“But they’re so creepy!”

“They do cool shit though.”

“Cool, *creepy* shit,” I amend.

He shrugs. “Yeah, I guess. They’re who started it all for me. I watched the videos they posted whenever a new one popped up. It freaked Mom out.” I give him a pointed look that he just laughs off like he doesn’t get it. “I fell in love with computer work the same way Garrick fell in love with

music. Mom couldn’t really argue with my choice not to attend college once she saw my passion for the work.”

I’m embarrassed by the rise of jealousy in the pit of my stomach. I should be happy for him for having that kind of support, but all I think about is Mom and her lack of encouragement with me. The only time she talked about college with me was when she wanted Harry to pay for it. She never asked me what I wanted to do after we left California. I’m not sure she cared.

“You’re not even listening anymore,” he accuses lightly, setting the popcorn on the table. I blink back into reality and flush.

Guilt floods me. “No, I am. I was just thinking about my mom. That’s all. It sounds like yours really loves you.”

He gives me a weird look. “Doesn’t yours? It’s kind of their job.”

I’m not sure I want to dive into the details of my rocky relationship with a woman who’s no longer here to defend herself. I want to tell him that Mom loved me a lot. She just loved herself more.

I don’t say that. “She did.”

His lips part, then quickly close in understanding. He really doesn’t know. That may just be a first. “Garrick told me to be careful about what I talk about, but he didn’t give me a list of specifics because he’s a dick like that.”

The laugh bursts past my pressed lips. “I should probably thank him for that, but it’s only because he mentioned my mother the last time we saw each other. He didn’t know either.”

He flinches in understanding. I just nod.

After the last video ends, he exits the app and stretches out. “I’m adopted.”

I stare at him, completely confused why he divulges that to me.

“That’s why I don’t have an accent.”

Another two slow blinks. “Oh.”

“Figured I owed you for the mom thing.”

Shaking my head, I move my hair behind my ear and crisscross my legs under me. “You don’t owe me anything, Chase. I know better than anybody that other people’s business is none of mine.”

He takes that into consideration, watching me a little too closely, for a lot too long. Eventually, he nods again. “Yep.”

My brows pinch.

“We’re definitely friends.”
I blow out a small breath.
Friends. I like the sound of that.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

THE TWENTY-SEVEN-YEAR-OLD SITTING across from me shouldn't have any gray hair, but I swear I see a streak of it starting over his left ear. Otherwise, his dirty blond hair is slicked back like it usually is. Not in a scumbag kind of way, just professionally since he refuses to cut it any shorter.

"Before you say—"

"No."

My manager sighs. "Kyler, dude—"

"No," I repeat firmly. Gordy is doing his job, I get it. It's likely the gray hairs that may or may not be growing by the dozen are because of me. I even feel a little bad about it. What I don't feel bad about is shooting down the opportunity he's attempting to goad me into. "Listen, man, if it were anybody else I'd consider it. Still probably tell you no but might give it a day."

He swipes his face and leans forward, pressing a finger onto the contract. "It's one song. Three minutes and sixteen seconds based on the demo. Can't you deal with him for that long?"

Clearly, he forgets the attachments that come along with doing a feature. There will be shows. Cameos. Appearances. If it's anything like when Single Division did shit like this, we'll be asked to perform on the Grammys, talk shows, you name it. That's a hell of a lot more than three minutes together.

“Mia can do whatever she wants,” I continue, knowing she will no matter my opinion on the matter. “But I’m not planning on following in her footsteps.”

“The album will be huge,” he tries again. Gordy is right. Garrick Matthews doing an album full of duets with the hottest in the industry *is* going to be huge.

“Good for them.”

He groans and leans back in his seat. I think another gray hair appears. “I spoke to his manager. Garrick has been asking to work with you for a while. Why are you still so hung up on hating him?”

I’ve long since gotten over him screwing my girlfriend, which is the question Gordy isn’t asking. Mia is right. I never liked Kylie all that much, and she cared more about her designer clothes and reputation than me. Ironic considering she fucked herself over when the media got ahold of the cheating scandal. I’ve learned that most people who want to tie me down are more focused on what it does to elevate them anyway. It’s been years of dealing with his cocky ass self that grates on my nerves. “I don’t hate him. I simply don’t want to collaborate. With anyone.”

All he does is stare like I’ve grown another head. It’s probably because he’s putting the puzzle pieces together. I turned down three other chances to put music out there in the past six months. All with other artists who range from people I’ve idolized to others I’ve never even heard of.

“I hate what this industry has become.”

“So, change it.”

Snorting, I shake my head. “Nah, man. Too much work for one person. If my name pops back up, people will expect the same shit. I’m happy writing.” It’s not a lie. I love writing music for other people. I enjoy hearing their takes on my lyrics and watching them adapt each cord.

I won’t pretend that I don’t itch to be on the other side of the mic sometimes, strumming my favorite guitar, but it’s not in the books for me. Not when Leighton is trying to pick up the pieces her mother left her with. Putting out music means garnering more attention than either of us wants or needs right now.

“This is because of your dad, isn’t it?”

I deadpan. “For fuck’s sake. What does Harry have to do with any of this? It’s because of *me*, Gordy. I get that my old label is breathing down

your neck, but you work for me. Not them. So, listen to me about what I want to do instead of worrying about those assholes."

My father may be one of the best music producers his generation, and mine, has ever seen, but he has nothing to do with me. When I broke away from the band and went solo, I told him I wanted someone else to work with on album production. No bias. A clean slate to prove I could succeed without him.

I'm not an idiot. He still had some power in the matter because one look could make people piss themselves, but I needed that freedom. He'd given me the chance to prove what I could do without him, though I think he was waiting for me to fail, and I didn't.

Until now. Well, I'm failing in *his* eyes. Not being under his thumb pisses him off because he can't control my career like he did before my balls dropped and voice deepened. Too fucking bad for him.

"He's asking, isn't he?"

Gordy goes silent.

"Gordy," I growl in warning. "Is he the one who's asking about this? I swear to—"

"Jesus," he unbuttons his suit jacket and peels it off. I'm surprised there aren't sweat stains under his arms by now. He usually doesn't dress up for our meetings, but I know he met a few people from my old label earlier. "No. Harry hasn't said anything directly, but Kalvin has been hinting that there's been pressure from up above. The time for comeback artists is here and they want to capitalize."

Which is exactly why they won't get me back. I walked away when they were pushing me in a direction I didn't want to go down. I took control. I told them no. I'm not about to derail my decisions because my father is barking orders. They're lucky enough I've been working with them on songs for their other artists, but if they keep pushing then shit is going to get ugly.

"You know, Garrick isn't a bad guy."

That's where I draw a line. "As much as I'd love to talk about Garrick Matthews, I'll leave that up to the fan club you're in with his other loyal followers." I know I'm being a jackass, but it's been a long day. I couldn't go for my run, which is time I use to clear my head, because the weather sucked. Leighton's bathroom has a leak that needs to be fixed and nobody is available to come look at it right away. On top of that, Mia has been

bothering me to bring Lenny out to see her, and when I didn't, she took it into her own hands. Should have realized she would. "It's bad enough Mia is playing house with the dude, his brother, and Leighton right now."

"Chase Matthews is there?"

"Yeah. You know him?"

A shoulder lifts. "Not really. I've talked with him a few times in the past. Decent kid. You'd like him. He's nothing like Garrick."

That does make knowing he's schmoozing it up with Leighton a little easier to handle. My sister's bright idea to get Lenny to stay by introducing her to people is almost comical. She thinks if she has friends, she'll feel better about sticking around. Fat chance.

"I suppose that's a good thing," I relent. I don't know much about Chase, but if he's hanging out with Leighton then I should learn a thing or two. "How old is this kid anyway?"

"Chase is a year older than Lenny."

My lips flatten. Mia could have at least tried harder to get her girlfriends. "Great," I mumble dryly.

Gordy chuckles. "Like I said, the kid isn't bad. Not in the industry. Frankly, I think Mia is onto something."

Eyes narrowing at my friend, I ask, "And what, pray tell, do you think she's onto?"

His brows lift. "It seems pretty obvious that she's trying to set them up. I had more than a handful of conversations with Chase, but he does kind of remind me of Lenny. They'd make good friends or more if that's what they wanted."

I curse. That makes more sense than the bullshit story about friendship that my sister spun me. Probably should have guessed it from the start, but she made this Chase kid sound younger than he was. Too young for Leighton. *Safer*.

"Could be worse," Gordy tells me, a hint of smile on his face. "He could be like us."

The fucker has a point.

"Hey, if you're going to see Len, tell her I'll get back to her about the PR gig," he throws out when I'm halfway out the door.

I shift. "What PR gig?"

He frowns at me. "She didn't tell you?" My eyes say *would I be asking if she did?* Clearing his throat, he scratches his cheek. "She asked if I could

put some feelers out for any type of internship to get some experience. Figured she'd need to do something for school eventually. I have a few ideas."

Huh. It does make sense, but why wouldn't she just tell me that? "I'll let her know, man. Tell the label—"

"Yeah, yeah. Where to shove it."

I grin.

I DON'T BOTHER KNOCKING when I arrive at my sister's place. The code to the keypad for the front door is memorized so I show myself in. Instantly, I hear Leighton's laughter coming from the den off the main room and head toward the sound.

When I walk in, I see the kid first. I've probably seen him before and didn't pay enough attention because he does look familiar. They're both on the couch sitting side by side as I approach them. He's holding a phone that's playing some dog video with a safe amount of space between them, so I'll give him the benefit of the doubt for now.

Doesn't mean I miss the tightness in my chest knowing why he's even here with her.

"Chase, I presume?" Stopping behind the black sectional, I cross my arms over my chest.

They both turn. A warm smile graces Lenny's face, so I give her a peck on the cheek like I usually do in greeting before eying him and await a reply.

He nods once. "The one and only. And you're Kyler Bishop. Garrick said he'd give me a hundred bucks to do something that pisses you off, but I'm thinking it's not worth it."

I snort over his honesty. "Probably a good idea. What are you two up to and where is my sister?"

Leighton rolls her eyes at my blunt inquiries. "We got lost down the YouTube rabbit hole while we wait for Mia and Garrick to finish. Two guys showed up an hour ago and haven't come down."

"Suits," Chase adds.

Ah. "Daniel?" I guess.

Garrick's little brother nods again. "And Ralphie, I think. Didn't get a good look at him."

Daniel and Ralphie are the lawyers who work at the label both Mia and Garrick are signed with. Since Mia has put more focus on her TV show, Danny hasn't been too involved in her contracts. I hear he reps some new kid who was discovered online or some shit that keeps him busy now.

Speaking of Mia's show, I turn to Lenny and plant my hands on the back of the cushion behind her. "Gordy says the episode of *The Casanova's* we're in is going to air Sunday night. Not too much to see, I guess, but enough where people will probably recognize you and start talking more."

We both chose not to speak to anyone longer than necessary the night of Mia's announcement party. The cameras agreed to give us some space, but there's no escaping the inevitable.

Her lips twitch, but otherwise she gives nothing away about how she feels. "Okay."

Chase's brows pinch. "You not into that sort of thing? Figured all girls liked reality TV."

I roll my eyes. "Good luck with that," I warn him, pushing off the couch. Leighton hates a lot of things, and reality TV is in the top five. I leave them to that discussion while I search for my sister in the meeting room I know everyone will be in.

If I had any respect, I'd wait until they were done instead of barging in. Mia doesn't seem that surprised, Garrick smirks at me, and the two suits just kind of blink. I think Ralphie may have been speaking because his lips are still parted.

"Sorry to interrupt," I lie, looking between the two people who are responsible for this meeting. Specifically, Garrick. "Except not really. I should probably tell you before your people do that I turned down the offer."

Mia looks confused. "What offer?"

Garrick rests his elbow on the back of the chair he's in. "I want him on the album."

My sister must really not have known because her eyes widen. She knows where I stand on music right now. I'm happier writing it over performing.

"Figured as much," the douche adds.

"Why ask then?"

"Besides getting on your nerves?" He chuckles and bobs his head. "I genuinely thought it'd be a good mashup. We have quite a few artists on it."

I’m not sure what game he’s playing, so I don’t bite the hook dangling in front of me. I opt to turn to my sister for my next question. “Care to explain the play date going on downstairs?”

“Play date,” she scoffs, glaring at me.

“Isn’t it great? Our little siblings are growing up,” Garrick coos. “Pretty sure your sister here is already planning their wedding. What do you think? Purple or blue for the color scheme? I think I look fucking fantastic in violet.”

I don’t have time for this. “Shut it.”

Mia sighs. “He’s messing with you. I already told you what the deal is.”

“You’re setting her up.”

“I am no—”

“Remember Brian?”

The room gets quiet. A lot of people remember the Brian Hillman situation. He’s an entitled pompous ass, more so than Garrick and that says something coming from me. His reputation wasn’t so bad when my sister had the brilliant idea to set Leighton and him up on a blind date. Except, it never ended up happening and Mia got Lenny’s hopes up. The douche hole was caught on camera with a busty blonde in the backseat of his Mercedes. When the paparazzi questioned him about the alleged date with Leighton circling the media, he said the last thing he wanted was to be tied down to anybody, least of all a “wannabe” Bishop.

Even though Leighton didn’t seem thrilled about being set up, I could tell what he said had hurt her. She pretended it didn’t every time some asshole with a camera would shout questions at her when we went somewhere, but I could tell the smile she donned was tight and fake. I still want to hit the fucking kid.

“That’s not fair,” she whispers.

“You’re right,” I agree, “it wasn’t fair to Leighton at all when she kept telling you she didn’t want to date anyone. Do you really think a repeat is in order? I don’t.”

“Watch it,” Garrick warns. “That’s my little brother you’re talking about. Don’t think I won’t lay you out if I need to. He’s nothing like that fucker.”

I ignore him. “I’m just saying that she should pick and choose her own friends. She did the first time she came here, and she’ll do it again. Forcing your hand in it won’t help anyone.”

“She had trouble last time,” she says softly. I know she’s worried. I am too. But we don’t have to be.

“She’s lost her mother, her dream college, and all the plans for the future that she’s been thinking about since she was little, sis. Give her some time to adjust to this new life.”

I wish I could ignore the sympathetic frown that Garrick shows. Leighton said she didn’t tell him much the last time they talked. Not wanting to hand him any additional information than I already have, I turn back to Mia. “We both know she can handle things on her own because she’s had to her whole life. If she and…” I sigh. “If she and Chase become friends, great. I’m not saying she doesn’t need some. I just think we need to let her get to that point by herself, so she doesn’t think we’re pawning her off.”

And so we don’t give her ideas.

She goes pale. “You don’t think she feels that way, do you?”

I shake my head. I honestly don’t. “No.”

Her hand goes to her stomach as she leans back in the seat. “Fine, I’ll back off. But I *do* think hanging out with Chase will be good for her. Please don’t scare him off.”

Rolling my eyes, I walk toward the door. I have no reason to be a dick to the kid. Yet. He wasn’t being handsy or cocky, didn’t have an attitude, and was wearing a t-shirt with SpongeBob wearing thick black glasses on it looking just as nerdy as him. As much as I may not want to admit it, Mia and Gordy are right. He doesn’t seem like a bad person. Harmless, for now.

“Yeah, whatever. I won’t.”

When I walk back downstairs, it’s just Leighton in the den. “Where’s your friend?” The term is heavy in my mouth. I’m selfish enough to admit I liked being her main friend—the one she confides in and comes home to. Having to share her with Mia is bad enough, but Chase?

“Bathroom.”

“Ready to go?”

She looks over her shoulder for a moment with her bottom lip between her teeth. “I’m ready. Let me say goodbye really quick.”

When she goes upstairs, Chase walks out of the bathroom and tips his head at me. “Are you guys leaving?”

All I say is, “Don’t be a dick to her, okay? I’m not a fan of hurting kids.”

He blinks. “I’m nineteen.”

“Don’t remind me,” is my grumbled response.

He presses his lips together and gives me a nod in understanding. I squeeze his shoulder and let go as Lenny comes back down. She says goodbye to Chase and follows me to my car, sliding into the passenger seat.

“He’s nice, Ky,” she insists like I need convincing. I don’t tell her I believe it. She can think whatever she wants.

I hum.

“They *both* are.”

I don’t grace her with a reply.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

I'M SEARCHING the kitchen cupboards for something quick to eat when I notice the box of Kraft macaroni and cheese. Pulling it out, I blink and let the slow smile stretch freely across my lips as I prepare a bowl.

"Figured you'd find that eventually."

I yelp at Kyler's voice close behind me. Throwing a hand to my chest, I let out a startled breath. "Don't do that to me! I didn't even hear you come in the house."

He laughs, putting his air pods on the counter and walking over to the sink to splash cold water over his sweaty face. "I just got back and heard you in here."

The muscle shirt he's wearing is covered in sweat, so his run must have been a good one. "I don't know how you do it. I tried running once and died halfway down the sidewalk of the street I lived on."

He snorts and grabs a water from the fridge, then leans against the counter to watch me slide the food into the microwave. "Years of practice. Since when were you interested in running anyway?"

My nose scrunches. I wasn't until I went back to my old school and realized everyone moved onto their own things. Anna was on the track team and skilled at cross country, so she convinced me to join the team. That was after another big blowout between us, where a lot of dirty laundry aired. Eventually, we were fine again, or as fine as we could be, and I tried out for

track. I didn’t make it. Clearly. “An old friend of mine thought it was something we could do together. I’m not cut out for anything that involves me being physically active.”

He shakes his head in amusement. “Do you still talk to her?”

Anna texted me twice since my mother died. Once to tell me how sorry she was, and another when she found out I was back in California. All she asked is if I was staying with the Bishops again. I wasn’t sure at the time, so I never answered. I really should reach out, but we’ve had more problems than anything else over the years. She never even tried convincing me to stay in school when I told her I was thinking about dropping out. She’d said, “Good luck then,” and went on her way with the friends she’d made after the first time I left.

“Not really.”

“Sorry to hear.”

I shrug.

When the microwave goes off, I stir the noodles and heat it for another few seconds. “I can’t believe you remembered I like this stuff. You always told me it was gross.”

“It is,” he replies instantly. “Beth made way better homemade macaroni and cheese, so I never understood why you kept making yourself this shit instead.”

I’ve always liked it. It was the easiest thing to heat up next to Ramen noodles when Mom was out doing whatever she did. And he *is* right. Beth, their cook and cleaner growing up, did make delicious food, but I never liked bothering her for any when I was more than capable of making my own. “Don’t judge. You eat cold pizza.”

He laughs again and says he’s going to take a shower. It’s almost nine at night, which is why Ky decided to run. The heat hasn’t been as bad this week, but I made him promise not to go unless it was cool enough. When he told me to stop worrying, I just eyed him while he grinned because he was being a hypocrite.

I’m stretched out on the couch watching *Bob’s Burgers* with most of my mac and cheese gone when Kyler comes back down, wet hair looking darker than normal, in a pair of gray sweats and white tee that’s fitted to his muscles. He looks to the screen. “Since when do you watch this?”

There’s an entire couch to sit on, but he picks up my legs and sits down on the cushion beside me, draping my legs across his lap. I’m suddenly

aware of the fact I need to shave because the stubble on my calves is a few days old, but Kyler doesn't seem to notice or care when his palm rests on me.

"Chase told me to try it," I answer, stabbing the last few noodles in the bowl. "He thought I'd like it."

"Huh." He watches the screen for a few minutes, chuckling over something that happens to one of the kids. His hot palm rubs my leg absentmindedly, stubble be damned, making me shiver a little with each slow pass he makes up and down. "Do you talk to him often?"

It takes me a minute to peel my gaze away from the TV and figure out what he's asking. "I guess so. We text almost every day about random stuff."

He nods slowly, a contemplative look crossing his face. "Sounds like you guys hit it off then."

The face I make must be comical because he chuckles but doesn't say anything else.

"Yeah, well…" I shake my head and adjust the sloppy braid my hair is in, tucking a few loose tendrils behind my ear before tipping my chin toward the television. "I'm already ten episodes in, so he was right about the show."

After finishing my food, I set it on the table and prop myself up with a couple decorative pillows behind me. We watch the rest of the episode and part of another before he turns back to me. "You ready for tomorrow night?"

He's referring to the episode of Mia's show that's airing with us in it. "No, but I don't have much of a choice now."

His frown makes me feel bad for putting it that way. "True, I guess. It shouldn't be that bad. I made sure Gordy got the footage and if he says we aren't in it much, I trust him."

An easy smile forms, even though we both know viewers will take even five seconds of footage and make it into something it isn't. "Me too. Is he still only managing you, or did he take on other clients?" I spoke to him briefly last week asking for a favor, something I rarely do, but it wasn't like we caught up on life. I probably should have tried before asking him for anything.

"A few." His eyes trail off like he's deep in thought for a few seconds. "I'm glad. When I moved to the east coast, he needed to fill his time with

more than video calls with me.”

“He didn’t visit?”

“He did.” His tone is strange, cautious, as he looks over at me with a sigh. “It wasn’t often. Him, Mia, and our mother came to see me a few times. Mostly to make sure I wasn’t losing my mind or doing something that would ruin my career.”

I roll my eyes at that. “I can’t see you doing anything wild enough to ruin your career. I’m sure they just said that because they missed you. I know I did.”

He clicks his tongue, looking at me a long moment before answering. “I missed you too. And you’re right. Mom especially wanted to make sure I wasn’t relying on alcohol and drugs to get through my hiatus. She’s seen a lot of people go down that path over the years.”

“That’s so sad.” Not unheard of, though. I know Kyler isn’t that kind of person though. I’ve only seen him drink twice in my time knowing him. Once during a dinner party our parents threw, and another on his twenty-first birthday. It was only one beer each time.

He hums in agreement.

I grab the remote and pause the show, nudging him with the heel of my foot. “You’re acting weird.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Ky.”

“Lele.”

My lips waver into a smile. I secretly love the nickname even if it sounds childish. It reminds me of when I was and didn’t have much to worry about. “Are *you* ready for the episode to air? I know that you prefer staying out of that kind of stuff.”

Rubbing his lips together, he leans his head on the cushion behind him. “I like my privacy. Shows like that give people a chance to dig up dirty laundry.”

“You don’t have any.”

“That’s when they make it up.”

I can’t argue with that. “What do you think they’ll say? Should I be worried about something, or…”

“No,” came his quick reply. “God, no. I don’t want to worry you over nothing. But this is the first time people will see me with my family in a

couple years, Len. There's been a lot of speculation to why that is. All bullshit, of course. It just gets tiring."

Watching him unload with his eyes toward the ceiling makes me sad. He doesn't want to be part of this, but he is. For Mia. For me. I know he keeps saying he knows what he's getting into by being back, but that doesn't mean he has to like it. "I suck," I declare.

His eyes swing in my direction, pinning me. "No, you don't."

"I do." I hold my hand up before he can argue like I know he wants to. "You're going through a lot because of me, and you can preach about how you want to, but save it. I know. You'd do anything for family."

"Well—"

"For the ones you love," I correct, eyes rolling at the way he was going to call out his father. Still. "You didn't want to be in the spotlight because you wanted space. What if you came out and said that? Nobody could say otherwise then."

The look he gives me is surprisingly considerate of the idea. "Like make a post?"

I nod. "It doesn't have to be a long-winded video or anything. Just post a picture or something and caption it with a short explanation about why you're not involved with her show. Stop the speculation. People will still talk, but at least they have no grounds. What about the photo Gordy took of you, me, Mia, Dylan, and your mom? That one was really nice. Plus, it'll be great coverage for the episode tomorrow. Just don't post any spoilers before it airs or Mia might murder you."

He scratches his jaw and eventually nods along. I beam when he says, "That's not a bad idea at all, Lele. The PR industry isn't going to know what hits them when you're working it."

The snort that comes out of me is wholly unattractive and pig-like. "It seems like an obvious fix."

"But I didn't think of it."

All I do is shrug again, feeling a little embarrassed when he looks at me with praise shining in those dark eyes.

He pats my leg. "Mind helping?"

My brows pinch. "On your post? Like, you want me to write it?"

"I'm capable of that," he teases, deepening the fire under my skin. "But I wouldn't mind you looking it over. Working your magic. Prove to Harry that you're meant to be in this business."

He must remember the time I brought up my interest in public relations during that incredibly awkward first family dinner. We've talked about it a few more times since, but he never seemed to believe I'd make a worthwhile career of it. Maybe it was because Harry wanted his kids to be bigger than the people they hired.

Biting down on my bottom lip, I roll it into my mouth. Kyler asks, "Don't think about him, Lenny. He's never going to be worth it. His approval is limited and it doesn't matter."

"It did once," I admit softly.

His light eyes silently respond, *but it doesn't anymore.*

I help him with his post that night, we watch three more episodes of *Bob's Burgers* in near silence, and then we go our separate ways to bed after a much longer peck on the cheek than normal as a soft goodnight.

I'm not sure why, or how, I ended up in his room hours later. But sleep evaded me, and the darkness and silence engulfed me until I found myself padding to the bedroom door that didn't belong to me.

My knuckles rap against the wood and I hear a strange sound on the other side, followed by sheets ruffling and a, "Lenny?"

I crack the door open. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah. You okay?"

Taking a few hesitant steps inside, I see the outline of him sitting up. I know he's staring, but I can't see him well enough to tell if I'd woken him. "I can't sleep. I was…" I bite into my bottom lip and tug on the oversized tee of his that I stole to sleep in along with a pair of leggings. "Can I stay in here until I get tired?"

There's a brief pause, so microscopic I almost wonder if I imagine his contemplation, before I hear his rough, "Sure."

Walking over to the side of the bed that isn't occupied, I slide under the covers and turn onto my side. "I'd normally try reading, but I hate reading on my phone."

"What about all those paperbacks you had? You used to have so many I thought Mia and I were going to need to stage an intervention."

The thought makes me frown, and I'm glad he can't see me. His eyes are on my face though, I can feel the burn of his gaze even in the darkness. "I had to sell them," I admit quietly. There were a few signed copies that I'd found at secondhand stores that got me the most money when I sold them to other thrift shops. Money for a meal or two, sometimes three. "Most of

them barely got me what I paid for them, not that I blamed anybody. I think the owners only gave me as much as they did for some of them out of pity."

This time there is a pause. I don't even hear him breathing, and I glance in his direction as he slowly lays back down. "You sold all of your books?"

I hum out a confirmation.

"What did Katherine have to sell?"

For a while, I say nothing. She sold various pieces of jewelry, an item of clothing or two that "didn't fit her style anymore", at least according to her. But that was it. I tried convincing her to sell the car because that would help us out more than selling anything else. We'd gotten into another fight over the suggestion, leaving me frustrated and her even angrier. She'd stormed out and I didn't see her for almost two days. "Her life," is what I eventually tell him.

If she would have just sold the car…

It's suddenly impossible to breathe, and it's getting harder to hold back the tears that want to fall, but I do it.

One night.

I let myself cry for one whole night.

I didn't want to do it anymore—to hold onto somebody who couldn't do the same, no matter what I did for her.

"Christ, Lenny," he whispers. Then I feel a hand snake over and find mine in the sheets, our fingers threading like the day they did at Dominick's.

"It got me through," is all I can offer him. I miss my collection, as aged and torn and beaten as they were. Most of the covers had little scratches or bends, some of the pages were ripped, and a few even had little things written in them. Thoughts, doodles, random things. But it gave them character and I liked it.

For the longest time, neither of us says anything. We lay there, both now on our backs. I stare at the ceiling and count his breaths. Inhale. Exhale. Again, and again. Eventually, we sync. We always have.

"I wish…" His voice cuts the silence, making me turn my head as his fingers tighten around mine. "I wish things were different," is what he says, and I don't ask him how different.

I don't ask him why.

Mostly because it wouldn't make a difference either way. Wishes are a thing of fairy tales. Fables that do nothing but waste people's breath. I

learned that after casting my own far too many times to count.

But also because…I'm afraid of what he'd do differently. Right now, I wouldn't want to change a single thing.

Not his hand in mine.

Not his warmth blanketing my body.

Not his scent caressing me to sleep.

He might say something else, but I'm not sure. I fall asleep, and it's blissfully dreamless.

I'M two and a half hours into my shift at Delmar's when I hear a commotion in the lounge. When I peek my head around the corner from where I'm restocking, my eyes grow wide at the two men with cameras being pushed toward the door by the assistant manager Mel.

"We just want to talk to her," the biggest one says, looking around the room. I quickly back away when his eyes trail in this direction.

I hear Mel tell them how little she cares while the door opens, the bell signaling her eagerness to get them out. Quinn pops up beside me a few moments later looking sheepish. "I think you should work back here for the rest of the day."

Paling, I give her a tiny nod. She's been looking at me all morning in a way that makes me squirm but hasn't said what's clearly on her mind. I'm surprised she and Harmony haven't prodded more about Garrick's arrival or how he obviously knows me, since Harmony seemed a little too enthralled when we all walked out together that day. We don't always work the same shifts, though, so she hasn't hounded me with questions about it.

"And Mel wants to talk to you," she adds.

Closing my eyes, I silently thank whoever is willing to listen for making this happen on a day Mr. Warren isn't here. That doesn't mean Mel won't fire me the second I walk into the office, but I can hope.

I set the box of coffee cups aside and head into the back where Mel is waiting for me in her office. Surprisingly, she has a warm smile on her face when she tells me to sit down in the chair across from her.

"This isn't my first rodeo with paparazzi," she begins lightly, folding her hands atop the desk. "It's no surprise they come in here and pester a few of the customers if they see them roaming, but it's rare they come heckle employees."

“I’m so sor—”

She holds up her hand, stopping me from apologizing. “I don’t need you to apologize, Leighton. Truthfully, I didn’t know who you were when you walked in asking about a job. Even if I did, it wouldn’t have stopped me from giving you an application or hiring you.”

I blink. “*You* hired me?”

Her smile grows. “I did. Mr. Warren gives me the final say if he doesn’t completely dislike the applicant. He did mention that something like this could happen if anybody knew who you were related to.”

Not feeling like correcting her, I nod along. I’m not sure where the conversation is going, but if she hired me knowing I’d be a risk then it doesn’t sound like I’m about to be told to clean out my metaphorical locker and hand in my apron.

“Harmony posted a few pictures of you and that famous singer online. The one from England. Or is it Scotland?” Her brows pinch as she thinks more on Garrick before shaking her head. “Anyway, the first photo only shows the back of your head, but our sign was in the background. Another photo surfaced later of you getting into the back of his car.”

My eyes close. I don’t bother asking why Harmony would do something like that. She’s his fan. The inner fangirl in me, the one pre-Bishop, would have posted pictures too or at least mentioned online about where I saw him, so I can’t fault her for it.

Mel cuts off my thoughts. “I’m going to talk to her tomorrow when she’s working. We have enough people where we can tweak the schedule to make sure you two aren’t on at the same time.”

“No!” Heat prickles up the back of my neck and settles into my cheeks. More calmly, I say, “No, that isn’t necessary. I wish she hadn’t done that, but I’m not angry about it.”

She studies me with both interest and awe, a combination I’m not that familiar with. Eventually, she nods in understanding. “As long as you’re comfortable. I want all my employees to feel safe. That’s why I do have to warn you that if this gets out of hand…” Her look is somehow soft and firm at the same time.

She’ll fire me if she has to.

If Mr. Warren were here, he’d do it now and save them both the trouble. Maybe Ky will know what to do when I get home. I saw the news alert on my phone that had Kyler in the subject line, with a picture of him

embracing Mia in a still from the show. Some TV blogger posted an article of the big news from Sunday's episode. Even though I only reactivated my private Instagram account shortly after the move into our house, it's enough to stay in the loop without being bombarded with tabloid articles that I don't want to see. I only follow a few people—Kyler, Mia, Dylan, Violet Wonders, a Single Division fan page (not that Ky knows), and a few TV shows, including *The Casanova's*.

As he drove me to work this morning, he told me not to go online for a few days until things died down. Most news outlets are busy focusing on Mia and Dylan's baby news, speculation on whether it's a boy or girl, and what they think he or she will be named. I'd agreed without hesitation not to go searching and felt an odd sense of gratitude toward the thirteen-week-old addition to the Casanova family. I admit, I feel a little bad that something so tiny is the fall back on my presence here, but Kyler told me not to think of it that way. Mia and Dylan will want their children to be in the public eye anyway, so he or she will get plenty of spotlight growing up as it is.

"Mr. Warren mentioned your interest in picking up more hours." Mel sits back in her chair and glances at the scribbled-on desk calendar. "Tell you what. We'll wait it out a couple weeks until things die down with the media. If nobody else comes in here that wants a picture or interview, I'll give you some extra time. Sound like a deal?"

I blink. "But Mr. Warren—"

"Leaves me in charge of scheduling," she finishes for me with a knowing smile. "He's a bitter man, Leighton, but I know how to handle him. I've been doing it for a lot longer than I wish I've had to, but it means I know what works. He's barely here anyway."

All my interactions with him haven't been ones I want to repeat, but I trust Mel. She's always been kind to me. "Okay." I stand and blow out a quiet breath. "Thank you for giving me a chance."

She simply waves me off with the same smile and tells me to get her if there's any trouble. Doing as Quinn said, I stay in the back doing stock, inventory, and helping them refill the pastry case when it gets low. It's only on my break when I decide to glance at my phone and see the messages waiting for me.

Kyler: *Gordy sent me this*

“This” happens to be a screenshot of me leaning against Kyler, his arm slung casually over my shoulders, while he speaks to his mother at Mia’s house. They’re talking to each other while I look around the room. Under the image is a caption, one that ices over my bones.

Ex-Bishop returns after two-year exile.

“Exile?” I whisper, gripping the phone in my hand. Part of the article attached to it is cut off by his screenshot, and I don’t make a move to search what the famous gossip blogger had to say about my grand return. Exile is enough for me.

Kyler: *Gordy says he’ll take care of it*

Mia: *Garrick told me Chase asked about you the other day. *Squee**

Mia: *Are you going to hang out again?*

Kyler: *Mia said her producers have been getting asked about you possibly becoming a regular on the show. It’s been turned down on my behalf, but they’ll ask you anyway.*

I pale. That’s a big fat no. I begin texting him back about what happened at the café but choose to backspace it all and have the conversation with him face to face. He’ll probably worry for no reason, even though Mel seems to have everything under control. I know his plans for the day included writing some new music he’s been working on but hasn’t had the time to finish since things have been hectic. He needs to focus.

Sending him a simple text back saying nothing more than “okay” and then ignoring Mia’s messages altogether, I finish out my break with a glass of water, bag of stale pretzels from the vending machines and head back out.

Sometime later, Quinn sidles up beside me as I organize the condiments containers. “So, what’s it like?”

My back straightens over the question I used to get asked all the time after moving in with the Bishops. If people didn’t want to know what being related to them was like, they wanted to know what the house looked like, what Kyler did in his free time, and if rumors about Mia and whatever random guy the tabloids said she was with were true. I never even gossiped about my home life with the one person I made friends with at Saint Michael’s. Nora, the girl I’d seen bullied the first day, never asked me anything that pried, and I only offered her the kind of information that I felt was fine to share. Usually, we talked about school, college, and when the time came, boys.

“What is what like?”

She leans her hip against the counter. “I get to ogle some hot celebs who come in here, but never Garrick Matthews. What’s it like knowing him? He seems so…”

“Flirty?” I offer. Honestly, I’m glad her question is about Garrick and not my current roommate. It feels less weird talking about him.

Quinn laughs. “That too. I was thinking more intense. I don’t know. Anyone who acts as cool and collected as he does in interviews usually has something he’s trying to hide.”

My face twists over her theory and wonder if there’s any truth to it. “Uh, he’s…nice.” Nice isn’t quite the word I’d use for him, but it’s true. “I know his brother more than I do him.”

Her brows arch. “His brother?” She clearly hasn’t done a lot of research into Garrick. If anyone really wanted to know him, they’d Google him. Otherwise, Chase is kept in the shadows where he wants to be, according to one of our many text conversations.

Not wanting to go into detail, I shrug. “I don’t really like talking about this stuff.”

Her frown only lasts a few seconds. “I guess that’s fair. So, did Mel seem upset? She’s usually pretty chill about stuff like that happening. I think she enjoys kicking people out.”

The tension in my muscles eases after her short-lived interrogation ends. Most people would push, and I’m grateful she doesn’t. “No, she wasn’t upset. I still have a job.”

Quinn blanches. “Did you think you’d lose it? Mel is, like, the bomb here. She’s been managing for almost ten years and has only fired one person for stealing.”

“Really?”

A nod.

“Huh.” I rub my arm. “She might be giving me more hours as long as me being here doesn’t disrupt the customers. I’m hoping to lay low for a while until things die down.”

When she glances out into the lounge and then back at me, I see hesitation on her face that I can’t read well. “So, I just wanted to say that Harmony shouldn’t have done what she did. But…”

I wait.

“She’s my friend.”

Oh.

“And I’m not saying that she shouldn’t get into trouble because it’s not cool selling people out, but she gets over excited easily.”

Telling her that I’m not upset with Harmony wouldn’t be the full truth. I am, in a way, that she posted the photos. Especially because she doesn’t know me or my circumstances. I don’t talk much to people here about my personal life. They know my first name, that I just moved here, and that I’m attending UCLA in the fall. Nobody knows my major, where I’m living, or the fact this isn’t my first stint in the area. Not unless they dig. And now that my photo is out there to go along with the cameo in Mia’s show, it won’t take long for people to find that information if they’re interested enough.

Sighing, I busy my hands. “I used to be a huge fan of Violet Wonders. You know, Garrick’s band. I’ve only talked with him a few times and it’s never been that earthshattering. He’s like anyone else, just with a lot of money and fans attached.”

She deadpans. “So…like nobody else.”

Like Kyler. Like Mia. Like three quarters of our clientele who still buy themselves things rather than asking other people to do it for them. “I’m trying to say that I understand why she felt the need to post the pics, but I’m not okay with being part of some media flurry. I’m here to work, earn money, and eventually, go to college. That’s all I want. It took me a while to figure out that Garrick is another human who, yes, has a lot more than most people, but is a decent guy.”

All she does is stare at me. Not knowing what else to say, I lift a shoulder awkwardly and walk around her to finish the last of my inventory for the day. I don’t expect anybody to understand where I’m coming from. Seven years ago, I wouldn’t have been able to either.

Seven years changes people.

It changed me.

I think about what I said. My goals. I wouldn’t mind a friend or two, but I have to be choosy. I lost touch with Nora after I moved away from Cali. She emailed, I replied a few times, but eventually there was nothing in my life that I was willing to share freely. Mom was a mess. We got kicked out a lot. Struggled finding money for food. I could have confided in Nora, but it wouldn’t have made a difference. I’m the reason our friendship failed, just like I always am.

With Anna.

With Kyler.

Inwardly sighing, I tell myself to stop thinking about it. The past can't be changed. If I wanted to, I could reach out to my former friends. I'm just not sure what I'd say. Anna liked asking about Kyler because of Single Division more than she asked about me. So, when I got an email from her after I was captured in a picture with *the* Kyler Bishop the year I first moved, it led to our first big fight. One of many because I wouldn't tell her the details of what it's like being around them.

Maybe our friendship was doomed from the start. We'd make up, talk for a couple weeks, and then fight again when she pushed for more details on her favorite celebrity. After six months of it, I stopped replying to her emails altogether and she figured out I was done for good.

For some reason, my mind wanders to Chase. He could be my friend. I mean, according to him, we already are. I guess he's not far off since we talk every night about everything or nothing at all. There's no pressure.

I'm not sure what I want, even if Mia is trying to steer me toward him. Asking Kyler is pointless because I know the decision is only up to me. He hasn't said much about Chase since I told him we texted back and forth, leaving his opinion open for debate. He's been…strange. And I can't help but wonder if it's because I fell asleep in his room—invaded his privacy. He hasn't brought it up, acting like it never happened, and I go along with it because it seems like that's what he wants.

But I think about it. More than I should.

When I clock out, I'm hesitant to go outside and wait for Kyler. Checking my phone, my nerves disappear when I see a text from him saying he's in the back lot by the side exit. I say goodbye to Mel and Quinn, who both wave me off, and head out.

Kyler gets out of the car, heading my way, and startles when I walk over and wrap my arms around his midsection for a tight hug.

It takes him a few seconds, but he eventually winds his arms around my back and squeezes me to him, resting his cheek on the top of my head. "What is this for?" he asks softly.

Inhaling the scent of our laundry detergent and the expensive soap he uses, I nuzzle my cheek into his chest and admit, "Just because I wanted to."

Because I want to make sure we're okay.

I know it’s probably not smart to be out when there were people here for me earlier, but I used to enjoy coming home from school and being greeted by Kyler like this. I miss it. He’s always given the best hugs, and they haven’t changed. If I could, I’d get them every day, feel his strong arms wrap me up, his warm breath on my hair, and listen to the smile in his voice whenever he’d ask how my day is.

“You ready to head home?”

I peel myself away even though I want to stay like that for a lot longer and smile up at him, repeating the word in my head. *Home*. All I do is nod and let him guide us to the car. The talk we need to have can wait because he puts on music we both like, pulls out of the parking lot, and starts singing along to the music.

When I lean my head back against the headrest to watch him, he notices me and grins.

“Do you miss it?” I ask.

He blinks, eyes going back to the road.

All he answers with is, “Sometimes.”

Then starts singing again.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

MY HAIR IS TIED up in a wet bun atop my head when I walk downstairs to get something to eat for lunch. The summer heat has been brutal lately and it's making me extra lazy, so my free time is being spent in my room with a fan pointed on me while I reread cheesy bodice-ripping romances.

I don't think much about donning my it's-too-hot-for-clothes attire until I'm standing at the fridge when two different voices approach. My gaze shifts from the contents of the refrigerator that I'm about to raid, to Kyler and Gordy, both staring at my very bare legs in the indecently small booty shorts. If I tug on them, I'll be flashing something totally different, and this will be about ten times more awkward.

"Hey," I offer weakly, hiding myself partially behind the fridge door. It's just them, so it could be worse. Plus, they're both shirtless and in loose shorts to keep cool so it isn't like they don't understand the torture.

"Leighton," Kyler says slowly, eyes still on what's visible of me, which happens to be a lot. A lot of leg, and a lot of torso because the tank I slid on before coming down is one that's too small in both size and length and doesn't cover all of my stomach. I'm not even wearing a proper bra since the top has a built-in one. "Why the hell are you wearing your underwear?"

Gordy chokes out a laugh and has the decency to look away, staring at something on the other side of the kitchen.

My cheeks blaze. “They’re *not* underwear!” I guess I can see why he’d think they are, but still. “And it’s hot. Can you blame me? I swear the A/C isn’t working.”

Kyler mumbles something under his breath that has Gordy’s brows going up as he looks at his friend.

When I sneak a peek at Ky, fighting a frown, I see something in his eyes flare as he locks his gaze at my lower half. It’s evident I don’t work out and enjoy my carbs, that’s for sure. Unlike him, whose runner’s body is built with lean muscle, mine is fuller and I’m okay with that. In a weird way, I’m proud. I did what I could to eat so I didn’t have to starve until my next paycheck.

Right now, that tiny victory feels heightened when Kyler’s eyes trail back up me. Even though it happens within seconds, it feels like he’s taking his time now that I’m on full display. He doesn’t hide his lingering eyes, and it makes me feel…elated. Confused but excited.

That quickly goes away though.

“You can’t just be strutting around like that here, Lenny,” my roommate scolds me. My chest tightens. Why does he sound mad?

“I wasn’t s*trutting*.” I’m standing here for crying out loud! How does that constitute as s*trutting*? “I was getting something to eat before I go back upstairs.”

His hand goes through his brown locks as he evades my eyes like he only just realized he’s staring a little too much. Not that I was complaining. The fridge door has shut, so now they have a whole lot more to see in the form of a busty chest and wide hips.

“And you couldn’t put on clothes?” More attitude. My teeth grind.

Gordy murmurs, “Come on, man.”

“These *are* clothes,” I inform him defensively, hand waving at his best friend since forever, pointing out the obvious. “And it’s just Gordy. I’m sure you guys have seen girls wearing a lot less.”

Kyler groans and Gordy swallows his laughter at the not untrue remark. Heat makes everyone moody, but I’m not used to it coming from him.

It’s his next words that cuts off Gordy’s laughter and splinters my heart. “Well nobody needs to see that.”

Because, I mean, how can anybody *not* feel verbally slapped by that?

Suddenly, I feel way too exposed. My butt feels too big, my hips too wide, and my thighs too chunky. Embarrassment is long gone, and in its

place is a deep threaded hurt as I wrap my arms around myself like it can somehow shield what he obviously feels offended over seeing. There's a dish towel I could grab, but it wouldn't cover much. Maybe it was stupid to think he actually enjoyed what he saw whenever he'd look my way since we moved in together. I'm not foreign to guys noticing me, it's usually just the wrong kind of guys. Until now, it didn't feel uncomfortable whenever I'd catch Kyler in the same act.

Gordy winces. "Kyler…"

My roommate looks at his friend before something flashes across his face and his eyes snap back to me. "Shit. I didn't mean it like that. Len—"

"You might want to turn around," I warn, tears stinging my eyes as I walk toward them in hurried steps.

It's Gordy who says, "Hey, Leighton, it's—" But I don't want to hear whatever he's about to tell me. Speed walking to my room, I close my door a little too hard and listen to the wall rattle. There's no lock, and I'm not about to barricade it with furniture so nobody will bother me because I know there will be a knock on it regardless.

I barely have time to slide on a pair of ratty sweatpants when the rap sounds from the other side of the stupid wood. There's an oversized tee in my hands, another old hand me down from Kyler, when the door cracks open with a soft, "Lele? Can I come in?"

"If that's your way of asking if I'm decent, I'm not," I murmur, sliding the shirt on and making sure I'm fully covered. My chest still prickles when I hear him sigh.

He takes a risk and peeks in, stepping into the doorway when he sees me standing there hugging my torso. "I'm sorry. That came out wrong down there. It isn't what I meant."

"Then what *did* you mean?" I snap. I'm not sure I want to know the answer. Another sigh comes from his parted lips as the hand on the knob moves to the back of his neck.

"You took me by surprise."

"So you thought you'd embarrass me in front of Gordy? Great thinking, Kyler. I love being humiliated about my body."

His eyes squeeze closed. "I didn't mean…"

"What? You didn't mean *what*?" I press, not letting him answer before I keep going while the iron is hot. "You made it sound like nobody would

ever want to see me naked, and that is *not* true! Lots of people want to see me naked." *Probably.*

His groan is heavy as he covers his reddening face. "I really, really didn't need to hear that, Leighton. At all."

"Why not? It's natural."

"You're—" Once again, he cuts himself off. It's probably smart to filter his words and choose them carefully at this point. "You're just grown up, okay? You aren't the girl I knew. Not even from three years ago. You've grown into…" More hesitated words. "It doesn't seem like that kind of time can change a person, but it can."

I'm not sure if the change he's talking about now is good or not. So good he has to insult me? Doesn't seem likely.

Shaking my head, I sit on the edge of my bed and watch him stick to the door. "You hurt my feelings," I tell him.

"I'm sorry."

I know he is, but the hurt isn't just going to go away because he apologized. Now Gordy probably thinks I'm some ugly shrew who nobody wants to sleep with or something. I'm not ugly. Even Mom told me that, and she was obsessed with everyone's appearance. I might even call myself beautiful, in a plain kind of way. Like a subtle beauty. Not that I would ever admit that aloud.

"Listen, Gordy and I wanted to talk to you about some things." His hand goes back to the doorknob. "Can you come back downstairs?"

I don't want to. "Maybe I—"

"Please?" His voice cracks and when I finally look up at him, his expression pleads for forgiveness. I know Kyler would never intentionally hurt me for malicious reasons, but I won't forget even if those warm brown eyes make me want to. "And change into something you won't melt in. Anything you're comfortable in. I promise not to overreact this time. Deal?"

I want to ask him why he overreacted the first time, but I don't. Giving him a terse nod, he watches me for a few more seconds and that's when I see it. The conflict. The way his eyes flicker down me again, like he's trying to figure out the same thing I am.

If we've changed.

If something else is going on that wasn't before.

Maybe he expects me to change back into what I had on to prove him wrong, to show that I'm stronger than being beaten down by his harsh words, but not even the apparent changed version of me, the grown up one as he calls it, is confident enough for that. Not while Gordy is downstairs waiting, and not when I see a spark of something that resembles lust and confusion in the eyes of the boy I used to consider family.

Making them wait for longer than necessary while I put on a pair of respectfully short pajama bottoms and try collecting my thoughts, I trudge downstairs. I see Gordy first, who gives me a sympathetic smile that only makes me feel worse as I take the furthest seat away from them in the living room.

They both frown.

Well, Ky sighs for what seems like the hundredth time, but I don't pay him any attention because I'm afraid of what my face will give away if I do. Taking a deep breath, I focus on Gordy. "Kyler said you wanted to talk to me?"

"Us," Ky corrects under his breath.

"Us," I amend. "What about?"

"Just some social media stuff." I know it's about what people have started posting online. I've seen a lot of crappy things said about me and Kyler randomly showing up in Mia's life again like we're somehow trying to use her. "I've been thinking that we should make a few posts just setting a couple records straight about why you're here. Maybe you could—"

"No." That's Kyler. Not just Ky's normal tone, but his protective-slash-angry voice. The one that gives his face hard edges as he openly glares in disapproval at his friend like he's asking me to model nude for some magazine. Clearly that will never happen.

Yep. Not getting past this anytime soon.

"Man, think reasonably. People are talking and let's be real, it's not good. Do you want people to tear her apart more?" I'm assuming the 'her' is me, which would be nice to know instead of being ignored while the two hash it out in front of me like I'm suddenly invisible.

Kyler palms the armrest of the chair he's in, his knee bouncing. "Do you really need to ask me that?"

All Gordy does is shrug.

I smile a little. Then remember what we're talking about and lose it in a heartbeat. "Is it that bad, Gord?"

His attention drifts back to me. “I’ve seen worse, Len. But I’m not going to fuck with you, it would be better if something were said now before it gets out of hand.”

“All because I went to Mia’s party?”

Whatever passes over his face raises alarm whistles in my head. “Because you showed up at Mia’s house with Kyler after you both disappeared for years.”

I’m not sure I understand the context he’s throwing out, and neither does Ky. “What the hell does that mean?”

Gordy raises his hands. “It means that people are going to draw conclusions no matter what. I’m willing to help out, but I think Leighton could come up with something to post like she did for you. You’re smart. Resourceful.” He directs the last part to me, making me beam.

He isn’t wrong, and all the information I retained from Ms. Wynona back in the day leads to doing exactly what he says. Still, I’m uneasy about what people have been concluding. “So, I make a post and then what?” I doubt it’ll magically be all better after that. Even Ky still got some crap online when he posted something on Instagram saying he was glad to be back and catching up with family. Short, sweet, and to the point. I mean, I was in the picture and people still have a lot to say about why I’m here.

“Mia will speak out too,” he explains, looking between us. “She’s been raring to fight this since the first article surfaced. Dylan had to talk her out of it. Called me saying something about pregnancy hormones going to be the end of him. Anyway, you’ll make a post, she’ll make one, and eventually people will find better shit to obsess over.”

Why do I doubt that? “Rather than obsessing over my nefarious plans to what? Use Mia and Dylan’s baby or something?”

Both the guys chuckle. “You never know,” Gordy answers. “People have done weirder things.”

He’s not wrong, and for some reason Mom’s face pops into the forefront of my mind when he says it. It’s no wonder. She faked a paternity test to get fifteen minutes of fame. Or four years. Same difference in the long run.

“True,” I admit reluctantly. “I’ll do it.”

“Leighton, I—”

“It’s not up to you, Kyler,” I point out. I’m not saying it out of pettiness. It’s fact. He can’t protect me from everything. My eyes stay on Gordy as I

give him a smile. “Tell me, oh wise one, when this post should be made and put up.”

“Sooner rather than later.”

“Wise one,” Ky grumbles, standing. “I want food. You guys cool with Chinese? It’s too hot to cook, but I can order in.”

Neither of us protests, so he heads into the kitchen to grab one of the menus hanging from the fridge door.

Tucking my legs under me, I stare at my lap and try ignoring the eyes I feel from across the room. “Cut him some slack, Len.”

“Why should I?” I grouch, not wanting to.

“Because he’s a dude.” A grin tugs at his lips, and that tint of humor dances in his light eyes. “And we’re morons when it comes to most things, but especially women.”

I try hard not to snicker because I can’t argue with him there, but I can’t help it. My lips waver and that stupid sound, the one of defeat, escapes my mouth.

“He cares,” he adds, after his own quiet laughter eases between us. “Sometimes, a little too much.”

If I didn’t know Kyler, I wouldn’t understand what Gordy means. I do though. Ky has a strong sense of devotion to people he cares about. The list is small. He has his moments like the rest of us, but those moments can be cruel because…well, because I care a lot about him too. And nobody takes it well when the people they love show a semblance of flawed humanity, because it means they’re not as perfect as we like to believe they are.

So, I do forgive Kyler.

Reluctantly.

The three of us eat Chinese for dinner and put on a movie about aliens that I zone out of because I’m busy watching Kyler, whose lap I’m using as a footrest again. He’s content, less rigid, with his palm resting on my bare, freshly shaven leg, and it makes me hunker down for the night because we’re back to normal. The way we should be.

He catches me staring and gives me a crooked smile, half his lips quirking up and making him look…youthful. Carefree. Like there isn’t anything to worry about outside of this room. Squeezing my calf, he dips his chin at me as if to say, *We good?* I smile at him, feeling my chest tighten a little over the day’s events, but nod in return regardless.

I’m not sure when I fall asleep, but two strong arms pick me up and cradle me to an equally strong chest at some point.

“Nah, I got her,” a familiar voice whispers near my ear. Gordy must have asked him if he needed help moving me. “Damned if I’m going to let her sleep on the couch. Thing is uncomfortable.”

It *is* pretty uncomfortable. Unless you have someone to use as a cushion like I did Kyler.

He carries me upstairs and gently places me in bed, pressing a kiss to my cheek in goodnight, except it lasts longer than usual, and his breath stirs the sleepiness fogging my brain.

“Sleep tight, Lele,” he whispers, and I offer him an incoherent reply back that sounds something like “you too”.

His chuckle is light as he walks out, the creak of the floorboards under his weight fading as he closes the door and heads back downstairs.

It’s only after I shift, burying my face in the pillow that I realize he didn’t put me in my bed. He put me in his.

Something happens when I fall back asleep.

I dream about Kyler.

His kiss on my cheek.

The way it lingers.

His warmth.

But it’s…different.

And different is dangerous.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LEIGHTON / AGE 13

THERE'S a man staring at me outside the school. At first, I don't notice him. Only the uneasiness prickling my skin tells me something is off. When I look around, I see him standing by the lush bushes that are trimmed into the school mascot—an eagle.

Nora Ashby, my only friend in the year I've been at the prep school, already left for the day, even though her older brother Cooper offered to drive me home. Mom said she would pick me up and I've been waiting outside for thirty minutes past the last bell wanting nothing more than to end this long, drawn out Monday.

Maybe my mood would have been better if I didn't get my English paper back with a C circled on the top. Everyone around me got Bs or better, and the notes in the margin were every student's worst nightmare. *See me after class.* Seeing any teacher after class is the kind of embarrassment you want to avoid, especially when you're the only one. Mr. Kline's stern look as I approached his desk should have been my first warning, but I could barely meet his eyes when he told me how disappointed he was.

Apparently, the faculty knows exactly who I am. A man like Harry Bishop doesn't pay a random student's tuition in full, so I guess I should have known. The impressive scholarship in his name offered annually

doesn’t even offer half what it costs to attend a school like Saint Michael’s, so of course my teachers would know there’s a reason I’m present.

Not only do I learn that Kline expects more than a “barely thought out” paper on a “mundane topic” like Steinbeck, I also found out that teachers love to gossip. By last period, a few of the other faculty look at me with the types of expressions that mirror disapproval and disbelief. When one woman announces to another that education shouldn’t be bought as I pass them, my face grows redder because I may have gotten a C on my paper, but I’m smart. Smart enough not to need Harry buying my diploma like everyone here thinks.

To them I’m a rags to riches story. A modern-day Cinderella. Except, there’s no fairy godmother to come to my rescue when Mom gets out of sorts, and I have no prince.

Mom being late paired with the man currently staring at me tops the cake—a bad cake with those nasty cardboard-tasting candies covering it. Sighing, I try pretending like I don’t see him, averting my gaze to the half-empty parking lot. The upperclassman who can drive have cleared out the student parking, and the staff lot is still packed since most don’t leave until three-thirty.

I’m too lost in thought about my poor paper grade, wondering what Mom will say, and what Nora is up to with her brother Cooper, to notice the faint sound of something clicking close by. At first, I think it’s shoes in the distance, maybe someone coming out of the school. When I see nobody exit the doors, I look back to the only person outside to find him holding a camera.

Swallowing, panic seeps in. I don’t have a phone even though Kyler told Mom I should have one just in case. She informed him we don’t all have money—that I wouldn’t need one. Now, I’m starting to see the error in her judgement because I don’t know what to do. I could go inside, but then I’d be surrounded by people who don’t think I belong here. If I stay perched on the front steps, I’ll be the target of this man, whoever he is.

Think, Leighton.

Pushing up onto my feet, I grab ahold of my bag and begin walking toward the doors. Going to see Mr. Kline, or any of the teachers, isn’t what I want to do knowing what they think of me, but I know there are open classrooms I could slip into until the coast is clear. Mom will just have to come inside to find me.

I’m walking toward my locker when a group of guys leave the gym, their voices growing louder as they get nearer. Their shoes squeak against the floor and when they appear around the corner they’re all in the same workout clothes. They must have some sort of practice. A few look my way, but most pay me no attention.

It’s a boy people call Striker who breaks from the pack and makes a beeline to me. “Hey.”

I freeze mid step, holding my bag close to my side like he’s going to mug me or something. It’s stupid, so I ease my hold and murmur, “Hi.”

“Leighton, right?”

He knows my name? “Yeah.”

“I’m Blake, but most people call me—”

“Striker,” I finish for him, almost too quickly. I’ve heard people talk to him in passing, and Nora’s brother plays on the soccer team too, which means Nora knows all there is to know about him and shares it with me.

His lips quirk up. “Yep.”

We’re silent for a few seconds.

“Why are you still hanging around? I didn’t take you for a club kind of girl, and I’d know if you were on a sports team.” His question isn’t judgmental. He seems genuinely curious, and I take note of his two very correct statements.

“Why don’t you take me for a club girl?” It doesn’t matter why he assumes that because I’m not, and never will be, part of some after school group. The only one that sounds remotely interesting to me is the newspaper, and they only let high schoolers participate. Maybe I’ll reconsider next year when I enter ninth grade, but I doubt it.

“Don’t take it personally,” he says with a lift of his shoulders. “You’re just quiet. Most clubs require socialization. You know. Talking.”

I blush. Well…

“Not that being quiet is bad.”

More blushing.

I clear my throat. “My mom is late picking me up. That’s why I’m still here. Are you practicing?” Talking about the weird guy outside should probably be something I bring up, but I don’t know him or what he’d be able to do.

Though maybe Striker has a cell. No, I *know* he does. I’ve seen him use it before in math when he’s supposed to be doing the assignments from the

board. Because I'm in honors, I share it with him and some other high schoolers, same with a study hall in the afternoon. Something Nora tells me she's jealous about daily. Before I can ask if I can borrow his phone, he says, "Yeah. Every day this week. Big game coming up. You going?"

"To the game?" I clarify.

A nod.

"Uh…"

He chuckles. "Didn't think so."

All I manage to do is shrug. Just as I'm about to ask to use his cell again, Coach Roberts yells out, "We don't have all day, Sullivan. Get a move on it or sit out the game."

He winces. "That's my cue. My dad will kill me if I get benched. Don't want that."

"Nope." He turns on his heels and shoots me a wave before Beckham Reeves pops up beside him donning the same outfit. He notices me after Striker-slash-Blake says something to him as they walk down the hall toward the back doors leading to the soccer field. Beckham doesn't say anything or wave, just stares, making me shift on my feet. My face gets all warm as the boy with dark hair, nearly black, studies me with slightly narrowed eyes while his friend talks his ear off.

I could have said hi. Smiled. Something. Instead, I sigh and decide that the office will have a phone I can use and choose to make my way there instead of watching the boys disappear.

Unfortunately, nobody picks up when I call. The automated voicemail on Mom's phone begins its spiel, so I hang up because I know she never listens to them. After dialing Mia with the same luck, I debate on waiting it out or maybe using the money Harry gives me as an allowance, which is way more than a normal teenager would get, to call a cab.

The secretary is a sweet old lady named Betty, who shares an eerily similar resemblance to Betty White. She asks if I need help finding a ride. I'm sure she would offer me one herself, but it seems as if she's supposed to be here for a while longer, and I'm pretty sure that's against school policy anyway, so I shake my head and dial the only other number I know.

Kyler is in the studio today after a grueling week of meetings with his label to finalize the song selections for his newest album. He told me he's thinking about taking some time off after he's done recording, but when his agent found out, it caused a lot of problems.

He picks up on the second ring. “Lele?” Worry is thick in his tone and I instantly feel bad for bothering him.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out. “I know you’re busy, but Mom didn’t show up to get me.”

He curses. “You’re still at school?”

“Yeah.”

There’s muffled talking in the background. I think I hear his best friend Gordon tell him something. Somebody with a thick accent also starts speaking. It’s hard to hear.

Then Ky’s voice cuts back into the noise. “I’m coming to get you.”

“No! No, you don’t have to. Um, I was wondering if you could ask Harry if—”

“Absolutely not.”

I sigh. “Kyler, you’re working.”

“Harry is too.”

“You could just ask him if he knows where my mom is. I’m not expecting him to actually come to Saint Michael’s.” Though, we both know he’d send a car versus coming in person. I’ve learned what kind of person he is in the time I’ve spent here. He’s not the worst human being on the planet, but he won’t win any father of the year awards either. In fact, most of our conversations are civil, even interesting, whenever we’re talking. He tells me how he started producing music, and I tell him all the different songs I love that is attached to his name because, in a way, we’re both prideful and I can respect him for it. There’s a lot of awkward tension between us still, but it’s far better than last year.

There’s no room for argument when Kyler speaks again. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

Knowing that’s it, I hang up the phone and offer Betty a small smile. “Can I stay in here until my ride gets here?”

“Of course, sweetie.”

Thankfully, twenty minutes pass quickly. I hear the shoes before I see the person they belong to stop in the doorway. Betty doesn’t seem all that surprised when he walks in and comes straight toward me.

All he says is, “Your mom?”

I shake my head. “Never showed.”

A dark look passes over his face, but I don’t feed it. I’m sure Mom has a good excuse. Maybe it’s traffic. Or her job? She started working as a

secretary for some music company, mostly answering phones and fetching things, so she might not be able to cut out without getting into trouble. It's the best I can come up with.

Then something else crosses my mind. The man with the camera. And I led Kyler right to him.

"There was a guy," I blurt suddenly, cringing when the people in the office all turn to me with inquisitive eyes. In a quieter voice, one matching a whisper, I say, "There was a guy outside earlier taking pictures of me."

Kyler's nostrils flare. "*What*?"

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner! I came inside once I realized what was happening, but I shouldn't have let you come when—"

"You think I'm upset with you?" He scoffs in disbelief, shaking his head. "Lenny, I don't care if some a-hole is taking pictures of me. There is no good reason for him to be doing that to *you*. What did he look like?"

Uh…

"Do you think he was a pap?" he rephrases, brows drawn up.

"I don't know. Maybe?" Why else would he be taking pictures of me? "I don't know why though. There hasn't been anybody around me before and nobody here—" Stopping myself from the unintentional lie, I sigh. Nobody here would willingly sell me out. The Dean promised Harry as much when the paperwork was signed.

"He could have been," I admit, defeated.

"Did he say anything to you?"

"No."

"Nothing?"

"*No*." I frown. "He just stood behind the bushes at the driveway and started taking pictures. He wasn't even trying to hide, Ky."

Ky grips the back of his neck. "Most of them don't, Leighton."

Oh. I guess I didn't know that. Nobody talks to me about that sort of stuff, just that I need to be careful when I'm out, not that it's often I'm lingering. Sometimes, Mom will take me into the city to the mall or something, but I prefer staying in because she likes drawing attention to us. She makes that easy since she leaves me alone so often to go out on her own.

He walks over to Betty-not-White and starts talking about setting up a meeting with the dean and whoever oversees security. I want to tell him that

isn’t necessary, but I can’t. Ky knows way more about this than I do, and I know he won’t let anything happen to me.

We don’t leave the school for another hour because Betty says Dean Torres has time to see him now. I’m not sure if he really did or if it’s because it was Kyler Bishop who demanded a meeting, but we’re walking out the front doors long after I expected to be.

Still no Mom.

I start to worry. “Do you think my mom is okay? What if—”

“She’s fine,” he tells me, loosening a breath before giving me a sympathetic look. “I asked Harry and he said she forgot. Told me it was good I was taking care of it.”

I focus on two words. *She forgot.*

She’s done it before. The first time that I can remember was during the Mother’s Day lunch my old school held. Mom promised she’d come, even signed the form saying she’d be there with the other moms. When she didn’t show, my second-grade teacher had to console me after a very public breakdown.

There have been other times too. Thankfully, ones that didn’t leave me in tears that my peers picked on me about for months following. Though, I know they’d feel the same if their mothers forgot about them. It’s natural. Who wants their parents to forget they exist when they’re looking forward to having them around?

“Oh,” is all I can say.

We walk to his car in silence, and something catches my eye. The soccer field is emptying of the boys’ team. I lock eyes on Beckham again, whose clearly not listening to whatever Striker is saying to him.

He’s staring right at Kyler.

I pale.

But…he doesn’t say anything to the guys running their mouths beside him. It’s too far away for me to know for sure, but I think he tips his head. No words. Nothing else.

“Friend of yours?” Ky’s voice sounds similar to when Mia talks about Dylan, her boyfriend of five months.

“Not really. I don’t know Beckham that well.”

“Keep it that way, kid.” He opens the passenger side door for me, gripping the edges while I slide in. “Guys that age are trouble.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KYLER / 20

THE LIVING ROOM floor looks like Christmas Day threw up all over it, except it's like a Tim Burton version because the wrapping paper is made of my worst nightmares. Balling up the nearest piece of purple monstrosity that has Violet Wonders' logo all over it, I glare at my giggling sisters.

"Very funny," I mutter dryly, opening the box and seeing another horror folded inside. Picking up the t-shirt, I hold it out to the only person in the room who would wear it. "Did you buy yourself a gift?"

Leighton snags it up and holds it to her torso like a prized possession. I'm glad we haven't eaten cake yet because I might lose it. "I got it for myself as an early birthday gift."

I eye my big sister, but Mia just blinks innocently at me as if this isn't her doing. "Your idea, I presume."

"The girl hasn't touched any of the money Dad has given her. She deserved a present for herself. I just thought it'd be funny if she gave it to you first."

I flip her off.

Leighton bites her wavering lip to fight off a smile and lowers the shirt onto her lap. "It's not all I got you. Look under the paper, there's something else."

Hesitantly, because I'm not sure if I can trust Lenny now that she's been corrupted, I lift the slim paper and see a picture frame laying underneath.

It’s black, simple, and the picture resting inside makes me smile as soon as I recognize it.

“It’s not much,” she whispers as I lift it from the box and stare at the image of the three of us. In it, I’m carrying Leighton on my back while Mia holds the phone to take the selfie of all of us together. Part of her head is cut off because she tried fitting us all in the frame.

“It’s perfect, Lele.” I have plenty of nicknames for Mia, which usually involve some sort of cuss word, but Leighton deserves something as light as her personality.

She smiles back down at the picture. “I know you told me not to spend any of my money on you, and there’s a lot I could have bought, but there isn’t a picture of just us anywhere, so—”

I cut off her rambling with a laugh. “Like I said, it’s perfect. You shouldn’t spend your money on anybody but yourself.” I know that the allowance our father gives her makes her uncomfortable. It’s one of the reasons it rests in a bank account untouched. I had to force her hand at carrying a little cash in case of emergencies, but to my knowledge, she’s barely touched that either.

Mia grabs one of the pieces of wrapping paper and throws it at me. “So, can we have cake now or what?”

I roll my eyes. “You act like we didn’t just eat an hour ago.”

She pouts. “I’m hungry. Plus, I always have room for cake. Don’t tell my trainer though, he’ll make me run an extra five miles on the treadmill tomorrow.”

Lenny’s face makes me chuckle. She’s made it clear she doesn’t like to exercise. The most she’ll do is use the pool here and swim on the hotter days, not that she does it often. At first, I worried she couldn’t swim and offered to teach her, but she ended up being a better swimmer than me when she finally jumped in. Like always, she felt weird about using our things, and it’s finally worn off enough for her to enjoy herself from time to time.

We end up in the kitchen, ignoring the mess behind us for later. Beth isn’t due to come in until first thing Monday morning, but we’ll have it cleaned before bed tonight. I can tell Len gets uneasy if we leave something behind. I’ve caught her countless times doing dishes in the kitchen, forgoing even the state-of-the-art dishwasher, just so the person we hire won’t have to do the extra work. I’ve joined in, making sure to rinse and

wash everything after I'm done with it. Mia still grumbles about it, but I think even she does it to appease our little sister.

Once I serve everyone cake, store bought marble because I can never choose between chocolate or vanilla, I turn to Leighton. "So, what do you want to do for your birthday?"

She plays with her slice of cake. "I don't know, I haven't really thought about it."

Her birthday is only a week and a half after mine, but she rarely talks about it. "Well, think of something. We can have another night in like we did for mine, or Mia and I can take you somewhere."

"Absolutely," our sister chimes in.

Leighton shrugs. "I'm not really into celebrating, so maybe we should __"

"Nope." Mia sets her plate down. "I refuse to be related to someone who won't celebrate their birthdays."

I snort. As if she had a choice. "You're just saying that because you go over the top and celebrate your entire birth month." I'm not exaggerating as much as I wish I were. She always has something ridiculous planned for the entire month of March. Last year, that included a spontaneous trip to the Caribbean. The year before, Mia rented out Disneyland—as in, the entire park.

Pushing that away, I focus on the person we should be talking about. "Why don't you like celebrating?"

She tries hiding her frown behind the glass of soda in her hands, but I see it. It's a twitch that weighs downward, curling like she'd rather be talking about anything but this.

"What do you normally do for them?" I pry knowingly. She and Katherine have been in our lives for over a year now. I know that Leighton has a sugar addiction, with chocolate and cherry Pepsi being her go-to favorites, that she has a nasty liking for boxed macaroni and cheese, and her favorite pastime is reading dusty looking books that look older than her. Her mother, however, I know little about.

Katherine, besides being an egomaniac with a personality that rivals Harry's, is close-lipped. Unwilling to share more than necessary. I know that she loves money and material things, never turns down a gift from my sperm donor, and talks down to Leighton any chance she gets. She's a

selfish bitch that Lenny loves, which tells me the reason her daughter doesn't enjoy birthdays is because she never had the chance to.

"I don't really…" She winces at her cracked tone, and Mia's genuine smile instantly drops as her hand reaches out to brush Len's. Clearing her throat, Leighton shrugs. "Mom is usually busy working or something, so sometimes one of our neighbors would bake me a cake. Last year, I went over to the store and got the ingredients to make it myself because I didn't really have anyone in our building that I was close with like other times."

She had to make her own fucking birthday cake? *Christ*.

I'm taken aback when I see an easy smile tilt the corners of her lips. "I shared it with the little boy next door once I found out we had the same birthday. He was only staying with his aunt and uncle for the week, but they didn't have the money to throw him a party. It was sort of nice to eat our weight in chocolate without having to share it with the adults."

Both Mia and I stare at her in wonder. When she realizes, she blushes and looks at her lap, picking at her yellow nail polish. "It isn't that big of a deal. It's just another day."

She squeaks when Mia hugs her from behind, squeezing her tightly. "You're too young to say that, Leighton. We're going to do something special for you this year. No more baking your own cakes."

"I like baking though."

"If she wants to bake a cake," I counter, eyeing Mia, "then we will. Together. Chocolate, I'm guessing?"

Mia snorts. "Duh." She feeds Lenny's addiction, slipping her chocolate candies any chance she gets. "Our little Lenny Lou is going to have the best damn homemade cake she's ever had."

"Lenny Lou?" I repeat, snickering.

Even Leighton scrunches her brows.

"If you get to call her Lele, then I get to give her a nickname too. You can't deny that it's cute as hell. Right, Len?"

"Lenny Lou," Leighton tests, like she's weighing it on her tongue. "Nobody's used my middle name for anything before. Ms. Wynona was the first one to call me Lenny regularly because she said it reminded her of an old client named Lenora Louise, or Lenny for short. She said she was spunky like me."

The name sounds familiar. "The PR person who used to tell you stories?"

A head nod. “I like it,” she tells Mia quietly, reaching up and resting her hand on our sister’s. I file away her lack of details on this Ms. Wynona chick, saving it to ask about later.

I smile at my two sisters. They’re the only two I wanted to spend the day with, so I’m glad our parents are out doing God knows what.

I wrap my fingers around my glass. “I think we should make this a tradition. Every year for our birthdays, we’ll spend it together. Homemade cake, presents, and a movie.”

They both smile in return. My littlest sister whispers, “I think that sounds perfect.”

“Me too,” Mia agrees, pecking the back of Lenny’s head before stepping back.

We finish our cake, clean the living room, and watch another movie. Leighton falls asleep between me and Mia on the couch, so when the movie ends, I pick her up and carry her to the guest bedroom beside mine. She stirs slightly before burying her face in the crook of my neck, letting out a content sigh right before I deposit her on the bed.

When I pull the covers over her, she snuggles into the pillow and murmurs something that I take to mean “thank you” before falling back into unconsciousness.

Mia is at the door when I turn around, a sleepy smile on her own face. “She’s the best thing that’s happened to this family in a while, huh?”

Even I have to admit that Harry has been less cold since Leighton’s been around. He’s more willing to ask questions and listen without being as much of a judgmental dick. He doesn’t grumble or remark when she does something that is outside of a Bishop “norm” like refuse his money or join an elite club at Saint Michael’s. She’s herself, and even if he’s used to getting his way when it comes to shaping his children, he doesn’t push her to conform.

Maybe he knows she won’t.

Still, there’s something that’s nagged at me a little more every day since Lenny and Katherine have been here—the way her mother acts toward her, the look in my father’s eyes when he studies the young girl like he’s silently wondering something. There have been very few times when my gut is wrong, and the heaviness settling into it makes me wonder if I’m missing something that Harry and her mother already know.

“Yeah,” I agree, letting go of the prickly feeling while walking out of our sister’s room and draping an arm around Mia’s shoulders. “She is.”

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, Lenny’s birthday is spent at her condo with Mia and I attempting to bake her a chocolate cake from scratch. Minus some burnt edges, it doesn’t look or taste awful. Her mother even joins us for a slice before kissing her daughter and saying she has to go. I’m surprised she even bothered staying for as long as she did, much less adding to the conversation we had while laughing it up in the kitchen. When she asked what we had planned today, I wanted to ask her the same thing—it’s a weekend. What could she possibly have to do that’s more important than spending time with her daughter on her damn birthday?

According to one of my buddies, she got canned from the job Harry set her up with. That takes skill considering most people wouldn’t fuck with a guy like him, but apparently she wasn’t “secretary material” whatever the hell that means. Makes me wonder if she purposely got fired, or if Harry himself had something to do with it. Something tells me, Katherine would rather play trophy wife than make a living for herself anyway.

Setting the empty plate down, I focus on the black-haired girl sitting across from me. “Has your mother said anything about Harry recently?”

Mia kicks me under the table, but I ignore her warning eyes. Brows arched, I turn to Lenny as if to ask, *Well?*

Confusion mars her face. “Um, no?” The statement doesn’t make me believe her. There has been more than one occasion when she’s come to Katherine’s defense when I question her parental role. Leighton is almost always home by herself, rarely goes with her mother when she’s meeting Harry somewhere, and rarely tells us about their lives before moving here, like there’s a lot she doesn’t want us knowing.

I want nothing more than for her to open up about their life before California. So I can help. So I can squash my curiosity. I want Lenny to be happy, and her mother is constantly taking that away from her. At the last dinner we had together, Leighton was telling us about her friend Nora, and Katherine felt the need to say, “Oh, you made a friend!” as if her daughter hadn’t mentioned the girl—Nora Jane Ashby, the girl Len saw get bullied on her first day, whose favorite color is yellow and apparently rivals

Leighton's academic standing at Saint Michael's according to my little sister—a handful of times in the past fucking year.

"Kyler," Mia warns under her breath.

"I'm just asking," I tell the protective pain in the ass. If she knew half the shit I witnessed with Katherine, she'd be suspicious too. "It seems like Harry and her spend a lot of time together, that's all."

Mia's eyes roll. "He also spends a lot of time with his two well-paid interns. Your point?"

I eye her, not wanting to talk about them with Leighton here. It's not unusual to hear about his conquests, but that knowledge shouldn't be passed on unless necessary. Nobody likes hearing that their parent is screwing someone young enough to be their kid, but that's Harry's favorite pastime. "You don't think they're together?"

Lenny blanches. "My mom and…?"

In the year she's been here, she's never referred to him as her father. She stopped calling him Mr. Bishop after he told her it was too formal for their relationship, so she started calling him Harry instead. Katherine scolded her, I grinned, and Mia rolled her eyes. I've asked Leighton what her honest opinion on Harry is without any previous bias she gathered from me and Mia. I knew when it took her a long time to answer, it wouldn't be a gleaming review. She'd said, "I was taught not to say anything if it wasn't nice" and made Mia laugh so hard water came out of her nose.

The thought makes my lips threaten to lift. Leighton will never have the mindset we do or feel the need to share her opinion on someone if it's negative. I hope she never does, because if she chooses to, that's when I know I've failed her. "It's just a theory. Wouldn't be the first time they were together, after all."

Her cheeks pinken.

Mia kicks me again. This time, I flinch at the pain radiating up my shin. "Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing," she reasons, turning to Lenny with a shoulder rising. "They could try making things work for the sake of our family."

I'm not sure I like the thought of that, mostly for Mom's sake. She's moved on already. Hell, she started dating some guy ten years younger than her two months after the divorce was final. As happy as I am for her, I don't know how she'd react if she knew that Harry was seeing one of the women he not only cheated on her with but also fathered a child with.

Based on the twisted expression on Leighton's face, I don't think she's okay with that either.

"It's only a theory," I repeat, trying to squelch any ideas Mia has. It's her love for The Parent Trap that's making her think this way, I'm sure of it.

Leighton readjusts, pushing her plate away. "I want my mom to be happy." It's all she offers in reply, so I don't push. Shit, I respect her honesty, but I know what the price costs if her mother's happiness is tied to Harry.

It'll cost her everything.

"Enough of this," Mia chimes in, clapping her hands. "We have presents. Before you tell us we shouldn't have, we did. So, get over it."

My sister, always the eloquent speaker. When there isn't a protest, I help Mia grab the handful of presents that we brought up when Leighton was busy with her mom. As soon as we drop them in front of her, she gapes.

"These are for me?"

I laugh. "Who else would they be for?"

She stares at the wrapping which Mia did for all but one. You can tell the difference because mine is sloppier with a lot more tape than necessary, but whatever. What's underneath the purple paper is hidden, so that's all that matters.

I nudge her. "Go on."

Shaking herself out of whatever thought she has, she reaches for the one closest to her and traces the edges. I know everything in front of her because Mia dragged me out shopping with her. Most of it is clothes—a shirt, dress, or some other piece of clothing I still don't understand the need for. Mia didn't choose anything too flashy, I made sure of it. I don't know much about girl's clothing, but I do know that Lenny doesn't like to stand out. She prefers comfort, living in tees, leggings, and sweatshirts when she isn't in her school uniform.

When she gets to mine, I'm watching with a strange nervousness prickling my chest. I could have taken up Mia's offer and let her pick something out for me to sign my name to, but I wanted to get her something different. Not clothing or jewelry or a gift card somewhere. Since finding out she didn't have any birthdays like this, which Mia dragged out of her during the talk we had the other week, I wanted her to have a special one this year.

“Kyler,” she whispers, grazing her fingers on the customized planner. It has her name on it in her favorite color, orange, and photos in each month’s pages. Even though I would have liked to get her something more, I know the idea of money being spent on her would only make her squirm. Plus, Mia spent plenty for the both of us. At least she could utilize mine in any way she wanted.

“You said you needed something to keep track of everything,” I tell her with a shrug. I know school keeps her busy, but she loves the challenge. Harry even seemed impressed when Leighton told us over dinner that she was put into an advanced math, science, and English classes this year. I made note of the assignments she kept written down on post-it notes in her bedroom when I’ve visited their condo and decided she needed a better way to organize.

Her tiny smile as she flips through the pages at the photos I selected has me smiling too. I lean back in my chair and watch as she stops on one of my favorites. Confusion pinches her brows when she asks, “When did this get taken?”

She isn’t looking at the camera, but she’s beaming at something Mia says as they walk down Hollywood Boulevard. Their arms are wrapped around each other, and Leighton looks genuinely happy. The first time I asked if she wanted to see the Boulevard, she told me she and Katherine planned to go together. When I learned sometime later that that was never the case from the she-devil herself, Lenny finally admitted she knew things were hectic when we went out and didn’t want to cause a stir. I’d stared at her, wondering how someone could be so selfless when I knew her mother was the total opposite. It wasn’t her she was worried about despite being uncomfortable with the attention. It was Mia and me.

“I love it,” she says, finally looking up at me. There’s a wet sheen to her gray eyes that she tries blinking away, but I see it.

I let her have her moment, which lasts a few seconds before Mia says, “I’m just saying, as far as gift giving goes, I win.”

We all laugh, but I see the way Leighton looks down at her planner. I have no interest in competing with Mia. Our little sister loves all our gifts, but…

I grin to myself.

She totally likes mine better.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

I HEAR the cussing before my name is being yelled from upstairs. Instantly, I know why. I left a towel on the floor. Again. *Whoops.*

Footsteps barrel toward the stairs until he clears the first flight, glaring at me from the landing between the short second set of steps that leads into the living room. He's shirtless, with low-slung blue jeans resting on his hips that shows off his trimmed abs and tapered waist.

"I'm sorry," I say before he can open his mouth. The bathroom I normally use still has a leak, but someone is supposed to come fix it today.

His eyes cut to Chase, who's looking between the two of us with an amused smile. "I didn't know you had company over." The way he says it is gruff, annoyance lingering in his low tone as he eyes Chase again on the couch beside me. He's gripping the railing of the landing tightly when he turns his focus back to me. "I've asked you twice not to leave your wet towels laying around."

My cheeks heat as Chase snickers beside me, and I want to kick him for enjoying me getting chastised. "Technically, you warned me about it once. The second time you asked me not to leave my other stuff lying around." Actually, it was my bra. My pretty pink lace bra that I accidently left on the door handle because I got distracted. I meant to go back and pick up after myself. Kyler happened to find the mess first and walked into my room with the bra strap dangling off his finger and his raised brows.

“Yet here we are,” Kyler states in exasperation, making me feel worse than I already do. Which is silly because it isn’t like I broke something valuable of his or did something exponentially bad. It’s a wet towel.

“I said I’m sorry,” I repeat, not knowing what else to tell him. He’s been moody all morning. All week, even. I asked Mia if she knows why, but she told me just to leave him be when he gets like this. I don’t remember him acting this way before, so I wonder if his moodiness is a new occurrence, and it doesn’t bring good memories back of Mom. Not that they’re anything alike. When Mom got into moods, she’d lock herself in her room for days and sleep or cry. It’s why she lost so many jobs. She’d stop showing up, and nothing I could do, beg, plead, or bribe, would get her out of bed when she was at her lowest points.

Ky’s eyes go back to Chase. “What are you two doing anyway?”

I point toward the screen where *Jurassic Park* plays. Chase all but flipped out when he found out I haven’t seen any of the movies, schooling me on all things dinosaur and Jeff Goldblum even though it’s going over my head because I’m not interested in either. “We’re watching a movie. Want to join?”

A strangled sound rises from his throat like he’d rather do anything else. I take it a little personally because I don’t remember him having an aversion to dinosaurs *or* Jeff Goldblum. “I’ll pass. Just…” He pushes off the railing, shaking his head at something. “Don’t leave your towels around. Or anything else, for that matter.”

The bra. *Cringe*.

He walks back upstairs, and I find myself watching him until he disappears. Since the night he put me to bed in his room, he’s been a little distant. He made it seem like it was work—a song he couldn’t get right. Knowing there’s nothing I can do to help, I let him be while he worked through it. I haven’t gone to his room on the nights when Mom crosses my mind and insomnia hits me, and he hasn’t made another move to bring me in there. We never even talked about why he did that night.

A door closes with more force than necessary, leaving me wincing into the cushion. He’s mad at me. Sighing, I settle back in and grab the remote, only to find Chase grinning at me.

“You’ve got a little—” He taps his chin with mischievous eyes. “—drool right there you might want to wipe off.”

My jaw drops. “What?”

He laughs loudly. “You just stared at his ass like an art broker at a gallery, Len.”

Oh my— “I did not! He’s my…we’re…” My lack of coherent words only makes him laugh harder until I’m smacking his chest to get him to stop. “Knock it off, Chase.”

He swipes an invisible tear from under his eye and stretches back out. “I’m not judging you or anything. You’re not related after all.”

My entire body feels like it was just thrown into a fire pit. I don’t want to admit that I *may* have let my eyes wander to his backside, his really nice backside, unintentionally. It happens. If my gaze drifts off and locks somewhere, it’s not really my fault. I was more lost in thought about what else I may have done besides leave a stupid towel around to piss him off.

“Whatever,” I grumble, playing the movie again in hopes it’ll quiet him. Because, yes, I may have noticed the way Kyler looks these days. Toned, muscular, but not overly beefy, trimmed, and…healthy. He looks healthy, and that’s a good thing. I’m happy for him. He’s clearly spent a lot of time on himself over the past couple of years. And if my eyes trail a little too long, it’s not like he hasn’t returned the favor on more than one occasion. We’ve noticed what three years have done for us.

It’s innocent.

It’s innocent, I chant again, though my chest tingles at the words.

“Don’t be mad,” he tells me. When I give him the silent treatment, he groans and moves over to me, stealing the TV controller. “C’mon, Leighton. I didn’t say it to embarrass you. I was just teasing.”

I know he was, but it makes me feel… What exactly? The pit of my stomach has little flutters kicking around in it. Kyler’s always been attractive, but I’ve never thought about it that way. I’ve mostly been told. Girls at school would always bring it up, trying to get details. Reporters would stop and ask what kind of girl could get a “hunk like Kyler Bishop” to settle down. To me he was just a good-looking guy then. Not so bad on the eyes—a viewpoint that was completely *innocent*. Except now, my stomach tingles with an awareness that I haven’t really felt before when thinking about the valleys between his lean six-pack and it makes me feel off.

Not to mention the dreams. Plural. As in, I’ve had more than one about my once half-brother. They aren’t R-rated by any means, but they’re

pushing the PG-13 boundary considering who he is. Sure, we aren't related, but once upon a time… *Stop.*

"I know," I relent, voice hoarse, and shoving the thought far, far away. Eyeing Chase when I see his lips twitch, I shove his shoulder and snatch the remote back from him. "We still have forty minutes of this thing left, so—"

"We should go out."

My eyes bug out of my head as I stare at him with my mouth still open mid-sentence. Did he just say what I think he did? As if staring will give me that answer, I study his features and try figuring out what I'm missing.

Half his lips curl up slowly. "You look surprised, which means I probably suck at making the whole I-like-you vibes noticeable."

I…don't even know what to say. "Oh."

The other half of his lips curve. "I know what Mia was thinking when she made Garrick introduce us. Have to say, didn't mind the setup when you slid into my brother's car that day."

Double oh. "So…" I blink a few times until I force myself to say something that doesn't make me sound like an idiot. My cheeks are hot, and the heat is spreading around my face. "You really want to go out with me?" I mean, he said he did. I imagine it wasn't an invite to go outside together, especially because it's raining and gross, but who knows? My experience with this sort of thing is nonexistent.

I think back to Saint Michael's when I had my only real boy experience, and it wasn't dating. I'm not sure the hand holding, hugging, and the occasional kiss counts because I do that stuff with Kyler. Well, the kisses are strictly cheek or forehead, no matter how long his lips stay, but still.

The feeling in my stomach turns to something different when I think about Beckham Reeves, who hasn't crossed my mind in a long time because every time he does I squish his memory, and Chase must think the shift in my expression is because of him because he instantly backtracks. "You know, we'll forget I even asked. It's fine. Really."

"No!" I blurt, heart drumming in my chest as I try making this right. "I mean, not 'no' as in 'no, I don't want to go out' I just mean 'no' as in 'no, I don't want to forget that you asked me to go out.'" Swallowing, I wave my hand. "Can we start over? I don't think I'm making much sense because I'm nervous."

"*You're* nervous?" He laughs again and I'm grateful that it's in a lighthearted way. "*I'm* nervous. It's taken me a lot longer than I originally

planned to ask you, and I hadn't really meant to blurt it out like that."

"What?"

He nods. "I'm not great at this. Garrick told me—"

"*Garrick knows*?" My voice is way too high to pass off as normal. He told his brother he was going to ask me out?

"Well, yeah. He actually called me an idiot for not doing it sooner." That admission comes with the faint coloring of his cheeks, rivaling mine.

Blinking, I need to take a deep breath to collect the thoughts running rampant in my mind. So what if his brother knows? His super famous brother who I kissed posters of. No big deal. What I should worry about is if Mia knows since she and Garrick have been working together over the past few weeks. And if she doesn't, she'll make a scene once she does.

His throat clears again. "So, would you?"

I'm brought back to the question at hand and find myself nodding because I don't know what else to do. "Sure. I mean, yes, I'd like that."

I think.

It's not a lie either, but the words feel funny on my tongue. I haven't been asked out before. Maybe because I've closed myself off to it, but mostly because I don't think guys have been interested. Back in Phoenix, I'd been flirted with, but it was usually by old men that would come into one of the many diners I waited tables at. Regulars who were harmless, for the most part. None of them were serious about their advances. Half of them did it to see me blush, then tease me the rest of the night when I did.

Chase seems harmless too. Nothing like his brother which is promising. Garrick is a charmer, the kind of guy who flirts with everything with a vagina. It reminds me too much of the men Mom hung around. In comparison, Chase is safer.

Safe is good, right?

But I look at him, really look, and wonder if I should have said no. Not because he isn't a decent guy. I like hanging out with him. But because part of me thinks the man upstairs won't like the development.

The curly-haired boy in front of me gives me a warm smile and nods, swiping a hand through his tresses until the strands flop back over his forehead. "We should exchange some weekends we're both free. I can rearrange my schedule easily, but I know the café isn't as flexible since Mel let you pick up more hours."

Nibbling my lip, I give him a nod and wonder what Mia will say. Then my mind goes to Mom, and I try not to frown, I really do, but my lips feel heavy thinking she isn't here to tell me what she thinks. Would she like Chase or tell me to go after Garrick? Would she give me advice on what to wear and how to talk and what color lipstick to apply?

I'm still thinking about my agreement to go out with Chase by the time Kyler is done with his shower and walking into the living room. Chase is gone—something came up with his mom, so he promised to finish the movie with me another day. We parted with a goodbye hug that lasted longer than normal, leaving me with a shy smile on my face that he matched before walking out. Sighing, I follow Kyler into the kitchen and sit at the counter while he prepares his usual protein shake that looks way too healthy for my liking.

"Where'd Chase go?"

"You chased him away with your broody mood," I tease half-heartedly, watching him pause what he's doing to eye me. I roll mine. "He had to go home." He resumes what he's doing, and the silence makes me think I upset him. Do wet towels bother him that much? "Are you angry at me, Ky? I said I was sorry."

His shoulders square off for a second before he relaxes them and dumps the ingredients for his shake into the blender. "Not mad, Len. I have a lot on my mind is all. Nothing you need to worry about."

How could he think that? "Of course I'm going to worry. We're friends. If you want to talk about it—"

"I don't," he snaps, grinding his teeth.

I blink at him, trying not to flinch over his tone. He has bad days like the rest of us, but he usually doesn't take them out on me. I'm not going to pretend it doesn't hurt, but the concern I feel knowing something is bothering him weighs more than anything else. "Kyler…"

His sigh is heavy as he grips the edge of the counter until his fingers turn white. "Listen, it's just some bullshit with my label. I really don't want to talk about it right now." Why don't I believe that's the only thing on his mind?

"Is Gordy doing anything to help?"

"Yeah," he grumbles, turning the blender on and holding the top down. We let the machine fill the silence, and I wonder if he's using it to stall for

time. He doesn't like talking about himself even now, after all these years. It makes me a little irritated, but I get it. I'd be a hypocrite not to.

I give him an out. As soon as the blender shuts off, I blurt the first thing that comes to mind without thinking. "Chase asked me out." As if he doesn't know what I mean, I add, "On a date."

I'm met with more silence while he turns his body toward me with an eyebrow quirked. I don't know what's running through his mind while he stares at me. It's unnerving. So, when he does speak up, I'm speechless. "I know."

He…what?

"He told me he was going to," he murmurs.

My heart bottoms out as I blink a few times while absorbing the concept. "I don't understand. He told you what exactly? When did this happen?"

Kyler drops his head down between his shoulders, shaking it, but enlightens me. "The kid talked to me about a week ago, asking for my permission."

I think my brows shoot up to my hairline, maybe further, but I don't say anything. Aren't guys supposed to ask men for permission to marry someone in their family? It's so old fashioned that Mom would probably laugh and tell me to brush him off. None of her man friends would ever ask something like that.

It's…well, it's refreshing. Sort of. But also confusing. Why would Chase ask Kyler for his permission to take me out?

But before I can inquire that, Ky says, "Mia should be happy. She practically shoved the guy into it," and any chance of a smile disappears and replaces itself with a heaviness in my chest.

"You don't think he'd ask me out if she hadn't gotten involved?" I whisper, hurt lacing my words. He's sort of right, I guess. Mia and Garrick introduced us, otherwise I'm not sure I'd have ever met Chase. Still…

He curses, gripping the back of his neck as he swings his gaze toward me. "That's not what I meant, Leighton."

It doesn't make me feel better. "I know Mia has a lot to do with it, but Chase is a good guy and seems excited about this."

"I never said he wasn't." A pause, then a slight slit of his eyes as he scopes out my face where I'm leaning on the counter. "Are *you* excited about it?"

My lips part to answer, but then close when I realize I haven't let myself think about it. Nervousness fills my conscious more than anything, but I *am* happy Chase asked. Who doesn't like being wanted? "Yes, I think so," I decide slowly, bobbing my head. "It's probably time. Mom would be cheering if she were here." The words slip out before I can stop them, and his eyes pin me until my face burns to the touch.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," I murmur, sinking down.

"Lenny."

My shoulders drop. "Nothing, Ky. You don't want to talk about the stuff with your label, and I don't want to talk about this. Okay?"

"Not okay."

I scowl. "Don't be a hypocrite."

He drops everything he's doing to walk over to me. More like prowl, with sheer determination in every step. Leaning down so we're eye level, brown eyes dark and all-knowing, he gives me that stupid look that always makes me spill my guts to him. It's like he possesses pixie dust or something equally, and annoyingly magical. "Tell me."

My jaw ticks and I look away only for a second before admitting, "I haven't been asked out before."

The kitchen grows eerily silent.

"It's embarrassing," I whisper. Considering who I'm talking to, the lack of attention I get when it comes to dating is lackluster. I don't want to talk to him about how nobody since Beckham has shown me any interest, and even that was skewed by his cruel intentions. "It's nice to be wanted for once, okay? I'm excited for this and you're ruining it by being a jerk."

"Don't." He uses two fingers to guide my chin back to meet his eyes. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about, Lele. Nothing at all. And you know what? I don't believe that nobody has asked you out since then. Knowing you, you probably just didn't realize it. You've always avoided stuff like that."

The burning in my chest is back. Flirting is one thing I tended to be bad at acknowledging unless someone made it blatantly obvious, but being asked out? How could someone, even someone as awkward as me, mess that up? "I haven't been. It doesn't even matter—"

"It clearly does."

“It doesn’t,” I say too harshly for him to believe in the lie. Okay, so I’m bothered a little. Who wouldn’t be? My experience with guys is probably nothing like most people my age. I used to be proud of that because it meant I was being picky about who I spent my time on. Not like Mom who tended to fall for any guy who gave her attention. “I really, really don’t want to talk about it, Kyler. Okay? Please?”

His fingers drop from my chin and fall onto the counter that his forearms are leaning on. For a while, I don’t think he’ll agree. The way his eyes search mine makes me uncomfortable because I worry what he sees. Then he relents with a long sigh and stands. “I don’t like you getting down on yourself. You’re better than that, Leighton. That’s all I’ll say.” The *for now* silently tacked on lingers between us.

Squirming until I can’t stand it, I slide off the chair and start walking toward the stairs. Stopping at the archway, I look over my shoulder where he’s dumping his shake into a glass. “Hey, Ky? What did you tell Chase after he asked? If he asked you, if you knew, then…”

He lifts his gaze, and half his lips are curved upward into a subtle smirk. “What do you think I said? He ended up asking you out, didn’t he?”

His insinuation that he influenced Chase’s decision makes me shake my head.

“You think it’s a good idea?” I ask in a tiny voice, part of me hoping he’ll say yes, and the other—a much larger piece of me—praying he says no.

“Like you said,” he tells me smoothly, whatever residual anger from earlier gone and replaced with reluctant distance, “he seems like a good kid. Mia wouldn’t push you toward him if she thought he’d hurt you, so I trust her. I think it’s…a good idea that you’re giving him a chance. I think it’d be best if you did.”

“Oh.” Best because of what reason? I want to ask, crave to know the answer he’s pushing for this, but I don’t because I’m too chicken.

He hums out a non-verbal reply.

“And me?” I find myself asking after another long beat passes between us, not willing to think about him wanting me to go out with Chase. “Do you trust me?”

His eyes rake over mine, a look in those russet hues that tells me his answer before he parts his lips. “Always.”

I press my lips together and nod, telling him I'm going upstairs after we fall into a thick silence. When I close my bedroom door, I see that there's a badly wrapped present on my bed. When I open it, I stare at the slightly worn book in my hands and loosen a breath at the note attached.

The woman at the bookstore said people love this one. Consider it the first step at your new collection. – Ky.

IT TOOK A FEW WEEKS, but I finally earned the stability of an additional twelve hours at Delmar's without being heckled by any big guys with bigger cameras. Mel seems happy, and Harmony hasn't said anything, or looked at me for that matter, since being talked to. By my calculation, which I did as soon as I got home when my new work schedule was posted Friday night, the extra shifts give me enough to buy my fall textbooks, even though the determined moneybag I'm rooming with keeps insisting he'll loan me the money for whatever I need. Not happening.

It's nice enough he pretends not to notice the groceries I buy for him—things I'd never eat in a million years that are green, lean, and leafy. Pass. It isn't like I eat Kraft mac and cheese every day, but the amount of spinach he consumes makes me want to call him Popeye.

Once I realized what he ate, I made a mental note and picked up a few items here and there whenever I'd grab things for myself at the store. When my paychecks increased, I started buying more since he refuses to let me contribute other ways. He probably knows I'd find other ways to chip in even though he tells me not to. Once, I attempted to slip him a fifty a few weeks after my first paycheck, which backfired when I found the same bill tucked into my purse the next day. I've gotten creative. A package of his favorite organic, non-antibiotic fed chicken breasts, or that gross mineral water that must have healing powers based on the dollar amount per bottle. Sometimes I even order from one of the restaurants he's obsessed with like the Mediterranean one a few blocks away where they know his order by heart.

It won't matter if he tells me to stop because he knows I won't. Like he won't quit telling me to save my money. I have been. My savings account gets the bulk of my paychecks that doesn't go toward my phone bill and the groceries.

When Saturday evening rolls around, I'm staring at the clothes sprawled across the bed trying to decide what to wear. Chase told me to dress comfortably for our first date, but I don't know what that even means. Leggings? Shorts? I own two dresses and neither of them scream "comfortable" even if they do say "this is a date".

Kyler's been working on music all day in his room, so bothering him is out of the question. I remember all the times he'd lock himself away when he was in the zone, never wanting to be bothered. Plus, he would tell me to call Mia if I was having problems figuring this sort of thing out. But Mia is out of the question because I'm not ready for the pep talk that would come with her fashion advice. I don't know her filming schedule either and the last thing I want is my pending date with Chase Matthews broadcasted for all her viewers to see. I already turned down a place in her show after appearing on that one episode, and that included over the phone cameos.

Cringing over the thought of people being in my business—especially if they found out Garrick's little brother is involved—I grab a few basic but cute items and change in the bathroom. I opt to keep my hair down, letting the curls do their thing and hoping the heat won't be too brutal. It doesn't take me long to apply a thin coat of eyeliner that make the gray in my eyes pop before I'm checking the clock on my phone and heading toward the stairs.

"Lenny?" Ky calls from his room. I turn on my heels and beeline for his door, peeking in to see him lounging across his bed with his trusty guitar in his hand. It's the same one he's had since he was ten. I know that because there are random stickers on it that I put there over four years ago—stickers consisting of cupcakes, kittens, and an array of other girly things I'm surprised he didn't peel off the second he could.

"Yeah?"

He sets the guitar down, sliding to the edge of his mattress and propping a knee up while giving me a once over. His lips curl up into a soft smile, but there's a strain to it that I can't help but latch onto. "You look pretty."

Looking down, I take in the black leggings and floral tunic. My favorite pair of Gladiator sandals are on my feet, showing off the freshly painted purple toenails I did this afternoon. When Mia texted me earlier asking if I wanted to get our nails done together, I'd already done my own. I knew she'd pay despite my protests, so she let me weasel my way out of it this time. I know better than to think there'll be a second.

Wiggling my toes, I lift my gaze back to his with a timid smile. “Thank you.” It’s normal to be nervous, but it feels pointless. I always have fun when I’m with Chase, so I know tonight will be no different.

Flattening my shirt with my clammy palms, I eye his notebook hoping to distract myself with idle conversation. “How’s the song coming along?”

One of his brows quirks. “You want to talk about my music?” Amusement laces through his words and draws me into his room where I sit on the edge of his bed. Why wouldn’t I want to talk about that?

“Yes.”

He chuckles. “It’s going well. Should be finished by the time you get back.” This time, he eyes me pointedly. “By eleven.”

Is he…? “Are you giving me a curfew?”

A grin spreads on his face and I don’t miss the pride twinkling in his eyes. “Yes. You’re eighteen and living here. I need to make sure you’re safe, so I want you back by eleven. I’ll make sure your friend knows too.”

My *friend*. All I can do is gape at him, waiting for him to start laughing and telling me he’s kidding. He is, right? I’ve never had a curfew before. Then again, I’ve never needed one. Now it just feels weird.

“You’re serious?” I hedge, eyes widening when I see his expression.

His chin dips in confirmation.

“Kyler—”

“Nope.” He shuts me down and drops his feet onto the floor, standing to full height. “I need to make sure you’re okay and I don’t want to stay up all night waiting for you.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

The disbelief I’m met with in his deadpan gaze has me pressing my lips together. Okay, so he’s being completely serious. Noted. “I know you don’t, but I won’t be able to sleep until I know you’re back. Just say okay.”

Sighing, I nod. “Okay.”

He beams. “Great. C’mon. We’ll wait downstairs for him. He’s picking you up at seven right?”

Giving him a nod, I look down at the time on my phone. We have twenty minutes still, which means twenty minutes of me freaking out for no reason. I’ll probably have to change my shirt or redo my eyeliner if I don’t stop thinking about the hundreds of ways this could go wrong.

When we’re in the living room, I can’t help but ask about his experiences. “What if there are cameras?”

His brows shoot up.

“And what if people recognize us? He’s related to Garrick frigging Matthews!”

That brings his brows down. “So?”

“*So*,” I repeat dryly, “people might say something. Or do something. Remember when Beckham—”

“Stop, Leighton.” Shaking his head, he scoots to the edge of the chair cushion and rests his elbows on his knees “You need to take a deep breath. Chase is nothing like Garrick, thank fucking God or I wouldn’t be okay with this, and he isn’t that asshat you dealt with in high school. You’re nervous, I get it. You don’t have a lot of experience with this sort of thing…” His voice gets low. Tugging on the collar of his shirt, he blows out a breath. “I’m going to be real with you because I always am. People *might* notice you guys and they *might* say something and, sure, they *might* take a picture or two. Forget about them and enjoy yourself. This is your night to be young and have fun. Fuck the rest.”

I blink. That’s his advice? Why does he sound so pained to tell me that? Thinking about it only makes me itch, so I brush it off. For now.

“Okay. Fuck them. Enjoy myself.” The CliffsNotes version makes me squirm, and Kyler looks close behind.

“Maybe don’t say it like that,” he murmurs. Not understanding, I give him a funny look until he’s wiping a palm down the side of his face. “You’re going to be good tonight, right? There’s nothing you’re worried about…”

Worried? Of course, I’m worried. He knows that’s immediately my default in life, which is why he always has to tell me to shut my brain off. “About what exactly?”

The way he shifts in his seat makes me realize whatever he’s getting at isn’t his typical conversation forte. “If he tries something…” His wince is what clicks it for me.

“Oh my *God*,” I groan, covering my face to hide the heat prickling my cheeks. “Are you trying to give me the sex talk right now?”

He goes completely white. Whiter than I’ve ever seen on his usually fair face. “What? No! Jesus—fuck no. I’m just saying if he tries something and you’re nervous, you can always…I…” Curse words fly from his mouth as he stands and swipes a hand through his hair, making it unruly.

It’s hard to swallow when I realize I just made this already awkward talk worse, so I don’t offer up anything else as he puts distance between us before turning to face me again.

“Okay, maybe I *am* hinting at *that*. He’s a nineteen-year-old guy. I know what they think like and what’s on their mind. So, sure. I’m saying to be careful.”

Careful? He wants… “Can we change the subject please?” I mean, I met Kyler when he was nineteen. Our long-winded tale started there. I’m not sure I want to know what was on his mind then because he and Chase aren’t the same people.

God. *God.* Now I’m going to be hyperaware of what may or may not be on Chase’s mind the entire night. I already worried about what might happen if he tried holding my hand. Would I let him? Probably. We’ve never held hands before. Every time we watch movies, there’s usually food between us that we share. Then there’s the likelihood of a first kiss, the one he gives me at the door. *If* he walks me to the door. I’ve obsessed over this since the moment I opened my eyes this morning. And now *that.*

Groaning again, I shake my head hoping it’ll rattle out of my thoughts.

Kyler says, “Maybe we should talk—”

“*No*.” My body is on fire. “No, thank you. I’m good. My mom told me everything I need to know, and I’m well versed on my right to say no. Trust me.”

Bad move. As soon as the words are out, his features sharpen. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Swallowing my words, I part my lips to try back tracking out of a conversation I really don’t want to have right now, but he cuts in again. “Is there something you haven’t told me that I should know about, Leighton?”

Leighton. Not Lenny. Not Lele.

“No. Nothing bad.”

He doesn’t look like he believes me.

“I promise,” I tell him, trying to sound believable. The sketchy places I worked in Phoenix aren’t worth thinking about much less telling Kyler. It’s over. I don’t have to see the men who used to grope my butt or come onto me too strongly, and I definitely don’t have to worry about anyone pushing me to “give them a little sugar” outside the building when I clock out at night or walk to the shady apartment building I resided in with Mom.

Swallowing, I stand on shaky legs. “I promise, Ky,” I repeat more firmly. “I’m just pointing out that I know what ‘no’ means and how to use it.”

The way he stares at me makes me wish I could hit the rewind button and stop myself from even implying the things I’ve experienced. He can’t protect me from other people even if he wants to. And I know he does. He’s Kyler, a self-appointed protector of mine from the start.

It’s sweet but… “You don’t have to worry about me tonight. I’m fine. Chase is nice like we’ve discussed. I’ll be home by eleven.” I have a feeling I’ll be home sooner now that my mind is wrapped around things I really wish it weren’t wrapped around. Instead of telling him that, I give him my best smile. Warm, comforting, one that tells him I’ll be fine because I will. I’m sure of it.

He blows out a breath. It’s small, but heavy, like he’s deflating the worry that’s built up in his lungs. “When did you become so grown up, kid?”

The sentence is an oxymoron and we both know it. He hasn’t called me kid in a while. I thought we were past that, but I guess I was wrong. I don’t have to answer him with words because I think we both already know the answer.

I had to grow up a long time ago.

He opens his arms and I step into him, letting his hug dispel the tension between us. I breathe in the clean soapy scent coming from him and smile to myself when he squeezes me, my nose grazing the column of his throat. “You’ll tell me?” he asks quietly, chin resting on my head.

For a moment, I don’t know what he means. Then it clicks, and my smile slips slightly because of course he won’t let it go. He wants to know everything that’s happened to me over the years we weren’t together. But would he really if he knew the details?

Tell me when it’s over, he’d said not long ago.

My voice cracks, “Someday.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

THE DATE itself isn't so bad, but Chase wearing anything other than his favorite graphic tees and jeans is just…weird. And then there's his hand, which rests on the arm rest between us like he's inviting me to hold it, but that makes me sweat even more. I try focusing on the movie, but those damn fingers move in my peripheral and I keep thinking about Kyler and his worries. That's weird too. More than weird.

Sighing inwardly, I settle into the theater seat and watch the flick. He heard me telling Ky I wanted to see it, but Kyler hates going to the movies. He says the seats are uncomfortable and there are too many people, plus the food is overpriced. *That* makes me laugh because I know how much his stupid waters cost.

When the credits roll, I wait for Chase to get up before I follow suit. The lights barely flicker on before we're making our way out of the small theater and toward the back entrance that leads to the parking lot. I've never been here before, but it's quieter without the bustle of L.A. and Hollywood traffic that I'm used to listening to in our little subdivision. I like that he kept it in mind so we could enjoy ourselves without people getting into our business. Since we stepped foot into the theater, not one person looked at us in a I-know-you sort of way.

On the walk to his white BMW, which he told me on the drive here he saved up to buy himself even though Garrick offered to spot him the money,

our arms brush and I feel a rise of heat creeping up the back of my neck while thinking *oh God, this is it.* I don't move away, and feel his fingertips graze the side of my palm, sending shivers through my spine.

Biting my lip, I stop by the passenger door as he opens it, giving me a lopsided smile that makes him look ten times more boyish. I take note of his pale green button down and black jeans, nothing super fancy, but definitely not his usual. I kind of miss the shirts with dorky sayings like the one he wore last time we hung out that said "life is too short to remove the USB safely" or my personal favorite "talk data to me" followed by string of ones and zeros that he had to explain to me because I was clueless.

Chase Matthews is a complete dork. A nerd down to his computer and game loving heart. It's why I like him, even though the few times he's tried explaining code to me went straight over my head. "I miss your t-shirts," I blurt, tugging on the button-down.

His eyebrows pop up, amusement coating his curled lips.

"Not that you don't look nice," I quickly add, fighting off the urge to wince. "Because you do. Look nice, I mean. Really nice. You just don't look like you." Shutting up, I press my lips together before I ramble on more.

Humor brightens his eyes as he nudges my foot with his. "Truthfully? This is Garrick's shirt. He told me I needed to look like I 'wasn't homeless for once.'" Rolling his eyes, he chuckles lightly.

I join in, biting my lip to suppress a wider smile from forming. "If Mia had anything to say about my outfit, I'd be in a dress and heels. Then you would have had to hold onto me the entire night or I'd look like Bambi the first time he tries walking."

A dimple appears in his left cheek that I didn't notice he had before. "I wouldn't have minded that so much."

I blink, blushing at the meaning. This Chase is more forward than the Chase I'm used to. The one who asks me if I want extra butter on my popcorn like that's an actual question, or the one who tells me *Jurassic Park* could totally happen in real life because of our modern world's scientific advancements. I never understood why anyone would want that considering how the movies turned out. The point is, he's more than playful now, and I'm trying to get used to it.

"I'm not very good at this," I admit, looking down at the pavement.

“I haven’t been on a date in a while, so I’m no expert on this either.” His comforting remark has me smiling slightly. “Though, if Garrick were here, he’d tell you I’m in a long-term relationship with my hard drive or something equally stupid like that.”

Snorting, I can’t help but say, “I like your brother.”

His expression turns from playful to…not. The twitch of his lips, which start weighing downward at the sides, has me losing my smile. “I get that a lot.”

Blinking, I replay the words in my head before I backtrack. “No! Not like that. I mean, sure, I like Garrick, but only because he picks on you like any sibling would. Like Kyler and Mia does, and it’s nice.” Now would be a bad time to tell him about the poster thing. Or the crush I had. Neither of that matters because I know the popstar now, have interacted with him, and realize I’d be way too uncomfortable if I even had that kind of thought about him. It’s easier to fantasize about some happy-ever-after with your celebrity crush when you know nothing will come of it.

“Chase?” I ask hesitantly, nudging his foot with mine. He knows me well enough by now, so he should believe what I say. I get it, though. He’s seen more of this industry thanks to Garrick than I have, which means he’s more easily accustomed to doubt.

He gives me a few terse nods. “Yeah, I know you didn’t mean it like that. I’ve had a lot of past experiences with girls who would date me to get to my brother. It’s just…” Shaking his head, he gives me a small smile, lifting a shoulder. “You probably get that a lot with Kyler, huh?”

I want to tell him about Beckham, but my chest still hurts from it. It’s the only time I could relate, but not because of Kyler. “Not really. Like I said, I’m not great at this whole dating thing because I never really dated. I mean, I sort of did. Once. That was a few years ago.”

“You’ve only dated once?” he repeats, awe in his tone. I think *here we go*, waiting for the conversation like the one I had with Kyler. Thankfully, it doesn’t come. The only thing I see on his face is surprise, the kind that’s flattering because he assumes I would have dated more. As if guys noticed me like that. He adds a “huh” before smiling wider. “Well, I better make this one the best you’ve had then. There’s a hamburger joint not too far from here that I like going to. It’s tucked away, not many people usually. You in?”

The sound of a hamburger makes my stomach growl, causing him to laugh and me to blush for what seems like the millionth time. My body is still probably angry at me for having a period where I tried going vegetarian and ate my weight in black bean burgers. It didn't last long because, eventually, those got expensive and the dollar menu at McDonald's was more accessible, which is another reason why the old wardrobe I walked away from the first time I left California stopped fitting.

"I'm in," I tell him.

I dip into his car and take a deep breath before he comes around and drops into the driver's seat. We exchange another look before I bite my lip and watch the scenery pass out the window, and the conversation we have shifts to pre-teen Leighton, my time spent at the Bishops, and how much easier it's been adjusting to being back thanks to Kyler.

I don't miss the way Chase frowns slightly when we settle into the booths across from each other at the cute establishment that smells like fries and cheeseburgers as I tell him about the adventures I've had with Ky and Mia, or how he scratches his jaw when I talk about Harry and Mom. But they're all I know. All I can offer in conversation. In order to know me, people have to know the people I love, and I think he gets that by the time he's paying the check.

The question is, does he accept it?

MY HEART IS THRUMMING hard in my chest as Chase parks the car by the front door and turns it off. When Kyler made a point to remind me of the curfew he'd bestowed like I was sixteen again, his eyes weren't on me. Thankfully, Chase understood perfectly, so here we are.

10:43 p.m.

My stomach is happily fed, maybe more than it needs to be thanks to the double order of loaded cheese fries he got for us, and my mind is whirling with *what next* scenarios. Some of them nice. A walk to the front door. A hand squeeze. Maybe a sweet kiss on the cheek. Most of them wind up with me making a fool of myself, which I've managed—for the most part—not to do all night. That would have been different if Chase hadn't said, "Pretend we're just hanging out like any other day. It's not so different, right?"

He’s right. It’s no different from the other times we’ve hung out together, but that gets me wondering if he ever considered those as more than just two people watching a movie. I’m sure 99 cent microwavable popcorn packets and $3.99 movie rentals aren’t what most people constitute as dates. Unfortunately, that train of thought leads me to think of Beckham. Again.

The first time he held my hand.

Our first kiss…and our second and third.

I was ten times more nervous then, because it was my first everything, and Mom didn’t help with her “advice” which consisted of how much skin to show off and where to buy the cheapest condoms. I was barely sixteen.

My face flames from the thought, which Chase either doesn’t see or pretends not to for my sake. Either way, I’m grateful. I shouldn’t be thinking about Beckham when I’m still on a date.

We walk to the door, still not holding hands, and I can’t help but smile over the night’s events. The movie was good, the food was yummy, and our conversation flowed easily. There isn’t much I didn’t already know about Chase that he divulged, but a few tidbits caught my interest—his love for old western movies, how much he hates the smell of ginger, and his celebrity crush on Jennifer Lawrence, especially after seeing The Hunger Games. I met him match for match, excluding my real celebrity crush considering…well, awkward, choosing to say I didn’t have one instead.

“Did you have fun?” he asks, sliding his hands into the pockets of his pants.

It’s not hard to answer. “Yes, I did.”

His smile is big. “I’m glad.” There’s a moment of silence when I’m trying to decide what to do or say, when he adds, “We should do it again sometime. Ever been bowling?”

My nose scrunches. “Bowling?” I haven’t been. I didn’t even know people still do that.

He chuckles. “It’s fun. We’d need more people though. It’s better to play it with at least four. Maybe we could invite Mia and Garrick.”

I’m not sure how Dylan would feel about an outing like that. He’s fine with Mia working with the eldest Matthews, but anything outside of a professional relationship makes him twitchy because he knows Garrick’s reputation with women. I’ve seen the way he scopes out guys when he’s out with Mia. He’s possessive and protective. It’s sort of nice. Romantic, even.

Sensing my thoughts, he grins. “Okay, so maybe not those two.” Another jaw scratch. “I guess Kyler could come with her. I’d say Garrick could bring someone, but it’d probably be one of his girls and…” He shudders. Actually, full-on shudders. “Well, nobody wants that. Trust me.”

I giggle, even though I’m curious why he wouldn’t mention Kyler to start with. He’s the likeliest choice for me to convince to come out. Then again, maybe Chase doesn’t want a guard dog glaring at him the whole time. I had to force myself to stop talking about my roommate after I realized how each story I brought up involved him. The books he’s subtly hid for me to find. The Kraft macaroni he’s kept in stock for me in the kitchen. All the TV we’ve watched together based on Chase’s recommendations. “Maybe I’ll ask Ky and see if he’s interested. He’s not big on going out and doing stuff.”

He looks considerate of that information before shrugging, seemingly leaving it up to me.

More silence. I’m staring at the front door, then down at my shoes.

“You sure you had a good time tonight?”

Why is he worried I didn’t? “Yes. The movie was good, and Patty’s had probably the best burgers I’ve ever eaten.”

He rubs his arm and looks over his shoulder at the car, then back down at me. When his gaze dips, it’s to my lips. Mine part as the panic creeps in, but all he does is give me another smile, the boyish one that reminds me he’s nothing like Garrick or Beckham. “Good. I’ll talk to you later?”

When I nod, he gives me a nod, stares at my lips for another few seconds before turning on his heels to his car.

No hand squeeze.

No kiss.

Part of me is relieved, and that relief eases the anvil that’s been third wheeling the date since I got into his car. The other part is worried that I did something wrong because he looked like he wanted to kiss me but didn’t. Did I want him to kiss me? To hold my hand? I’m not even sure I know in the web of thoughts swirling my head right now. I offer him a small wave before he drives off, fighting a frown that deepens when I hear a *thunk*—and see a curtain falling back over the window before I unlock the door and push it open.

Kyler is sitting on the couch with a magazine in his hand and his feet propped up on the coffee table when I walk in, and I know he was more

than likely eavesdropping because there's no way he'd read Cosmo otherwise.

"Hey," he greets.

"Enjoying some light reading material?"

My lips waver when I see him glance down at whatever page he's on and curse quietly under his breath. His "uh-huh" is barely audible as he drops it onto his lap.

"You really stayed up to wait for me," I note, not sure if I'm really that surprised.

The look he gives me says the same thing. I sit on the edge of the coffee table and pick up the magazine, brows touching my hairline as I stifle a laugh. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

Confusion contorts his face until I show him the cover, tapping the article bolded on the side that reads "50 Ways to Please Your Man." His cheeks pinken as he swipes the magazine and throws it onto the other side of the couch. I add, "I'm totally not judging. I'd love you no matter what, you know that."

His dark eyes offer little amusement in return, and he changes the subject like I expect him to even though it makes it that much harder to fight off the laughter trying to bubble its way up my throat. "How was your date?"

I tell him what he wants to know, which also happens to be the truth. "He was a perfect gentleman, which I'm sure you know because you were spying on us out the window."

Kyler doesn't deny it, he just shrugs. "Did you have fun?"

This time, there's no teasing in his tone and I nod. "I did. What did you do besides worry unnecessarily?"

"Worrying about you *is* necessary."

"I can handle myself."

"Sure, but it's others I don't trust."

"Like Chase?"

Silence.

"I thought you said he was nice."

"Nice boys have hands too," he grumbles.

I blink. "Are you serious?" Laughing when he looks like this isn't a good idea, so I refrain.

Evading my inquiry, he moves on. “Is there going to be a second date?” There’s a funny tone to his voice that I can’t figure out.

“We’re hanging out again,” I answer carefully.

“On a date?”

My shoulders drop. “Why?”

“Because…” The tip of his tongue darts out and wets his bottom lip. “Because if there is, I think we need ground rules for the house.”

Ground rules? “You already gave me a curfew, Ky. What else is there to…” Stopping myself, I gape at him in understanding. Mom didn’t even give me rules about guys being over when it was just me, not that she would have cared. In fact, she’d applaud it.

“I’m being smart,” is what he thinks to reply, ignoring my expression.

“Smart,” I repeat slowly.

A head nod. “I’m not comfortable with him being here with you if I’m not. So, if this is something you’re going to pursue, we need to talk about it.”

“Would you rather I hang out at his—”

“*No*,” he cuts me off. “Remember the ‘I know how nineteen-year-olds think’ talk we had before you left? I don’t want you alone with him anywhere. That’ll give him ideas. You’re too young.”

He really said that. Young? “Kyler, I’m going to be nineteen soon. Isn’t that a little unfair? I haven’t asked you not to bring girls here.” Though, saying that out loud and thinking about him bringing dates makes me queasy.

“I wouldn’t bring girls here,” he informs me. His tone is too rough for the conversation at hand and it makes me irritated.

“You don’t even date anyway!”

He stands, putting distance between us before throwing out, “Just because I don’t date, doesn’t mean there aren’t girls, Leighton.”

I have to think about that way too hard, not wanting to analyze the way my stomach drops. “What? When?” Immediately, I want to take back the question because I don’t want to know. I mean, I’m still curious even though I shouldn’t be because he never talks about anybody other than me, Mia, and Gordy.

“I’m not discussing that with you.”

“Then discuss with me how you’re being hypocritical right now,” I fire at him, crossing my arms over my chest. If he can go out to *wherever* and

with *whomever*, then shouldn't I be able to, too? "You're acting like I'm going out and hooking up with random people or something. It's just Chase and we're not even doing anything. It was one date. One date that *you* basically told me to go on."

His eyes pierce mine, and something shifts in the air, making it thicker. "I'm being reasonable here. Just because Katherine would have patted you on the fucking hand and told you to do whatever you want doesn't mean I'm going to. You're not living with her anymore."

"Of course I'm not!" I all but shout, halfway to seething in hurt and anger. "In case you've forgotten, s*he's dead*." My voice cracks and I fight off the tears. How did we get here? "You know what. Whatever. I had a good time tonight and you're ruining it. *Again.* I don't get why you've been such a jerk to me. If I'm getting on your nerves, tell me. I know being roommates isn't what you wanted for yourself, but I can give you space if you need it. I can make it easier for you." I hiccup and stand, ready to go upstairs.

He sighs and tries catching my arm. "I'm sorry, Lenny. I don't know what to do here. It feels like I need to throw down some rules, especially since we share this house. Me not bringing girls here is out of respect for you."

I wish he'd stop telling me about these supposed girls because it makes the nausea worse. How many girls are we even talking about? The question is front and center in my mind and no amount of pushing gets it to go away. I shouldn't care about who he hooks up with, but I do. And I hate that I do. "I understand that, Ky, but I didn't ask you to. Telling me I need to be supervised just feels like you don't trust me."

Trust shouldn't even be a problem here because I'm not some hopeless teenager. I've handled myself over the years perfectly fine. If this is his way of making up for lost time, he's going about it the wrong way.

"What I said is final."

I blink. Okay then. His look is challenging, so I give it to him instead of backing down like he expects. "Chase hasn't done anything inappropriate before and he won't now, especially if I tell him no."

"Leighton—"

"Don't 'Leighton' me!" My irritation is growing with every second and I hate how he's looking at me like I'm his responsibility. When did that look change? Gone is the playful brown eyes and goofy smile, and in its place is

sharp features that make him look way too serious all the time. It's not just tonight—it's been building. Anger, irritation, all leading to small fights between us about the stupidest things. "You're not *actually* my brother, Kyler," I point out gingerly. "You can't tell me what to do."

Instantly regretting the words when I see his expression crack, I inhale a sharp breath. What kind of crap is that to tell someone who's dropped everything for me? Guilt swarms me, and I shake my head. "I didn't mean that."

I go to apologize, to say those two words that I value more than anything when they're meant with genuine emotion, when his gravelly voice rasps, "Trust me, I know that I'm not. I've been telling myself that for a long damn time now."

We stand in the middle of the living room bathed in silence and thick tension. His face becomes unreadable, his eyes masked with something… dark and I wonder if I messed up. Well, I know I did. I'm not sure to what level I'll have to bask. More expensive takeout? Renting his favorite movie even though I hate horror films? I'll do it.

"I'm sorry," I tell him quietly.

"I know," he repeats, this time dryly.

But does he? "I—"

"You should go to bed," he tells me, walking into the kitchen. I know he swipes his keys from where he throws them onto the counter because I hear them jangle against each other as he makes his way back into the room.

"Where are you going?" My voice is small, beaten down with defeat as he beelines for the front door.

"Out," is all he says.

I want to ask why he gets to leave this late if I can't be out past eleven, but I don't. Not when this is *his* house that he pays the bills for—one that he doesn't even want because it meant dropping everything in New York. For me. All because of me.

So, I watch him open the door with a death grip on his keys and not give me another look before calling out, "Don't wait up," and slamming the door behind him.

I wait up anyway.

He doesn't come home after an hour. Two. Three. Four.

Stomach souring when I tap out after four thirty in the morning, I hug the comforter to me and think about everything he's sacrificed. He tells me

it’s not a big deal, but it is. I’ve said that from the start, and he’s pretended not to care.

When I realize how disrespectful I was to him, I feel the tears spill onto the pillowcase my head is buried in. He’s always looking out for me, and tonight is no different. So, knowing he’s probably at some girl’s house makes me feel like crap. What I really wanted was to tell him about how much I enjoyed the movie, how great the jalapeno burger I had was, and how silly it was to worry about not having enough to talk about. Now, I feel like bringing that up is a bad idea because he’s obviously not okay with me dating. At least not under his roof, and I don’t know how to take that since he gave Chase permission to ask me.

He *told m*e it was a good idea.

Maybe I should get a loan out and see if UCLA has room available on campus still. That way he won’t need to go to girl’s homes or wherever he takes them, and I won’t have to worry about upsetting him if I decide to move things further with Chase. And that’s a big if, because right now confliction weighs on me.

I add the task to my mental to-do list and decide not to bring it up to Kyler. Not yet. Mostly because I don’t even know when he’ll get home, what condition he’ll be in, or if we’ll be okay.

I can feel it—the slightest change in our relationship.

And I don’t like it.

It’s long after the sun is up and caressing my face when my mattress dips and Kyler’s voice rouses me from sleep.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

My eyes crack open tiredly to see his head tipped down, staring at the floor. He’s in the same clothes he left in and he doesn’t smell like perfume or alcohol. I don’t know where he went, but he looks exhausted. Defeated.

“I know,” I murmur, blinking to adjust to the sunlight. Sitting up on an elbow, I add, “I am too, for what it’s worth.”

He finally looks at me, bags under his eyes. Head bobbing slowly, he reaches out and squeezes my hand. “I don’t want to fight. I’m just…I don’t know how to do this.”

My chest aches. “Neither do I.” Staring down at where our hands tangle together, I draw out a slow breath. “We’ll figure it out.”

I believe that, even if what we’re talking about isn’t the same thing. Maybe he means he doesn’t know how to be the brother again. Or the step-

in parental role. I don't want that of him though. I want my friend. My confidant. My Prince Charming who's willing to sweep me off my feet, even if it's innocent.

But especially if it's not.

And that thought hits me hard.

I know I shouldn't want that, but if it keeps Kyler in my life, if I get to keep him, then I'm willing to be selfish enough to hope it comes true. Somehow, someday.

His fingers twitch. "Guess we have to, huh?"

Another nod.

More silence.

Then, "You know I love you, right?" That comes from me, but my voice is small, like I'm worried he doesn't know that anymore. When was the last time I told him that?

His eyes close as he starts moving his hand away before stopping until only his fingertips are resting on my skin. "I know." I wait for him to say it back. To say more than those two words that float between us.

But he doesn't.

"Go back to sleep."

I almost ask him to stay, to curl up with me until we both get some sleep. It looks like we could each use more. He looks so sad and I want to fix it, but I don't know how. I know Kyler, though, and he needs to be alone when he's like this. I murmur an "okay" and watch him walk out, clicking the door shut behind him.

Hugging the pillow closer to me, I feel my heart squeeze in my chest, and I don't like the heavy feeling that accompanies the ache of awareness Kyler leaves behind.

Refusing to think about it, I turn on my side and force myself back to sleep and try ignoring how silent the rest of the house is because the silence is…eerily deafening.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

"HAVE YOU TALKED TO MOM?" Mia asks, with something rattling loudly in the background. She curses and mumbles under her breath.

"It's been a week or so. Why?" More background noise has me pulling the phone away from my ear. "What the hell are you doing?"

She answers with a groan. "I'm trying to move furniture out of the room we're making into the nursery."

According to the group texts she sends to the family updating us on things I'd usually rather not know, her second trimester is going well. "Shouldn't somebody else be doing that?"

Her laugh is abrupt, telling me I shouldn't have asked. "I would have asked *you* to help me when you were here, but you were too busy whining about your fight with Leighton."

I tip my head back, resting it on the headboard I'm leaning against. The last thing I want to do is relive what happened between Lenny and me. Even though we both said we're fine, that we moved on, it lingers silently between us. "Shit. Sorry, sis."

"Whatever. That's why Mom wants to hear from you. I told her about your little spat with Lenny Lou, so she wants to know what happened when you grew some balls and went back home."

Seriously? "You told Mom."

"Duh."

I roll my eyes. “I apologized.”

“As you should have,” she chirps.

Releasing a sigh, I shove the notebook off my lap and throw my legs over the side of the bed. Enough writing today. “We’re good now.”

Things were awkward a few days following our argument, but we’ve gone back to our old routine for the most part. At least two meals together. Movie or TV at night. Conversation. She tells me about work, I’ll tell her about my day. We don’t talk about Chase. I can’t help but feel the tension buried under our normalcy. Tension thanks to my prickly ass and the white lies I sprouted.

Scoffing to myself, I pinch the bridge of my nose and think about what I said. There haven’t been any women in my life since coming back here. I’d debated on it, thought maybe it’d release some of the frustration that’s been building, but I didn’t want them around Leighton. And I definitely didn’t want her around them. Not only because I had no clue what they’d say to her, but because I wasn’t sure how she’d see me if she knew the sole purpose of them being there was to warm my bed when she wasn’t in it.

“What’s she up to now?” my sister asks, probably noting the time. It’s going on nine o’clock.

Clearing my throat, I walk downstairs to get something to drink. I told myself tonight would be different than the last time she went out. I’d keep my distance to show I *do* trust her. “She went out with Chase again.”

There’s a pause, but I hear the smile in her voice. “Oh, yeah?” Translation: tell me more.

I don’t. “Yep.”

“Kyler,” she whines.

Chuckling, I fill a glass with milk and sit down at the island. “I’m doing what you told me to. I’m staying out of her way.”

“But I want details!”

Of course she does. “You were right to call me out on being an asshole to her. I decided not to involve myself. I’m sure she’ll tell you about it if she wants to.”

I doubt she’d want to tell me anything considering I freaked out on her last time. We barely talked before she left tonight. I got a quiet goodbye and a door in my face after I told her to have fun.

She mutters, “I wouldn’t say ‘asshole’ exactly…”

“Mia, your exact words were ‘quit being such an overprotective asshole to Leighton, you douche bag’ to which your supportive husband laughed while nodding his head.”

Another pause. “Okay, so maybe my hormones got involved in that conversation. It’s not like I don’t understand. We watched her grow up in a way. It’s probably weird to watch her go out, especially since it’s with Garrick’s little brother.”

I don’t want to think about that any more than I already have. Chase showed up a couple days after their date to drop off something Len forgot in his car. He asked how I was, how my music was doing, and didn’t push to come in or wait for Leighton. The kid is respectful, exactly the kind of guy she deserves to be with.

So why the fuck do I want to ban him from coming here? Why do I want to tell Lenny that I’m *not* okay with them spending time together? That I regret telling her to give him a shot? As friends, it was safer, because safe means I don’t have to share my time with a nineteen-year-old, no matter how respectful he is.

He isn’t me, and that’s the fucking problem.

“We didn’t watch her grow up.” Len only spent four, almost five years with us. Four plus years that I watched her develop into a smart, pretty teenager with a quick wit that she loves using on me now. That’s hardly anything in the grand scheme of things. “It is weird,” I relent quietly.

“Plus, you two are constantly in each other’s space now that you share a house,” she points out. “It makes sense that you’d fight more. I just wish you’d fight about normal things.”

“Normal things?”

“You lost it on her about a boy, Ky. It’s just…I don’t know. I have a lot of thoughts about why that is.”

“What exactly is your point here?”

She sighs. “My point is that you’ve become testy with her. You’ve both said you’ve been arguing more. She’s noticed. Do you know how many times I’ve had to reassure her that it isn’t her?”

My heart drops in my chest. “What?”

“Yeah, dumbass.” Her tone is hardened, full of disapproval like it was the night I showed up pissed off and wanting to talk. I’m pretty sure I interrupted something because her face was flushed and Dylan’s clothes were in disarray, but I honestly didn’t care. “You know Lenny. She worries

about everybody. I mean, thank God she's toughened up over the years, but you're still her weak spot."

The hell? "What is that—"

"Oh, hush," she cuts me off. "I don't mean it in a bad way. We all have people we want approval from. Dylan is mine. You're Lenny's, and I'd put a lot of money down to say she's yours."

This time, I say nothing.

"Thought so."

I never considered Lenny as my weak spot. It doesn't sit well with me that there's truth stitched into the statement. "I'm not sure I agree with your theory, but I don't have the energy to argue about it."

She takes that as a victory anyway. "Just to be clear, you're *not* going to pick a fight about who she spends her time with just because you're jealous, show up at my place, and ruin my sex life, right?"

I definitely interrupted something. "Too much information, Mia. Way too much. And the answer is no. Wait—"

"Don't be such a prude."

"I'm not." Who wants to hear about their sibling's sex lives? I sure as fuck don't. "What was that thing about being jealous?"

She snorts. "You picked up on that, huh. Come on, Kyler. There's a reason you got so worked up about her dating, and it's more than you being overprotective."

"That's not—"

"You care about her."

"Of course I care about her!"

"As *more* than a brother."

Silence.

"Hear me out, Ky—"

"No. What the hell, Mia?"

Her sigh is heavy. "Are you really going to pretend you don't have any kind of feelings for her? You got upset over *one* date. One. She never even told you there'd be another. Only that there *may* be in the future. And you went off."

"I know," I grind out, "I was there."

"So, tell me why that is. Because it's not as simple as you looking out for her. It's not because Chase is Garrick's little brother. You said so

yourself that he seems like a decent person. You can tell me anything. I won't judge you for what you're thinking or feeling."

Feeling. Christ. What I'm feeling is beyond me. The thoughts in my head that have been swirling around since I've watched Leighton walk around the house, cooking, cleaning, watching fucking television, have been confusing. Seeing her in those microscopic shorts that might as well have been underwear was a breaking point. She's beautiful. Always has been, but it's different now. She's quick to fight back because she's learned there's no other way to be heard, but she's still her—still shy at times and timid about certain things, and I love that she hasn't changed that much.

Books and $0.98 macaroni and cheese still excite her more than fancy dinners and clothes. She doesn't want to constantly talk about me and my music and doesn't mind falling into silence when it's just us.

What am I thinking? I shake my head, palming my face before gripping my neck, which is stiff from this turn of conversation. I never thought there was a bad age to be until Leighton turned eighteen. *That's* what I'm thinking. Because eighteen means a lot of different things. It means adulthood. Independence. *It means she's legal.*

But I refuse to tell my sister any of those things, no matter what she already suspects. What will she think of me if I admit that I'm pissed the fuck off that Lenny is out with Chase? That they're probably holding hands and laughing over some inside joke between them? I don't want to know, don't want to wonder what kind of person that makes me.

"Your silence says a lot more than your words do, you know?" My sister's words make my shoulders stiffen more. "Listen, I love you and I love Lenny. I want you *both* to be happy."

"Well, she's happy with Chase, and I'm perfectly content with where my life is at now."

"Really, because I call bullshit."

"Mia, drop it."

"Why won't you admit it?"

"There's nothing to admit."

For a moment, she's silent. "Fine. Then you need to get laid, baby bro. When is the last time *you* went out?"

"I don't see how that's relevant."

Her snort makes her sound like a pig doing a line, but I know telling her that would get me castrated over the phone. Pregnancy hormones are no

joke. “You’re sexually frustrated and taking it out on poor Lenny. Maybe if you got some—” I groan. “—then you’d be fine if Leighton—”

“No,” I rasp. I want to block my ears from this conversation completely. “Nope. We are not talking about her in that way. I will hang up right now if you continue that sentence.”

She’s laughing so hard I wouldn’t be surprised if she pisses herself, and I hope she does. All over her white fucking carpets. “Yeah, you don’t care about her at all. You need to open your eyes, Kyler.”

“They’re wide open. You know what they see? My annoying ass sister torturing me for no reason. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Wait!” More laughing. “God, you’re so touchy. At least call Mom sometime. She wants to hear from you.”

Sighing, I give her that. “Fine.”

“I love you, Kyler.” I swear she’s wheezing still, so I roll my eyes at her theatrics. She enjoys my pain too much.

“Yeah, yeah. Love you, too.”

After hanging up, I begin to take my drink upstairs with me when I glance out the window by the front door to see Leighton and Chase. I overheard them talking about dinner, so they must not have planned on doing anything after.

When I see him lean down slowly, I notice the way her head tips up. My stomach clenches when I see their lips touch, staying a little too long, and then slowly gliding along one another’s.

I peel myself away before she walks in or before I storm out.

I don’t trust myself not to, especially after my conversation with Mia.

Teeth grinding, I close myself in my room and wonder what that means for them.

It shouldn’t matter, but it does.

That bothers me more.

“Fuck,” I murmur.

I SPEND weeks keeping my mind busy and far, far away from my sister’s inquiries, and it leads me straight into the firing squad, all dressed in expensive Armani suits. There are at least four different things I want to call Kalvin Brooks right now, but I bite my tongue like Gordy is silently pleading I do rather than stir the pot. It’s not easy and I’m fairly sure I taste

blood, but it'll be easier for him if there isn't bad PR to cleanup on the trail my ass leaves behind from the recording studio.

The Englishman in front of me is pushing his luck for the umpteenth time since I came back to this fucking state. I didn't realize how grateful I was for the videocalls Gordy set up for us when I was still over on the east coast. At least then I could feign computer problems and hang up when the fucker got on my nerves.

"I didn't sell you the song to rewrite the parts you don't like," I grind out, losing what little patience I have. They can't expect me to sit here and take it. "What the hell is wrong with the version we *signed a contract* for?"

My friend pinches his nose but doesn't say anything. Gordy knows better.

Kalvin leans back in his chair. "The artist doesn't feel like it's fitting for his audience. We're inclined to agree."

"The contract—"

"Doesn't say adjustments can't be made," he finishes for me, a cocky smirk on his face that I'd love nothing more than to smack right off it. "However, we have discussed other options that would prevent said changes from impacting the song."

I wait, already knowing I'm not going to like what he says.

"Record the song yourself."

Snorting, I stand and walk toward the corner of the room to distance myself from the prick. "Let me ask you something," I pry. "Are all men with accents complete fucking dickheads, or do you just fancy yourself to be one?"

Gordy mutters, "Christ," while dropping his face into his palms.

"Relax," I tell my manager, "this dick has definitely been called worse."

Kalvin laughs. "By all of my exes," he confirms, a wider smirk stretching over his face. "Call me what you want, but this is business. You know how it works. The song is definitely not fit for the original artists' audience, but yours…"

"Even if I was stupid enough to say yes, you already signed a contract giving the song to Thompson."

"We signed a contract proclaiming the rights to your song for the label itself, not an individual artist. That's interchangeable as we see fit."

One of my brows arches.

"We want you to record the song."

“I already said—”

“Kyler,” Gordy sighs, stepping into the conversation for the first time since we got here an hour ago. “Man, I’ve always gotten you out of this kind of stuff, but I have to agree with them.”

The fuck?

“We all heard the demo you cut for this song,” he continues, ignoring the betrayed glare I cast in his direction. “There isn’t anybody who could do it better than you, and that was just a rough version.”

The song itself is probably one of the best ones I’ve written in a while. I sang it a few times before doing the demo so they’d get an idea of the sound, but it wasn’t for this. “I can’t tell you no in many more ways than I already have.”

“Who’s it about?” Kalvin pushes.

My face screws. “Nobody.”

“I don’t believe you,” he states casually. “But that’s neither here nor there. Thompson can’t pull this off. Your manager is right.”

“Then find someone else who can.”

“We have.” His eyes are pointed.

I look at Gordy. “You’re not going to stop this? It’s damage control you’ll have to face when I walk out of here.”

His hesitation tells me that he’s considering his options, but there’s a determination not often in his eyes when it comes to going against me. Gordy chooses his battles wisely. “I’m going to stop you from making a stupid decision, which would be giving this song to somebody else. Record it once. Doesn’t have to be today. Think about it.”

The dick in front of me chimes in. “We may have others who would do it justice, but not the way your vocals could. Acoustic only. Raw.”

Since when do they allow me to do acoustic off the gate? They’ve only allowed me to do acoustic once before and it was over a year after the song released—a special edition to rake in more money.

He can tell he’s got me interested, so I wipe all emotion from my face. “Take a week. If you say no still, we’ll move forward. Call me whatever the hell you want, but I’m persistent among my many titles.”

I’ll give him that. “And Thompson doesn’t care that you’re passing the selection on after working with him on changes?”

The smirk he gives is woven with amusement. “Unlike you, he’s too much of a pussy to call me out on anything.”

Again, Gordy mumbles under his breath.

“One week,” he repeats.

Reluctantly, I agree. Gordy and I walk out to his waiting car, and I think I already have my answer even before the front door to the studio closes. When I open the back door to the Ford Explorer, I turn to him. “You knew,” I accuse.

He shrugs, not looking worried or guilty over my accusation. “You wouldn’t have even gone if I said anything. I meant it, Kyler. Everyone in that studio heard the way you sang that song. Nobody can record it but you.”

My jaw ticks. “Did Harry hear it?”

Confusion pinches his brows. “Not that I know of. The last Kalvin heard anything from up above, it was when I brought up the Matthews collaboration. Harry has been unusually quiet.”

A few months before I packed up and left, Harry informed me that he’d bought Studio 51, the label I use. That’d been the last straw for me. He’d given me years of freedom, but the second I told him I wanted a break, he went behind my back and purchased what little freedom I had from him. “He has a lot of people doing his bids these days, G.”

Understanding flashes in his eyes. “He hasn’t heard the demo. Even if he did, it’s your choice. Your song. Your one chance to do something on your terms. Kalvin didn’t bring it up during the meeting, but he told me he’d let you do it your own way.”

That explains the acoustic comment. “I don’t understand why he would now.”

“He knows it’s the only way to get you to agree. The dude is everything you’ve ever called him, which I wish you’d stop doing to his face, but he’s also smart. Even one song from you would bring in the kind of cash flow that would make you both set for life. They need it. Harry has run their place into the ground by expanding their artists, and none of them are bringing in the kind of money you did.”

“Well—”

“And don’t tell me you don’t want to be used,” he stops me. “Admit it, Kyler. You’ve always loved recording. You enjoyed being behind the mic, guitar in hand, singing your heart out. You’re a great songwriter with a lot of credits under your belt, but you’re a phenomenal singer, and your fans have waited long enough for something like this. Don’t you miss it? Miss

hearing them sing along? The smiles on their faces when you watch the crowd? The covers on YouTube we used to watch together? It's everything else you hate." There's no point in disagreeing because we both know every one of those statements are true.

"Humor me," he continues, raw determination in his eyes. "Record the song. Do it at home for all I care. You can go back to writing for others after if that's really all you want to do. What's a few minutes of your time?"

We've had this conversation before, but before I can point that out, he cuts me off. "I won't book you for anything if you don't want me to. If someone asks, I'll send them off. Do this for you, man. Make yourself happy again. Leighton wouldn't want you holding back, and if she figures out you're staying away from recording because of her, she won't forgive herself."

Have I been that transparent? I haven't been as miserable as people say I am, though I'm starting to wonder if I've come down with Resting Bitch Face or some shit.

I've told Gordy before that Leighton should come first. She needed to settle down and get into the groove of being back without paparazzi bombarding her with stupid questions like she used to get. I don't consider myself a selfish man, and it feels like agreeing to do even one song would make me exactly that.

"I wish people would stop assuming I'm not happy," I grumble more to myself than him.

We slide into the car, Gordy slamming the door shut behind him and turning his body toward me. "It *has* been a little hard to ignore your moodiness, and I've tried. Trust me. I've seen you snap at people you never would have before." He's referring to the ebony-haired eighteen-year-old at home who he's witnessed my less than stellar moments with. After the first time he saw our verbal spat in the kitchen, he's been on my ass about watching what I say. He's still protective of her, except it's different now. It's like *he's* the big brother, stepping into the shoes I used to fill.

What the hell does that make me?

Rolling my eyes, I look out the window as we start driving through the city. "I'll think about the song," is all I tell him. For me. For Lenny because I know he's right. For my fans.

The rest of the drive is silent.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

LEIGHTON / AGE 14

"LEIGHTON, what's your favorite thing about living with the Bishops?" a female reporter asks, shoving a recording device toward my face.

I want to say "not this" but I know better. Harry's PR person taught me better than that, and both Kyler and Mia said to be the bigger person. In fact, it was Kyler who told me to give them my sugar-sweet smile and say nothing at all.

I'm walking toward the school after Mom dropped me off down the street when traffic got backed up. We're running late because she overslept, and I had to go into the room she and Harry shared since we moved in back in March. It's been months, but the fascination of the Bishops bringing me and Mom into their lives doesn't seem to fade. It took her thirty minutes to get dressed, another ten to do her hair and makeup, all to get inside her car and drive. She wasn't even getting out, but she tells me we have to be prepared to be seen.

I guess she's right. I'm flattening out the wrinkles in my uniform when the reporter shoots off another question. "What does Kyler eat for breakfast?"

Oatmeal with a banana and peanut butter mixed in. I don't tell her that though. I keep my head down, eyes pointed at the shiny Mary Janes that Mia bought me for this school year and count the cracks in the sidewalk.

“Is it true that Mia started seeing Hannah Taylor’s ex-boyfriend Dylan Casanova while they were still together?”

It’s hard to keep my composure when a question like that comes out of left field. Without my consent, my nose scrunches and the reporter’s face beams like she’s onto something, when really, I’m just confused. Hannah’s name sounds vaguely familiar. I think she used to be Mia’s best friend at one point if memory serves, but that can’t be true if what this woman is saying is right, because Mia would never do something like that.

“Do you have any thoughts on the matter?” the persistent woman pushes, plucked eyebrows raised.

I shake my head, gripping the strap of my bag tightly in my hands. “Sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I have to get to school.”

My steps pick up and she doesn’t follow once I pass the school’s sign. They’ve learned to back off when Saint Michael’s security booted more than one press junkie off the property since Kyler raised a fuss.

I’m itching to pull out the cell phone from my skirt pocket and send a message to Mia telling her what I was asked. It took a while, but Harry finally told Mom it was safer for me to have a phone now that people knew who I was. Not even her forgetting to pick me up at school convinced her that it was necessary. Something that Kyler got into a fight with her about.

Mom had said something like, “She’s too young for technology.”

“Don’t you think when strange men are taking fucking photos of your daughter, she should have a way to contact someone immediately?” That’d come from Kyler.

Mom had rolled her eyes and simply stated, “She can handle herself,” which only made Kyler angrier, roaring, “She shouldn’t have to if you were the kind of mother who gave a shit!”

Harry had to intervene, being the one to tell Mom that a cell phone was more than necessary at this point. In that moment, I felt like I had him on my side, because I didn’t feel good knowing there could easily be a repeat of the photographer lurking in the bushes anywhere I went. There won’t always be a phone nearby if it happens.

Ever since we moved in, Harry has spent more time with me. I can tell Mom doesn’t like it, like I’m somehow stealing him from her, because one night when it was just her and I, she’d said, “I hope you’re happy. Always vying for attention when you get enough of it already.”

I'd brushed it off then because she was in one of her moods and always said hurtful things when she got like that. I'd planned on waiting up for Harry to get back from wherever he met with Mia in the city to talk more about the research I'd done on Stanford. Turns out, he'd gone there for a year before transferring to Harvard, and he admitted he liked it—being close to home, since he was born and raised in Los Angeles. It was common ground, even if he still thinks I should shoot for something besides public relations.

When I get to my locker, Nora, Beckham, and Striker are all waiting for me like every morning. Our group has become a norm that I look forward to seeing, and I'll miss this when summer break starts in a few weeks. "Morning," I greet quietly, opening my locker and depositing my things inside.

Striker and Beckham joined Nora and I at lunch one day shortly after some stuff appeared about me and the Bishops online. People whispered, making me squirm, and I hadn't been completely honest with Nora, so she'd been just as much in the dark about my position with the Saint Michael's royal family as everyone else. It turns out, Beckham Reeves wasn't. Even before he'd seen Ky pick me up from school, he'd known who I was because his father is the Assistant Dean.

He and Striker made it an everyday occurrence to sit with us at lunch so people couldn't bother me. Something that took Nora and I both by surprise. My friendship with my outspoken bestie didn't wane even though she'd been upset I kept my newfound family a secret, because she'd understood. She always did, which didn't make me feel any better because I knew I could trust her and still kept quiet.

"Morning," Beckham says first, pushing off the locker and helping me with my uniform blazer. Nora teases me about him when we're alone because I've developed a small crush on him since he's been hanging around. He chases off nasty girls who make comments about how I'm not "Bishop" material, and the guys who catcall and say they didn't get a chance at Mia, so they'd settle for me. I've never told Kyler the things people have said because I know he'll get upset and overreact. The last thing I want is for him to storm the school and demand something be done, because then I'll be a narc on top of a "fake wannabe" like I've been labeled.

Beckham says the same thing every time he sees me flinch from the harsh words. “They’re just jealous.” But the reasoning doesn’t make me feel any better.

The day goes as smoothly as possible, and I choose not to bother Mia with the silly question that’s nagging the back of my mind. Nora can tell something is wrong by the last bell though, so she pulls me aside in the girl’s bathroom so the boys won’t hear. “What’s going on with you today? Is it about what Striker suggested at lunch?”

Striker had brought up all of us hanging out and studying for finals together since we’re all struggling with a course or two, which shouldn’t be a big deal, except I’ve never hung out with friends, especially not friends who are older like the boys are. Not even Nora. Kyler told me I could invite her over to the house, but I’ve liked keeping my school and home life separate. Now that the big secret is out, it shouldn’t matter if Nora sees the huge house I live in, or the giant pool outback that Ky, Mia, and I spend a lot of time in when it gets hot. I’m not built for group activities, and Striker and Beckham would only make things more awkward because they’d probably want to utilize everything the Bishops have when I’m the opposite.

“It’s not that.” Frowning, I lean against the row of sinks with my back to the mirrors. “I got asked something about Mia this morning on my way to school, and I don’t know what to do.”

“By like paparazzi or something?”

I nod. “Reporter.”

“What’d they say?”

Deciding it’s better to tell someone, I give her a quick breakdown of my morning. The silly lifestyle questions aren’t new. For some reason, people want to know every detail about the Bishop clan, right down to what kind of socks they wear and what laundry detergent they use. By the time I’m done, Nora gives me a funny look that I can’t decipher. “What?”

She shrugs after a while. “I mean, what if it is true? People do stuff like that all the time. There isn’t anything you can do about it.”

“You don’t think I should tell her?”

“I’m sure she already knows that’s what people are saying.” My best friend has a point, but my stomach feels funny by burying it. “What do you think can be done if you say something? I’m sure someone has already told you that the press will release whatever they want for a quick buck.

Remember that story on one of the English royals? They're always printing stuff about her even if the palace makes statements and stuff saying it's not true. If I were you, I'd let it go."

Let it go. I can try, I guess.

Nora loops her arm around mine. "Back to the boys. Do you think your mom will let you hang out at Beckham's house? It seems like his place is the most reasonable one to meet up at since Cooper and his friends are always at mine being obnoxious, and you keep your place locked down like Fort Knox."

I cringe, knowing she's still sort of upset about that even though she tells me she isn't. "I don't think my mom will have a problem with me hanging out with you guys."

It's Kyler who might. Maybe even Harry. I'm not sure if he's playing the protective father role, or if he genuinely cares, but he's told me to be careful when I go out, and asks me how my day is when he gets home from work, making sure nobody bothered me. It's…nice. Mom doesn't always do that, so it's foreign coming from the man who I've known for far less time.

Nora leans in. "I think I like Striker. I know he's older, but we'll all be in high school this fall, so it won't be so bad."

My eyes widen. "Does he like you back?"

Her eyes roll. "I don't know yet. But, I mean, he flirts with me all the time. Just like Beckham does with you."

Stomach fluttering, I shake my head and push the bathroom door open. "No, he doesn't. He's just being nice."

"Lenny," she laughs. "He's being nice because he likes you. He hangs out with us because *he likes you.* Spoiler alert, he invited us to his house because he—"

"I get your point," I cut her off, face flaming as people look in our direction. We walk side by side, arms still wound together, as we head to our lockers for our things. The boys have practice, so it's just us. "Is your mom coming to get you since Cooper is at practice?"

Her nose scrunches. "Nah. I'm supposed to wait for him. Unless…" She eyes me, eyelashes batting, and I give her a sad frown.

"My mom is supposed to pick me up," I tell her cautiously. I can barely count on her to remember me, much less a friend.

"Oh." She frowns. "Kyler doesn't pick you up? I thought Beckham said he did."

I blink. Beckham told her that? I didn't know they talked about me when I'm not around. "Ky came once because my mom…" I cringe, not wanting to relive that day. "He only did that once. It's not really safe for him to come here since people recognize his car. Plus, he's busy."

The disappointment is clear on her face, but she shrugs it off, closes her locker a little forcefully, and says, "I'll see you tomorrow then," before walking down the hall.

I want to tell her I'm sorry, say anything to get her to understand that Mom isn't the dependable kind, but I don't. Telling people that I'm embarrassed of my mother makes me the worst kind of daughter, but it's the truth. And after living so many lies since attending Saint Michael's, it feels good to admit.

When I pull out my phone to see if Mom texted me saying she's on her way, there's only one message waiting for me.

Kyler: *I'm sure I'll have to twist your arm, but the store was out of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream, so I bought death by chocolate instead. Hope you'll have some with me so I don't have to eat it all on my own.*

I laugh at the text because he doesn't even like chocolate ice cream. I'm the only one that does. And it's exactly what I need after today, so I simply send a smiley face emoji and slide my phone back into my pocket while waiting for Mom to arrive.

Thankfully, she doesn't forget this time, and when I climb into the passenger seat, her smile is big, her eyes are bright, and I blow out a tiny breath knowing whatever has been between us lately is gone.

"Hi, sweetie. Good day?"

It is now.

MY FOURTEENTH BIRTHDAY is spent making a mess out of the large kitchen, laughing at the flour all over Kyler, Mia, and me after we got into a little food fight while making the cake batter. Beth walked in, saw the disastrous state of the room, and walked right back out again. Not that I blame her.

After we're done cleaning up, which took longer than it did for the cake to bake, *and* the time it took to whip up some frosting for it, I'm perched on the counter with the last present in my hand and a huge smile on my face,

my legs swinging back and forth as my two favorite people watch me. “I love it, Mia.”

The phone case that doubles as a wallet is the same shade of violet that’s on Violet Wonders logo, and I wouldn’t be surprised if its custom made that way because I doubt Mia Bishop went on Amazon to buy it as is. “There’s more. Unzip it and check out what’s inside.”

Even Kyler looks curious, his eyes darting down to the contraption in my hand as I do as she says. My lips part when I see the card inside, specifically, the dollar amount. “Mia—”

“I don’t want you to say anything.”

“But—”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “If I gave you that amount in cash, you’d put it into your savings like you’re trying to run away.”

What? “Why would I run away?”

Kyler’s interest is piqued over that too.

She looks at me, a sympathetic frown on her face, before a light sigh escapes her lips. “I overheard you and your mom arguing the other night.”

I pale instantly, not even able to feign innocence when Kyler’s eyes snap to mine. “I thought you said everything has been going good with you two? Where the hell was I?”

I look down at the $500 gift card to one of Mia’s favorite stores in the mall that she’s taken me shopping at before. “You were at Gordy’s hanging out. It’s not a big deal, Ky. Promise.”

“You told your mom you didn’t want to leave here if something went wrong,” Mia cuts in, ratting on me.

I feel both their stares pin me to my spot, my legs no longer swinging, my smile gone. How can I explain that I’m always waiting for the other shoe to drop? That I’ve seen Mom leave the house thinking she’s with Harry, only to find out she’s not. She goes unaccounted for, for hours, and I half expect to see her on a tabloid at the store. When I asked where she went a few nights ago, she told me she met up with Harry at his favorite restaurant. But I know that’s not true because Harry came back and asked where Mom was. Not knowing what else to do, I lied for her. I lied to the man who was trying to be a father to me, who seemingly liked my mother, and I felt horrible about it.

Instead of telling me anything that eased my worries she gave me her typical, “That’s none of your business, Leighton.” I expected it. Hoped I

wouldn’t hear the lackluster answer, but saw it coming. It still makes my stomach hurt.

“Lenny,” Mia says softly, her hand resting over mine. “We’re here for you. Talk to us. You’ve been quieter than normal, and Katherine hasn’t been…” I meet her eyes, wondering what she’s noticed about Mom. There’s hesitation in her gray hues. “Your mother hasn’t been very warm to you lately, and I have a feeling that’s why you’ve been down. You love her.”

Nibbling on my lip, I lift a shoulder.

Ky squats down, eyeing me from below so I can’t look away. “If there’s something you’re worried about, Mia and I can help. You know that. Right?”

I nod, but there isn’t anything they can do. If I tell them I think Mom is cheating on Harry, what will they do? Will they tell their father—*our* father? Will they investigate themselves? Kyler doesn’t like Mom and Mia isn’t far behind. What if this gives them the ammunition they need to get rid of her, and in turn, me?

Fear drenches all other feelings, and my heart plummets to the bottom of my chest. If something happens with Harry, I doubt Mom will stay here. She’ll take me away, somewhere far from here, and I won’t be able to see them again. How can we afford California when we could barely afford to live anywhere else we’ve been?

I do save up all the money Harry still gives me just in case that happens. With Mom barely holding down a job, I need to be prepared. Because one thing she’s always taught me is that nothing good ever lasts.

I look at the two people who I’ll miss more than they could possibly know if, or when, things go awry—because they always do when Mom is involved—and I can’t even tell them that. There aren’t words to describe the hole in my heart that having to leave here will cause. Everything I’ve dealt with would be worth it if Harry decided to take me in and I stayed, but would I? All I’ve even known is Mom. Her moods, her routine, her need to leave on a whim when it strikes her.

When I had to say goodbye to Ms. Wynona the day we moved, she’d told me, “Your mother is a gypsy, Lenny. She just needs to find that someone special to settle down for.”

Selfishly, all I ever wanted was to be that person. I want Mom to settle down *for me*. Not some guy, not money, not because she needs a change in

scenery. For once, I want her to choose her daughter, to love me, to let me have friends and a stable home.

The problem with wishful thinking, is that you can't rely on it. I don't want to keep creating heartbreak based on my own expectations.

When nothing else feels right to say, my heart yearns for one confirmation. "Promise that you'll love me no matter what?"

They both stare at me. Pain, uneasiness, but love and light all mixed in their eyes. It's Kyler who takes my hand and squeezes, interlocking our fingers together. "I don't know what's going on in that head of yours, but you never have to worry that we'll stop loving you. Love is nonrefundable. Once you have it, you can't give it back. It's there for life."

Swallowing, I offer him a grateful smile.

Before anybody can say more, the front door opens, and Harry's and Mom's voices call out for us. When they walk into the kitchen hand-in-hand, I instantly see the glow on Mom's face. My brows pinch at the way she smiles, and I hate that I have to be suspicious when she's happy, but it's become second nature.

It's Mia who whispers, "Holy crap," and Ky who murmurs, "You've got to be kidding me," before Mom raises her left hand to show off the huge rock on her ring finger.

My eyes widen when she says, "I'm getting married!"

And after the shock wears off, after I look around the room at Kyler's sullenness, Mia's surprised expression, and Harry's seemingly happy one, I let myself believe that this is Mom's birthday present to me.

A promise of her own.

That we'll stay.

That everything will be okay.

That I finally have a family.

I hold onto that, to Ky's words, and for a long time everything is perfect.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

THE BEGINNING of July marks the halfway point of summer being over, and the heat has let up enough for us to enjoy it. Like a lot of times since our first date, I spend time in Chase's pool, swimming while he works at the table set up under the shade.

Today shouldn't be any different, but the way he looks at me tells me he's thinking what I'd rather he just forget. *Just like somebody else has.* My lips threaten to curl downward.

Don't think about it, Leighton, I scold myself as I float along the cool water. Sighing inwardly, I close my eyes and feel the sun caress my wet skin.

Chase's sigh comes next. "Are you sure—"

"I'm sure." He doesn't even need to finish the sentence because he's already asked me twice if I want to stay here or go somewhere else for the day.

The tightness in my ribcage resembles sadness and a little bit of anger. Maybe when I was younger, the feeling accompanying my every thought today wouldn't have been that foreign, but it's been a long time since I've had to endure the feeling of being forgotten. I mean, Mom used to forget about me all the time. But I never expected Kyler too, and no matter how hard I try giving him the benefit of the doubt, the bitter, ugly feeling inside me manifests into something all-consuming.

Mrs. Matthews chooses the perfect moment to come out with a tray of drinks and snacks, offering me a smile when I turn my head to her. I love Chase's mom. She can't be more than five foot, maybe five-one, and her blonde hair is graying in cool streaks that she says she quit dyeing a while ago because mother nature is doing it for her.

"How about something to eat?" she suggests with a tiny accent resembling Garrick's, setting the tray of food down on the table in front of her youngest son. They share a quick look before glancing at me wading over to the pool's wall and leaning against the tile edge.

"You didn't have to do that." I push myself up and reach for the towel Chase set out for me.

Her warm smile is all-knowing. "Well, since you won't let us do anything special for your birthday, it's the least I could do. I even got the soda you like." She points toward the can of cherry Pepsi, while Chase winces. I know he told her what today is because her hug was extra tight when I walked in to say good morning like I do every time I come over to hang out with her son. Even though she didn't say the words, it was the way she squeezed me, patted my back, and told me to relax and have fun that told me she knew.

"Mom," Chase murmurs in warning.

"It's okay," I tell him quietly, walking over and looking at the assortment of finger foods. I giggle when I see the little chicken tenders and my favorite dipping sauces, honey mustard in one and ranch in the other. Turning to the soft-faced woman, I return the easy smile, grateful for her kindness. "Thank you for this."

"I'll leave you two be."

After she walks back inside, Chase lets out a heavy sigh and closes his laptop. "Sorry. I told her not to—"

"It's not a big deal," I assure him, taking the seat directly across from his, the towel still wrapped around me as the air peppers goosebumps against my damp skin. Picking up one of the tenders, I dip it into the ranch and grin when I see him make a face, since he thinks ranch on chicken is gross. "It was a really nice thought."

He's quiet for a moment, studying me while I eat. It doesn't make me uncomfortable, but I wish he'd stop looking like he's expecting me to cry. So what if Kyler forgot my birthday? Mia hasn't so much as texted me either. They're both busy with their own lives.

But… We made a pact. A silly pact that ended with my sixteenth birthday. I spent seventeen and eighteen not even thinking about the ways the Bishop siblings made my birthdays special with homemade cake, sometimes burnt and sometimes perfect, cheesy movies that made us all groan, and presents that always warmed my chest even if they tended to be over the top things that I didn't need but loved because they were special. The less I thought about it, the less it hurt.

Today is the three-year anniversary of everything changing. Most girls love reliving their sweet sixteen, but mine was a nightmare. It turned into a day I wanted to bury and never think about again, but it never works. Knowing the two people who always made me feel special on this day have let it drift to the back of their minds hurts like a knife to the heart.

Nineteen shouldn't be a big deal. It's not like eighteen when I'm legally allowed to vote, or twenty-one when I can legally drink. There's nothing special about turning the big one-nine. I keep reminding myself of that, telling myself it's not a huge issue that the Bishop siblings are doing their own thing for the day. After all, I'm with Chase. The boy who kissed me after our second date. The one who holds my hand and makes me feel wanted. I'm enjoying myself for the most part. *Aren't I?*

Kyler has been busy with Gordy working on something that I'm ninety percent positive is new music, and Mia is going nuts preparing her house for the baby that's going to arrive later this year. When I got up and went downstairs this morning, I'm not sure what I expected. I had hoped I'd walk into cheesy singing and big smiles, not an empty kitchen, or a text that said "be back later" with nothing else. No note and no "happy birthday" written anywhere.

"How's work?" I ask, dipping my chin toward his laptop. I can't keep dwelling on the things that make me upset. Chase has been sweet today and thinking about Kyler and Mia isn't going to put me in a good mood. So, distraction mode it is.

Chase got commissioned to do some coding work for an up-and-coming business and from what he said, they paid him well. At least, that's what he implied when he ordered takeout from a steak house that would cost me at least three paychecks at Delmar's to cover the bill for.

"They've added to the list of things they want me to do, so it'll take longer to complete than originally planned." He shrugs. "It's going fine though."

Plucking a chicken tender for himself, he steals the honey mustard. I eat in silence while he explains some of the other work they hired him to do, and I smile when I see the light in his eyes get brighter the more he talks. He loves what he does, so I can see why Mrs. Matthews is content with his work. It reminds me of Kyler when he—

Don't think about him.

"Are you ready for next weekend?" he asks, leaning back in his chair. It takes my mind off the current person my thoughts like lingering on.

Grinning, I reach for the bag I brought with me and pull out some papers I've printed since getting an email about the event. I show him one of the sheets with a wide smile on my face. The paper in front of me is highlighted in pink to show my three Monday, Wednesday, and Friday classes. Yellow marks the two I have on Tuesday and Thursday. Orange is my adviser's name, email, and office information. I was proud when I finished color-coding everything.

"You're such a freak," Chase teases, swiping the paper from my hands to get a better look at my organization.

"I like to be prepared." I grab the paper back. He wouldn't understand. For someone who basically runs his own company, he's the most disorganized guy I've ever seen. He doesn't file anything. He just tosses any paperwork he has on the desk in his room. The first time I saw him do it my eye a*ctually* twitched.

I've had my class schedule finalized for a few weeks now. The accepted student weekend is to get new students comfortable with the campus and classrooms. I get to meet a few of my professors, too, and I'm looking forward to seeing Marcia Adams, who owns a multi-million-dollar PR firm in New York City. She's teaching Principles of Public Relations this semester before returning to the east coast, and I'm lucky enough to be in the class. My only hope is not to make a bumbling idiot of myself.

Mia and Kyler both offered to drive me to campus, but I agreed to have Chase bring me because I figured he wouldn't make a big deal out of it. Plus, Ky told me that Mia would whip out a camera and take pictures to make a spectacle out of me finally attending college, and I believe it. She loves embarrassing me.

"Speaking of," he presses. "Are you sure you don't want me sticking around that day? I wouldn't mind."

I shake my head. “That’s okay. It’s going to be an all-day thing. I’ll just call you when I’m finished. Plus, you have the project deadline.”

His eyes roll at that. “Babe, you know I can finish this with my eyes closed.”

Babe. My skin prickles from the nickname he started calling me after a few weeks of seeing each other. It doesn’t make me uncomfortable, but it doesn’t sit well with me either.

We haven’t done much more than kiss, though there’s a lot of it, and some minor touching. Above the clothes and waist…mostly. The first time his hands lingered, we’d been in his room watching *The Princess Bride*, and his hand had trailed from where it was holding mine between us, to my hip, then my thigh, and when I finally gathered the courage to look at him, his eyes were asking a silent, *is this okay* to which my choppy breath had said, *yes*, even though my mind was screaming with a thousand thoughts that pulled me in different directions. I’m a constant pull of should I or shouldn’t I, a ball of nerves that tells me to step back, yet I don’t.

Not once had he tried taking off my clothes or pushing for me to, and I’m grateful. Whenever we’d start making out somewhere—his bed, the couch at my house when Ky was off with Gordy, here by the pool—he’d touch my breasts, trail his hands between my legs, but I’d always tense up. It’s not because I didn’t *want* to do more, because my body indicated I really, really did. It was my head that got in the way every single time things got heavier.

Like the time his shirt came off and he encouraged me to touch him wherever I wanted. His chest is trimmed, but not muscular like Kyler’s, and his waist doesn’t have that V shape like the youngest Bishop’s does. And when I touched him, his softness wasn’t like what I’d felt anytime I’d playfully swatted Ky or been carried to my room in a pair of strong, hard arms. I’d stopped anything from going further when my mind tainted my thoughts, replacing the boy who’d been hovering over me, touching me, kissing me, with a full grown, beautiful man.

Chase hasn’t said anything about taking the next step because he’s patient with me. We go to movies, dinner, he’s taken me bowling like promised with a reluctant Kyler and an excited Mia. Garrick even crashed much to my roommate’s dismay, but I secretly think he didn’t mind it because it took the brunt of torture off him since Mia and I ganged up on him a lot. He kept making weird faces whenever Chase and I hugged when

we got a strike, and I even caught him scowling when Chase dipped down and pecked my cheek after I'd gotten a gutter ball, telling me, "Next time, babe."

Ky hasn't said anything more about Chase or the "rules" he threatened me with after the first time I went out. It isn't like he avoids the elephant in the room because a large chunk of my free time has been spent with Chase instead of hanging out in my room or with Ky at the house. I miss it…miss *him*, and the few times we have been hanging out, he hasn't acted like himself. Instead, he's distant, robotic, like our conversations can't pass the basic "how's it going" and "are you happy?" which seems strange, except, I had to think about it. *Really* think.

But I am happy. More so than I thought I'd be if I'm honest with myself. And a big part of that is because Kyler seems to want this for me. Maybe even for him.

"Humor me," I tell Chase. His eyes are sparkling when I ask, "Are you trying to use me as an excuse to procrastinate?" It wouldn't be the first time. When we hung out together last, we were supposed to keep each other on task. I had to start my summer reading for one of my English classes, and he had a work deadline. Not even two hours in, he got up asking if I wanted something to eat. Before I even answered, he raided the kitchen and spent the next forty-five minutes *cooking* an entire meal for not only me and him, but Kyler to.

"Would you feel better if I said yes?"

"No."

He gets that mischievous gleam in his eyes that lights up his whole face. "You're no fun sometimes, Len." Pouting even looks good on him when he sticks that bottom lip out, but I still manage to roll my eyes at him. "Be honest, though, you're looking forward to it? You haven't said much about UCLA lately."

I'm buzzing with excitement about classes starting, even though most people probably dread summer being over. I already have books ordered and ready to pick up at the store, and money to spare since I got a few of them used and on rental versus buying new. "I am. How can I not be? I've been talking about college long before I even graduated high school."

Thinking back to Saint Michael's has me fighting a frown. How many times did I talk about what came after graduation before everything happened between Harry ad Mom? Everyone who knew me expected

exactly what I did then—that I'd be valedictorian and get into any school I wanted. Obviously, things changed, and I wonder if any of them know just how bad it got. They had to have seen some of the articles, the speculations of the "Bishop mistresses" no longer being in the picture. Everyone wanted to know what had happened, but I never saw if there was a statement made, or if the Bishops chose not to say a word at all. Although I learned from them that seeking out articles like that only lead to dark waters, so I never actively searched.

"I'm proud of you," he tells me softly. "I don't think I've said that before, but I am. You're just so…" Shaking his head, he palms the side of his neck and smiles. "Resilient. Persistent."

His words mean more than he can possibly know. People don't tell others that they're proud of them enough. I would have killed to hear Mom say those four words to me even once, but no matter how much I achieved, I didn't get them. Now, I hold onto any form of recognition I can, letting it seep into my skin and bones for life because it feels good and I never know when, or if, I'll hear it again.

I don't even think about it before I'm leaning over the table, trying to cement the connection we're forming. His lips are soft as they sweep across mine in a brief kiss, nothing compared to others we've shared. I sigh in contentment as I pull back just enough to smile.

There isn't a lot of other kissing experiences I can compare these to, but kissing Chase is nice. I'm sure there are better words to describe it because none of the books I've read ever leave a kiss as being only "nice" but my mind struggles wrapping around anything else to explain it. My chest gets warm and my lips tingle, but it isn't like what I've read in novels that leave my heart pumping or limbs numb.

Nerves. I chalk it up to nerves.

And there aren't as many of them that linger now versus the first kiss. The night he dropped me off after a nice dinner at a Greek restaurant that was way too pricey for my comfort zone, I already knew what he'd planned to do before he did it. If the way he kept looking at me in the car on the way home wasn't a clue, it was how he wiped his palms against his legs constantly like he was sweating and trapped in his own head. That kiss had rattled me because I thought about everything that I had worried about with Beckham. Where did I put my hands? What should I do with my tongue? When, really, it didn't last long enough for me to freak out about. Ten

seconds tops. We'd smiled at each other after it happened, he pecked my lips again softly, and that was that.

I lean forward again and give him another chaste kiss until it morphs into one that lasts a little longer, pressing my lips to his with more pressure than he'd given me the first time. Chasing…something. And it does work a little because my fingertips prickle as I touch his cheek and taste the faint trace of lemonade he's been drinking.

Ever so subtly, my lips part and my tongue dips into his mouth to get a better taste of the tangy flavor, and he meets each pass just as slowly. One of his palms comes up and cups my jaw, sliding down until it's resting on my neck as he changes the angle and kisses me deeper. His fingers twitch on my skin as I draw his bottom lip into my mouth and bite down lightly until he stifles a small groan.

He breathes heavily against my mouth and rests his forehead against mine. "Anytime you want to do that, go for it."

I can't help but laugh and peck his lips again, sitting back down before his mom comes out. I know she told me to have fun, but I'm pretty sure that wasn't an open invitation to maul her son.

I'm picking up another piece of chicken when he shifts in his seat and makes an uncomfortable face. My eyes narrow in confusion before they dart to the edge of the glass table where I see him reaching down and—

Oh. Adjusting himself. He's…

Clearing my throat, I ask, "Are you, uh, okay?" My cheeks burn, and his match mine when he realizes I saw him.

It takes him a second before clearing his throat and giving me a jerky nod. "I'm fine. It…it happens."

How many times has that happened to him? I'm tempted to ask, but I don't think I'm ready for that conversation.

"What do you expect," he teases, nudging our feet under the table. "I've got a beautiful girlfriend who's a bomb ass kisser. It's bound to happen."

Swallowing, I blink at him. We've never used labels before. I mean, I expected he's my boyfriend and listened to Mia poke fun at us by calling him that when I'm at her house, but…

"I'm your girlfriend?"

His lips twitch. "Unless you object to that," he answers carefully, gauging my reaction.

I shake my head slowly, realizing I don't. In my head, I guess I already knew what this was, but it becomes real when the label is officially there. I'm not sure why, but my head goes to Kyler again and I wonder…

What will he think?

THE FRONT DOOR CLOSES LOUDLY, and I hear the footsteps seconds later. "Lenny?" I sit up in bed, setting my book down when he appears in my doorway, guilt washed over his face the moment we lock eyes.

"I'm so damn sorry."

He knows.

"It's—"

"Don't tell me it's okay," he cuts me off knowingly, frowning even deeper. "It's not. I'm a shithead."

It's hard not to laugh over that. Who calls themselves a shithead? "Ky, it's fine. You've been busy." I mean, I mulled it over all day, and decided to let it go. What else could I do?

A hand goes through his hair. "Mind if I come in?" I shake my head and watch him approach my bed, sighing as he drops onto the end of it and stretches his legs out opposite me. His eyes land on my book, another random gift from him to grow my new book collection, before meeting mine again. "I'm sorry. I should have remembered, but things have been crazy."

I already knew that, so I shrug. We didn't even celebrate his birthday at the end of last month because he and Gordy have been running around being secretive. Admittedly, that hurt. I always used to be the first to know when Kyler was up to something. He let me in on all his secret projects, making me feel special, like our bond didn't come second to his music.

"Listen, you and Mia have been so busy that I didn't expect anything." Were my feelings hurt over it? Yes. Do they still sting a little? Maybe like a cat scratch—a tiny little kitten scratch. He doesn't need to know that though, because then he'll feel worse. "She's been going crazy making sure their house is babyproof, and you and Gordy have been sneaking around, so it is what it is."

"I texted her on the way here," he admits sheepishly, cringing at whatever he's thinking. "I had no idea until Gordy mentioned the date. As soon as I realized, I told him I had to go."

He did? “Kyler—”

“Mia feels like shit too.”

I drop my head back and groan. “I don’t want either of you feeling that way. Okay? I’m fine. Today was…it was good.” Chase bought me a cupcake from the store that was double chocolate and yummy, but nothing like the homemade cakes in my past. I sort of miss the burnt edges and the buttercream frosting we used to put too much of on top.

When I look at him again to try reassuring him with a smile, he still looks sad. “Did you at least do something with Chase?”

“We hung out at his house by the pool.” Not knowing where we stand on certain things, I add, “Supervised.” Well, mostly. Mrs. Matthews actually stayed indoors most of the day and only came out to grab our dishes or offer us more drinks despite Chase saying he could get us stuff if we needed it.

The sigh that he responds with has my shoulders tensing, and I mentally prepare for our next showdown. To my surprise, he doesn’t say what I think he will. “Like I said, I’m a shithead.”

Uh…what?

He shakes his head. “I’ve made it seem like you can’t tell me shit anymore when it comes to Chase. I took it too far the day you came home from your first date. I gave you guys space because Mia told me to cut it out. She was right. I had no reason to act like a dick.”

This is not going how I expected. Is it unwarranted? No. He apologized the morning he came back from…wherever he went after our fight, but never said a word about it since. I waited for it. Expected a conversation, but never started one because it seemed like he wanted to avoid the topic.

“I’m glad you two did something today, even if it was just lounging around.” Another pause is accompanied by a tick to his jaw. “And if you want to invite him over tomorrow, maybe we can do some cake? Mia already told me she’d get the ingredients to do one from scratch like we used to. I know it’s not the same, but we can make it right.”

I blink. “You want to do that?”

His throat bobs. “I made a promise to a twelve-year-old. I’ve done a pretty shitty job at keeping it the past couple of years, so it’s time to make up for it.”

“You don’t have—”

“Don’t start with that.” He takes my hand and threads our fingers together. “I want to. You know I do. In fact, I kind of missed baking cakes

with you and Mia over the years. Haven't done it since you turned sixteen."

My lips part. "What?"

He offers me a sheepish shrug, almost embarrassed by the admission. "I planned on baking one for my birthday the year after you left, but it didn't feel right. Mia ended up picking something up from the store. We spent the day talking about you."

Having no clue what to do with that, I only stare. Kyler had left California only a few months after Mom and I did. Did that mean Mia went to his place on the east coast to celebrate his birthday?

He nods when he reads my disbelief. "I asked if she'd heard from you and all she'd tell me is that she was sure you were doing well. I know you mentioned that you two kept in touch but…"

"We didn't right away," I admit. "I wasn't sure if she'd want to hear from me. If either of you did. The way things were left was kind of messy."

His nod is grim, probably remembering that day like I am. "Yeah, I know."

My mind is still latched on to one thing that my stomach rumbles over. "You really want to make me a cake?"

He reaches over and taps my hand, not letting his fingers linger. "Of course I do. Chocolate still your favorite? I don't see you eating as much of it."

I don't tell him that I keep a bag of Hershey kisses stashed in the bottom drawer of my dresser. "It is."

His smile makes mine grow. "Until then, what do you want to do? There's probably a movie we could rent. I've got some popcorn we can make. Anything."

The fact he wants to pick up where we left off does make my heart thump loudly in my chest. Crossing my legs under me, I take a deep breath before admitting the only thing I really want. "I want to hear the song."

He blinks.

Then blinks again.

Slowly.

"You want to hear the song?"

"The one you're working on."

"How do you—"

"Because I know you," I tell him, knowing where this is going. "I've always known you, remember?"

I know that he can't look people in the eye when he's lying, and I know that his eyebrow twitches when he's uncomfortable. He tugs on his ear when he's trying to get out of a conversation, usually with his annoying agent, and there's a…a kind of light in his eyes whenever he's onto something brilliant. Music. Heartfelt lyrics. His eyes, those pretty, warm, melted chocolate hues, have had an extra spark since he and Gordy have been going off together for their secret meetings.

Ky takes another second before nodding, standing, and offering me his hand. "My room?"

Giddiness makes me forget any hurt feelings he caused for forgetting about today. He leads me to his room and gestures toward the bed while he grabs his acoustic guitar from where it sits in the corner. I can't help but smile, probably looking like a huge dork, but not caring. I get to hear Kyler Bishop, *the* Kyler Bishop, sing to me on my birthday. Most girls would kill for this experience. I'd know—I've seen the comments on his Instagram account.

It takes him no time at all to set up and give me one last look to see if I'm ready before strumming the first chords. And they're…they're so beautiful as the song begins and progresses that I think I forget to breathe.

But when he opens his mouth?

I'm gone.

So gone for this boy and his talent and the raw, gritty tone to his voice as he sings about something that sounds so grueling and helpless but romantic and needy, and I think…*God*. I don't know what to think.

By the time he finishes, tears prickle my eyes. He looks at me and frowns. Before he can ask what's wrong, I tell him, "Play it again."

And he does.

When he finishes singing for a third time, I'm lying on my side on his bed, hands curled under my cheek like a makeshift pillow, watching him closely. His eyes are closed because he's as lost in the song as I am, and I know then how much he missed this. Singing. Performing. Loving every word that passes through his lips.

"I forgive you," I whisper when there's no more sound between us besides the drumming of my heart.

His eyes crack open as he watches me, an unsure look on his face. I don't know why he thinks I have it in me to stay mad, but deep down I'm sure he knows I don't. Like always, he beats himself up over things that

sometimes we can't control. Life gets busy. People get forgotten. I'm as guilty as he is for losing touch.

"The song is beautiful, Ky." My eyes get heavy as I blink at him, thinking about what a hit that will be.

"Thanks, Len."

I hum out something before lulling myself to sleep, only waking up sometime later when the lights are off, the room pitch black, and something tugs on my hand.

Another hand.

Kyler's.

His soft, even breathing on the other side of me tells me he's sleeping.

Sleeping while holding my hand.

And it's…it's a lot of things that I don't let myself think about, because those thoughts are dangerous and confusing.

Dangerous *because* they're confusing.

I should slip out and back to my room.

Back to safety.

Back to where I can think about Chase, and how his hand doesn't consume mine like Kyler's big palm does.

But instead, I hunker down and find myself absorbing the feelings I definitely shouldn't have someone who I thought was my brother for years.

He's not, that nagging voice in my head reminds me in a sultry way.

And that's the problem.

I know.

I think I imagine it when I feel a pair of lips brush my shoulder at some point during the night, lingering there, before a distant voice murmurs, "We can't do this, Lenny. *I* can't."

And I don't know if I'm supposed to hear it, or if I dreamed his pained voice, but I accept the words for what they are and force myself back into oblivion.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

KALVIN THE DIPSHIT smiles the entire time the producer plays the feedback. I don't even try pretending I'm not smug when he looks over at me where I sit on the couch. Gordy and I knew he'd love it.

The entire time Kalvin and his friends raved about it, all I wanted was to do was share the moment with one person. Leighton is spending the day with Chase and Garrick, celebrating her first event that UCLA holds for all accepted students. She left early this morning with a peck on my cheek and told me she'd be back tonight. I'd planned on taking her out to dinner to see how the day went when she texted me around three saying the guys and her were going to some new place to celebrate themselves.

I dealt with it. Didn't like it, maybe let irritability creep in for a bit knowing I wasn't there with them, but I let it go. She deserves to have fun with people that aren't me, like I've told her to.

The only reason I encouraged this from the start is to prove something to Mia and myself. If I want Leighton to be happy, she needs to live her life. That means not being dragged into bullshit involving me or Mia, and not being held back by the things that I want. And based on the dreams that leave me waking up with a massive boner, those things have become complicated.

Deciding to stay out later too, I shoot Leighton a text saying I'll be back around ten that way she doesn't wait up. I don't get anything more than a

smiley face back, which only tweaks the irritation in the pit of my stomach more.

Because she's busy—with someone who isn't me.

Because she doesn't ask where I'm going.

I sigh at my pathetic mindset.

The song went over well with everyone, and true to his word, Kalvin let me keep it as is. No instrumental beside me and my guitar. The next step is figuring out when to drop it, which a meeting that's scheduled with a few marketing people will settle soon enough.

A surprise release from Kyler Bishop will make people lose their minds, so I'm sure that's what they'll choose. But, knowing Kalvin, he'll want more. To make a scene. Start some sort of social media riot by dropping hints. I don't plan on letting him, but I'm not holding my breath that I'll have a say considering he's already given me creative leeway, which is more than he's ever given me before.

I signed a contract—one I *really* want to share with the dark-haired girl who asked me to update her as soon as I heard. Singing to her had brought back something inside me that craved more, but only from her. More of her thoughts, opinions, feelings, attention.

A few drinks later at Dominick's, I tap out, leave some money for the beer and burger, and head home. Gordy left an hour ago when his girlfriend, who he still won't tell me about, called asking him when he was getting back. Calling him whipped is an understatement but whipped looks good on him, and when I told the smart ass, he said, "You'd definitely know what that looks like," with pointed eyes that I pretend not to notice.

On my way home, I debate on stopping to pick up some snacks for Len to convince her to watch TV with me when she's back. It's been a few days since we've spent time together one on one. The day after her birthday, Mia came over and we made a mess out of the kitchen baking her cake like we used to. Chase came over for a few hours but didn't stay because Leighton told him she wanted it to be a Bishop night like old times, and I'll be damned if it didn't make my chest swell a little with acceptance and nostalgia, among other things.

Following that night, she roped me into watching some more episodes of Bob's Burgers with her after I cooked up some of the chicken I pretend not to notice she buys, and roasted potatoes for us. We ate in silence, laughed at the show, and talked until we went to bed—about our days,

music, school. Her excitement over UCLA still rings in my ear, and I feel an odd sense of fulfillment knowing she's getting to go to college like she's always wanted. That, in some ways, I was able to be a part of this new step for her when I couldn't be before. She'd told me, "I couldn't have done it without you," which I know isn't true. Lenny can do anything she sets her mind to without anyone. She has before. It's what I admire most about her. I'd simply replied, "I've always got your back." Because even if I disagreed with her, she wouldn't believe me.

I still have a hard time accepting she's headed to UCLA instead of Stanford, because I remember how her face lit up during the campus tour. She soaked in every single boring fact the guide gave along the way, dreamt of what it'd be like to live in the dorms, study in the massive library, and be part of the culture. I wanted that for her—still do. But if she can accept the downgrade, then I have to too. It's only fair. If anything, her willingness to attend at all should be something to celebrate, no matter where she goes. If she decided to take a year off, I'm not sure if she would be as happy as she is when she tells me about her classes, the professor's names, and the reading assignments she's already done. Being able to witness her beaming like the school nerd she is makes me wish I knew what she looked like post Bishop breakup.

She's divulged a few new details in her life after Harry kicked Katherine and her out, but nothing explaining the look she gets in her eyes whenever her mom is brought up. It's more than mourning and grief. It's… guilt, but I can't figure out why. The only thing I can piece together is that Katherine went back to her old ways and Leighton was there to pick up the pieces. She shouldn't have had to be the adult, but she wouldn't be Lenny if she chose not to be.

Blowing out a breath, I tell myself not to think about it. Being angry at a dead person isn't getting me anywhere but angrier. Lenny doesn't need to see that feeling toward her mother. I just wish she'd talk to me about it. Or Mia. Someone. Hell, I'd settle for Chase being the person she opens up to, even if the little green fucker inside me hates thinking that she may already have.

When I pull into the driveway, I park next to Chase's beamer. Glancing at the clock, I note it's earlier than expected. According to her text, she figured they'd be out until at least nine.

Unlocking the front door, I walk into the kitchen and drop my keys in their normal spot on the counter, right next to Leighton's bag. Another pair of keys and a jacket are draped beside it. The living room is empty, and the light is off, so I furrow my brows and look in the backyard thinking they may be out by the fire pit. We've all hung outside together before, exchanging stories about Garrick for the most part. Half of Chase's tales give me enough ammunition to shut the Australian prick down the next time he opens his mouth, and I look forward to tapping into the bank of new knowledge on the guy who, admittedly, I don't mind so much now. He's calmed down considerably over the years.

What I find interesting—maybe *more* than interesting—is that whenever Chase and Lenny are with each other, she clams up. I used to think it was nerves. Her first relationship is probably new territory, and I don't force her to talk to me about it even though I've told her she can. Do I want to hear the happy couple in love? Not really, but I will if it makes her happy. What I do want to hear is why she always talks to me when the three of us are around, exchanging banter, old memories, and talking about things that she can talk to him about too. Part of me doesn't want to analyze it because… I'm not sure I care. The asshole in me wants to pump my fist in the air and celebrate her giving me more attention than him, something his nostrils flare at occasionally, but I play nice and try including him because I don't want to show the side of me that I keep locked up tight.

When I head upstairs to change my clothes, I notice Leighton's door is wide open. There's nobody in there though, which I shouldn't have checked, but creeping suspicion had me channeling my inner nosiness.

Where the hell are they?

Heading back downstairs after tugging on a new t-shirt that doesn't smell like beer and peanuts, I look around until I hear a thump on the other side of the guest bedroom. There is never going to be a moment or thought that would prepare me for what happens when I turn the doorknob.

"Leig—*holy shit*." Before I can even hear the surprised scream tear from either of them, the door is slammed shut again with my death grip on the knob.

Holy shit.

Holy—

Before I know what I'm doing, my phone is out and pressed against my ear as I scramble away from the bedroom, putting as much distance

between me and them as possible.

Barely able to rasp out the words when my sister picks up on the third ring, I croak, “You need to come over. *Now.*”

“Kyler, I’m—”

“*Now*.” My fingers are woven into my hair, gripping tightly. She can’t protest before I hang up and lean over the kitchen counter trying not to upchuck dinner. It’s tempting. So, so tempting.

Because the image seared into my head is not going anywhere. Ever. No matter how many other things I try burying on top of it, I still see the shirtless dark-haired girl on the bed, and the boy with his head between her thighs.

“Oh my God,” I groan, dropping my forehead against the cool counter.

Almost too soon, there are hesitant footsteps nearing the kitchen, too heavy to belong to Leighton. Suddenly, my blood boils in my veins and the white-knuckle grip I have on the island becomes painful as I grab Chase’s things and toss them in his direction, not caring if he catches them or not.

He clears his throat. “Listen—”

“Get out.”

A pause. “Kyler, I’m—”

“*Get. The fuck. Out.*” My voice is dark and barely recognizable, but he hears me perfectly fine. The threat. The warning. I don’t want to fucking look at him right now. For more than one reason.

This time, he listens.

The front door opens and closes moments later and only then do I stand to full height and grab my face trying to figure out what the fuck to do. Until Mia gets here, and she better make it goddamn fast, I’m staying right where I am.

Leighton never comes out of the bedroom. The house is eerily silent until twenty-five minutes later when a car door closes outside.

“What the fuck, a-hole?” my sister calls out.

“Kitchen,” I rasp.

As soon as she sees me, her face changes from irritation to worry. “What happened? Are you okay? Is—”

“Leighton.” I wet my lips and try making a coherent sentence, but it still comes out forced and pained. “You need to talk to Leighton.”

Her brows furrow. “What? Why?”

I thrust a hand through my hair again, knowing it probably resembles someone who put a fork in an electrical outlet, but I don't care. "She… he…" Another deep breath.

Three more.

I'm still choking on air.

On the image.

Jesus H. Christ.

"She's in the spare bedroom. Please?" It's all I can manage to get out, but she must know not to push because she eventually nods, cradling her stomach, and then turning in the direction I point her in.

There's muffled talking.

Silence.

Then…

I hear crying.

And I know it's Lenny.

MY SISTER FINDS me sitting outside, clearing her throat as she approaches me. I stand instantly and clench and unclench my fists. "Is she okay?"

"She's embarrassed," Mia says, sighing lightly.

It's been an hour, *over* an hour since she arrived and disappeared into the room. I could only take five minutes of hearing Leighton cry before escaping outside and pacing, trying to figure out what to do while trying not to crawl out of my skin.

"But she's—"

"She's okay, Ky." Her voice is still soft, reassuring, but there's something in her eyes that makes me narrow mine. "She's going to come to my house for a couple days."

What? "No."

"Ky—"

"No," I repeat more firmly. "You can't make her pack a bag and leave, Mia."

"*She* asked to go."

That stops me dead in my tracks. Lenny wants to leave me? Those words are the first ones that pop in my head and they curdle like soured milk in my stomach.

Her shoulders drop a little. “Come on, little brother. Think rationally. She’s as embarrassed as anybody would be in this situation. Remember that time when you walked in on Mom and Dad—”

“Stop. I don’t want to remember that.”

“Exactly.” Her deadpan expression has mine molded into reluctant understanding. “Give her a couple days, okay? You both need it. What happened is…it’s rough.”

That’s the understatement of the fucking year, but I don’t point that out to her. After all, she didn’t have to drop whatever the hell she was doing to come here, but she did.

“I should talk to her.” My voice hitches, causing me to clear it. “Clear the air, maybe.”

She shakes her head, eyes widening as if to say that’s a horrible idea before she actually tells me as much. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. In fact, maybe you should go to your room and let me take her home.”

Is she really telling me Leighton doesn’t even want to see me? “This is bullshit. She’s going to avoid me?”

“Don’t you think you’ve seen enough of her for one night?” she snaps back, making me press my lips together as I pale. Because yeah. I’d seen a lot more of Lenny than I had before.

Side boob.

There was definitely some side boob.

And a nipple.

Shudders rack my spine when I think of the other image permanently burned into my brain like a cattle brand. I wouldn’t mind never seeing the little shit, Chase, again, but it’s different with Lenny. It’ll be fucking hard—*groan*—but I’m not going to let her avoid me forever.

Logically, I know Mia’s right.

“Look,” she says, glancing over her shoulder at the house. “Things are going to be really awkward between you two for a while. She thinks you’re going to hate her or think differently of her somehow. She…” Mia sighs lightly. “She wasn’t making a lot of sense. Give it time.”

Hate her? “I would never hate her. *Could* never hate her.” Will I think of her differently? Not in the way she’s probably worried about. Clearing my throat, I rub the back of my neck. “I don’t hate her, M. Did you at least tell her that?”

My sister's dark eyes roll. "Duh. She knows it too, it's just the heat of the moment talking. Once she gets out of here and takes a deep breath, she'll realize it'll be okay. You two can survive this like you have everything else."

I know we can, but hell if she isn't right about it being awkward as fuck. I'll listen to her though. Mia wouldn't steer me in the wrong direction when it comes to Lenny. "Fine. Tell her that…" Blowing out a long breath, I drop my hands to my sides. "Let her know I love her, okay?"

She squeezes my forearm. "Lenny said that she was trying to move on." Her brows raise, as if I'm supposed to know what that means. "Take that for what you will, I guess."

When she turns back to the house, she stops for a second before calling out my name. "I know it's probably tempting right now, but don't kill the kid. They're both young."

I blink at her, wondering if she meant to say that or if there were other words attached to the overused sentence when it comes to teens making choices like this.

They're young and in love.

Blanching to myself, I shake my head out of it. I don't want to think about it. Not tonight. So, I just give her a tense head nod. I'm not, *not* going to kill him for my sister.

But for Leighton…

"Fuck," I groan again, palming my face.

Tonight did not go as planned, and now I have to hide in my room knowing Leighton is going to my sister's house.

My *sister's* house. At least they've put a halt on production for now. They won't resume until some union shit is settled with the company that's doing the filming. When Mia first brought it up, she'd been upset, but when Dylan and I pointed out that they had more privacy, more time to get the house set for the baby, and spend time together before she gave birth, she didn't mind so much. Now it seems convenient for other reasons. It doesn't rub me the right way that Lenny wants to leave, but where the hell else would she go? Chase's?

That thought makes the nausea come back full force, as I sulk inside after my sister, and beeline up the stairs.

Once I'm in my room, sitting on the edge of the bed leaning forward with my elbows on my knees, I realize how screwed I am. Screwed because

thinking of Leighton doing anything with Chase, or any boy, means that I'm way too invested. Screwed because I've done far worse when I was her age.

Screwed because…

"Goddam it." I clench my eyes closed, pinch the bridge of my nose, and drop back onto my bed until I'm staring at the ceiling pointlessly.

I try not letting it get to me when I hear voices downstairs. Or when someone comes upstairs into Leighton's room. *Or* when the front door opens and closes.

The house grows quiet.

Too quiet for my thoughts.

When the silence becomes too much, I call Gordy without thinking. He must hear the tone of my because he asks, "You want me to come over?"

I want to say yes. Be selfish. But I hear a voice in the background that reminds me he has his own life, a girl, and I'd be selfish to drag him here over this.

"No, man." I sigh. "Have a good night."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. No worries."

I'll see him tomorrow anyway where I might tell him, confide in somebody without giving away too much. I don't want to embarrass Lenny more than I already have by walking in on…*that*.

I swallow.

It's going to be a long night.

One spent alone, even if I think it'd benefit me to move on from any thought I've had about the girl who left me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

KYLER / 21

THE KID DOESN'T SQUIRM. Not once. He gets points for that, but only small ones. Microscopic. It's Mia who smacks me out of the stare down and shakes her head in exasperation, then yanks me away from the person in question.

Mia snorts. "You're an idiot." We walk into the kitchen, plopping down on the stools and watching Beth do her thing at the stove. It smells like she's making her famous cream of chicken soup, and my stomach instantly reacts to the salty smell in the air.

"I know his type," I defend, even though I don't have to. How is she not worried? He's a fucking Reeves, someone she didn't even blink twice over when he walked through the door knowing who his sister is.

"He's a kid, Kyler." That comes from Beth, who's now looking over her shoulder pointedly at us. Her hair has gone white over the years, but she still dyes it blonde because she says she's not ready to look her age. "Give the poor boy a chance before you start threatening him."

That makes Mia snort louder. "Too late."

Beth sighs.

I decide to point out the obvious. "He's on the soccer team." When neither of them says anything, my brows lift in disbelief. "Am I the only one who remembers the guys that got suspended for the list they made?" The list consisted of all the girls they hooked up with and then rated. In

great detail. The kind of detail that had investors in the school threatening to pull out when they saw *their* daughters' names listed.

My sister's eyes spark with humor. "That happened when *I* was in high school," she chortles, shaking her head. "There is no way that any of those guys are even still there."

"They have siblings."

Her eyes roll. "Again. You're an idiot."

I throw my hands up when Beth laughs, wondering how I'm the only one who's being cautious of Beckham fucking Reeves. I eye my older sister. "You of all people should want to watch out for Leighton. There's no way in hell you've magically forgotten Hannah since the media has been all over that story since those rumors have leaked."

Those two girls were joined at the hip until Mia decided to break the "hoe code" as she calls it and started dating an ex of Hannah Taylor. Except, they weren't exes at that point, which is something the media has latched onto. After that, Hannah divulged some nasty secrets on Mia that I, as her brother, never wanted to know about my sibling. It got ugly. Fast. And all because of a guy.

A guy that Mia is insistent on marrying someday.

So, yeah. It's highly doubtful that she forgot about her precious Hannah Banana, a nickname that always made me roll my eyes.

"Beckham isn't Hannah," she tells me, shrugging like it isn't a big deal. Sure, it might not be yet, but I know what it's like to look out for your siblings.

I didn't even know Len had more friends than Nora until one day out of the blue when she'd asked her mother if she could hang out with a group of people at Beckham's house. Sure, it was to study, but it still didn't sit well with me. Never once had she mentioned hanging around with boys, and the second I asked about, her cheeks tinted red, and I swear the color spread all the way to her ears when Mia asked, "Do you have a crush, Lenny Lou?" She did. She liked the douche currently in our house. Leighton says they're friends, but just friends my ass.

Beth steps in again after turning the burner on the stove off and moving the large pot to the back burner. "Your sister is right, Kyler. This boy doesn't deserve to be judged before you get to know him. He makes Lenny smile. Isn't that good enough to give him a shot?"

I hate when they gang up on me. Where is Harry when I need him? He didn't even care when I brought up Leighton's request that Beckham spend the day here. Her mother, big shocker, thought it was a great idea. Ever since Len brought up Beckham, her mother has looked at her with a newfound pride. Because of a damn boy. Not because of her grades, or the way she's settled in or made friends—but a boy. "I'll give him a chance, but don't come crying to me if this ends badly. I won't hold back on saying I told you so."

A quiet voice that I know belongs to Lenny without turning around asks, "What did you tell them?"

Mia cocks her head, grinning at me in a way that makes me want to glower. "Yeah, Ky. What were you telling us?"

"Nothing," I grumble, nostrils twitching.

Leighton shifts on her feet. "Is it still okay if we use the pool?"

Before I can answer, Mia chirps, "Yes! I can grab some towels while you get changed. Does your friend need swim trunks? I'm sure Kyler would let him borrow some."

Over my dead body. But I grind out, "Sure." The forced word is unconvincing.

Beth's lips waver upward, but she doesn't say anything. Instead, she makes herself busy while Lele explains that he brought some with him. Good. I don't want to help the kid anyway.

The rest of the day I keep a close eye on them, never too far away from the backyard where there's laughing and talking. It isn't until Harry and Katherine get home from some charity event, dressed to the nines, that I take a breather. Even though I don't want to talk to my sperm donor or the person he slapped a ring on, it's more than necessary.

Fortunately, I don't have to bring up the boy in the backyard before he notices. "Who the hell is in my pool with Leighton?" His tone says it all. He's not pleased, and for once, I'm in agreement with the graying man.

Mia pops out of nowhere. "That's Beckham, Daddy. Remember? We told you he was coming over to hang out with Lenny Lou."

My eye twitches.

Harry grunts. "That's right." It's a non-answer. Monotone. One I don't like because that means he won't push it. Questioning him, though, means telling him the reasons I don't like the kid. He'll want more than "he

doesn’t sit well with me,” because, according to Harry, my instinct is shit. He informed me as much when I went solo and refused to work with him.

Katherine looks out the large windows that overlook the entire backyard. Leighton is sitting on the edge of the pool in a purple one piece that Mia bought her—instead of the tiny bikini she originally picked out that I vetoed in record time—with her feet swinging in the pool. Her *friend* is doing laps and talking to her, and Len seems to hang on to his every word.

She’s crushing. Hard. It’s obvious. The kid isn’t stupid enough not to know that, which makes me even more suspicious of his motives. I knew when she asked to go study with him, Nora, and one of his friends that she liked him. She never needed to study. She’s naturally smart and prefers working on assignments alone unless she wants to make sure something is perfect. Plus, she never invited Nora over before, which makes me wonder if Beckham found a way to sweet talk his way here.

Mia says she’s old enough to date now that she’s almost fifteen, but I don’t agree. Her mother, however, does.

In fact, Katherine told Harry that they need to let Leighton ‘live her life’ instead of restricting her freedom. Something about reading a self-help book on parenting, which I’m not disagreeing she needs, and insisting the more locked down they keep Lenny, the more she’ll rebel.

Leighton. The same girl who watched me pick up a beer on my twenty-first birthday and stared at me like I was doing a line of shots. It was one beer. One. And I spent over an hour and a half nursing it. It’d been piss warm by the time the bottle was empty, but I couldn’t help taking my time when she looked at me with those damn gray eyes.

She’s not the type to rebel, and the sad thing is, I think Katherine is disappointed by that.

I can’t help but look out at the fourteen-year-old in question, wondering what happened to the shy girl who wouldn’t look anyone in the eyes right away. The one who always hesitated to join us like she was expecting us to tell her to leave. Two years have passed since she’s been here. Katherine has her own walk-in closet and a fucking diamond ring on her finger that proves they’re here for good, even if I still don’t like her mother. Our parents are engaged, but no wedding date is set despite the eldest Grier pushing Harry to start planning, and I hold onto that. It means Harry isn’t sure. It means he’s as doubtful of the woman as I am because there’s a lot to

be doubtful of. She disappears for hours at a time still, treats her daughter like shit, and goes off over the strangest things. The fact I'm not the only one who has noticed tells me something isn't right.

"Is he staying for dinner?" Katherine asks, wrapping an arm around Harry's. He doesn't move away like he used to with women who are overly handsy, something I've noticed that's changed since the Grier girls walked into our lives. The bastard has softened, and it's not because of the woman with the sharp claws currently sunk into his arm. It's the raven-haired girl outside, giggling innocently as she splashes Beckham.

Harry looks at Lenny like she's his last shot. I didn't want to believe it at first, but I've seen on more than one occasion how his eyes brighten slightly whenever she makes conversation with him that would normally bore or annoy me. Hell, he keeps one of his guards on her every time she's out without her knowing, and when I brought it up, he'd gruffed out, "Nobody needs to mess with her." Which, for Harry, is as close to an "I love you" as anyone will get.

His dark eyes go out to the yard again, and Len must feel everyone looking because she glances over her shoulder. Her lips part when she locks on our watchful gazes, probably blushing if she were close enough for me to see.

She gives us an awkward wave.

Definitely blushing.

Beth breaks the watchful silence. "I made enough for everybody, sir."

Harry grunts and peels himself away from Katherine and the rest of us, unbuttoning his suit jacket with one hand. "We already ate at the gala, but if the boy wants to stay he can."

My jaw ticks when he disappears upstairs, leaving the rest of us behind. Seriously? He's not happy with Beckham being here, it's obvious, but he'll let him stay for dinner?

"How is he with her?" Katherine asks me in a low tone, setting a palm on my arm. Her hand lingers, and I brush it off, eyeing her in disdain. Why does she care about how he treats her when she can't even treat Leighton with any form of respect? "Don't give me that look. I want what's best for my daughter."

Even Mia scoffs at that, but Katherine doesn't seem to notice. "If you really gave a shit, you would have skipped the charity event and stayed here

to meet him when she told you he was coming over. You would have made sure he's good enough."

One of her dark brows raises along with the corners of her lips. "Why would I need to do that when her guard dog is here? We both know you're going to watch out for her regardless of who else is around."

Teeth grinding, I glare at her.

She touches my arm again, but this time her overly done manicured nails dig in and don't budge even when I try jerking my limb away. "I would suggest being nice to me, Kyler. Whether you like it or not, I'm going to marry your father. It would benefit the both of us if you accepted that now." Her voice is low enough for only me to hear, and she knows it. "For Leighton's sake, of course. I know how much you care about her."

Is she shitting me right now? She lets go and pats my hand, sauntering off after Harry with an extra swivel to her step that makes my anger boil over.

It's no wonder my mother brushed off the engagement news when I brought it up to her with a generic "better her than me" reply. She probably figured she'd been through hell long enough, so it was only fair that someone else has their turn.

Mia walks over to me. "What was that about? The woman looked like she wanted to eat you alive."

Nostrils flaring, I shake my head. "I can't figure out what the fuck is wrong with her. I mean, how could someone like her have a daughter like Lenny?"

My sister's smile instantly warms. "That just proves what kind of girl Leighton is, little brother. She's innocent."

Sighing, my eyes travel back to the pool right as the girl in question lets out a shrill scream before being pulled into the water. Her laughter echoes into the house, pulling Beth and Mia's attention over to her too. They're both smiling.

My annoying, oftentimes right, older sibling has a point. Lele has the kind of outlook on life that I hope she never loses. With a mother like Katherine, she'll need that positive perspective to survive. It's her trust in people, the one she offers freely from the start, that worries me. It's been drilled in my head over the years that trust is gained, earned through years of trial and error until you're worthy of having it. When it breaks, it's in

seconds, and the person that once held it lets go of the broken shards before they get cut. And they always do. They'll bleed for it.

I don't want Leighton to bleed.

"We have to do something about Katherine," I murmur quietly, not wanting Beth to hear any scheming. She hates it when we butt our heads in business that isn't ours, but the heavy feeling in my gut since Katherine arrived tells me it's time to get to the bottom of things.

"I don't know, Ky…"

Hearing Katherine's words, her subtle threat to me, I give a long-lasting look to Mia that shows I'm not going to back down from this. "For Leighton."

She can't say no now.

I'M GOING to have a permanent mark on my wrist if Leighton squeezes it any harder. Cringing when her nails dig in as she gapes at the stage is worth it, even if there's been at least ten people taking pictures of me since arriving backstage to listen to the dreadful concert.

I can picture the headlines now and groan inwardly. The guys are going to give me shit when they see I was watching a goddam Violet Wonders show, but I knew Lenny would have a good time. She may hate people spending money on her for her birthdays, but she sure isn't complaining right now.

Even I have to admit she looks damn cute as her eyes follow Garrick across the stage while he pours his heart out to the screaming audience. The guy may be an egotistical tool, but he's good, one of the few who have the raw talent it takes to make it. Not that I'll ever tell him that.

Lenny has earplugs in to drown out some of the noise since we're standing so close to the band, but she's still singing along to every song. It's getting close to the end of their set, which means the biggest part of her birthday present is about to come.

When I called Gordy asking for two backstage passes to the VW concert held at the Staples Center, it took him five minutes to stop laughing his ass off before finally agreeing he'd hook me up. The bastard knows Leighton's a huge fan, but he's hounded me since showing up with the tickets asking if I've finally caved.

The answer is no. Hell no.

When Garrick thanks the crowd one last time before the guys all take a stand, I brush Len's arm and gesture toward the curtain that separates the main stage from the back. She follows, her eyes dragging behind her until the stage disappears, before she plucks out her earplugs with a big smile on her face.

I stumble when she barrels into my chest, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" She squeezes me so tight I cough out a strangled breath before hugging her back.

A few people smile at the affection, while other stagehands snap pics. I want to glare and tell them to fuck off, but that won't look good. I pat Len's back a few times before she peels back, eyes shining. "This is the best birthday ever, Ky!"

I feign hurt, slapping a palm across my heart like she delivered a fatal blow. "Are you trying to tell me that I'll never be able to top today? Not even if I ask Single Division to visit?"

Her answer is instant, but there's such an innocence to the answer I can't be offended of the subtle burn. "SD was good, but Violet Wonders is…Violet Wonders, Kyler."

The people in earshot all laugh, giving variations of "burn" and "she got you good" while watching us. All I can do is shake my head at her, lips curving upward at the corners.

Her eyes get big. "I didn't mean—"

Pulling her into my side, I drape an arm around her shoulder and ruffle her hair. "You totally meant it, Lele."

A few reporters who get backstage privileges call my name, drawing my attention away from the traitor under my arm. "Shit. You okay for a few?"

When she nods, I peck the top of her head and walk over to the group of people holding out their hands and phones. The woman closest to me begins the inquisition. "I'm Emily from Merida's Top 100. It's the most viewed vlog on this side of the US. Maybe you've heard of it?"

I haven't, but I smile and nod. "What do you want to know, Emily?"

She beams. "I'm going to record this on my phone. Is that all right?" Another nod. "Great. How does it feel having a little sister who prefers your rival band over yours?"

The guys behind her all snicker and I can't help but join in with a shake of my head. Should have seen that coming. "It is what it is. We can't all like the same stuff."

“How would you describe your relationship with Leighton?”

My eyes go over my shoulder to see the girl in question eyeing the curtain in wait for the guys, a thumbnail between her lips like she’s biting down on it. It makes the smile on my face twitch upward a little more. “She’s my best friend,” I tell the woman honestly.

Lenny must sense we’re talking about her because she meets my eyes and does her usual dorky wave.

“That’s so sweet,” Emily croons.

I lift a shoulder and look at the vlogger again. “It’s no hardship. She’s an easy person to get along with. Easy to love.”

One of the guys asks, “Was it difficult transitioning into a big brother role after finding out about her?”

Was it? Maybe for a couple days. I said some shit I shouldn’t have, regret it, but moved on. We both have. “Not really. Like I said, we get along really well. Having her in the family is the best thing that’s happened to us.”

Emily grins. “That’s one lucky girl.”

She brushes my arm, which I subtly move away from with an easy smile. Flirting with people is practically another language of mine, but I’m not about to lead the poor woman on thinking she has a shot. Especially not when Lenny is here. “I’m the lucky one,” I go with.

Before they can ask another question, there’s a sharp inhale behind me followed by a familiar accent saying, “Is that Little Bishop?”

I turn in time for Garrick, shirtless now for some fucking reason, to approach Leighton. Her eyes grow twice their size, making him grin like he won a prize.

Nope. Excusing myself, I walk over and stand close to Lenny while eyeing the Aussie fucker who’s grinning ear to ear at me. “When I heard the Bishops were at our concert, damn near pissed myself, mate. I’ll be sure to tell the merch people to hook you up with some great VW fan swag.”

He wiggles his brows and turns his attention to Lenny, who squeaks at the rockers’ sole attention. “And who might this beautiful soul be, hmm?”

“Fifteen,” I warn.

He lifts his hands innocently.

Lenny croaks out, “Leighton. My name is Leighton. Or Lenny. Most people call me that.” She blinks, then blinks again, her face turning redder by the second. “You’re not most people though, so you can call me whatever you want.”

Even I can’t help but snort at her awkwardness, but I get it. I was about two seconds away from peeing myself when the frontrunner of Journey shook my hand after a Grammy performance and told me he liked my sound.

Zayne gives Lenny a once-over before smacking Garrick. “I’m thirsty as fuck. Let’s go to the room before we have to deal with the sharks.”

Chuckling over his accurate description of the people calling out to them, I nudge Lenny and give her a silent “you okay” look. She nods once, her throat bobbing as she glances back at Garrick with awe in her eyes.

I’ve never seen her this starstruck. Not even when she met me. Maybe a *little* bit of jealousy rises in me, but I brush it off because it’s not important. I’m still her favorite person, she’s told me as much.

Before I can walk to the back room set up for them, one of the reporters call out to me again. “Mind if we ask you and Garrick a few questions before you head out?”

The Australian and I share a look. I don’t particularly want to do a dual interview, but I’ve already dodged my fair share of questions the past couple of years. Gordy and my agent both told me I need to start talking to them more to stay involved with the fans, even if they twist the crap I say.

“Sure,” I relent, after making sure Leighton will be okay.

The oldest of them is a reporter who made a name for himself in the industry for being blunt. “There’s no short speculation about the fallout between the two of you after your split with Kylie,” he begins, eyeing me, then Garrick. “Has that feud since passed since you’re both here?”

It’s the prick who answers, “Not even bad blood can stop people from enjoying good music. Isn’t that right, mate?”

I refrain from glaring at him. “Anything that’s happened in the past has stayed there. There’s no point in bringing up old issues.”

A new person chimes in as soon as I finish answering. “Can we expect a collaboration between you two in the future then?”

I say, “No,” the same time Garrick replies, “It’s a possibility.” We both look at one another, his face amused, mine blank. It’s him who turns back to the crowd. “I’ll let you work that out more. I’m sweaty, tired, need a drink, and have a pretty girl waiting for me. Thank you for coming out.”

The wink he shoots me as he backs away has my nostrils flaring. “Hands to yourself, Matthews.”

He lifts them again and smirks.

Lenny is smart, and Garrick is—for the most part—harmless. All talk, no show. So, I grin and bear it.

"When can we expect new music from you?" That comes from Emily.

"Will you consider doing a performance with a band like Violet Wonders?"

"There are rumors about Single Division getting back together, can you confirm or deny?"

On and on it goes for another ten minutes until I answer all their questions and give them each a handshake. Emily slips me her number and winks before acting like it never happened when someone asks her a question. It's been weeks since I've gotten laid, and I'm tempted to use the number, but decide against it.

Don't sleep with any type of reporter.

Harry taught me that much.

When I walk toward the dressing room, I hear the laughter first. Leaning against the open door, I see Zayne and Garrick doing handstands against the wall while Leighton smiles from the couch.

"What the hell are they doing?" I ask, walking over and putting a hand on her shoulder. There's a stopwatch app on her phone counting the seconds.

"Zayne said he could hold a handstand longer than Garrick, but Garrick doesn't agree."

"We're making Little Bishop keep count," Garrick says, his arms shaking from where they hold him up.

I cock my head. "Does it count if you're both using the wall for support? Seems like that's cheating."

"I'd like to see you try, asshole!" protests Zayne, cursing when he drops out of it and falls flat onto his back in a heavy *thump*. His foot catches Garrick and makes him tumble too, causing me and the rest of the VW crew to laugh.

"I win!" Garrick announces, sitting up on his elbows and grinning.

Zayne grumbles something under his breath and stands, brushing off his pants.

Len exits out of the app and looks up at me with a smile on her face. Her cheeks are no longer red, but flushed, and I wonder what's going through her mind. She's happy, and that's what I focus on.

When I glance up at Garrick, he's holding a half-empty bottle of beer. "Can't you put a shirt on or something?"

He swipes a palm down his abdominal muscles, which he's known to flaunt a time or a hundred, before lowering the beer from his lips. "Am I turning you on too much?"

Leighton giggles, but it sounds choked.

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, that's it," I reply sarcastically, squeezing Lele's shoulder. "Are you ready to head out? I told Harry we'd be back at a decent time since you've got school in the morning."

"Mom said I could skip."

Why doesn't that surprise me? "Not happening, kid. Come on."

She frowns but obeys, standing and looking at all the guys. Zayne is talking with Grayson, paying us no attention, but Garrick and Manning are both leaning back in their spots with eyes on us. "It was nice meeting you." She hiccups, blushes, and kicks at the ground with her sandaled foot. It's the same pair that Mia bought her for her last birthday, even though she got at least two new pairs this year.

Garrick pushes himself up and prowls over, his arms stretched wide. Len yelps when she's swept up and wrapped in his sweaty ass arms, being swung around until she giggles. If she wasn't blushing profusely before, she is now. As soon as her feet touch the ground again, she's redder than the lipstick stain on the Australian's neck from who the fuck knows when.

"I'm sure we'll see each other again real soon, Little Bishop," he tells her.

She gapes.

I laugh to myself and drop an arm around her shoulder again, leading her toward the door and calling over my shoulder, "I'd say it was nice seeing all of you assholes, but I'd be lying."

Some of them laugh, others throw things, and there's one, "you know you love me, motherfucker," from who I assume is Zayne since there's a slight Bostonian accent.

When we're outside in the cool air, I huddle Leighton closer to me when she shivers. I'm opening the passenger door to my car when she looks up and asks, "Did you mean what you said to that woman earlier? Am I really your best friend?"

"You are."

Her eyes light up. "You're mine too."

I grin. “I know.”

She laughs, shoves my shoulder, and climbs into the car. When I’m seated behind the steering wheel, she says, “My life is way better with you in it, too.”

Like me, I know she’s not lying.

I squeeze her hand once before driving us back, watching her sleep not even ten minutes into battling the L.A. traffic.

When we get back, I carry her inside like I’ve had to do plenty of times, nodding at Harry who passes me on the stairs, and lay Leighton down in her room, listening to her incoherent mumblings.

Tonight only proves that I’d do anything for her, so it doesn’t surprise me that the headlines the following morning are all variations of the same story.

Kyler Bishop wins best brother award.

Youngest Bishop sister brings out the best in ex-boy bander.

Celebrity royalty: The Bishops win over the world with close-knit relationship.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

TWO MISSED CALLS. One voice message. Three texts I can't gather myself to reply to. And that's just from today.

I'm a jerk.

Kyler: *Talk to me. Please?*

Kyler: *We'll get through this*

Chase: *When can I see you?*

Sighing, I flip the phone over so I can't see the screen and start highlighting a few of my notes in front of me, not really paying attention to the lines I've probably read five times over.

It's Dylan who flicks my ear as he passes me before dropping onto the cushion on the opposite end of the couch. "You can't keep doing this, Lenny."

The "this" he's referring to isn't hard to figure out. He's telling me I can't keep avoiding the people who have been reaching out to me for the past month. An entire *month* that I've hidden at Mia's house and avoided the two people who I still get queasy thinking about.

"Just text them back." He pops something into his mouth. Probably his favorite Chex Mix. He always liked those nasty breadstick pieces best and gave me the cereal bits.

I sigh to myself. Kyler and Chase have been trying to get me to talk to them, and it isn't like I've ghosted them completely. I've replied to one of

Chase's many texts the same night *the incident* happened, telling him I was okay and staying with Mia for a while. That I'd talk to him when I was ready.

Kyler on the other hand…

My entire body flames with unwelcome heat remembering the look on his face in the briefest moment as he realized what was happening when he walked into that room. *God.*

It still makes me want to vomit.

The night Chase and Garrick had taken me out, something changed. It was gradual, a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach that started when Chase dropped me off at the UCLA campus. Maybe if the girls in the group I was assigned to hadn't talked about how excited they were to make the most out of their college experience, I wouldn't have gotten the idea to begin with. But it was Kyler's words, his whispered insistence in shutting down any type of thought or feeling I had, that cemented my decision.

We can't do this, Lenny.

I wanted to grow up. Live. Experience. Do things I told myself I couldn't do or else I'd be just like Mom.

By the time Chase picked me up, I'd made up my mind. I wanted to… feel. So, I kissed him. Kissed him in a way that told him without words that I wanted to do something else. Something *more* like he'd probably been waiting on for forever. To show myself that I was ready to move on and try new things.

All throughout dinner with his brother, he kept staring at me, a spark in his eyes, a question like he wondered if I'd change my mind.

I wouldn't. I wanted it.

But then…God. Then *it* happened. The one moment I finally allowed myself to enjoy somebody in a way I hadn't before was ruined by the very person my mind had imagined was between my legs, hot breath ghosting over my sensitive bundle of nerves. It wasn't Chase in that room when he'd taken off my shirt and peeled down my leggings. And I…I didn't bother to try harder to focus on who was there on that bed with me because I knew my brain would just go back to the person who wasn't actually there.

I'm sure Kyler probably thinks I've been fooling around with Chase long before then based on the warning looks and taunts thrown at the youngest Matthews over the period of us seeing each other, but to see it is a whole different story.

“Shit happens, kid,” Dylan goes on, digging through his bowl. “It’s awkward as hell, sure, but everyone will get past it. Kyler isn’t going to think of you any differently. Chase has been trying to reassure you everything is okay, right? He wants to be there for you.”

The week I told myself to keep distance from Kyler had turned into two. Then three. He called me, and when I ignored them and his voice messages, he called Mia. When she finally told him to give me space, Kyler called Dylan. My nerves were shot, and every time I convinced myself to go back to the house and face the music, I chickened out.

I don’t blame Dylan for telling me to move on from what happened four weeks ago. I’m trying. I don’t even get the burning in my chest when I think about Kyler, and I’m not haunted by the look of disgust on his face when I close my eyes at night. I’m working past it. Slowly.

Mia walks into the room, cradling her stomach with a big smile on her face. “Leave her alone, Dill. We’ve all been through this. It’s traumatizing.”

I’ll forever be grateful for Mia coming to rescue me and letting me stay here with them, but I get it. She and Dylan haven’t had a lot of time alone since I’ve arrived, minus the times I go to campus during the day and the café in the afternoons. School only started a week ago, and I’ve been adjusting to my new, busy schedule, and loving the distraction it gives me.

It isn’t like my presence has forced either of them to be monks. They’ve always been heavy with the PDA and hands on stuff, and I’ve had the misfortune of hearing them a time or two or three when they thought they were being quiet.

The thought makes me blush, catching Mia’s interest. “What?”

I simply shake my head.

“I still think she should talk to them,” my brother-in-law for all intents and purposes says.

He’s right. I know he is—I’m just being…me. Awkward. Overthinking everything. Chase has left a few voice messages telling me he’s okay with giving me some time, but that he wants to talk face to face, not over phone or through text. I know that’s what has to be done, that I can’t hide forever, but it’s daunting.

Yet, when I think about doing the same with Kyler, it’s worse. Worse because I’m afraid that he’ll look at me but not *at me*—the girl he used to know—but instead, the me who is her mother’s daughter. There’s only ever

been one person's approval I craved the most, and it wasn't Mom's like I used to think. It's his.

When I turn my phone over and open my messages, I thumb through the first messages he sent a week after I originally planned on coming home before anxiety took over.

Kyler: *Please come home*

Kyler: *We need to talk about this*

Kyler: *I miss you*

It's those exact texts that made me overstay my welcome here, because I *know* I need to come home, and I *know* we need to talk, and I miss him more than I wish I did, but the more I think about that night, the more I wish I could take it all back. I wish I didn't care what those girls said at UCLA, and that my mind never agreed to greenlight things with Chase.

The newer ones give me a little courage, a sense of strength on top of the encouragement Dylan and Mia have given me over the past couple of weeks.

Kyler: *We can forget it happened*

Kyler: *I just want you home*

Despite my embarrassment, which will turn me tomato-red the second I see him, I want him back too, and my mind grips that like it's a life raft while I take those words out of context. *He wants me back.* Between Mia, Dylan, and my own conscience telling me that what happened is a natural part of life, it doesn't mean things won't be different when I do step foot back into the house.

Thankfully, Mia decides to change the subject from her husband's pep talk. "Maybe once you and Kyler make up, you guys can help me with a project."

My eyes dart to hers. "What project?"

I recognize the excitement in her eyes. It's the same look she got when she first confirmed to me that *The Casanova's* was picked up for another season after she was sure the network would cancel it. Granted, she seems fine with the time the show has been on hold, so maybe that's why she's even more stoked to start something new.

Her and Dylan exchange a look before she meets my eyes again. "This isn't public or anything—" As if I'd tell anyone. "—but I'm auditioning for a role in a drama based on a book. You've heard of Kinley Thomas, right?"

Had I— “Babe,” Dylan laughs. “She’s the one who told you to read the first books turned into a movie from her.”

I nod to that.

Mia frowns. “Oh. Yeah.” She glances down at her stomach like it’s to blame for her memory. Maybe it is, I know nothing about pregnancy other than what she’s shared, and that’s been more than enough already. “Anyway, her newest book is being made into a movie by the same company. It’s not a lead role or anything but it’s something.”

“Mia, that’s great!” Kinley Thomas happens to be one of my favorite contemporary authors, and her and her husband Corbin—who was the star in her book-to-movie box office success *Through Shattered Glass* have been deemed Hollywood’s “it” couple even after their rocky start. My smile grows over the prospect of Mia being able to work with her. “I may be a little jealous right now. They’d be stupid not to let you have a part.”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s a big leap, Lenny Lou. Not a lot of people take reality stars seriously, at least not at first. Plus, they want to start filming next summer.”

The cringe I answer with has her nodding. That’s going to be hard with a baby. Dylan is home a lot more these days and there’s no doubt he’ll be a great father, but I know how much work Mia will probably have to put into any role she gets that might take away from motherhood—something she’s always wanted to be invested in like her mother was invested in she and Kyler’s lives.

“Baby steps, babe,” Dylan responds, kissing Mia sweetly.

She melts into him, settling on his lap. “I know. It’s just nerve wracking.”

“It’ll be okay, Mia.”

She smiles at me. “So, you’ll help? I’ve been bugging this one about it, but he’s all like ‘I don’t act’ blah blah blah.”

Dylan snorts. “I don’t sound like that.”

I giggle. “Yes, I’ll help.”

She beams. “Yay! I’m supposed to get the script in a couple days. My agent says it’d be a perfect fit for me.”

I’m happy for her. Really happy. The giddiness in her voice, the way her husband looks at her with so much love and admiration, makes me want that too. And I think…I think of what to do, letting Dylan’s words soak in.

Swallowing, I pick up my things and grab a tight hold on my cell phone. “I’m going upstairs. I think…” I lick my bottom lip. “I think I need to make some calls.”

They both glance at me. It’s Mia who mirrors my words back at me. “It’ll be okay, Lenny. Everything happens for a reason.”

Is it wrong that I hate when people say that? Everybody means well by it, but it never sits well with me. It curdles in my stomach until I can’t take it anymore.

Because my mother is dead.

Because my life got flipped upside down.

What’s the reasoning for that? What possible reason is there to make my life hell over and over again? Some might say it was to make me stronger, and it has. Even with my mother, I had to grow up and be the adult. Without her?

Well, they say that every struggle one day is a developing strength the next. Thanks to Katherine Grier, I could beat the Incredible Hulk in a one-on-one battle.

My first phone call is to the only person who can relieve the ball of nerves tangled in my chest muscles and make everything okay again.

But Kyler doesn’t pick up.

YOU WOULDN’T THINK SEEING him would feel like it’s been years, but the way his smile grows and arms open to welcome me back makes the guilt for putting this off tenfold.

He really missed me. And he’s going to pretend it didn’t happen. I can tell when I step into his arms and he wraps them around me, squeezing me to his chest until I can hear his heartbeat *thump, thump, thump* against my ear.

“Missed you,” he murmurs against the top of my head, kissing it briefly before pulling back to examine me.

Classes today were rough, but it’s Friday which means an entire weekend off since I’m not scheduled to work. I asked Quinn if she could cover my shift tomorrow because I didn’t want Kyler thinking I was running even when I agreed to come home. He gave me space by not coming to Delmar’s when I thought he would, so it’s only fair that I stay here and not plan an escape.

The tight feeling in my chest as I step away from the soapy, manly scent radiating from him reminds me why I should have never left. He guides me inside with a palm hovering over my lower back and I smell something familiar as we enter the kitchen.

“Is that…?” There’s a huge bowl of Kraft macaroni and cheese on the counter, the cheese melted with steam billowing from the top. I know it’s my favorite brand because there are a ton of packets lining the other side of the island like he didn’t have time to clean up before I opened the front door.

Kyler nudges my shoulder. “I figured you’d want something simple. Thought we could watch something. Catch up.”

He wants to catch up. And watch TV. I can’t help but turn to him with unblinking eyes. Kyler is always picky about what he eats and not once has he eaten my favorite go-to meal with me past a few bites.

Swallowing past the emotion lodged in the back of my throat, I try clearing it away. I wasn’t sure he meant what he said when he called me back the other day. His name popped up on my screen twenty minutes into my conversation with Chase, who told me he understood why I’d been quiet and made plans to see me when I told him I had to go, and I answered Ky’s call to hear his relieved sigh. He promised he wouldn’t bring it up, saying, “I just want you here, Lele. Come home?”

And that’s all it took. The “yes” was followed by another answering sigh, that one lighter, until I told him I wanted to finish out the school week at Mia’s because it was a little closer to campus. Reluctantly, he agreed.

As promised, Chase had met up with me at Delmar’s the day after we talked on the phone. It wasn’t a conversation I wanted to have after my shift ended, but it was necessary. His hug had been warm and strong, but the way I held him to me reminded me that his hugs weren’t Kyler’s. The comparison had come out of nowhere, and I blamed my hormones. Mother Nature always hit me hard during periods the first few days, but *the incident* had my emotions wrapped in a tight rubber band ball waiting to snap which didn’t help matters any.

The talk with Chase happened on a walk in a nearby park, and he hadn’t made it as awkward as I thought it’d be. Not that I’m surprised. Chase has always been sweet like that, thinking of me before himself. So, when he told me how sorry he was, I had to stop him. Because he shouldn’t be the one apologizing. It was me, and I did. I was sorry for not calling him. I was

sorry for ignoring his messages, and I was *especially* sorry for making him think that he was somehow at fault for what happened.

We're both embarrassed. We're both going to move on from it because we have no other choice. The kiss we departed on after he dropped me off at Mia's was sweet. Nothing lingering that would lead to more. He didn't ask to come in, and I didn't invite him.

Looking back now, maybe I should have. When Mia had come downstairs, she asked where he was, and seemed a little disappointed when I told her he'd left.

"Thank you," I tell Kyler, voice watery when I walk over to the food and examine it closer. He didn't have to do this, obviously, but he did. For me.

I'd practiced a speech to give him over and over all day that distracted me from my lectures. Professor Adams even commented on my lack of participation, making me promise I'd come back Monday bright-eyed and bushy-tailed because she saw "something" in me that left me reeling the rest of the day considering how much I look up to her.

Still, the words I repeated over in my head are nowhere in sight now. I could tell him that I'm sorry for that night, that things like that happened, or I could play along with our silent agreement to just not talk about it.

I go with the latter.

Dropping my things onto the counter, I slide onto the stool and watch as he fetches two smaller bowls from the cupboard next to the sink and a serving spoon from the drawer. It's not even five yet, which is a lot earlier than we normally eat, but I don't complain. Too nervous to eat all day, my stomach has been cramping with hunger and uncertainty that barely held down the crackers I swiped at the campus store.

He's scooping the food out and into each bowl when he asks how school is. "Mia's been telling me that you seem happy there. How are your classes?"

Mia *would* tell him that. She never mentioned they talked about me, just that he was doing okay in case I wondered. I did, but all I'd do is nod when she told me every time they got off the phone.

Grabbing the bowl he extends to me, then the fork, I give him a small smile and ignore the Mia comment for now. "It's going okay. We haven't done much yet. I was only assigned something today that I have to turn in on Monday."

“And Marcia?”

He remembers her? My voice is tiny as I poke at some of the noodles. “She’s even better than I could have imagined, Ky. Those videos I showed you of her keynote speeches don’t do her any justice. Being taught by her is —” I stop when I see his lips quirked up into a crooked, amused smile. “What?”

He shakes his head, leaning his hip against the counter. “You’re fangirling your professor. Haven’t seen you that way since meeting Garrick for the first time.” Considering he didn’t even grumble over the Aussie’s name, I’d say he’s come along way. Then again, they’ve been bowling together, *and* out to eat with Chase, Mia, Dylan, and I. He’s had practice in not scowling since there are people to report on his every move otherwise.

“She’s who I aspire to be some day.”

Even though public relations is typically a female dominated industry, it’s lacking in female leaders. Those at the top of PR companies are almost always male, suited up and ready to bullshit their way into making more money by any means necessary. Marica beat those odds, shattering the glass ceiling, and keeps a primarily female-oriented lineage at her company to prove we can do anything men can. Why wouldn’t I want to be like her?

Kyler snickers when I say, “Being taught the tricks of the trade by her is equivalent to you being given advice by, like, The Eagles.”

“I get it.” He tips his chin toward the living room. “Want to eat in there? I’ll grab us drinks.”

Nodding, I head into the living room and plop down on my usual side of the couch. I hear things rattling from the kitchen and turn as Ky walks in holding two bottles. Soda for me, water for him.

He sets my drink down on the edge of the table so I can reach it, then sits on the cushion opposite. I try not to wonder why he doesn’t sit beside me like normal because then my mind would wander to a lot of different reasons.

It nags at me as we put on a movie we’ve both seen a million times, eating mindlessly with nothing but the film between us. He wants to catch up, but he doesn’t offer any information freely. “How is the song going?” I find myself asking, setting the bowl of picked-through macaroni on my lap.

He makes a face at his food and my lips flutter into a knowing smile. Why he’s torturing himself over dinner is beyond me, but he seems

determined to eat it. “It’s been recorded and we’re dropping it next week on all platforms.”

My brows lift. “That’s soon.”

“It’s been about a month since we finished it…” Voice fading, he clears his throat, putting the food down onto the table. “There’s been a lot of meetings about when to release it the past couple of weeks, but Gordy and I won out.”

“How are you going to release?”

His face screws in confusion. “I don’t know. A general post announcing that it’s streaming? I think Gordy has a plan.”

Instantly, I shake my head. “No.”

“No?” Ky’s face twists, but there’s humor in my quick reply.

“No,” I confirm, crossing my legs under me and thinking back to a chapter I just read in my Intro to PR textbook. “If you’re going to surprise release it, there should be something attached in the message that’s more heartfelt than a post-and-ditch. Like a video.”

“We’re not doing a—”

“Not a music video,” I cut him off, rolling my eyes. “Well, not a traditional one. Homemade. If you’re playing it how you did for me, then it should be just as raw and uncut, right? Let me film you singing it like that.”

He blinks.

“It’ll be fun,” I tell him, smiling wider at the thought. “We can do it here at the house and I can cut it down to do a “sneak peek” for an Instagram post and something for the app’s story feature that way people can swipe up for the buy link.”

Kyler blinks again, clueless, but there’s also something close to surprise in his eyes. “I don’t see why not. You should reach out to Gordy about it since he handles all my PR shit.” I’m nodding enthusiastically when he cocks his head. “Is this what you’re interested in doing with your degree? Working with musicians?”

My lips part to answer, but close almost as quickly. I haven’t really thought about what kind of PR I’ll go into. Based on the first reading assignment, there’s way more branches than I was originally aware of. I wouldn’t want to go into corporate, and community relations relies too heavily on local support in whichever community you’re in. Whenever Ms. Wynona told me stories about her life in the industry, I loved the passion working one-on-one with people could bring to the job, highlighting the

clients accomplishments, bettering their image, just…having fun showing the world what one person can do.

So, the short answer is, “Maybe.” Shrugging, I consider it a little more while he watches me contemplate. “It’s too early to tell, but I know the areas of focus I’m not interested in, which helps.”

He nods in agreement. “Gordy is still willing to help you with an internship. Hell, work with him.”

Interest flares in my chest. “You mean that?” Regretting my words as soon as they’re out, I try backtracking before he can call me out on the doubt. “I mean, I appreciate it, but I know Gordy has a few other clients too. Taking me on to show me the ropes would make him busier.”

The look I’m being given makes me internally prepare for his inquiry. “Go back a second. What do you mean ‘you mean that’? I’ve never *not* wanted to help you, and Gordy’s no different.”

Bracing myself, I flatten my palms against my bent knees and inhale softly. Sometimes it’s better to rip the Band-Aid off no matter how much it’ll hurt. “C’mon, Ky. The elephant in the room is more like a herd of them waiting for their shot to trample us.”

His eyes widen at my blunt outburst.

“I don’t want things to change because of what happened, but I know they did,” I continue, trying hard not to squirm and show my discomfort. It’s bad enough it’s melded all over Ky’s face. “I really appreciate you giving me an out, but it’s going to eat at me—” He winces. “—if I don’t get this out. You’re not even sitting next to me like you used to.”

His eyes go to the open space between us, an entire couch cushion length. “You shouldn’t read into things, Len. I’m only sitting here because we’re eating and it’s easier to talk to you that way.”

“But we’re *not* talking.”

There’s a brief pause, another flinch, before, “You don’t have to tell me __”

“I do, though. We’ve always been open and honest with each other, and we need to be now even though it sucks.” Swallowing down my nerves, I grab ahold of the metaphorical Band-Aid and rip that mother right off. “Chase and I haven’t done anything besides kiss until…until that night. I’ve never wanted to, and he’s never pushed me. He’s a good person. I thought you’d be out longer and that we’d have time. The only reason we were in

that room instead of mine is because I was worried that *if* you came home, you wouldn't find us in there."

He palms his face. "Leighton—" he chokes out.

"No. This needs to be said as mortifying as it is for me. Once it's out there, we can wash our hands of it and never, ever talk about it again. Okay?" When he says nothing, I give him a piercing stare before pressing, "Promise me?"

His throat bobs. "Fine."

I nod once, gathering my bearings. "I never want to be like my mom," I start, watching his eyes bolt to mine before one of them twitches. "I had to watch her go through men like it was a sport and she never cared if they actually liked and respected her. It was hard for me. I'd keep telling myself that I had to prove I wasn't another Katherine. Being with Chase meant something to me. It meant a lot."

"As it *should*," he cuts in firmly.

"Being intimate is always going to be hard for me because it'll remind me of what I lacked in a role model when it comes to…that stuff. Mom would tell me that all I had to do was show a little cleavage and wear tight clothes to get a guy's attention, which only made me want to do the opposite. For a long time, I swore I wouldn't even date to spite her." Glancing down at my lap, I fidget with my fingers and feel the familiar burn of memories rise to my mind, all circling my mother and her not-so-sage advice.

"Choosing to do things feels like I'm letting myself live." My words get choppy, so I force myself to take a deep breath. "Doing that with Chase was a step in a direction I've never gone down before." Cringing at my choice of words, I avoid his eyes and shake my head. "I'm really, really sorry that you saw…that it happened. I'm sorry that I ran instead of talking to you, and that I didn't call or text you back when you tried talking to me after. It wasn't mature of me."

He says my name again, but this time softer, less raspy. "Leighton, you have absolutely nothing to apologize for."

Don't I? "I messed up."

He chokes again, this time shifting toward me until his knee brushes mine. "You didn't. You're nineteen. You can make your own choices, as you should, without me approving them. What you do with—" He looks

like he wants to vomit. “—your boyfriend is between you two. Okay? I’m not going to judge you because I sure as shit don’t have room to.”

I can’t meet his eyes, so I stare at my chipped nails, the fuchsia color that Mia painted last week already mostly picked off.

“Look at me,” he says, reaching over and lifting my chin up to meet his gaze. “Telling me what you just did took some guts. What your mother did…what she’s told you, it’s not right. You have every right for wanting to do things at your own pace. And I’m going to tell you this once and for all. You. Are. *Not*. Your. Mother.” He states each word slowly and surely, keeping his fingers on my chin so I can’t look away even if I wanted to.

And I did, especially when I break and whisper, “She was sick. At least, that’s what the doctors said. There wasn’t a diagnosis until after we went back to Phoenix.” A long inhale. “The specialist said it was depression. Manic, most likely. You know, bipolar disorder? The mood swings, the way she treated me like crap one minute and loved me to pieces the next, it all made sense when the doctor finally told us. I had to beg her to see somebody about things when she—”

His features sharpen when I stop abruptly from admitting what I never have before. “When she what?”

My eyelids close. My brain says, *don’t tell him* but my heart tells me differently. “When she did a lot of things. Or didn’t. She’d lose jobs because she wouldn’t leave her room. Sometimes she’d disappear for days at a time and come back looking…weird. But I asked her to go when she hit me.”

A sharp inhale. Then, “How often?” His voice is suddenly dark, growly, a sound I’m not sure I’ve ever heard him make before.

I say nothing.

“How. Many. Times?” His tone gives me no room to avoid the conversation.

“Three or four max. I don’t know.” I won’t give him the specific dates, even though I knew each one by heart. They’re branded into my brain because each are significant—they represent four separate occurrences when I realized I’m not enough. Not enough to stick with the medicine or therapy. Being slapped by your mother tends to be something you remember for life, even when you shove it into the back of your mind and hope to forget it because *you know* she’s sick. But another part of me, the one that doubts the diagnosis even though a thorough Google search told

me it was plausible, wondered if it was truly accurate. What if she was just a bad person? Sometimes there didn't need to be a reason for somebody to do bad things. The more I think about it, the more I realize that it could be the likelier reason.

The silence is suffocating, so I crack my eyes open and see that his are closed. His chest rises and falls slowly, methodically. He's angry.

Really angry.

"She was sick," I repeat, not sure if I'm trying to convince myself of that or him. "The last time she…" *Don't think about it.* I wouldn't. What does it matter now when the last time she laid a hand on me was? "Look, she wasn't the best mom out there, but she was mine. I loved her. *Love* her. I always will." I can tell he doesn't approve, but he's smart enough not to voice that.

We sit in silence for a while, his hold on my chin loosening until it's more of a comforting caress across my lower face. His thumb brushes the underside of my jaw lightly, causing me to close my eyes and take a few calming breaths.

"It's over," I whisper, leaning into his palm, expelling a long breath.

His hand twitches. "What is?"

There's a pregnant pause. "You told me to tell you when it's over," I remind him, jaw quivering when I see him watching me with pinched brows. "I'm not shutting you out anymore, Ky. It's over. I'm done."

The breath he releases is heavy, relieved, and his hands apply more pressure on my face as he leans his forehead against mine. His warmth radiates into me, his breath tickling my nose, and I close my eyes and absorb the moment.

He ate macaroni and cheese for me.

He listened to me even though he was willing to let it go.

Flutters fill my stomach as his fingertips twitch again on my skin. Neither of us move from the position we're in. My hands lift and rest on his chest, palms flat against his muscular pecs. One of them shifts until it cups the space over his heart, feeling the thumping beat against me.

I tilt my head up so, so slowly, enough to feel his labored breath ghost over my lips. His head moves downward, our noses grazing each other's, our breathing picking up, but neither of us closing the microscopic gap between our lips. It's the silence between us that asks, *do we or don't we?* Because I want to. I want to angle my head enough to brush my lips against

his, to seek his comfort in new ways, and I want him to return the gentle kiss with one of understanding and yearning.

Just as I make my choice, a choice I've accepted that I'd have to heed the outcome of no matter what, my phone rings from the coffee table, breaking the moment in an instant. Our eyes go to the screen where Chase's name flashes before Kyler pulls back, Adam's apple bobbing.

"Thank you," he says.

I'm not sure for what.

All I can do is nod.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

THE PAPARAZZI SURROUND me as soon as I walk out of the store, blinding me with their cameras, and deafening me with their onslaught of questions. I raise a hand and curse to myself, remembering why Gordy told me to stay in today while gently elbowing my way through the crowd to get to my car. I should have known when I was picking up a few things in produce and saw cell phones raising that the sharks would arrive next.

"Kyler, should we expect a new album?" one of the paps calls after me.

Another yells, "Are the rumors of a collaboration between you and Garrick Matthews true?"

"When is the next single dropping?"

Fumbling with my keys, I unlock my door and climb in. It doesn't stop them from rattling off questions that will go unanswered, shouting into the windows and trying to get the best shot through the windshield.

"Fuck me," I mutter, turning the ignition on and waiting for the idiots to clear. The last thing I want is to be charged with a hit and run because they're not smart enough to move.

When the radio comes on, it's my song coming through the speakers. You'd think I'd be used to hearing my vocals blasting, but I never will. Especially not lately, when I favor premade playlists from my phone that never have Single Division or my solo shit on it.

It’s the tail end of the song by the time I’m able to inch out of the parking spot with a few of the paps running after me. I roll my eyes and pull onto the main road, ignoring the people still shouting, offering them no more than a sarcastic wave.

“That was Kyler Bishop’s newest song ‘Cali on my Mind’ which the six-time Grammy award winner surprised his fans with yesterday. Kelly, I know you’ve been a long-time fan of his since his Single Division days, so what do you think?”

Normally I hate listening to commentary on my work. There’s never going to be a song that everybody loves. With every handful of loyal fans, there’s always a hater or two in the mix. It’s never easy hearing people dislike something you invested hard work in because there’s a piece of your soul woven into it. I’ve had my fair share of criticism over the years, the worst of it when I made the announcement that I was going solo. The hate mail and accusations were so bad that they had to hire people to go through it first to make sure there weren’t any viable threats against me that needed to be reported.

A popular radio host takes over, her feminine voice filling the airway. “You know, Keith, I think very few people can do what Kyler Bishop has in his lifetime. We’ve seen boy bands break up all the time, but it’s rare they make a name for themselves on their own. There were a lot of doubters when he decided to leave the guys of SD behind—”

“Let’s not forget what his former bandmates said about it. They didn’t even think he’d make it without them,” the male news caster cuts in, laughing.

Nose twitching, I ease off the gas and roll my eyes at the old shit he’s trying to drag up. My former bandmates and I still talk. Not often, or as much as we probably should considering the years we’ve spent together, but we didn’t hate each other. Were things tense after I walked away? Yes. Did a few of them say things to the media that was taken out of context? Yeah. It was misconstrued for the drama factor and people ate it up.

“The point is, he did. There’s been speculation over the past year that he’s retiring after such a short run compared to others in the industry, and without him speaking out on it, it was plausible. Then he drops this. He’s always been talented, but did you see that video? He was making love to that camera as he sang every word, Keith.”

“That’s a bit excessive, don’t you think?” her co-host chuckles.

She scoffs. “Hardly. Not only did he get over 1.2 million views in the first hour, he broke the record for the most likes in a day. And that was only on Instagram with a thirty-second preview. I don’t know who his people are, but they played the game right. The full YouTube video for the song has already broken at least two different viewing records on the platform. And the comments—”

“Since listeners can’t see Kelly right now, she’s fanning herself,” the guy announces in amusement.

“I’d be surprised if there aren’t a handful of women pregnant just by listening to that throaty performance. It’s his best work yet,” she concludes.

The grin on my face stretches as I flick the radio off in satisfaction. Chances are, there will be people tearing it apart, but I don’t want to hear it. Mind latching onto one particular comment on “my people” and their obvious stroke of genius, I tell myself I’ll have to buy Leighton every kind of chocolate there is for coming up with the video idea.

Even Gordy hadn’t considered doing a home video until Lenny called him the same night she suggested it to me. It took three different tries, but the final version was tweaked enough to fit the different platforms and was ready to be uploaded the second the single went live.

Gordy called at one in the morning, a full hour after it dropped, to tell me we’d already broken records. As of this morning, ‘Cali on my Mind’ is in the top three single releases on four different charts in the US alone, and according to everyone who I’ve talked to, we’re vying for the number one spot in no time.

I’m supposed to be laying low since the release, but I’ve been low on groceries since my not-so-secret shopper spent a month away from the house instead of sneaking food into the pantry. Gordy’s been getting calls since yesterday wanting me to do exclusive interviews, and I still have yet to agree to one. Realistically, I’d look like too much of a prick not to speak out after this, so I’ll have to do a few to get people off my back, which means my friend will need to be selective about who will get the green light.

I’m pulling into the driveway, thankful nobody followed me, when my phone buzzes where I tossed it in the cup holder. The screen on my dash lights up with the person it’s from since it automatically connects through Bluetooth, and my brows lift a fraction.

Aussie Asshole: *How does “Making love to the camera” feel? Asking for a friend*

Aussie Asshole: *I’m the friend. I’ve yet to be told I make love to inanimate objects, but I bet I’d be damn good at it*

Putting the car into park, I roll my eyes and grab my phone.

Me: *We aren’t friends, and you’re just jealous*

Aussie Asshole: *Damn straight I am*

Snorting, I pocket the device and grab the few bags I have before making it inside. Lenny still has a few hours on campus before she’ll be back, or I’d call her about what people are saying. She’ll be excited when she hears.

I drop things onto the counter and feel my phone buzz again with an oncoming text.

Aussie Asshole: *Does this mean you’ll be on my album?*

Me: *No*

Aussie Asshole: *A live duet then?*

Me: *Why are you texting me?*

Aussie Asshole: *I’m one of the many people who got pregnant over your “throaty performance” and I’m working my way up to demanding child support*

Me: *Don’t you have better things to do than listen to the radio and annoy me?*

Aussie Asshole: *I feel obliged to listen to Kelly. Gives great head. Fox in the sheets too if you’re interested*

Me: *Sounds like she’ll be the one demanding child support then*

Aussie Asshole: *No glove, no love mate*

Over this conversation, I put my phone on silent and leave it on the counter. It takes less than five minutes to unpack, and another ten to figure out what to make for dinner that Leighton would eat. Anything with too many vegetables and she acts allergic, always making me chuckle.

I’m half tempted to text her telling her to invite her boyfriend over if she wants, showing that I meant what I said during our heart to heart. It’d be a peace treaty—an olive branch. I may hate it, but she’s an adult who has every right to do what she wants. And admitting to me what she did the other night?

My fingers grip the edges of the counters until they’re white thinking about anyone hitting her, let alone her own fucking mother. Sick or not,

nobody has the right to lay a hand on another human unless it's deserved. Leighton is the last person on this goddamn planet who's deserving of that kind of treatment.

How she's *still* defending her mother is beyond me. I'll never understand that unconditional love to a woman who's never reciprocated it. I love my mother, and probably would do a lot of questionable shit for her if I had to, but Katherine shouldn't be treated the same.

There's still a lot I'm sure Leighton hasn't told me knowing the state of her mother's health—one I led her to take care of on her own. How she can forgive me for that, act like it doesn't even matter, leaves me in awe.

I'm as much at fault of what happened the past few years as her mother. I'm the person who caused her suffering and the reason she had to sacrifice everything. If I'd just kept my nose out of it like Mia told me…

Sighing, I grab a water from the fridge and head toward the stairs to change into workout clothes. I need to run. To clear my head.

Yet, the look of trust, of something warm and alarming, that Lenny gives me is all I can think of even when I try not to think at all.

It's over, she told me.

Fuck me.

It is far from over.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

THE CLASS DISMISSES and students all crowd the door waiting to start their weekend. I'm the last to pack up my belongings before Professor Adams calls me up to the front.

I offer her a timid smile, still trying to refrain from making a fool of myself even this far into the semester. Every time she calls my name, I can't believe *the* Marcia Adams is saying it, and whenever I tell that to Kyler at night, he tries not to laugh but always fails. "Yes, professor?"

She's sitting at the edge of the table in her usual business attire—the kind that screams success. Navy pencil skirt, a silk white blouse tucked into the high waist, and heels that make her probably five-seven height a solid five-eleven. Swift. Sophisticated. Intimidating. "I was very impressed by your paper. Not many freshmen can narrow their scope of interest so early on like you have."

Deep breath. In, out. "Thank you." I'm proud when my voice doesn't crack, but it raises an octave that makes me internally wince.

Professor Adams crosses her arms over her chest. "Tell me, what are your interests in relations? I know you're connected with the Bishops. Is entertainment what you plan on pursuing when your senior year requires an internship?" The surprise on my face must register to her because she smiles knowingly. "I'm known to do my research on people, especially those I see potential in."

Oh my God. My heart bursts. When was the last time I felt like this? Fifteen? It was definitely the day I went to see Violet Wonders in concert. Kyler had only muttered a few curse words the entire night we stood backstage, and never once commented on my lack of vocal skills when I sang along to their set obnoxiously loud. I'm pretty sure he was thinking it, but he kept it blissfully to himself.

"That means a lot," I manage, swallowing down the bubbles of excitement trying to escape my throat. "I'm not entirely sure what medium I'd want to work in, but I do want to do more career-driven PR work. Whether that's in the entertainment industry for musicians, actors, I guess I'll try figuring it out as I go."

"I could help if you're interested."

I blink. She can… "You'd want to?"

Amusement flickers in her eyes, and those perfectly painted lips waver upward. "Trust me, I don't offer something like that unless I mean it. You've proven time and time again over the past month and a half that you're interested in earning your own way. I've worked with many people who come from similar backgrounds as you, Leighton. They tend to expect things to be handed to them because of who they know."

The background she's referring to is not the one that consists of asbestos and rodent-infested apartments, and Ramen noodle nights because we couldn't afford better. Clearing my throat, I glance at the clock on the wall knowing I have a shift at Delmar's to get to. Mr. Warren hasn't found a reason to fire me yet, and he's tried. I'm not going to be late to give him one after all this time. All I offer her is, "I grew up with a strong work ethic."

"Do you get that from your—" She pauses, pressing her lips together. If she's done her research, she knows Harry Bishop is not the person I share half my DNA with. And I don't want to even think about what she knows about my mother because I doubt it's anything good.

"My mother," I tell her softly. The inspiration I've gotten from Katherine Grier isn't traditional. Her work ethic didn't exist, which meant mine had to in its place. I'm not sure who I'd be if I weren't forced to grow up as quickly as I did. Would I be part of a sorority now? Top of my class? Maybe I'd be at Stanford parties and dating somebody on the football team. It's not a sure thing, or something I want to get lost in because that isn't my life and never will be, but the thoughts do like to taunt me from time to time.

“Well, she raised you well then.”

The irony isn’t lost on me, but I don’t say anything. Simply nodding, I gesture toward the door. “I’d love your help in figuring things out, but I should go. I have to get to work.”

“Of course. I’ll see you on Monday.”

I think about our encounter the rest of the day, getting through my shift fueled by my idol’s praises. Not even Mr. Warren’s beady eyes on my chest can break the high I’m feeling.

And when Kyler surprises me at the café at closing and drives us home, our hands somehow finding each other’s with threaded fingers as I tell him about Marica Adams, everything inside of me buzzes with completion. I’m excited to see a movie pulled up on the screen, plain cheese pizza on the coffee table, and my favorite soda waiting for me when we walk in the door.

It isn’t until I wake up the next morning on a hard surface that isn’t my bed, with drool crusted onto my lip, that I realize he never carried me upstairs like usual. Blinking until my eyes adjust to the light streaming in from the living room windows, I look down at the firm chest I’m using as a pillow and note the arm draped around my waist to keep me from falling off the edge.

His even breathing lulls me back to sleep.

CHASE SPLASHES me with the warm pool water, pulling my attention away from my notebook, now dotted with droplets. Wiping them away, I fight the glare I want to shoot him and close the notes I’ve been studying for an hour then walk over to where he’s floating.

“Done?” he asks.

“For now,” I relent, sitting cross-legged on the heated cobblestone. The sun is starting to set, cooling off the previously warm October day that hit the high eighties. I’m looking forward to the days cooling off, though Chase has been dreading it. According to his mom he’s always been a water baby. Since I arrived this afternoon, he’s been swimming more than he’s done anything else, probably procrastinating from another work project, even though we haven’t talked as much about his programming lately.

“You’re going to ace it, Lenny.” He’s referring to the European History exam I have first thing Monday. My grades this semester mirror what they used to be before my attention was pulled away by Mom and her personal

problems—problems that don’t feel so heavy since finally coming clean to Kyler. Like how, shortly after we’d gotten kicked out of the Bishop house, Mom went into a deep depression followed by a two-week binge of alcohol and anger where she nearly got arrested. I had to pull her out of a bar before the cops came. Or another time when she came home saying she lost her job and tried telling me it was the owner’s fault, when really, she was clocking in late all the time and half-assing her duties. When I’d asked her, “What now?” she’d looked at me in a way I never wanted her to look at me again—with a mixture of anger, defeat, and something far, far darker. Mom had simply replied with, “I’m doing my best, Leighton.”

But she lied. She always lied.

I didn’t realize how suffocating it was keeping that to myself, like I had something to be ashamed of when I didn’t. I’ve always been proud of myself for making do with the cards I’d been dealt, but there are still days I look back and think of all the ways things could have gone differently.

Sighing, I roll my shoulders. “I know. I’m almost done going through the last section from the study guide.” All my classes have been relatively easy, and the few writing assignments, though not my strong suit, have still earned me As, except for a short essay that my 3 a.m. binge-watching session of some K-drama with Kyler distracted me from preparing for. I should have gone to my room when Kyler put it on, but the break I allowed myself turned into five straight hours of TV watching, and before I knew it, I was being shaken awake by a freshly showered Kyler who’d already went on his run, showered, *and* cooked us breakfast. At least I’d gotten a B+, barely lowering my overall grade.

“Why don’t you come in here?”

Frowning, I huddle into the pullover I grabbed before leaving. “It’s cold.”

He deadpans. “It’s like seventy-nine.”

Shaking my head, I offer him an apologetic smile. “I’m just not interested in swimming today, I guess.”

“Still busy thinking about your professor?”

My nose scrunches.

“What’s her name? Miranda?”

Miranda? “Do you mean Marcia Adams?” My lips twitch a little that he doesn’t remember her name, and the way he teases me about her doesn’t

make my tummy flutter when Kyler does it, but I give Chase the benefit of the doubt.

He looks a little apologetic. “I was close. Miranda. Marcia. That’s all still going well? You mentioned that she wanted to help you.”

I nod absentmindedly, feeling a little angry—probably irrationally so—that he doesn’t remember the conversation we had not even days ago. We barely talk about things anymore as is, so what we do say to each other should count. “I think she’s going to help me with an internship, but Gordy, er…Ky’s manager, said he’d get me something too. I guess it depends who gets to it first. I mean, I have plenty of time.”

“Most internships don’t start until senior year anyway. You should focus on having fun instead of bogging yourself down with work.”

I know he doesn’t feel the same way about his job, so I’m not sure why I should focus more on anything but my own interests. “I like the thought of getting experience early, but yeah. I won’t get any type of credit for the work until my last year at UCLA.”

We’re quiet for a moment, a thick tension in the air between us.

Eventually, I change the topic. “How did that meeting go with the overseas investor?”

The face he makes tells me not well as he swims over to the edge of the pool and leans against the side by my crossed legs. “Guy was a total douche. He wasn’t interested in investing, he wanted to buy me out and turn it into some mindless corporation.”

I blink. “That’s…” I mean, what could I say? It’s kind of cool somebody was interested in buying him—an almost twenty-year-old—out. “I know that isn’t what you want, but it’s awesome that he offered, right?”

He considers it before shrugging. “I guess. The guy wouldn’t take no for an answer right away either. Pissed me off.”

“What’d you do?”

The corners of his lips tug up. “Hung up on him.”

My eyes bulged. “Chase!”

He laughs, flicking water at me again, making me squeal. “What? It isn’t like I had any intentions of making connections with the guy. He said his piece, thought I’d take his $1.5 million and walk away from everything I built from the ground up.”

Jaw dropping, I silently repeat the number he just said as if he was talking pocket change. *Did I hear him right?* There’s no way a number like

that came out of his mouth.

His laugh gets louder. “Did I just make you speechless?” Swiping a hand through his long, curly wet hair, he swings a leg over the edge and sits beside me, water droplets dripping onto the ground. “I’m not sure if I should be offended that you didn’t think my work is worth that much.”

“God. No!” I choke out, picking my jaw off the ground and swallowing. “No, sorry. It’s just…wow. That’s a lot of money. I mean, you work by yourself, so I’m impressed that a guy who clearly specializes in investments __”

“Corporate takeovers,” he corrects.

“Takeovers,” I amend, “would be interested in putting that much money down on a one-man business. You should definitely be flattered. Proud.”

“I am.” He leans forward and pecks my cheek before reaching for his towel and drying off his hair and body. “Want to go in and watch a movie or something? I was thinking about ordering delivery. Maybe from that new Indian restaurant.” I try not making a face even though it’s hard. He should know by now that I don’t like spicy food.

Biting my lip, I feel the guilt rise when I tell him, “I have to get going. Kyler told me he’d help me get in some last-minute studying.”

“I can help.” He stands, offering me his hand. I take it, letting him haul me up. I know he’d help me, but I’m sure he’d rather do other things. The last time we studied together, he kept getting distracted by something on his phone, or telling me about some new video game he was testing out for a buddy. It was hard to concentrate, and I’d feel bad if I ignored him to get something done.

I give him an apologetic look. “I know you can, but I already made plans with Ky to do it.”

His brows furrow, walking over to the table with me to help put my things away. “I thought you said he had plans tonight?”

I shove my books into my bag and turn to him. “Yeah, Mia talked him into going over and helping her and Dylan reorganize the baby’s new room. She’s been going *crazy* buying stuff. When I talked to Dylan last week, he told me he had to hide her credit card, but she memorized the numbers and still shopped online for more clothes, diapers, you name it.”

“The baby is due soon, right?”

I nod. “End of November.” I can’t believe in a month Mia is going to have a baby. She and Dylan decided to keep the sex a surprise, so

everything in the nursery is white with a mixture of colors because apparently “assigning one color to the baby based on the sex is ridiculous.” At least, that’s what she told everybody one day over dinner when Kyler asked if he should buy the baby something in blue or pink.

Then Mia started crying.

It was a little traumatizing.

“Did she ever hear about that part?”

Draping my strap over my shoulder, I follow him into the house. “They ended up passing on her, so she was pretty bummed. But her agent already got her two other scripts to read over. I’m supposed to go over tomorrow to help her run lines because the audition is in a couple weeks.”

He stops by the door with a frown deeper than the one previously. “I thought you and I were going to my friend’s party tomorrow?”

My lips part. I’d forgotten about that. He asked me last week if I’d be interested in making a quick appearance. His friend Jacob was hired at some thriving multi-million-dollar startup company and the party is to celebrate. Cheeks pinkening, I nod in confirmation. “I can do both. What time is the party again? I probably won’t be at Mia’s until noon, but that leaves me all day to help her before meeting you.”

Chase scratches his jaw, shoulders stiffening. “I figured we could get something to eat before. Jake will probably have some lighter food, but nothing much. We haven’t been out since…” He hesitates, wincing slightly. “We haven’t gone out in a while.”

A while. I know when the last time we went out was, and it has been a lot longer than two people dating should go without actually making plans. We’ve hung out, he’s helped me with school, I’ve listened to him update me on his business on occasion, and sometimes we’ll eat a meal with his mom. Things have been distant and strained and I know it’s my fault, but my head can’t sort out the millions of thoughts that circle my skull whenever Chase is involved. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I promised Mia I’d help, but I can leave early. I’m sure Kyler or Dylan will be more than willing to fill in.”

“Kyler will be there too?” His tone is weird as he studies me.

I make a face. “Of course. We always get roped into running lines with her together.” He’s quiet. Too quiet. I’ve told him that before, haven’t I? “Why?”

He turns the door handle and gestures for me to follow him out after snatching up his keys to take me home. “No reason. You’ve just been

spending a lot of time with him.”

It’s not that odd. Kyler and I have gone back to the way we used to be. Inseparable in a lot of ways. “I guess so.”

We’re a little too quiet for comfort as we climb into his car. I watch as he buckles and starts it, pulling out with a tick to his jaw. I’m not sure what passes through his mind, but he eventually sighs and eases into the seat. “Are you going to the taping of Hot in Hollywood next week?”

Turning my body toward him, I toy with the zipper of my bag. “No. Why would I?”

Surprise flickers across his features. “Oh. Maybe he wanted it to be a surprise.”

I don’t do well with surprises. “What?”

He sighs again. “Maybe I’m not supposed to tell you, so you didn’t hear it from me.” Pinning me with his eyes until I agree, he nods once and says, “Kyler is supposedly performing his new song on the show next week. I only know because Garrick and Mia are also guest stars on the show to do a duet of their single as a first-look exclusive or something.”

My eyes widen. Nobody told me that was happening. Not Kyler *or* Mia. “Oh,” I repeat slowly, wondering why they’ve kept it hush hush. I didn’t even know Kyler’s interested in going on those types of shows. Last we talked about it, which was a while ago, he said he wasn’t planning on doing anything like it.

Chase butts into my thoughts, probably guessing where they’re going. “I’m sure they wanted to surprise you with the news.”

I manage to lift a shoulder. “Maybe.” There’s no way I’m not bringing it up when I get home. I want to celebrate with them. Even if going on Hot in Hollywood wasn’t Ky’s idea, it’s worth being excited over, and Mia hasn’t performed in quite a while either. “Are you going?”

He glances at me, one shoulder lifting. “I want to, but Mom is having a few people over and I promised I’d stay home and catch up with everyone.”

My chest deflates. I wouldn’t have minded going with him to support everyone. It would make things more fun than being on my own. I don’t even know if I’m invited along, though, so I better not think too much into it. “I’m sure it’ll be boring anyway.”

Not even his chuckle is convincing. “Oh, yeah. A bunch of hot celebrities singing songs you absolutely love would be torture for you.”

Blushing I playfully shove his shoulder.

He shoots me a wink and reaches over, threading our fingers, and resting them on my leg, and I try hard not to think about how often Ky and I do this when we're out driving, or even at home watching television together. Last night, he was going through my paper to proofread, a pen in one hand, mine in his other, and I'd been completely at peace with the silence between us.

He squeezes my hand. "Dinner tomorrow, then the party?"

"It's a date," I confirm, though my stomach doesn't get the tingly feeling it used to.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

"YOU'RE AN ASSHAT," I inform my sister, glaring at the screen she showed me. It isn't like her elephant-level laughter is surprising considering the headline, but it doesn't stop me from hoping she pees herself again.

She wheezes. "It's just…" More wheezing as her hands cradle her stomach. "I think I'm going to frame it. Put it somewhere everybody can see." Her head bobs. "Yep. It's going in the bathroom."

"The bathroom?" I repeat deadpan.

A confirming nod.

Why do I put up with her? I don't even want to be here running lines, but she insisted that Lenny already agreed and the scene she has to audition for needed three people. Her husband could easily do it if she weren't so damn picky, but he's off with an old friend for the day while we stay with her.

The headline stares me in the face until I finally close out of the app and begrudgingly pass my sister's phone back to her. She's a pain in my ass but I love her, even if she finds it funny that a "source" claims my new song is about my feud with Garrick Matthews. That could be ignored if the speculation didn't stir some bullshit rumors that maybe the Australian and I had a lot more going on than we led people to believe over the years.

After a few seconds of silence, Mia starts laughing again. "They think you two are lovers," she rasps out, holding her sides. She's turning red from

how hard she's cracking up, for Christ's sake. Cheeks puffed out as she tries refraining from more, she fails. "Oh my God. If I don't stop I'm going to pop this kid out before he's ready."

I blink. Did she just…? "You're having a boy? I'm getting a nephew?"

Leighton walks back in the room with a tray of drinks she insisted on making for us. "Did I just hear the baby is a boy?"

Mia sobers quickly. "Shit. You didn't hear that! I couldn't stop wondering so I made an excuse for Dylan to leave the room that way the doctor could tell me. Dill doesn't know."

I'm surprised Dylan left the room. He's been her guard dog since she entered her second trimester, reading up on every possible thing the internet said could go wrong. He only leaves her side when he knows trustworthy people are with her just in case. "What did you say to him?"

A shoulder lifts. "I told him I wanted to ask the doc about vaginal discharge."

I blanch as Leighton laughs, high fiving my sister.

"Dylan can't find out I know," she warns, eyeing the two of us. "He's set on it being a surprise. It's the only reason I agreed in the first place, but you know me. I hate surprises."

"You love surprises," both Lenny and I say at the same time. We share a smile.

Mia glares. "Not when it comes to the fucking watermelon that I have to push out of my vagina."

Oh my God. "Can we go back to you laughing over the gay lover rumors?" I beg, noting her serial killer look. "You're starting to scare me."

Leighton shifts slowly, looking at me with arched brows. "What am I missing here?" Her voice is skeptical, but there's interest burning in her hazel gray eyes that makes me roll mine.

"I'm sure my lovely sister will be—"

"Look!" Mia exclaims, happy again. I swear, her mood swings are giving me whiplash. She shoves the phone in Lenny's face, who takes it without hesitation and begins skimming the article in front of her.

Then…

The traitor laughs her ass off.

"You're supposed to be on my side!" I bellow, grabbing the phone and turning off the screen. The website that posted it found two different shots

of Garrick and I at the 2012 MTV Music Awards wearing the same designer, with a caption that says, "*Coincidence*?"

Yes. Yes, it was. If I'd known that the Aussie asshole was going to wear the same designer as me, I would have found something else to go in.

Mia's wiping tears from under her eyes as she shakes her head, waving her fingers at me to give her back the phone. I'm not sure I trust her with it. When she smacks me with a pillow, the traitor beside me steals it away and passes it to Mia when I'm too distracted getting ready to do a counterattack with the scratchy designer monstrosity only Mom could have bought.

I look around at the thought, nose scrunching. "Where's Mom?"

Mia rolls her eyes. "Out with Rob. They're back on again."

My mother's insistence on never marrying again has left her years-long relationship with Robert Handler rocky. They fight about it all the time, but she always wins. It isn't like I don't understand her reluctance. Harry messed her up. She doesn't trust men. But she deserves to be happy, even if that means letting Rob put a ring on her finger.

Sighing, I lean back. "One day she's going to break, and Rob will get his way."

"You know how she feels," Mia chides.

"She's letting Harry win."

"She's finally living her life the way she wants to, Kyler. Maybe you should take a page from her book and do what you want." Her tone is pointed, and when I meet her eyes, her brows go up in challenge.

"I just want her to be happy."

"Some people are happy without wearing a wedding ring. We can both agree she's been better without Dad." Before I can retort, she adds, "And some people are better with that sort of relationship. It depends on how bad they want it."

She's been throwing things like that at me for weeks, and I never give in. A few minutes later, Mia is passing us scripts with different lines highlighted. She knows it's best to let things drop when I get like this, so I accept the paper and skim over the lines.

My lips twitch when I realize she assigned me the lead role to play, since she's auditioning for a secondary one—apparently a friend of my character's.

"Uh…Mia?" The caution in Leighton's voice pulls me from the sheets in front of me and up at her. She's frowning, her eyes bouncing between the

script on her lap and my sister. “Are you sure you want us to do this scene?”

“Why?” I ask, trying to figure out what she’s reading that’s making her uncertain.

When she bites her lips, I know it’s something I’m going to curse Mia out for. But when her cheeks turn pink? I start reading through the other parts until I get to the one she’s referring to.

“Er…” I rub the back of my neck. “Mia?”

She sighs dramatically. “You guys promised! I don’t get to choose which scene I do during auditions. They selected that one to make sure there’s chemistry between my character and the leads. So—” She claps twice. “Chop, chop, children. Get into character.”

I’m going to maim her. After the kid is born, of course. My nephew. Come to think of it, spilling her secret to Dylan might do the trick.

I can feel Lenny’s eyes on me when I murmur, “Let’s do the scene before she goes Ted Bundy on our asses.”

Standing, I crack my neck and release a heavy sigh before asking where I’m supposed to start. Mia tells me which line to begin at, and I look at Leighton once, just a quick glance, before dipping my head.

It’s a script. Acting. It’s no big deal. That’s what I want my eyes to tell her, even if my chest is tightening over the disbelief in my own thoughts. Clearing my throat, I wet my lips with a swipe of my tongue and focus my gaze on the highlighted yellow line my sister directed me to.

“You should leave Maybrook,” my character tells Mia’s, apparently directing a pointed gaze in her direction.

“But that would mean leaving…” Her words trail off as she looks at me, shrugging with a sheepish look on her face.

There’s silence. I glance down at the script to make sure I’m not supposed to go next when Mia clears her throat. “Lenny Lou, it’s you.”

The girl in question blushes, shaking herself out of whatever thought is trapping her attention and moving an ebony piece of hair behind her ear. “Sorry,” she murmurs, skimming over the sheet. “Maybe I should go,” her character chimes in.

“Stay,” I say, eyes piercing her, even though she’s not looking up. “Alex was planning on going anyway.”

Mia lets out a quiet breath. “It’s that easy, huh?”

“Supporting my best friend?”

“Best friend,” she almost whispers.

I know where this script is going almost instantly without needing to read further past the highlighted scene. Unrequited love. I've been stung by it a time or two myself, not that I knew it at the time. "I've always supported you. You've wanted to leave this town for forever."

"You used to tell me you'd go with me." Mia's eyes find Lenny for a moment before they trail over to me. "But I can see why that's changed. Will you at least miss me?"

"Every day."

"Promise?"

Lenny clears her throat. "I can give you two a—"

"There's no reason to," I inform her, sidling up to her side, but not touching her like the script gives direction to.

"Ky," she whispers.

Mia says, "His character's name is Sam."

Leighton blushes. "Sam," she corrects. "Er…" She's distracted, her eyes struggling to flit over the words. "I really think that you two should talk alone."

"And I think you should stay here." This time, I take her hand, threading our fingers together, and squeezing our palms together. My eyes go back to the script for a moment before lifting to Mia. "We've known each other our whole lives, but there's another life out there for you that doesn't involve me. You should find it. Live it."

"And you'll stay here with her?"

Lenny shifts on her feet, hand twitching in mine like she's debating on letting it go.

"I'm staying where I'm happiest."

A small smile curls Mia's lips. "Then I guess there really isn't anything left to say, is there?"

Lowering the script, I clear my throat. "I think you're going to kill it, Mia. They'd be idiots not to cast you."

Leighton nods. "He's right."

My sister stares between us. "You have to finish the scene."

We both stare at her, our hands still locked palm to palm.

"You two promised."

"I don't think that's nec—"

"My character is supposed to walk back in, where she gets her final answer. It's pivotal, Kyler. They're going to ask us to do the whole thing

during auditions, so I need to make sure I do the full run through."

"Mia," my voice cracks. "I really don't think that's necessary," I repeat slowly, trying not to look in Leighton's direction. From my peripheral, I see her flinch, her hand trying to unlock with mine, but I won't let her.

I'm not trying to embarrass her. I don't want to make her uncomfortable because of Mia. Why the hell couldn't Dylan be here for this?

The thought instantly clears when I realize what I'm saying. That would mean he'd have to kiss Lenny, and I'm not okay with that. At all.

Free hand twitching into a fist around the script before loosening on the crinkled paper, I blow out a breath. My sister is giving me the fucking puppy dog look that normally wouldn't work on me. Maybe it's the fact she's eight months pregnant and moody, or that there's a chance she'll coerce someone else to fill my shoes if I say no again that makes me nod once. Grimly. Reluctantly. Hesitantly because I know part of me wants to do this, and another part scolds me for that eagerness. "You get one."

She claps. "Yay! Okay. One." Her eyes turn to Lenny's, and I can't help but do the same, noting the pink settled into the apples of her cheeks. "Ready, Lenny Lou?" The way she says it makes me narrow my eyes at her, but she ignores me completely. "Remember, your character holds a lot of uncertainty. Sam needs to win you over."

Leighton gives her a tiny nod, our hands finally letting go of each other's. "Ready."

Turning to her, I lift my script. "Don't give me that look."

"What look?" Lenny returns quietly.

I step closer. "The one you're giving me right now. You feel guilty. We can't force ourselves to love somebody because then we're not giving them our all. Who would want to settle for second best?"

"Alex is your best friend," she responds quietly, eyes still glued to the paper in front of her.

"Exactly."

She peeks at me through her lashes. "I consider her a friend, too. Whatever this is, don't you think we should consider—"

"No." Another step closer. "I'll always care about Lizzy. But she's never going to be you. Whatever you're thinking, the scheme you're trying to convince yourself of, it stops right here, right now."

Licking my lips, I take the last step toward her, my shoes skimming hers. My throat tightens as my heart thumps harder in my chest, my free

hand rising to brush her cheek. “She’s not you,” I whisper again.

Leighton’s breath catches.

My hand cups her jaw, caressing the smooth skin that’s flushed of color.

Her eyelids flutter closed.

I lean in and say, “If breaking her heart is what it takes to gain yours, then I’ll be the bad guy.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

THE TENDERNESS of his touch steals the oxygen from my lungs as his palm glides down to cup my jaw. Thumbing my bottom lip, I watch the intensity in his brown eyes grow with the desperation that matches my own.

Thump, *thump*, *thump*. The drumming of my heartbeat echoes in my ears, and if I put my hand over his heart I know I'd feel the same thing because we've always been synced that way.

He exhales like he's in pain, his grip tightening on my face and I inhale like I can absorb the suffering. Every conscious breath taken is a step toward something we can't come back from. "How did we get here?" he asks.

Closing my eyes so I no longer see my reflection, I place my hand over his and press it harder against my face to absorb any warmth he can give me to thaw the uncertainty icing my mind. "I don't know."

Throat thickening, I shake my head and squeeze my eyelids to stop the tears from falling because the swarm of emotions lodging in my chest are threatening to splinter and burst. I turn my head and press my lips against his palm, listening to his shaky breath release.

He asks me again, this time a nearly inaudible whisper that rips open the reality of what people may never understand. This is how we'll both go out because nobody will ever accept what's changed easily.

Swallowing my tears, I choke out the words I've been trying to hold back for months without realizing it. "Please, Kyler."

He curses and draws my face closer, our noses brushing lightly against one another's in anticipation, hesitating with the ghost of his lips hovering over mine.

He wants this.

He doesn't.

He fights it.

He loses.

"Fuck," he rasps, before cupping one hand around the back of my neck and pulling me toward him, closing the space between us until his lips experimentally press against mine.

I sigh against his pillowy lips and let the first tear of adrenaline fall, praying no more follow because this is what I've been dreaming about. This is what we've been skirting around in almost moments—on the couch when we watch TV, in his bed where I sometimes fall asleep, in the car when we're holding hands and singing along to whatever is on the radio.

There's hardness and pain, and then softness and leisurely peace like he's trying to heal the damage done like he's the sole person to blame for what's been building between us.

My fingertips lower until they dig into the fleshy part of his cotton covered shoulders, hoping if I hold onto him tighter then the moment won't end. His tongue drags along my bottom lip, the velvety caress stealing my breath until I find myself parting my lips in anticipation for more.

Then I feel it. The hesitation.

I feel the pain.

The uncertainty.

Thump, thump, thump.

The script slips from my hold and crashes onto the floor as his lips draw back instead of deepening, hovering over mine with nothing but his breath caressing me. My top lip is nipped, then my bottom, before it's rolled into his mouth. I breathe him in, trying to contemplate the next move—to make it myself or wait because the moment his fingers twitch against the back of my neck, tightening in indecision, in thoughts I'm too afraid to think about, I know the truth.

I'm obliterated the moment he pulls back, because of course he's the first one to withdraw, reasoning with the reality of our situation. He's the

one who stops it from going on, from making it more than two people helping someone they care about finish a scene.

"Tell me when," he rasps, forehead resting on mine, one hand still on my face, the other raising until it threads in my hair.

I know what he means.

Tell him when to stop.

I say nothing.

Nothing at all.

But Mia does. "Wow."

It's then we realize the enormity of what transpired.

We didn't follow the scene.

We didn't stick to the script.

My whole body burns in a mixture of embarrassment, anxiety, and something far deeper when I turn to Mia, whose watching us with wide eyes and parted lips. The gray orbs I meet are full of surprise, awe, and something…something I don't let myself see as her lips ever so slowly rise at the corners.

All of our attention goes to the ringing cell phone, which I pull out of my pocket to break the silent stare down, the knowing smirk on Mia's face, and the pained one on Kyler's.

Chase. The boy I'm seeing. The only one I should be kissing.

Kyler rakes a hand through his short brown hair, voice hoarse as he says, "You should take that," before walking out of the room.

I blink at Mia, fear in my eyes.

She says, "It'll be okay, Lenny Lou."

I manage to nod, but I don't believe it.

I'M DISTRACTED all throughout dinner, nodding absentmindedly as Chase talks. I don't even remember what I ordered, if I liked it, and barely recall thanking him—though I'm sure I did because it's an automatic response for me.

By the time we arrive at his friend's party, Chase watches me with a careful eye, and I can hardly meet them because of the guilt over the day's events. Things he asked me about and I avoided by redirecting the conversation because my lips and limbs and chest all still prickle with heat and shock.

Before leaving Mia’s house earlier, she pulled me aside and said, “Don’t beat yourself up, Lenny. You did nothing wrong.”

She saw it in my eyes, the shame that ate me in accusation. The thing is, I can’t allow myself to believe I did nothing wrong because a piece of my heart knows it’s not true. Actors and actresses kiss their coworkers all the time on the job. It’s no big deal when they go home to their significant others and share a kiss that means something more.

But the kiss I shared…

It meant everything.

“You okay?” Chase asks over the loud music, leaning into me. It’s a fair question that I expected him to ask sooner, not that I’m complaining.

The feeble nod I give him isn’t lost on him. He frowns, those usually upward-curved, playful lips weighing with my baggage. I’m ruining his night.

Sighing, I rub my arm. “I’m actually not feeling well,” I tell him, opting for a partial truth so I don’t layer on the ill feelings I already have. I want to be honest, but I don’t even know what to say—can’t put it into words. “I think I want to go home and sleep it off.”

We met his friend Jake when we first arrived over an hour ago. They hugged it out, his friend told us where to get drinks, and then we mingled with a few other people Chase knew. I did my best to smile and shake hands with people whose names I don’t remember, but my thoughts have been elsewhere since.

Chase’s hand finds mine, threading our fingers together. “Are you okay?”

Licking my lips, I look toward the door, barricaded by bodies, and gnaw on the inside of my cheek. “Just tired. I’ve got a headache.”

I feel bad for lying. He doesn’t deserve it.

He doesn’t deserve this.

Swallowing, I nod when he tells me he’ll get us out of here. When we pass Jake, who is schmoozing some redhead with big boobs, they exchange a friendly man-hug and shoulder pat before Jake kisses my cheek in goodbye. He yells, “It was nice meeting you, Leighton” only cementing what a horrible person I am because I barely paid attention to him besides a distant “Congrats” on his job.

On the ride home, the car is quiet. The radio is nothing more than a low hum because Chase, being thoughtful as always, tells me he doesn’t want

my headache getting worse. He offers to stop somewhere and get medicine since his friend's house is a solid forty minutes from mine, but I shake my head, give him my best smile, and tell him I'll be okay.

My body is tense the entire way. He barely says anything, doesn't hold my hand, but sometimes brushes my leg to let me know he's here for me.

He doesn't deserve this.

When he pulls into the driveway after punching in the gate code, he shuts the car off and turns to me. "You're pale. Is there anything I can do? Get you something?"

I unbuckle, looking at the dimly lit house. Only a few lights are on upstairs by the looks of it, so I know Kyler is home. He said he had to go after…things happened at Mia's. She told me not to think about it, that she'd talk to Kyler, and said I should enjoy my evening. How could I when I may have ruined everything?

I didn't say his character's name.

I said his.

I said '*please, Kyler*.'

Closing my eyes for a moment, I take a deep breath. I'm not in the right state of mind to voice my thoughts right now. Not about Kyler, and not about Chase. I need to sleep on it. To think. The last thing I want is to hurt either of them, but I think, based on the way Chase's wary eyes scope out my face, it's too late. It probably has been for a while.

"I just need to sleep," I assure him halfheartedly, but not even I convince myself.

He leans in and presses a soft kiss to my lips, and I don't mean to do it, but it happens before I can stop. I freeze. Tense up, drawing back ever so slightly, enough for our lips to stop touching.

Chase blinks. "Well…good night." His tone is resigned as he begins sitting back. I press another kiss to his cheek and get out of the car, thankful he doesn't walk me in. I'm closing the door behind me, hyperaware the car is still parked there, when I realize he must have read my body language. That he must know what I won't let myself.

Closing my eyes, I lean against the door and don't move until I hear his tires pull away. It takes one minute and fourteen seconds. Blowing out a breath, I drop my things on the table in hallway before staring at the stairs.

There are two options.

Go to my room and give Kyler space.

Or confront him.

The first choice is smarter.

The second one will put me at rest—let me fall asleep a little easier without obsessing. He's here, after all. He came home.

That's something.

So, when I knock on his door, I'm surprised when I hear the very quiet, "Come in."

It's only a little after ten o'clock and he's lying in the dark, probably in his usual sweatpants and tee that he tends to sleep in unless it's too hot. Taking a deep breath, I inhale for three and exhale for three before getting it out in the open. Maybe then we can both move forward.

"Are you going to leave again?" I ask him.

There's a small pause that feels like it stretches an eternity as my heart *thumps* loudly, rattling my ribcage. Then, from the bed before me, there's a quiet, "No."

"Are we going to talk about it?"

He rasps, "No."

There's thick tension permeating the air, but it hasn't suffocated us yet. "Can I sleep in here tonight?"

I wait for the inevitable "no" to follow the hesitant silence, but it never does. After waiting a few long heartbeats, I walk into the room, toward the lump under the thin sheet he sleeps beneath.

Even though it's dark, I see his eyes moving in my direction, feeling them piercing my face until my skin tingles. To my surprise, he says, "Okay."

I toe out of my shoes and slide into his bed, keeping plenty of distance between us. We don't touch or talk, only breathe until another eternity passes.

I turn onto my side, back facing him, and whisper, "I think I may break up with Chase."

No answer.

No sound.

Is he even breathing?

Then there's a tug on my hand as nimble fingers wrap around mine, then a palm, and I swallow down my words. He pulls me closer to him, both of us facing each other now, his mouth dangerously close to mine, and stays there.

He doesn’t move.

Doesn’t speak.

Throat bobbing, I press a kiss against the corner of his mouth. *I* do that. *I* become that person, and I don’t think about the consequences when his breath hitches or when he moves enough where our lips line up like he’s daring me to do it again.

And I want to.

I crave it.

Both of us breathe hard, making it the only sound in the dark room. His hand tightens around my palm, his nose caressing mine, his lips so close I can practically taste them.

I close the distance, kissing him lightly, slowly, unsure, but wanting. Neither of us moves to deepen it, we just breathe into each other like we’re giving one another life. As if, in this moment, the faintest touch of our lips is all there is.

Nobody else matters.

Nothing else could get to us.

In that moment, I realize something soul crushing.

Maybe I’m not so different than Mom after all.

And when I wake up in the morning, he’s already gone, the sheets on his side of the bed cold.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LEIGHTON / AGE 16

IF THERE'S one thing I've learned while living with Mom over the years, it's that good things never last. Considering those "good" moments were rare before walking into the Bishop home, I hold onto each one tightly. Like meeting Ms. Wynona and listening to the tales she told, or Anna's friendship before I'd let it crumble after being dragged to California.

In the almost five years of adjusting and adapting to the fast-paced world the Bishops live in, not a lot can surprise me. Everything happens in a blink of an eye—people throw out questions, rude comments, untrue rumors, and expect you to say something about it. I've learned to let things slide, to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, and to adjust the best I can to the whirlwind lifestyle.

Like things with Beckham Reeves. The more time we spent together, whether alone or with our group of four friends, it seemed like the more things changed. Nora taunted me about Beckham's constant flirting until I was red in the face, and even Striker joined in whenever his friend made his interest clear. It seemed like it happened before I knew what to do about it, even though Mia told me she'd been waiting for him to make a move for a while.

Beckham. The boy who kissed me under the old oak tree at Saint Michael's one day after school. My first kiss had occurred so briefly I almost didn't know it was happening. I'd been waiting for him after

practice like he asked me to, like I'd done plenty of times with Nora because she wanted to see Striker, and when he walked up to where I was reading a book against the large tree trunk, he'd kissed me right then and there, saying, "I've been wanting to do that for a while," before sitting down and smirking when I stared at him in shock.

We'd sat like that for some time, staring and silent, while all the teasing and taunts Nora and Mia had made about my crush on Beckham pushed to the front of my mind. He'd flirted, I realized, for some time, but I never thought he'd do anything about it. Girls at school call him charming, which means he does it with everybody. I'd seen as much. And there are plenty of girls who want his attention, who would be better suited for him than me.

Then he kissed me again, much slower than the first time, like he was testing me. I'd let my book fall, hands twitching in confusion of where to place them, and he helped me. He put one of them on his waist, the other on his shoulder, and guided my lips. It was fumbled and awkward and slightly embarrassing because I couldn't meet his swipes or nips, but I don't think he expected me to. Eventually, he'd said, "That was your first kiss, wasn't it?" Maybe I blocked out the cockiness in his eyes or chalked it up to pride and teenage longing like I read about, because it isn't until this moment, thinking back to the quick tale that had been whatever we were, when I realized he'd been playing me all along.

When I'd mumbled, "Yes," he'd smirked and told me there'd be more. And there were. Small kisses, big kisses, mostly private, but some were shared in the hallway or on the courtyard like he was proving a point. Nora always giggled, but Striker looked…off after a while. Like he didn't approve of what his friend was doing, and I kept wondering why but chickened out on ever asking. Because I didn't want to know.

I guess I know why now.

Harry stares at me with severe eyes that makes me want to hide behind Kyler. He must sense it, because Ky steps in front of me, tucking me behind one of his shoulder blades. I get why the head Bishop is upset with me, but it's not something I saw coming.

It's not my fault.

It's not *my fault.*

My eyes move to Mia's whose brows are arched as she studies her dad, exasperation marking her face over the situation. When mine drift back to

the man himself, I study one eye, then the other, noticing how dark his dark gray-blue orbs are as they pin me to my spot.

"How did you let this happen?" Harry finally booms, eyeing me through Kyler. I can feel the penetrating glare that I've been anticipating since I found out what Beckham did.

It's Kyler who solidifies my thoughts. "It isn't her fault."

Mia's quiet voice cuts in, and I still struggle to look at her after this. "He's right, Daddy. Lenny couldn't know he was going to do that. It's no different than other people getting information on us."

The way red tints Harry's neck as the tendons tighten make me flinch into Ky's back. One of his hands reaches out and brushes mine in comfort. "She *led* him into our home!"

Closing my eyes, I rest my forehead between Kyler's shoulder blades to try avoiding the fire that may start shooting from Harry's eyes. I've never seen him this angry. I thought Harry liked me—enjoyed our many conversations, as mundane as they may have been, and maybe even been amused over my love for PR work, romance books, and silly movies that I rant about to anyone who will listen. He doesn't look at me with the same eased expression now. That disappeared when the media blew up this morning.

The man I use as a shield tenses as Harry says, "She should have known better if she had any brains. Someone with that last name is never up to any good, certainly not with a girl like that."

What is that supposed to mean?

Jaw quivering, I fist Ky's red tee and blow out a tiny breath. Mom must have already made him angry. They've been tense lately, everyone noticed, but nobody said a word about it. Mia told me it wasn't worth it. Ky grumbled about how "they'd figure it out on their own" but I wasn't so sure. Now even less so.

Beckham got his hands on private texts and emails between Mia and Dylan, Hannah Taylor's ex-boyfriend and Beckham's older sister, proving that the oldest Bishop sibling got involved with him long before he'd broken up with her. All the speculation that'd graced the tabloids and gossip websites for months and months was right. I never thought Beckham would do something like this, certainly not under the guise of interest in me. How could I? Mom would tell me how pretty I am, Mia would tell me that I

deserve to be happy, and Kyler, though he never liked Beckham, never stopped me from hanging out with him either.

Harry seems to be unsurprised by Beckham's motives, but if that were the case, why would he allow Beckham over as many times as he has? Why would he endure our many movie nights and awkward dinners together? Sure, he'd give him a few scathing looks, but I assumed it was a fatherly type of glare. The one that says, "if you ever hurt my daughter, I'll ruin your life." Which, I guess, is true. Beckham Reeves wanted to get revenge for his sister's broken heart and used me to do it knowing I meant something to Mia.

So, maybe it *is* my fault.

It's on me for thinking someone as popular as Beckham, who can have anyone at Saint Michael's, would choose me.

Lips wavering into a frown, I find the courage to step out from behind Kyler. I'm stronger than hiding, and I have to remember that. Like the first time I showed up and overheard Ky calling me pathetic, I offer a genuine apology. "I'm really sorry for everything that's happened."

Mia steps toward me, shaking her head instantly. "Lenny Lou, you don't need to apologize. *This isn't your fault.*"

"The hell she doesn't," Harry growls.

For the first time since the paparazzi swarmed the house and everybody's phones started going off, my mother speaks from where she's been standing idly by, arms crossed, and unamused. At Harry for talking to me like he is, or for me to even put myself in the situation to begin with, I'm not sure. She said she liked Beckham. Told me I'd "found a catch" even though it made Kyler all red-faced and narrow-eyed whenever she encouraged me. "I hardly think this boy is the cause for such a big blowout, Harry. Leighton isn't that experienced when it comes to reading boys and their intentions yet."

The way Kyler goes rigid beside me is more than just something I notice. He takes one small step toward Mom, yet the action is somehow bigger, a warning. A dark expression settles onto his face that makes him look scary. "You should really reconsider speaking right now, Katherine."

Mia gapes at the cold voice coming from her brother while I stare wide-eyed at the ice forming over his tone. He's never used it with her even though he's probably always wanted to. He stopped picking fights a long

time ago, choosing to avoid her when he can and ignore her commentary if she does try starting conversation with him.

Mom crosses her arms over her chest in an unthreatened manner. “You can’t speak to me like that. We all want what’s best for this family. I’m simply pointing out that arguing over what can’t be changed is pointless.”

“What you’re saying—” Ky spits, “—is that *your* sixteen-year-old daughter doesn’t have the skills to read what a teenage boy’s intentions are, as if you expect her to start learning it like a fucking artform. Spoiler alert. She isn’t a goddamn whore like you.”

“Ky,” I whisper, voice cracking. My palm rests in silent warning against his forearm, but he shakes his head at me, eyes cloudy when he meets my uncertain ones.

His gaze lifts again, looking between our parents. “You can play men however you want and expect the worst from them, but Lenny shouldn’t have to live that way. She didn’t know Beckham was going to go through Mia’s shit. Why would she? I’ve been around the kid enough to assume that he was halfway decent. Not good enough for her, but not the worst person in her life.” He narrows his gaze to my mother when finishing the last sentence, as if making a point.

Mia clears her throat. “This is on me, you guys. Dylan and I knew what we were doing when we first started seeing each other. He and Hannah were on the outs, constantly breaking up and getting back together. Things got intense and we decided to keep seeing each other no matter what the circumstances were. That isn’t on Leighton, Dad.”

Harry’s jaw gets tight, but he doesn’t say anything. Maybe she broke through to him because his nostrils flare but his lips don’t open to speak or argue.

I look to Mia and mouth *thank you*, still sidled closely to Kyler, whose hand has slipped into mine in comfort. My mother looks between us, something haughty in her eyes as she studies our linked fingers, before huffing. “As Mia said, this isn’t Leighton’s fault. I think we should try moving past this the best we can to get back to normal.”

Under his breath, Kyler scoffs, “Normal,” with thick skepticism in his tone that nobody questions. I look at him, brows pinched, as he tugs on my hand and leads me away from everyone and into the kitchen.

He gestures toward the stool, letting go of my hand and digging through the cupboards for something. When he produces a box of Kraft macaroni, I

can’t help but smile.

“Don’t let them make you feel insignificant, Lele,” he informs me, going about heating up my favorite meal. Ever since the news leaked, things have been crazy around the house. Mia’s people are setting up meetings, and Harry and Kyler have both been pestered for commentary on the matter, asking if they’re going to defend their family or not. Extra security had to come because the crowd outside has gotten so big that there’s a break risk, and I don’t fully want to accept what that means.

Everyone has been advised to remain quiet until a statement is made, but I’m not sure what can be said since the evidence is pretty clear based on the messages plastered on every site known to man. Mia and Dylan can’t deny the cheating scandal and Mia said she didn’t want them to. “It’s in the past,” she told the PR people on the phone earlier.

They didn’t take it well from the loud voices projecting through the other end of the phone.

At some point in the process of making me lunch, Kyler’s back tenses. Without facing me, he clears his throat and says, “Listen, Len. Things like this can get ugly before they get better. And when…” Rubbing the back of his neck with one hand as he stirs the macaroni in the little stovetop pot with the other, he sighs. “When people like my father get involved, a lot of shit is bound to come up.”

He never refers to Harry as his father, so I understand how heavy the situation is. “I don’t understand how people can make this worse. Mia is right. This happened a while ago. What more could they want besides an apology or something from her and Dylan?”

This time, he does turn. It’s slow and calculated, and when he meets my eyes, he gives me a funny look. One I can’t decipher until he opens his mouth. “That’s why you’re always going to be one of the good ones, Leighton. You don’t think anybody would be willing to dig up dirt on others for the sake of the show.”

I blink. “What show?”

His smile is sad. “When you’re public figures like we are, you’re the world’s entertainment. Every move made, word spoken, and action taken is going to be picked apart by the people watching, reading, and listening no matter when it happens. Look at all the social media posts from years ago that get dug up when the time fits that gets celebs into hot water. Remember when that happened to Asher?” He’s referring to his former Single Division

drummer, and I nod, remembering some tweet taken out of context that got him nearly dropped from their label and replaced in the band. “Katherine should have never brought you into this mess because you’ll be part of the scrutiny now.”

My throat bobs as I try swallowing that factoid. I haven’t done anything to warrant any public scrutiny minus the whole Beckham thing. I never cheated on a test or copied anybody’s homework. I’ve never stolen anything or even jaywalked in my life. The media has no reason to involve me. “I didn’t do anything, Ky.”

My frown is weighed down with worry as he blows out a long, burdened breath. “I know you haven’t,” he murmurs. “But your mom has, and I have a feeling it’s about to bite her in the ass.”

Mom? “I don’t understand. What do you me—”

“There you are,” Mia says, walking in and stopping behind me. She wraps me in her arms, squeezing me to her in a hug and resting her chin on my head. “I’m sorry about all that in there, Lenny Lou. Daddy is just protective about our image. I screwed it up, and he wrongfully took it out on you.”

My eyes are still locked on Ky’s, but he turns back around to finish making me lunch instead of telling me what Mom supposedly did. I look up to Mia and give her a tiny smile. “You don’t need to apologize either. We all make mistakes, right?”

She nods once.

“Are you and Dylan going to be okay?” I ask, genuinely worried. They seem so happy together. I like him. He’s funny and charming and sweet to Mia. He makes her smile, which makes me smile because she deserves to find someone who loves her as much as she loves him. When she told me after their first date, which seems like an eternity ago, that she was going to marry him someday, I believed it.

I still do.

Her arms tighten around me, making me gasp for air as she laughs. “I love you, Leighton. You’re always so worried about other people.”

“Because I care,” I rasp out, sucking in a breath when she releases me to take the seat beside me.

“I know you do.” Her smile grows. “And Dylan and I are going to be fine. We’ve already talked this morning. This won’t break us. We’ve made our bed and we’ll lay in it.”

“That’s it?”

She shrugs. “What else can we do?”

“You’re not going to go after Hannah or Beckham?” I blurt, making Kyler laugh from where he turns off the burner and grabs a bowl from the drainer.

Mia huffs. “Why would I do that?”

Again, Kyler snorts in amusement. “You once said you were going to scratch out the woman’s eyes who messed up your nails during a manicure.”

“They were crooked!” she exclaims in exasperation, throwing her hands up. “I paid a lot of money for them to be perfect. They were for *the Oscar’s*! How could I go to a prestigious award show with *crooked nails*?”

The warm brown eyes I’m accustomed to seeing everyday roll as he walks over with a bowl full of cheesy noodles. “Next you’re going to threaten to break the legs of whoever messes up your hair during your next stylist visit.”

Scoffing and crossing her arms over her chest, Mia says, “Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

When Ky looks at me, his brows are drawn up as if to say, *I’m the one being ridiculous?* The giggle escapes me before I can try holding it in, causing Mia to scowl at the two of us.

“You both suck,” she states, pushing off the stool and walking toward the door. “I hope your stupid macaroni and cheese is burnt and the brand goes out of business.”

Kyler’s laugh is loud and abrupt. “It wouldn’t upset me any,” he calls after her as she raises her middle finger in the air.

I frown. “Hey,” I grumble.

He rolls his eyes. “They’re like a multi-billion-dollar company. I doubt they’re going anywhere in our lifetime.” Pushing the bowl to me, he shoves a fork into the noodles. “You know I love you, right? No matter what?”

I blink at the random question, and when I see the distant but saturated look darkening his eyes, I frown. “Of course, I do.”

We’ve promised each other that we’ll always be friends, no matter what happens. That we’d love each other. I always keep my promises, and I know he does too. I bank on it, something I’ve never been able to do with Mom or anyone else.

But when he nods, I can't help but wonder what it is he doesn't want me finding out about. There's nothing that could make me feel any differently for the boy who I consider my closest friend—the only true one I hope to have for life.

AFTER TWO OF my favorite people wake me up with their loud rendition of "happy birthday", they yank the blankets off my bed and shake me until I'm laughing at their theatrics. Ky is grinning at the end of the bed while Mia tickles me under my arms relentlessly.

"We made breakfast," she announces, tugging on my arm.

"And by we," Kyler cuts in, "she means Beth. We burnt the pancakes. And the bacon."

Mia mutters, "The eggs were rubbery too."

Giggling, I swat Mia's hands away and sit up on my elbows. "You guys didn't learn the first time you tried cooking breakfast?"

After our birthday cake tradition, they thought they'd be ready for birthday meals. Specifically, breakfast. My favorite meal of the day. Beth even tried showing them how to cook certain things, and there's been a ten percent success rate over the years. I always smile and eat it because it's the thought that counts. Plus, they're better than Mom, and I manage to eat what she gives me without too much fuss.

The frown on both of their faces makes me laugh again as I swing my legs over the bed and follow them downstairs. I'm not surprised when I see that it's only us, neither of our parents anywhere to be seen. They know what tradition Mia, Ky, and I have, and rarely intervene when birthdays are involved. Mom sometimes leaves me a note wishing me a good day, Harry will sign a generic card with way too much money inside and put it where I can find it, but that's the extent of their involvement.

This is the longest relationship Mom's been in, and I think the biggest reason is because Harry always parades her around. She loves attention and used to get fed up or bored if one of her old boyfriends didn't give her enough of it. While it always bothered me, I'm glad this lifestyle is one that seems perfect for her, because it means we'll stay longer.

Since the Beckham fiasco, things between them have been extra awkward. I found Mom sleeping in a guest bedroom instead of theirs once, cheeks stained with tears, hair a mess, no makeup on, and I knew it was

bad. Another day when she was leaving the house after Harry left for work, I asked her if she was okay and she said, “I haven’t been okay in a long time,” before closing the door behind her. She didn’t come home for hours, and once again, arrived long after Harry did with no explanation.

An elbow nudges my arm, drawing me from my thoughts. “What are you thinking about?” asks Kyler in a quiet voice as Beth plates banana pancakes, bacon, eggs, and my favorite turkey sausage patties for us.

I give him a genuine smile, pushing away thoughts of Mom because I don’t want my worry to bleed through. Not today. I spend every other one obsessing over what she’s doing, if she’ll fall into another pit of depression or lash out, and I want *one day* where I don’t have to think about her. “Nothing. How long have you guys been up trying to make breakfast?”

His lips twitch when I emphasize “trying” but he just chuckles. “Beth kicked us out of the kitchen after eight. So…almost an hour?”

The woman in question puts a hand on her hip and stares at Kyler. “It’s disheartening to see so much good food wasted from a lack of skill. One of these days, you two will need to learn to cook.” She eyes both of them, nodding her head once when they wince.

When she meets my eyes, she smiles warmly, affectionately, and it’s a look I wish I saw on Mom’s face when she looked at me. “I have faith in you since I’ve seen you in the kitchen. You’ll have to teach these two something.”

Grinning, I accept the plate she sets in front of me with a “thank you”, earning me a “Happy birthday, sweet girl,” in return.

Breakfast is as delicious as it smells, and Mia initiates the presents first like always once we’re seated in the den with the TV paused at the beginning of our first movie of the day. They both asked if I wanted to go anywhere, especially since last year was spent at a Violet Wonders concert, but all I want is to lounge in my pajamas, make a cake, and spend time with them.

“Unfortunately, *someone* made it impossible to top last year’s present. I tried, Lenny Lou, but Kyler nixed my idea.”

The man beside me chokes. “I wasn’t going to let you hire Garrick to come here and do a goddam striptease.”

My face heats. “Uh…what?”

Mia points at me. “See! She would have been down for that.”

Wincing, I say, “Actually, I—”

“She wouldn’t,” Ky answers for me, pinning our older sister with firm eyes that tells her to drop it. “End of discussion. Give her your gift so we can move on from this.”

She mutters under her breath something that sounds like “just because you don’t want to see his junk doesn’t mean we don’t” which makes me struggle out a nervous laugh. Mia knows about the crush I’ve harbored on the lead singer of Violet Wonders, but that doesn’t mean I want to see his… *thing*. The thought alone makes me blush harder, and Kyler’s eyes narrow when he sees my blazing cheeks like he knows what’s going through my mind.

Sighing, Mia passes me a beautifully wrapped present that she eagerly watches me open with excited eyes. When I open the lid, she says, “I know, I know. It’s not the typical stuff I normally buy you. But since you loathe people spending a lot of money on you, I figured buying you a car would be out of the question even though you’re sixteen and absolutely need one.”

Staring down at me is a driver’s manual from the closest DMV. Smiling, I pick it up and notice the pink sticky note attached with Mia’s handwriting listing a date and time.

“That’s when your written exam is! I’m taking you that way Kyler can’t claim the glory of driving home with our newly permitted sister.” She claps her hands and beams when I smile at her.

“This is awesome, Mia,” I tell her truthfully, flipping through the booklet of laws and regulations, already eager and nervous for the written exam that I know awaits a week from now.

“Study up, sis. Don’t be like me who *may* have had to retake the test.”

Kyler deadpans, nudging my foot with his from where he’s perched on the floor with a long, rectangular box on his lap. “She had to take the exam twice, and the second time one of the workers practically gave it to her by going through the answers together.”

A loud groan sounds from beside me before Mia defends, “I have test anxiety, jackass! It’s a thing.”

It totally is a thing. Nora struggles with it, which is why I always help her study the week before a big test. She knows all the answers because we’d go over them countless times, but her anxiety would get the better of her and once she barely scraped by with a passing grade. I know she’s been working harder and harder to get the salutatorian spot for our graduating class, and every time someone—usually Striker, even though Nora told him

to go away after what his best friend did—would bring it up, Nora would get weird and clam up, saying she didn't want to talk about it.

Once their banter is done, Kyler passes me his present. I know what's inside isn't a test booklet, ticket to see my favorite band, or anything he's given me before, because he looks nervous. His front teeth bite into his bottom lip as I delicately undo the pretty silver ribbon wrapped around the plain white box. I don't recognize the label on the front of it, but Mia does when she gasps and starts watching carefully over my shoulder to see what's inside.

She sucks in a breath the same time I whisper, "Kyler," as I stare at the pretty silver chain with a guitar charm on it. Grazing it with my fingertip, I notice a smaller charm beside it, a heart that dangles off the same loop and hides behind the larger piece of jewelry.

He clears his throat. "It's interchangeable. There's an extender on the bottom if you want to wear it like a necklace, but it can be worn as a charm bracelet too." Picking it out of the box, he taps my wrist and helps me put it on.

"It's beautiful."

Mia examines it closer, taking my wrist and touching the charms. "How did our roles get reversed? I'm usually the one who goes overboard for birthdays."

I wince. "By overboard, you mean…?"

My sister with a slight shopping addiction meets my eyes with arched brows up to her hairline. "Do you know how much these things cost? Individual charms are at least—"

"Not important," Ky cuts in, smacking Mia's hand away before eyeing me. "It doesn't matter, so don't bother Googling it either. I saw it and knew I had to get it for you."

Normally the thought of something so expensive would make me uncomfortable, but it doesn't this time. I mean, I've worn designer clothes that Mia or Mom would give me, so jewelry isn't all that different. And it's from Kyler, which somehow makes it that much more special because he wouldn't spend too much money on me unless it was worth it.

I give them both hugs before we settle in to watch a movie, my hand cupping the bracelet resting on my wrist as our marathon continues throughout the day.

It’s going on three when we finish eating a lunch that Beth made us when the front door bursts open, and two familiar voices begin yelling from the foyer behind us. We all turn, alarm on my face, confusion on Mia’s, and something ashen on Ky’s as Harry and Mom appear in the den.

In Harry’s hand is a yellow envelope, but his eyes aren’t on Mom or whatever he’s carrying. They’re on Kyler, searing, sneering, and so dark that I feel it in my soul.

“What’s going on?” Mia asks slowly, caution thick in her inquiry.

“*You*,” Harry spits, suddenly staring directly at me, “and your mother need to go.”

“Harry,” Mom cries. It’s only then I see her red face, wet with tears, and glassy eyes as she wraps a hand around her fiancé’s arm. He yanks it away, putting distance between them as he walks further in the room, right in my direction.

I stiffen on the couch, heart nearly stopping with dread, with Mia and Kyler both leaning in as if to protect me when they see the way Harry’s hands shake as he lifts it and points.

“Dad—” Mia begins.

“No.” He glares at her, then turns to Kyler, who’s tucked me partially behind him again like the last time Harry went off at me only weeks before. “I don’t know what made you so inclined to butt into business that wasn’t yours, but I hope you’re happy. You got what you want.” He shifts his attention back to me, eyes cold, and adds, “I want you and your mother out of here by sundown. This won’t work anymore.”

Jaw quivering, I flinch when he turns abruptly and walks back where he came from. Mom starts crying harder. “Let me explain, Harry. I promise, I __”

“You lied!” he yells, making me gasp at how close he looks to hitting her. I stand, wanting to get between them, but Mia and Ky both put their hands on my arms to stop me. “You’re exactly what they say you are. A filthy, lying, gold digger. My fucking son was right about you.”

“That is enough!” Mia tells him, hand tightening around mine. “I don’t know what’s going on, but it can be worked out—”

Harry’s laugh is dry and humorless as he eyes his daughter before turning to me with hatred and something else burning through the air. “Whatever DNA you have that isn’t your mother’s is no longer my problem. I have nothing more to say to you but good luck with that one.”

His narrow eyes snap to Mom. “I sure as hell won’t be dealing with her again.”

My lips part in shock and something inside me snaps. I feel empty. So empty. Like a dam has been drained and all the memories, promises, and emotions formed over the past five years is just…gone. Vanished.

I croak out, “Mom?”

Harry shakes his head and throws the envelope at Mom’s feet, walking out of the room and closing the door behind him. The two people beside me are staring at my mother, and it’s Kyler whose grip loosens on me as he steps back like he’s been burned.

Turning to him through a glassy gaze, I try to take deep, even breaths, but feel like I’m suffocating in confusion. “I d-don’t know what he’s t-talking about.”

A gentle hand finds my back. “We’ll figure this out, Lenny Lou. Right, Ky?”

Kyler’s eyes are on the yellow envelope now in Mom’s hands. She reaches in and pulls out whatever’s inside, a few things falling to the floor. Pictures. Documents by the looks. One of them resembles my birth certificate, except it’s not the faded, yellowed one that is locked away upstairs. This one is white and free of flaws, like someone copied it.

“Mom?” I ask, walking toward her.

“I just wanted another chance.” Her words are so quiet I almost miss them. I blink at her, then at the paper on top of the pile she’s gripping so tightly in her hands that her pointy, manicured nails are cutting into it.

When I see the results in bold at the top, I know what it is. The paternity test taken when we first arrived. Except, it doesn’t have the same information as the one she gave Harry.

“Mom,” I repeat, brokenly. We were doing better. She took me out, bought me things she couldn’t before, and paid attention to me when she was always too busy in our old lives. We still fought, she said hurtful things, but nowhere near as bad as when it was just the two of us. “What did you do?”

Her eyes change. It happens so quickly I can’t process it. The tears subside and a switch flicked, her features going from pale to blank before I can blink. “What did you expect from me, Leighton? I’m trying to live the life you took from me.”

Feeling like I've been slapped, I take a step back and ball my hands into clenched fists. My own fingernails dig into the meaty part of my palm until they sting, and I won't be surprised if a mark is left or blood is drawn.

She lied.

Mom lied.

Again.

How many times is that? How long did she think she could keep up this charade? The questions are endless, and they'll never be answered because I know Katherine Grier. She won't give me the benefit of explaining herself or why she keeps ruining everything.

"We were happy here," I tell her through a cracked tone, broken like the ties she destroyed in front of everybody. "We were happy and you *ruined it*."

With one shake of her head, she glances over my shoulder at Kyler. "No, I didn't. *He* did. The one you've been following around like a lost puppy for years. Go ahead and ask him about the PI he hired to follow me. This is on *him*. He's the reason we're leaving. He's the one who's taking you away from this life."

She doesn't let me ask Kyler what she's talking about before she starts toward the stairs, her hand letting go of the paperwork until it flutters to the ground in a messy heap on the floor. "We need to pack, Leighton. Let's go."

Blinking past my tears, I stare at the different pictures of Mom with some guy I don't know outside the office I had to go to get the paternity test done. The man is kissing her, touching her, and she's smiling like she's encouraging it. Sultry, sexy, the same look she gives all men. There are so many different photos, on different days, at different times, with different men, that I suddenly understand why she always disappears.

When my eyes go to Kyler, all I can do is blink, waiting for him to say something. To deny it. Confirm it. Anything. His eyes are apologetic, sad, and Mia looks in disbelief as she shakes her head at him slowly.

"Why?" I ask.

Nobody answers.

Mom repeats herself. "We need to go, Leighton. Now. Go upstairs and pack your things. We're leaving."

But they're not my things. We don't have things. The only belongings upstairs are items given to us by the people we've both lied to. It doesn't matter that the lie I lived was by default, wholly unintentional, it's still a lie.

One I have to live with for the rest of my life when I look back at how loved I felt in this house by the two people who aren't saying a word. They aren't stopping Mom. I'm not sure they know how to process any of this, Mia the most, since apparently Ky has known.

He lied too.

In that moment, I decide I never want to be like the woman whose chronic lies impact everybody around her. As the Bishop siblings, who I no longer have a bond with like I believed, stare at me helplessly, I realize I want to be far from here and the heavy storm that's bound to come.

I can see it in Kyler's eyes.

This is only the start of something very, very bad. And Mom and I won't be around to witness it.

Before the front door closes behind us, I turn to Kyler, who's lips are pale and parted, and whisper, "You promised."

More silence.

More heartbreak.

Mia cries, hugging me tightly before stepping back and saying she'll fix it. "I'll make this right, Lenny Lou."

But I don't want any more promises.

I stare at Kyler one last time.

He never says a word.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

THE CHAIRS ARE PACKED when I peek my head out to see where all the buzz is coming from. A giddy smile spreads across my face when I notice people holding signs with Kyler's, Mia's, and Garrick's faces on them, along with a few "marry me" and "have my children" ones that make me giggle.

After Chase told me about the show, I'd gotten home to another book wrapped on the kitchen counter for me. But not even my favorite novel by Jane Austen could make me forget that Ky hadn't told me he was going to be on TV.

As soon as I brought it up, the look on his face turned sympathetic. Before he even said the words, I knew what they'd be. *"It's no big deal,"* he'd told me. But it is, and Kyler never lets anyone acknowledge that. I can't help but wonder if it's because Harry never made his accomplishments look like they mattered.

So, all I said was, "It is." Then asked him what time we were leaving.

One of the stagehands smiles at me when I scope out the large area. Everyone is busy getting things set before Hot in Hollywood starts filming, so I make my way back to Mia's dressing room. I may or may not have been eavesdropping when a man carrying a clipboard came to tell everyone when they would be called out. Mia and Garrick are appearing first, doing an interview together and then performing their song for the first time, and

then Kyler is the last to perform after doing an exclusive with the host Penny Gomez.

It’s surreal to be here, watching a pretty dark-skinned girl curling Mia’s hair while another does her makeup. “You look beautiful,” I tell her, walking in. They have her in a skintight red maxi dress, not that it’s hard to do when her bulging belly fills out most clothes she wears already.

“Thanks, Lenny Lou.” She’s told to look up so the petite woman whose skin looks like porcelain can do the finishing touches to Mia’s eye makeup.

“I just wanted to tell you good luck.” I jab a thumb behind me. “The audience is full, and everyone seems really excited.”

The woman doing her hair smiles at me through the mirror’s reflection. “This show sold out in an hour and a half after the lineup was announced. The show’s producer is expecting it to be the highest rated show.”

My brows lift. “That’s amazing.”

Both women nod while Mia beams. “Did you see Ky yet?”

Nibbling my lip, I shake my head. “Not yet,” I offer quietly. She catches the tone and stares at me through the mirror. Nothing is said, but the way her eyes lock with mine says a lot more than words can.

I don’t actively talk about the day at her house because I’m afraid I’ll give away too much. Ky and I haven’t shared any more kisses since that night, but the stolen touches happen more often than not—when one of us is making breakfast, the slightest brush of a hand in passing, the dancing of lingering fingertips as we wash the dishes, and the faint taunt of whispered words as we go our separate ways to bed.

We’re hyperaware of each other, but never make another move, no matter how badly we may want to.

I’m glad neither of us are running from what happened, but we’re also not talking about it, like saying the words, admitting what we haven’t openly said, would make things change too quickly. Is that what he wants?

When he’s watching TV with me, he’ll absentmindedly stroke my shin when I’m using him as a footrest, his thumb digging into my skin a little harder than normal, like he’s trying to engrave his fingerprint. Hope settles into my chest when I think about those moments but threatens to run when we’re saying goodnight and he won’t kiss me on the cheek like he used to. He’ll stare at me, eyes cloudy, before squeezing my arm for a few seconds and then walk upstairs without looking back.

And when he asks me about Chase and his voice gets low and his eyes won't meet mine, I wonder if he's trying to figure out if he'd prefer I say I ended things with him or that I haven't. Ever since I told him I was considering my options he's never asked why or if I have.

We're a mixture of tension and normalcy and I can't figure out if I'm relieved or anxious over it, waiting for the last shoe to drop. Maybe even hoping it will because that means a decision has to be made.

Shifting on my feet, I rest a hand on the wall beside me and smile. "I'm going to see him after this."

She nods once. "Good. And if you see Garrick, tell him if this baby surprises us with its presence today, he has to deliver it."

I snort and the woman doing Mia's makeup chokes out a laugh. "That'd be something, wouldn't it?"

Mia shrugs. "My mother told me she had both of Kyler and I sooner than expected, and I figure today would be the day for the little one to show up if he or she—" She eyes me again. "—is as dramatic as I am."

This time, the hair stylist chuckles as she lowers the curling wand. "The first can come at any time. Let's just hope it's not today. I'm not sure I'd want Garrick Matthews being my midwife."

When Mia opens her mouth, I know what she's about to say is going to be a true Mia Casanova response because her eyes sparkle. "If I had to choose anyone here, it'd be the one with the most experience around a vagina."

"Oh my God," I groan, which is drowned out by the sound of all three of them barking out laughter that I'm sure a bunch of people can hear outside the room.

"You're not wrong," the makeup artist giggles, putting a brush down before grabbing a tube of lipstick. "If the stories I hear are true, he knows what he's doing with one."

Mia snorts and puckers her lips when asked so the lipstick can be applied. The beautiful woman finishing up the last touches to Mia's hair says, "I don't know if I'd want to be with someone who has that much experience with—" She side eyes me for a second. "Er, lady parts."

I can't help but grin when Mia snorts at her artists' careful words. "You can say vagina, pussy, or any variation around Leighton. She's been stuck dealing with me long enough and I don't beat around the bush. No pun intended."

Cheeks heating, I roll my eyes at her. “It’s true,” I agree, biting my bottom lip when the hair stylist glances at me.

“I’d want someone with a little less of a reputation that way I won’t have to constantly compare myself to the others they’ve been with,” she says, shrugging. Momentarily, my mind goes to Kyler and all the women he’s bound to have been with. Even though I haven’t admitted I’m a virgin outright, he definitely knows. “Someone like… Doesn’t he have a brother?”

Choking on air, I see Mia’s humor-filled eyes dart toward me. A flawless eyebrow arches as she opens her mouth. “He *does*. And tell us, Lenny Lou, are there certain…traits or skill sets passed down through genetics?”

Heat explodes across my face when the other two women gape at me as I refrain from glaring at Mia. She knows Chase is adopted, but that doesn’t stop her from getting her fill.

“Oh my God!” the makeup artist chirps, blinking at me. “I forgot he was dating someone. You guys never go out! You might as well be Big Foot to the media.”

Flinching, I manage to lift my shoulders in a casual shrug. “Neither of us really likes the attention. It’s easier to stay in.”

Mia’s eyes pierce mine in silence.

The same woman sighs dreamily. “It’s so sweet that the youngest Matthews and Bishop are together. It’s so…fairytale somehow.”

I’m about to make the distinction that I *know* they know already when Mia beats me to it. “She’s technically not our blood sister.” Before I can let her words go to heart, she pins me with her eyes, and with conviction adds, “But she’ll always be family. No matter what.”

Both women make noises that sound like a mixture of “aww” and “so sweet” before returning to finish their work so the reality star can go sing her heart out.

There’s no way neither of them didn’t know the reality of the Bishop scandal. It was everywhere. Headlines that called out my mother. Tabloids that accused me of trying to get an ‘in’ to buy the best education this side of the country has to offer. I never told anybody this, but after going back to Phoenix, Mom and I would get trailed by reporters wanting to follow the “exiled has-beens” to see how we were living. They got a lot of good pictures and footage of the shitty places we stayed, and the men Mom would parade around to act like she wasn’t hurt by Harry kicking us out. I

don’t know what happened to those pictures because I refused to look at the magazine rack at the stores I went into and was thankful when our internet was cut so I couldn’t see anything lingering online.

Telling Kyler and Mia about how bad it got would make them feel worse than they both admitted they already do. Kyler more. He’s held it against himself like the whole thing is his fault. But he didn’t tell my mother to have sex with people so they’d lie about my bloodwork. He wasn’t the one to convince her to cheat on Harry during their engagement. Ky never asked her to keep up a pointless charade that would tear us apart.

It’s not his fault. It never was. And while I spent a long time being upset with him for letting me walk away so easily, I had to let it go. I was already being eaten alive by Mom’s constant mood swings and games, I couldn’t hold a torch over my heart whenever I thought about Kyler and let the flickering flames threaten to burn me alive.

“He’s too young for me anyway,” the stylist says, sighing again. She grabs a can of hairspray and looks over her shoulder at me. “He treats you well, honey?”

There’s no hesitation. “Yes. Very well.”

Her smile is sweet. “Good. You keep him, you hear? Boys like that are rare. We need to hold onto them for as long as we can.”

Ignoring the look that I know Mia is giving me, I clear my throat and bob my head once, not wanting to continue this conversation with strangers. “I’m going to check on Kyler.”

His room is only a few doors down, and I think I’d be more comfortable without prying eyes studying me the way Mia is right now.

“It was nice meeting you,” the women call out as I wave goodbye.

The short trek to Ky’s room lasts all of five seconds, and I stop short when I hear him and, who I know for sure is Gordy, talking. “I already checked. They can’t, man.”

“You sure?” Ky gruffs.

There’s a pause. “Can I ask why?”

“No.”

“Kyler—”

“You’re my friend,” he tells Gordy slowly, the tone of his voice warning. “But you don’t need to know everything.”

A heavy feeling drenches my skin like a sheen of sweat. Are they talking about me? Ky doesn’t always make Gordy do things outside of

what's expected of him without an explanation, and I'm sure he's not willing to explain that we…

Don't go there.

But I do. Because the barely-there kiss, the one that was just a ghost of a touch between our lips, still replays in my mind. Over and over like a stupid broken record of torture, followed by the others we shared in his bed. I tell myself to stop thinking about it whenever my thoughts take me there, but that makes me think about it more. How can I not? Two practically non-existent kisses from the boy who's been my best friend and number one supporter from the start is melded into my mind, body, and soul unlike any other kiss I've gotten before.

It's likely, more than likely, that he's asking Gordy to do something for him that's because of me. Then real sweat dots my forehead. What if he's asking Gordy to look for other places? Kyler wouldn't just up and leave. The whole reason I'm here is because I needed someone to help me get grounded, and I already checked with UCLA about housing, but—

"Hey," Gordy says, snapping me out of my train of thoughts. "You okay? You're a little pale, Len."

A little pale? That's probably an understatement, but I force a tight-lipped smile across my face and nod anyway, hoping he doesn't know I overheard them. "I'm good." The high tone of my voice says otherwise, and I want to kick myself.

His eyes narrow. "Kyler was looking for you earlier. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you."

My mind wraps around the worst as I give another terse nod to Gordy and walk past him into the room that's slightly bigger than Mia's.

Instead of being in a makeup chair with people surrounding him, Ky is on a small loveseat with an arm thrown over the back. He isn't smiling when I walk in, but the anvil on my chest lifts a centimeter when his eyes brighten as our eyes lock. "Hey, you."

"Mind if I sit?" I ask stupidly, gesturing toward the space unoccupied.

His brows pinch. "Of course."

Hesitantly, I sit in the furthest spot from him, flattening the skirt Mia gave me as a late birthday present. It's long, orange, and matches my fingernails that I painted this morning. "What was that about? With Gordy, I mean?"

Something flashes in his eyes, and worry settles back in the pit of my stomach. “Nothing you need to worry about.”

“I just thought…” Stopping myself, I shake my head. Strands of hair fall over my shoulder, obscuring part of my view of him.

“You thought what?”

I shouldn’t have said anything. Wetting my dry, chapped lips, I look up with a bright smile on my face. “I came in to wish you luck. I just saw Mia, and—”

“What did you think, Leighton?”

Lips twitching, my smile slips, giving away the fret before I can mask it again. “It’s nothing, Ky. I’m just being stupid.”

His nostrils flare. “Tell me then.”

Knowing he won’t let this go, even if I stall long enough until he goes on, I close my eyes for a few measly seconds before opening them to an intense, impatient stare. “I thought maybe you were asking Gordy to look into a new house or something.”

He blinks. That’s all he does.

“You know, because of the other night. The, uh, the thing that happened at Mia’s. And then… Well, you left, and I know you didn’t have anywhere else to go because you’d already said your schedule was clear for the day. I figured you were trying to escape because you were upset.” The shrug I add is meant to be causal, like it doesn’t bother me, but Kyler knows me better than that.

Slowly, he shakes his head in disbelief, his eyes narrowing enough to make me prepare for the response that’s coming. “I told you I’m not running.”

I swallow.

“It was barely a kiss,” he adds.

In hindsight, my brain conjured the same thought. It really *wasn’t* a kiss—not the first one. That one had been a means to an end. For Mia. But the second one, the one that led to nothing, no follow up or discussion, had been more, and we still don’t broach the subject like we’re letting it slide through the cracks.

But hearing that from him is different than accepting it myself. Those words sting more than they do when my brain formulates the admission to myself, and I wonder if it’s because I don’t *want* what happened to fall through the cracks, but maybe he does.

So, I don’t say anything.

He does though. “We’ve been fine, haven’t we?”

I want to tell him yes, because we don’t talk about it, but I don’t. “I suppose.”

More staring. Then, “There hasn’t been anything weird between us, so there isn’t a reason for me to spend more money than necessary on another house. If I wanted to run, I’d be back in New York right now.”

My lips part slightly. He’s right. I know he is, but the side of me that insists on overanalyzing everything clings onto the fact he won’t tell me about the conversation with Gordy.

He must know that. “I already told you, the thing with Gordy isn’t anything to worry about. Some stuff with my mom and her boyfriend. That’s all.”

Oh. I frown. “Is she okay?”

A pause. Then a head nod. His lips press into a grim line as his eyes trail off, lost in thought. “They’re going through a rough patch. Same story, different day. Just wish she’d make up her mind about what she wants.”

From what Mia has said, she already has, but I can tell Kyler still doesn’t agree with her choices. “Maybe she has, Ky.”

He looks at me, blinking. “Yeah, maybe.”

Eventually, the TV mounted in the corner across from us starts a countdown for Hot in Hollywood. From the close distance, the audience begins cheering, calling out Penny’s name as the screen shows the same people waving their hands and signs in the air as the camera pans over them.

“Want to watch it in here with me until I’m called?” he asks, eyes focused on me instead of the TV.

I don’t ask him if he means it because he wouldn’t offer otherwise. “Yes, please.” He stretches his arm back out over the top of the couch cushions and settles in, spreading his legs to get comfortable.

Biting my bottom lip, I crisscross my legs under me and wiggle into the hard cushion. You’d think for the money they’re sure to have here, they’d buy more comfortable furniture, but I guess style is more significant.

It’s the twenty-five-minute mark when one of the crew member’s tells Mia and Garrick they’re getting ready for them after the allotted commercial break. Ky and I walk out to wish them luck.

When Mia and Garrick are introduced and make the walk onto the stage, the crowd's noise level increases so much I have to cover my ears to drown it. Ky nudges my arm before dipping his chin toward the dressing room again, so I nod and follow him back to watch them from the TV instead.

The interview they do has both Kyler and I laughing so hard there are tears in my eyes. At some point throughout the fifteen-minute segment when they talk with Penny, play a get-to-know-you game where Garrick and Mia have to guess each other's favorite things (which they both got almost all wrong), Kyler is planted so close to me our thighs are touching. I feel the fingers from his hand thrown over the back cushion, playing with the loose strands of my hair. I'm not sure he knows he's doing it, or if it's an absentminded action, but I'm hyperaware of each time his fingers curl a piece of hair around it and tug ever so slightly.

When Penny tells the audience that Mia and Garrick have agreed to perform their new duet, they all get on their feet. I smile when Garrick helps Mia up like a true gentleman and guides her over to where the crew set up two microphones and stools. There's a band off to the side that the camera turns to, making sure each member is shown, before zooming into the two singers.

The song is perfect for them. Mia's voice is light and airy, whereas Garrick's is low and seductive. I know Dylan, who's in the front row of the audience with a huge, goofy grin on his face as he watches his wife, told Garrick not to get too much into the performance. I wasn't around when they practiced, but according to the man Mia took her last name from, Garrick was doing anything to flirt and get a reaction from him.

From what Kyler said, seduction is the key to capturing listeners' attentions. And the performance they're putting on is definitely worthy of starting rumors that Mia's baby might not be Dylan's after all. That's how good it is when they face each other and sing, eyes never breaking apart during the entire time.

I shake my head. "They're amazing," I whisper, unable to look away from the screen. Goosebumps cover my arms when callused fingers brush the crook of my neck, tracing the line of my shoulder and collarbone.

"They are," he agrees quietly, working the muscles in my shoulder until my head rolls forward from the blissful sensation of knots being undone.

We sit like that until the song finishes, the audience claps and yells out in praise, and Penny gives both her guests hugs before saying they'll be back. Kyler only withdraws his hand from my shoulder when Mia's and Garrick's voices grow nearer, entering Kyler's room where we both stand to greet them.

They don't need us to tell them how amazing they are because both singers already know. The hug I give Mia is tight and the smile I offer Garrick is sheepish because, no matter how much time passes, he's always going to be my first crush—an idol I've looked up to for so long and loved every song of.

The way he watches me now is still with a teasing tone, his eyes bright and up to no good, his smirk somehow different as his eyes dance between me, Kyler, and Mia. We talk for a while before Mia says she needs to get off her feet and leaves to her dressing room.

Garrick and Kyler chat for a few minutes while I listen to Penny playing a game with the audience and doing a segment about some new movie coming out that she's endorsing. It's just Ky and I again for a few minutes before he has to go on.

I follow him out like we did for Mia and Garrick, saying, "You and Garrick seem to get along better."

He chuckles, lifting a shoulder. "He's never been a bad guy." The tip of his tongue swipes across his bottom lip before he glances down at me. "I'll still deny it if you tell him that."

Not able to stop the giggle, I remind him of what the media claimed not long ago. "Every couple has a lover's quarrel at one time or another, I suppose. Maybe your guys' is over."

Glaring, his amusement counters the otherwise deadpan expression. "You spend too much time with Mia. She's corrupted you."

All I can do is smile, not bothering to hide the way his thought amuses me. Maybe he's a little right, but he doesn't seem fazed. "There could be worse influences."

His silence agrees.

"Mr. Bishop," the crew member calls, waving him forward. Ky winces, still not okay with the name. He, like always, doesn't correct them. "They're getting ready to call you."

I'm busy looking out at the waiting crowd, what little of them I can see from here, when I startle over a hand capturing mine. Long fingers thread

through mine, warm and callused from guitar strumming, and I glance down when he squeezes our palms together as Penny calls his name.

“See you after,” he tells me, brushing a kiss to my cheek that lingers dangerously close to the corner of my mouth until the last second he has to make his walk into the screaming crowd of mostly women admirers.

His kiss lingers, my fingertips brushing the area he touched, a feeling buzzing through my system as I watch him stroll out with unblinking eyes. Kyler is confident and eased as he waves to his many fans. They’re louder with him, more desperate because of how little he makes appearances these days. I wonder if he’ll decide to do a show or two, maybe plan a concert, after seeing their reactions. Selfishly, part of me doesn’t want him to because that means having to see him leave, but I know how important that is to a singer’s career and I’d support him no matter what he chose.

When Penny hugs him, they exchange a few words before she tells everybody that he’s going to sing his newest song, and when he walks over to the lone wooden stool, picks up his trusty guitar, I melt along with every person in the audience, holding onto the lyrics that caress the air.

I don’t realize I’m not alone until halfway through his song, one I’ve heard so many times because I’ve asked him to sing it to me all the time since my birthday, until Garrick appears in my peripheral.

“Do you like my little brother?” the Australian asks, leaning against the wall, one ankle crossed over the other.

I blanch. “Of course I do.”

He studies me. “*Really* like him.”

All I can do is blink because I’m not sure what prompted the question. He’s looking at me like Kyler used to look at Beckham when I first brought him around—guarded.

“You know I like you, Little Bishop,” he says when I don’t reply. “But I’m sort of obligated to like my brother more. Which means I need to look out for him.”

Swallowing, I catch his meaning. The unspoken threat that a good big brother would give anybody close to Chase. I respect it, even if it makes me uncomfortable.

“So,” he hedges, that accent smooth yet firm, “You need to cut him loose if this isn’t the kind of like that he feels for you. He deserves more than someone who’s hung up on another guy.”

My lips part, but nothing comes out. No words, no oxygen. Lungs stinging, I force myself to take a breath and watch him push off the wall, suddenly forgetting the reason I'm here because all I hear is my thumping heart.

"No matter *who* the guy may be," he adds.

He walks away.

Later, I'll realize that he knows the truth before I do. A truth I don't want to admit because it'll change everything.

I miss the interview in a tangle of panic, sitting in the dressing room and staring at the string of texts from Chase that I hadn't noticed until now because I've been lost in the only man who's ever fully captured my attention.

Garrick's words echo in my head.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

MY THUMBNAIL IS PRACTICALLY nonexistent from all the biting I've been doing, but it's settled between my lips while Chase looks at me. It started when I suggested we do something at his house instead of going out to dinner like he wanted since his Mom and her friends would be there for their book club. It's…safer. Safer because the way he looks at me isn't with any type of admiration like he used to, and though I deserve it, it doesn't make me any less scared to do what I should have long before now.

I'm not surprised he walks us to the sunroom where we've done a lot of work together and asks, "What's going on with us, Leighton?"

The question is overdue, and maybe I should have asked myself that a while ago when I let my thoughts linger to Kyler. But my need to turn those thoughts away had me holding onto what I had with Chase, no matter what that was. Until now, I'd wanted it to be more than friendship, because that meant whatever I had with Kyler was a fluke. That perhaps, maybe, I saw the man with the pretty brown eyes that the world loved as a safety net. Someone to depend on. And I do, but that's not the sole reason.

I love Kyler because he remembers people's names.

I love him because he endures the nasty things I eat, the music that I love, and books I read because he knows they make me happy.

I love Kyler because he's always willing to do whatever is necessary to get me to smile, to understand that I'm worth it no matter what others tell

me, and that my dedication to my future is admirable instead of embarrassing.

I've never pretended not to love Kyler Bishop, because I've gotten to love him for years. This kind just happens to be different—the type that people will judge and dissect and scold and discuss for years to come.

But love that we can't have always lasts the longest, hurts the deepest, and feels the strongest because we have more to prove to those people than anything else.

My throat struggles to swallow, my lungs stinging from the lack of oxygen properly flowing as I search Chase's distant eyes.

He sits on the edge of the red and white Hawaiian-themed bench cushions, his elbows resting on his bent knees. "I've been trying to get through to you for a while now but you're not there anymore."

Cringing, I accept the truth in that statement because he's not wrong. I remain standing a safe distance away, not that the room is particularly large enough not to feel the rising tension in the air. A sweaty palm runs down the side of my leg, nerves building higher and higher in my chest. "Can I ask you something?"

He blinks at me slowly, shaking his head in exasperation. "If it gets you telling me what's happening, then sure." There's a bite to his tone that I accept full responsibility for.

"Are you happy with me?"

Silence.

He leans back and stares at me, studying my squirmy figure as I shift on my feet. Eventually, one of his hands threads through his curly hair before scraping down the side of his face. "Is this your way of telling me you're not happy with me? Because I think I'd rather you just come out with it."

I suck in a breath. "It's not that—"

He stands, throwing his hands up. "Then what is it, Leighton? We've been walking around whatever you haven't told me for weeks now. Just tell me. What's. Going. On?"

I've never seen Chase angry before. His eyes are darker, and his stature seems taller when he stands at full height as he waits. Waits for what? Me to tell him I'm miserable when I'm not? I'm happy with Chase…as friends. Everything else feels forced. If I'm being honest with myself, I think it felt that way even before Kyler walked in on us, like I was trying to convince myself that going further with him would somehow change my feelings, so

maybe it was a blessing in disguise that we'd been interrupted. If one person feels that in a relationship, then doesn't the other have to at some point as well?

"I've been…" Excuses linger at the tip of my tongue, but I wet my lips and walk over to the matching armchair. "I'm not unhappy with you, if that's what you think. I only ask because neither of us has—" Stopping myself with the bad choice of words, I shake it off and regroup, trying to figure out what to say and how to say it.

Chase doesn't give me that chance. "We haven't what? What has neither of us done? Because I'll be honest, Leighton, it feels like I've tried to do a lot lately and you've been everywhere but here with me."

Closing my eyes, I fist my hands and bury them under my legs. "We haven't really been talking about anything," I tell him, voice too somber for the mood of the conversation. "You knew I wasn't any good at the dating thing because I've had no experience at it, but I wanted to try."

"*Wanted* to?"

Nibbling the inside of my cheek for a moment, I peek up at him. "We were really good friends. You were the first friend I had here who I didn't think felt obligated to be with me for any reason."

He jerks back, jaw slack. "Friends?"

Aren't we? Before I can ask, he laughs, but it's the unamused kind. Dry. In disbelief. "Is this because of what happened with Kyler that night? We haven't been the same since then, which makes no sense considering your still buddy-buddy with the person who caught us doing it. It isn't like we fucked, Leighton! He could have walked in on worse."

Blood drains from my face. "I don't want to talk about—"

His voice raises as he paces his side of the room, stopping to stare at me with hard eyes for a moment. "Of course you don't! You never want to talk about it. Like always, I have to drag the conversation out of you."

Warmth fills my chest, and I don't have time to figure out if it's in embarrassment or something else. "It wasn't easy to talk about."

He steps forward but stops himself. "If it was so hard to talk about with me, then why is it so easy for you to run back home and pretend like it never happened with the person who saw me doing it to you?"

The flush is furious on my face. "Chase, I don't—"

"No! I went down on my girlfriend and got caught. If you don't think that's embarrassing as hell for me too then you're mistaken. But I moved

past it like I thought we were both going to do, except *I* actually did something to prove that. Do you think I wanted to show my fucking face to the guy who looked like he wanted to murder me that night? No. But I showed up to talk to him *for you* because I know how much Kyler means to you."

My eyes grow big. "What are you talking about? You never told me you went to see him."

His hands go to either side of his neck, gripping it as he expels a breath. "It wasn't important. What was said had to be between him and me. And it was. The point is, not once have you shown any effort to actually move on from it."

I want to tell him that's not true, but instead, I stupidly blurt, "Is this because we haven't fooled around since then?"

The gaping expression on his face tells me my mistake instantly. "Garrick was right," he states, shaking his head again and giving me his back to look out the window.

What does Garrick have to do with this?

He blows out another long breath, but the muscles of his back are still tense. Shoulders drawn back as he leans against the wall, he murmurs, "None of this is about us not *fooling around*, Leighton. I've been willing to wait as long as you needed to."

He's never pushed. "I know you have."

"So why," he asks, turning to me slowly with eyes that pin me to the seat, "does it feel like you're trying to make excuses to end this?"

Something inside me untethers, and the reality of this situation floods the room. "W-What?"

His tongue swipes over the closed seam of his lips as he makes his way back over to the cushion he occupied before. "Ever since I talked to Garrick about…" A shoulder lifts. "He's the type to be brutally honest with people, especially me. I never listened to him before, but I should have. I see my error. Silly me."

My mind wraps around one thing, and one thing only. "You told him about what happened between us?" The rising octave of my tone makes him stare at me with an unreadable expression.

"*You* told Mia," he points out.

"Because I needed her!"

“And I didn’t need my brother?” he yells back, making the distant chatter in the house dull. He’s standing again, and so am I. “You’re not the only one who gets to confide in people, Leighton. I needed to talk to somebody, and that someone happened to be him, because I finally met someone I liked. Someone I thought liked me back, but I’m obviously an idiot.”

Garrick knows what happened. My chest tightens and I feel familiar nausea take over my stomach, creeping up my throat. He knew when he talked to me at the set of Hot in Hollywood—when he warned me away from his brother.

“Oh my God,” I croak.

Chase scoffs at me. “It doesn’t feel great, does it? Knowing that people are willing to talk to anybody but you about something private.”

“That’s not—” My voice cracks. “I mean, it is sort of the reason, but—”

“What?” he demands loudly. “Is it harder for you because you’ve always been a huge fan of him? Is that why this is mortifying for you?”

I’m struck speechless, lips parted at his statement phrased as a question. How does he know about my obsession with Violet Wonders? I never got around to telling him because I didn’t think he’d take it well.

“Yeah,” he says coolly. “Mia didn’t hesitate to show me pictures from over the years. Real cute, the way you practically wallpapered your damn bedroom with my brother’s face.”

Blinking back tears that sting my eyes, I shake my head adamantly at him. Now he’s making assumptions and being cruel. “It wasn’t like that. Yes, I was a fan, but it’s not like I ever used you or anything because of it.”

“Then why are you acting like this?”

Why? I ball up my hands again. “Maybe we shouldn’t talk about this when we’re both upset.”

His laugh is maniacal. “Wow. Shocker. Instead of talking about things, you want to run away from them. Let me guess. You’ll go home and talk it all out with Kyler, right?”

“We’re not talking now! We’re arguing and going around in circles,” I hiss, trying to keep my voice down even though the damage is already done. I have no doubt people have heard more than they bargained for.

“You’re right. We’re arguing. Couples argue, Leighton. You’d know that if you actually gave us a shot.”

This is all my fault? I've blamed myself for a lot, and while I do hold some of the blame here, I won't accept all of it. "I'm sorry that you're upset, but I don't feel like being the bad guy here. We both could have tried harder."

He actually rolls his eyes. "I did try. My biggest problem with this entire thing is that you can't see that. It was never me you were going to choose, so what's the point?"

His words sound so final that my heart squeezes until it tears. "What does that even mean, Chase?"

"It means…" The way his shoulders lift into a tense shrug has me staring at him, trying to read his expression. It's clear though. Blank. Drained. While his tone shows defeat, nothing else gives away what words come next.

"Leighton, dear," Mrs. Matthews says quietly from the doorway of the room. She looks between us, then over her shoulder where I'm sure people are eavesdropping over our spat. "I think it's time you left."

I don't miss the apology in her tone. Standing, I nod at her and run my palms down the front of my thighs to get the clamminess off them. When I wait for Chase to say something else and realize he's not, I know I have to make the next move. Maybe the final one. "Are we breaking up?" I whisper, holding onto the doorjamb before exiting it.

It's awkward enough being broken up with but having other witnesses —his *mom*—to see it, makes it worse.

His head slowly rises, eyes finally showing a mixture of hurt and anger when they lock with mine. "I'm not sure we were ever together, so I'm making it clear that way we're finally on the same page for once."

All I can do is nod, feeling the brush of Mrs. Matthews' hand on my back in a strange sense of comfort as she guides me to the door. Before I walk out, I turn to her. "I didn't mean to hurt him."

Her smile is sweet, but somber. "Nobody means to do that, sweetheart."

She doesn't tell me to give him time, or that it'll be okay. For some reason, that makes me feel better. I don't want any more false hope that things will be fine when I know, in a lot of ways, they won't be.

Because today I lost my first friend in a long, long time. And that seems more tragic than anything that was said between us.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

SHE'S CURLED into herself with her hands cupped together under her chin watching *Jaws*. The smile she gives me when I walk in doesn't reach her eyes, and I know something happened. Patting her legs, she shifts and lets me pick them up like normal, dropping them, and the blanket, over my lap to cover both of us.

It's probably pointless to state the obvious, but I do it anyway. "You're watching a Steven Spielberg movie."

Humming, she pulls the blanket to her face and covers part of it when the shark appears. She used to try hiding like this whenever we watched other things that scared her. Or that one time not too long ago when we rented *Toy Story 4* and she got emotional because it was ending so she used the blanket to pretend she wasn't crying when the credits rolled.

"You hate Steven Spielberg movies," I add slowly.

"I don't *hate* them," a tiny muffled voice says through the knit material.

I yank the blanket away to see her frowning. "Are you going to tell me what's wrong, or do I need to guess?" It's then a single tear rolls down her cheek. Before she can wipe it away, I curse and reach for it myself, brushing the path with the pad of my thumb. "Please don't cry. You know I hate it when you do that. I'm helpless here unless I know what to do."

Her little sniffles don't help the ache in my chest as I tilt her chin to meet my gaze that she's trying to avoid. The glassy eyes that meet mine

lodge my heart into my throat and chokes me with emotion. “Hey,” I murmur quietly, offering her my free hand and waving it to get her to move. “Come here.”

She stares at me with unblinking eyes until I grab one of her hands and tug her up, swinging her body around until her head is using my lap as a pillow instead of her legs. Stroking her hair, we sit like that for a few moments before I loosen a sigh. “Is it work?”

I know Leighton well enough to know nothing at the café could make her cry. Not even the scumbag who owns the place or the coworker who’s selfish enough to sell bogus fucking stories to the press for a quick buck. She’s stronger than letting low lives like that win.

“Is it school?” I guess when she doesn’t answer, her head burrowing into my leg more as she battles me for the blanket. “Lenny, I’m not going to let you hide. Tell me what’s up so I can try helping.”

It’s faint, but I hear her words perfectly clear when she croaks them out. “You can’t.”

There isn’t much that I can’t help her with, so I need her to explain. “I’m sure there’s something.”

Her head moves in a shaking motion.

My hand stops brushing through her loose hair. “If you don’t tell me, I’ll be forced to use my charm and wit. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll have to use threats.”

More sniffling. Then, “What would you threaten me with?”

Narrowing my eyes, I scope out the roots I helped her cover. “I won’t help you dye your hair again if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.”

A pause. “You already told me you were never doing that again because of the smell.”

The smell *is* atrocious. “Fine. I’ll…” My hand starts moving again on its own free will, sending calming strokes through her thick strands. “I’ll hide all your mac and cheese so you can’t find it.”

At first, I think she’s crying harder because her shoulders shake lightly. But after the softest, choking-like sound escapes her lips, I realize she’s laughing. “That *would* be cruel,” she replies, a bit of amusement laced in her tone.

My hand drags down her head to her neck, massaging it before settling on her shoulder and squeezing. “Can you at least tell me if you’re okay? I

can kick somebody's ass if you need me to. Mia would too if it came down to it."

After a moment, she turns to face me, her eyes still glazed with tears, but no more falling that I can see. "I know you guys would." She presses her lips together for a moment, absentmindedly staring off in front of her like there's something fascinating about the plain gray tee I'm wearing. I'm still staring at her when she glances up at me through her thick lashes. "I got into a fight with Chase."

My eye twitches. "Oh."

She nods once. "Did he…" Licking her lips, she takes a deep breath and asks, "Did he come to see you after I went to stay at Mia's?"

Scratching one of my raised eyebrows, I look away from her for a second. The kid had come to see me a few days after the incident, and I gave him a lot of props for it. If I were in his shoes, I probably wouldn't have shown my face for a while.

"He did," I answer cautiously, not sure what he told her already. Based on her question, I'm guessing not much.

She waits for me to enlighten her.

Clearing my throat, I shift under her until I'm sunk into the cushion I'm occupying. "He wanted to make sure things were going to be okay moving forward. With you two. With…all of us." The conversation may have been a bit more complicated than that, and there was a time or two I considered threatening him with my fist or a gun, but I figured Leighton wouldn't appreciate that. Because the truth is, any guy who's willing to face me after that happened is always going to fight for her, and she deserves somebody like that no matter how I feel.

"You two fought?" I inquire, my hand palming the length of her bare arm before making slow strokes back up it in warm friction. My mother used to do the same to me, calming me when I was worked up. I'm not sure who needs it more for this talk—me or her.

It feels like an eternity stretches between us before she says, "We broke up."

My hand stops halfway through its stroke, a tangle of hair wrapped around my fingers as I watch her carefully. "Oh." The repeated word comes out much slower this time, my head wrapping around the three words. I blink, snapping out of the haze and tensing up. "Want me to do something about it?"

Leighton snorts, looking up at me again with a twisted smile on her face. “Like what? Hire the mafia you elude to knowing?” Her gray eyes, nearly charcoal from the tears, roll. “Can I ask you something, Ky?”

Clicking my tongue, I nod slowly.

She repositions so she has a better angle to look up at me, one of my hands falling to her hip when she sits up on her elbow. “Have you ever been with somebody because you thought it was for the best, but all it does is mess things up between you?”

My brows fold in as I watch the seriousness meld over her features as she lies in wait for an answer. I’m the last person anyone should ask about relationships because I haven’t been in a semi-serious one in years. There have been dates and sex, but nothing that ever lasted more than a few weeks. I always ended it first before things could get misconstrued. “I, uh, don’t think I’m the person to ask, Lenny. Maybe Mia would be the best person to have this conversation with.”

Her lips waver downward, but she fights it off and plasters a fake smile on her face instead, nodding in understanding. “Oh. Okay.” Her tone is distant, disappointed, making me sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose.

“I don’t have an answer for you that I think would help,” I explain quietly, thumb making circles where it rests on her hip bone. “It isn’t because I don’t want to, I just…”

“What?”

“I’ve never been in a situation like that before, Lenny. Truthfully, I’ve never given anybody the chance.”

Her brows raise. “What about the girls I used to see you post pictures with? There was that really pretty redhead with the bright blue eyes one time that people kept saying you were seeing.”

A small grin kicks up the corners of my lips at her obvious research. “Keeping tabs on me, are you?”

Her cheeks turn pink. “You know I follow you on Instagram. Mia even mentioned that you were dating somebody. The point is, I’ve seen the girls you’ve been seen with. Why haven’t you given any of them a chance? They’re all very pretty.”

That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? The same one that Mom asks. And Mia. Fuck, Gordy too. They’ve all wanted to know why I’m so set on not settling down. If Mia hadn’t married Dylan, I’m sure Mom would

have begged me to date a lot sooner so she could become a grandmother in this lifetime.

It isn't like there haven't been girls who I've considered doing the long-term thing with someday. But eventually they stopped being what I was looking for, which is something I haven't defined even after all these years of one-night stands and pastime hookups. Their personalities aren't friendly enough, their intentions never pure. I'd find one thing or another to stop it. They would ask me to communicate more, I would tell them there's never anything to say, and that would be the end. I'd become another girl down and the muse to whoever the male equivalent of Taylor Swift is.

Looking down at Leighton, who's blinking up at me with a curiosity sparking those smoky eyes, I can't help but wonder what life would have been like if I had chosen one of those other girls to be with. There's no way they would appreciate the close-knit relationship I have with the girl in my lap, innocent or not. And for many years, it has been. Innocent. But could I say the same now, when I study the way her bottom lip is fuller than her top one, or how there's a faint scar marring the corner of them that you'd only see if you stared hard enough?

The reason I've never let anybody in on our dynamic is less about what they'd complain about, and more on what they'd accuse me of. To some degree, they'd have a right to question the way I look at the nineteen-year-old who spends as much time in my bed sleeping as I do. Or how our routine has become flawless in prosecution because of how many times we've executed it. Mia would always get pissed off over how easy things have been between Leighton and me, and I'd rub it in her face because she always had to work a little harder toward their relationship. Not because Lenny made it hard for her, but because there was always some link between us that just happened to make things effortless. Like an invisible string that keeps us attached at all times, wrapping us up in each other without anyone else knowing. It's fate's cruel joke—the boy and girl whose circumstances put them together and ripped them apart.

No matter the doubts I had after she showed up, I always played along with the title Harry so quickly granted her. The paperwork first confirming her spot in our family only deterred my belief for a little while before less started adding up. Her lack of attributes from Harry, the personality differences, the way her mother acted whenever her "father" was brought up. It didn't matter when I found out the truth from the PI I'd hired, because

Leighton Grier was going to be a permanent fixture in our family no matter whose blood she shared. It was for selfish purposes. That was why I didn't use the information I'd gotten after they'd moved. I paid a heavy sum for the truth, and an even heavier one for the dickwad to stay silent about it. Apparently, that number wasn't enough though, because the second Harry found out about Lenny's bloodwork, I knew who'd given him the files.

There isn't much I wish I could take back in life because, realistically, we'd always end up right here. Watching Lenny walk away, my sister cry, my sperm donor act like he lost a piece of himself probably for the first time in his life, was all because of me. Had Mia's scandal with Dylan not made headlines and garnered more investigative work in what the Bishops have been up to, maybe we could have played house a little longer.

Or maybe it was always meant to end.

Thing is, I was never going to keep her out of my life forever. I'd planned on letting her live her life, however that may be, without me until we were both old enough to come back together. *If* she wanted that. I'd never force her to do anything that she didn't want to, even if that meant never seeing her again.

"Kyler?" A hand comes up and brushes my jaw, jerking me out of my head. "What are you thinking about?"

Nostrils twitching, I shake my head. "It isn't important right now. Listen, the thing about relationships is that there's never a wrong kind unless you're in it for the wrong reasons. Chase and you—" Why the fuck is this so hard? "He was good for you, but that doesn't mean he was *it* for you."

There's a moment of silence, of contemplation, before she eventually nods. "I guess so. I wish I knew what I was doing though. Chase was so… he was so *mad*, Ky. And he had every right to be."

My body goes rigid as I narrow my gaze at her. "Are you sure you don't want me to kick his ass?"

She rolls onto her back and looks up at the ceiling, blowing out a heavy breath. "There's no need. Everything he said was justified. Well, yelled, technically."

Jaw ticking, my hand clenches around a fistful of blanket. "He yelled at you?" The question comes out slowly, calculated as ideas swarm my thoughts over how to get to his house and have a one-on-one without his mother calling the cops or his brother hunting me down.

“It’s not a big deal,” she tells me again, though I refuse to believe that. “He made a lot of points that I’ve been ignoring. We barely talked about anything other than school or work, we never…well, that’s not important. It stopped feeling like we were dating a while ago but kept pretending anyway. That’s why I wish I knew what I was doing, so I can stop hurting people.”

“Who the hell have you hurt?” Doubt is thick in my hard tone. “Len, look at me. You broke up with your boyfriend, that’s going to be hard for everyone involved. But people tend to break up because both parties are at fault for one reason or another. You can’t table all the blame.”

Our eye contact falters when she admits, “Technically, *he* broke up with *me*, and the biggest reason is because I wouldn’t talk to him about…stuff.”

I blink, even more tempted to find a horse head and put it in his bed or some shit. “Nobody knows what they’re doing in a relationship. You learn as you go, okay? Don’t beat yourself up because it didn’t work between you two.” I don’t tell her that I’m glad it didn’t because I can tell she’s upset about the situation.

There’s a playful tint to her eyes as she jabs a finger into my stomach, only easing some of the tension built into my squared shoulders since sitting down. “How would you know, oh wise one? You’re apparently the last person to ask about relationships.”

Snorting, I swat her hand away, then capture it with my own, threading our fingers together. Her gaze dips to where I rest our joined palms on her stomach, lips pressing together to suppress the smile that twitches on her lips. “I may not be an expert, but what I do know is that relationships are a lot of work, and sometimes they don’t work out. In the long run, it’s better when they end.”

She blinks, then slowly narrows her eyes at me. “You’re sort of a cynic, you know that?”

I laugh, surprised by her causal comment as she eyes me with skepticism. “All I mean is that sometimes there are relationships that don’t work out for the better. You’ll know when they’re worth it when you realize you can talk to that person without it being forced, or be silent with that person without being uncomfortable, and joke about anything even if it’s awkward. *That’s* the kind of relationship you fight for. And when you get into arguments, which is going to happen no matter how many couples act like they’re perfect, you don’t let it break you and you don’t walk away.

“Don’t give me that look, Leighton. I don’t know what happened today between you two, but I’m going to be real with you. The kind of guy you want is one that will piss you off, annoy you, and say the stupidest shit that he’ll want to take back in an instant. Which means he’ll also be the person who will do anything to win you over to earn your forgiveness. That kind of guy, that *man*, is one who will feel about a thousand different things all because of you, which means he won’t know which way is up until he sorts through his shit. It also means that you won’t find another love like his, even if you tried to.”

Blowing out a breath, I watch her unblinking eyes scope out my face leisurely, looking at one eye, then the other, trailing down to my nose, lips, and back up until she finally lets out a tiny breath. The hand I’m holding gets squeezed, and just as she loosens her grip, I tighten mine. “Are you sure you’ve never been in a relationship, Ky? Because it sounds like you know what that feels like.”

My throat bobs. “What does what feel like?”

The tip of her tongue pokes out the seam of her lips before trailing across her bottom one slowly, leaving my chest caving and vice gripping my fucking heart while something else twitches to life. Suddenly, I’m glad there’s a blanket bunched up under her head. “Love. It sounds like you’ve been in it before.”

One choppy exhale later, I look up at no particular object across the room and murmur a croaked, “Maybe I just want you to know that there’s a guy out there for you like that.”

For the longest time, there’s not a word spoken between us. The silence penetrating the air becomes a peaceful filler as our even breathing takes over. Our hands are folded together, resting on her stomach again, her cheek using my thigh as a pillow, and my thumb absentmindedly stroking the back of her smooth hand. “You going to be okay?”

Turning on her side again, she rests a palm flat on my thigh and uses it as a mini pillow. I know she’ll be fine because she’s resilient enough to get past this. Anyone would be upset in her shoes, but she’s taking it better than most considering this her first real boyfriend, not counting that fucker Beckham.

Refusing to think about it, I wait for her to answer. She’s worrying her bottom lip like she’s trying to figure out the answer, even though I already know she’ll be fine. Eventually, she nods and says, “Yes.” It’s the only thing

she tells me before staring off again, eyes glazed, and I wonder what's on her mind.

I'm watching the movie and trying not to focus on the squirming teenager on my lap when she murmurs, "Kyler?"

"Hmm?"

"Can you change the channel?" I'm fighting a smile when she adds, "I really hate this movie."

Snickering, I grab the remote and do as she asks, flicking her ear until she swats my palm away and grumbles for me to be nice. Rolling my eyes, I channel surf until I find something we both relatively like.

Sometime later, I hear, "Kyler" again, causing me to peel my gaze from the TV screen and down at the girl who's paying no attention to David Bowie's character in tights that leaves little to the imagination. She used to beg me to watch this with her once upon a time, so I know whatever is clouding her eyes right now is distracting her from singing along to the movie that still confuses the fuck out of me.

At some point during the film, my arm raised up to rest above her chest in a gentle embrace. Her cheek is pressed against my forearm, eyelids heavy, and one of her arms is holding onto mine. "Can I sleep with you tonight?"

Her question shouldn't throw me, and it definitely shouldn't cause that tick in my heart to increase a beat or two faster, but it does both. Usually, she'll slip into the right side of the bed, a spot I've deemed hers over the course of the weeks she's claimed it, without asking. I'll listen to the door creak open, her soft footsteps, and pretend I don't hear the sheets flitter up, the mattress sink down under her body's weight, and the level breathing as she settles in until her breaths slow in peaceful slumber.

But I do. I become hyperaware every single time she sneaks into my room, curls into my sheets, my blankets, and buries the scent of her floral shampoo into my pillow. The thing is, I could ask her to stop, tell her it isn't appropriate, but I never do. We'll sleep like that, rarely ever touching, never talking, or acknowledging each other's company, and when the morning comes and it's time to get up, one of us is usually out of bed before the other.

Not once do we talk about it. It's as if it never happens, like we can't enjoy each other's company when the night blankets the house in darkness.

I suppose it’s better than admitting the truth. That, sometimes, it’s easiest to love the people we know we shouldn’t when nobody can see us.

The night is ours.

The darkness is our ally.

And when the sun comes up…

Throat thickening as I swallow past my confliction, I exhale a small breath and let it flow from my parted lips. She rarely asks. I prefer it that way, because then there isn’t pressure for me to tell her no, to be the person that needs to set those boundaries when it’s the last thing I want to do with her.

But it’s impossible to turn down a girl like Lenny, who’s heart has always been in the right place, worried about everyone else rather than herself. If she asked, it’s because she needs the validation. I won’t deny her that.

I could tell her that it’s a bad idea, that we should consider staying downstairs where falling asleep together seems more plausible, more justifiable, than walking upstairs together, but I do neither. Instead, I bend down and press my lips against her hairline and whisper, “Yes.”

And that’s the moment when everything changes.

LENNY FIDGETS beside me as we enter the small diner, people already turning and murmuring when my hand falls to the small of her back to guide us inward from the whipping wind outside. I don’t know if she means to step into me when a few people call out my name, but she does, probably wanting to duck and hide like old times whenever this happens.

Leaning down, I whisper, “Relax,” close to her ear and tip my head with smile at the group of people staring. It’s all they’ll get from me today.

“Are you sure you—”

“Positive,” I tell her for the fifth time since we’ve left the house. Forgoing my morning run for breakfast out with Lenny might not have been the smartest thing to do since I know her comfort level is minimal when attention is drawn to me, but I wanted to take her out. To feed her in public, to make jokes and watch her laugh and not give a damn who saw.

Her breakup with Chase shouldn’t have opened a door, yet it did, and I wedged something in it to keep it from closing. I have every intention of utilizing her newfound freedom for my own selfishness. I don’t let myself

analyze anything other than what I know as fact—that every single person I tried having something more with was never Leighton Grier.

Our circumstances are in the past, even if people won't let them stay there, and I refuse to think about them. They don't matter now. Not to me, and I have a feeling, after the move she made in my bed that night, it doesn't to her either.

"Find any place you'd like," the older woman tells us, not even looking up from the cash register where she's working. I tip my chin toward the back corner, where a small two-person table is available.

Lenny silently follows me, the entire right side of her body brushing against mine along the short trek. It's not too packed today, thankfully, and the noise level isn't bad. The section we sit at has more older couples talking amongst themselves than the other side of the diner, which means less chance of anyone bothering us.

It isn't until we get our drink orders taken by the same older woman who greeted us by the door that Leighton clears her throat. "There are people staring," she murmurs, eyes scanning absently over the menu she's holding.

"I know."

"It doesn't bother you?"

Lifting a shoulder, I say, "I'm used to it."

Her head nods slowly, her eyes darting to the side where a few tables clear across the dining room are all blatantly gawking. "I've never understood how people can get used to this. It's not something I think I ever will get used to."

My lips flicker downward for a moment before I offer her a casual smile when she glances back over to me. "It's more about accepting that it comes with the territory."

She makes a considerate face. "I guess."

I chuckle at her reluctant answer. "It's not so bad, Lenny."

We're left to silence as we look over the menu items, only other people's conversations filling the space between us. When I decide what to order, I set the plastic menu down and notice Leighton's eyes are on me again.

Before I can even ask what she's thinking, she blurts, "You haven't called me Lele in a while."

I blink, momentarily surprised by her abrupt statement. I haven't called her that because the nickname no longer fits. The past version of us would have left little hesitation for me to call her Lele, but she's not that innocent pre-teen who apologized after what an asshole I was shortly after she and Katherine showed up.

Lele was a young girl who needed somebody on her side because she had nobody else.

Lenny is a young woman who has people looking out for her but knows she doesn't need it because she can fend for herself.

She's grown up. *Stronger.*

"You're not Lele anymore to me," I tell her honestly, watching her eyes widen a fraction. Before she can misinterpret my words, I lean forward and say, "You're more than the twelve-year-old I met all those years ago. I don't want Lele."

Her breath hitches.

"I want Leighton."

She blinks. Then blinks again. Exhaling quietly, she whispers, "You do?"

Looking around the room, I realize this isn't where I planned on having this conversation, but it'll do. "Last week you asked me why I haven't given any girl a chance." Slowly, she nods, waiting for me to enlighten her with a point. "It's because I couldn't just watch TV with them in silence, or poke fun about their interests knowing they'd poke back or laugh with them when they roasted me about something I deserved. I went on dates with women who I knew wouldn't last because they weren't who I was looking for in the long run."

Her lips part, but nothing passes them.

"I don't know what's going on between us, Lenny. All I know is that something has changed. And maybe I'm reaching, but it seems like whatever this is, is something neither one of us would mind exploring. I'll always be your friend, no matter what you decide, but I'm a selfish bastard and want more than that if I can have it."

She sits back in her chair staring at me with pink cheeks and parted lips, and I try not worrying about what she's thinking. The small thread of hope I'm holding onto is the move she made on me—the way she kissed me. And if that's all I'll get, if I'm reading into this and grasping at straws, then I'll have to accept that and move on with my life.

Eventually, I let out a small breath of relief when she says, “I’m scared.”

I don’t have to ask why because I know.

She’s scared about it not working out.

She’s scared of what others will think.

She’s scared of a lot.

“I am too.” I shrug loosely, knowing that we can’t let that stop us. “We don’t have to advertise this, not right away. But if you decide I’m worth the headache, then I want people to know. You’ve never been a secret to me.”

Her top teeth dig into her bottom lip, and I can tell she’s contemplating everything I’m tossing at her. The pros, the cons—and I know there are far more of those than anything. She doesn’t like the spotlight, and that’s what she’ll get if she gives this a chance.

Gives *me* the chance.

“I know I’m asking a lot from you,” I offer her softly, watching as she peeks at me through her thick lashes. “And I know that I’m asking you to make a lot more sacrifices than me, but I hope you say yes to this.”

“What exactly is it I’m saying yes to?”

A slow smile stretches across my face that I have to try toning down. “To being mine.”

Her lashes flutter. “Haven’t I always been?”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

THERE ARE two girls whispering to each other as I walk from my last class, one of them glaring at me, the other elbowing her and giggling. It's been happening all day, except most people try pretending like they aren't leering in my direction. These two don't care.

I walk quickly past them and turn the corner, beelining toward the stairwell at the end of the hall, when I stumble into a small body that nearly knocks us both down. "I'm so sor—"

"*Leighton?*"

After regaining my balance, I stare wide-eyed at a familiar face, sans thick glasses and long dark hair. Nora Ashby looks nothing like she did at Saint Michael's. Her hair is a caramel blonde, she's wearing the kind of makeup that Mom used to, and her clothes are form-fitting and highlight her much leaner body.

She laughs, quickly pulling my surprised, frozen body in for a hug. "I knew that was you. I still see pictures of you online. Some things don't change, huh?"

I blush over how untrue that statement is given the development in my life over the past couple of weeks. "Do you go here?" I ask, sure I've never seen her on campus before. I tend to walk with my head down to avoid days like today though, so it's likely I've missed her.

She readjusts the purse strap on her shoulder attached to an expensive bag that's bigger than my head. I recognize the designer because Mia has a collection of the same ones. "I actually go to Stanford. I'm just visiting somebody today."

Stanford. I swallow, slowly nodding, as a rise of something thick fills my throat. I know Nora mentioned her interest in the university, but she'd also been looking into other ones around the country she seemed more interested in. I didn't realize she'd ever decided on going to the college I'd always pictured myself at some day. "That's…wow. Congratulations."

Her beaming smile is full of pride. "It took a lot of work, but I ended up getting the top spot in our class. Striker and—" She pauses, wincing, and waving a manicured hand in the air. "It doesn't matter. I mean, the only real reason I got a full ride is because you left."

I glance away, trying not to hide the way my lips waver downward at the reminder. I'd never gotten around to explaining to her what happened, not that it mattered. The press did that for me in a much cruder way. Everyone I used to know at Saint Michael's knew I was kicked out, and I'm sure plenty of them were happy considering I was still the "wannabe Bishop" in their eyes.

"Do *you* go here?" she prods, arms crossed over her chest. "I heard you were back in town, but you never reached out. You're back with the Bishops, right? I've been seeing pictures of you and Kyler everywhere."

Kyler has made it his job to take me to and from classes, and his car has popped up on numerous social media pages. Nobody can tell it's him, thanks to his tinted windows, but it's always me either getting in or out of the passenger side. The story attached is the same every time: *Where is Chase Matthews?*

My face reddens even deeper, heat creeping up the back of my neck as I brush off the posts I've seen lately.

I could feel bad that I didn't try harder to reach out to Nora when I was back, but she could have done the same if she were interested. I've been too focused trying to get settled back in to worry about other things. "I study PR here," I tell her eventually, offering a small smile. "It's no Stanford, but I like it."

Her nod is slow as she studies me, eyes roaming up and down the front of me. "Well, that's good. You always wanted to do that."

We stand in awkward silence, people skirting around us to get by.

I shift on my feet. “Do you still talk to Striker or anyone?” Because of Striker, I know she used to talk to Beckham. They were never close, but I can’t help but wonder if they’d talked more after I’d left Saint Michel’s.

She shrugs. “Striker will text me sometimes if he’s looking for a hookup, but that’s about it. I’ve made my own friends on campus.”

My brows go up. “You and Striker…?”

Her eyes roll. “Junior year. We dated on and off, but he was graduating, so it never stayed on for long. If I’m bored, I’ll meet with him.”

“Oh.”

She hums. “So, you and Garrick Matthew’s little brother? Or is that over? It’s hard to keep up with the headlines.” Her clipped tone makes my eyes widen slightly.

Part of me doesn’t want to talk about that considering Chase won’t even answer my texts. I’ve tried apologizing, but he won’t give me the time of day. And ever since I’ve took a step forward with Kyler, I’ve felt even worse about what I’d done to him. “We’re not seeing each other anymore.”

“That’s a shame.”

I bite my tongue.

She sighs. “Can I ask you something?”

Nerves prickle my skin as I nod.

“We were friends, right?”

My answer is instant. “We were. Why?”

Her painted pink lips press together a moment, her eyes darting past me. “Because you didn’t trust me. You never told me who you were living with, and even when I found out, you never invited me over. It was like you didn’t want me in that part of your life.”

Hurt—hurt for *her*—laces through my veins. I always knew she’d been upset over it, but it was one of the many things we never got a chance to talk about. “It wasn’t that I didn’t trust you, Nora. I had enough trouble being part of that life on my own. The way they lived wasn’t the same way I did, and my mom…” My throat tightens as I swallow down emotion. “There was a lot I didn’t want anyone to know about. It wasn’t just you.”

She doesn’t look like she believes me based on her pinched expression—lips flat, brows furrowed slightly. “You let Beckham over. Friends let other friends into their lives no matter what. That’s what we’re supposed to be there for.”

I swallow, staying quiet. After what Beckham did, things happened so fast. I barely had time to absorb anything before I was being kicked out.

"You know, I felt a little bad for being valedictorian at first. I know, even if you didn't tell me about your homelife, that it wasn't pretty, and it seemed like Stanford was the one thing you were always excited about. But then I thought, why? Why should I feel bad when I worked my ass off at everything I was a part of. I got a full ride because I studied and dedicated my time to every single class, with or without you. It sucks what happened to you, Leighton. But maybe if you'd given me the chance, I would have tried being there for you. We could have…" She shakes her head, shrugging. "I don't know. Maybe we could have been friends for a lot longer. We could have tried going to Stanford together. Roomed together like we wanted."

A sour feeling cements itself in the pit of my stomach. How many times had we talked about being roommates at college? At getting dressed up and going to parties? Studying together? That seems like a lifetime ago, an entirely different world.

And somehow…somehow that world doesn't feel like mine anymore. Because Mom took that world from me. I grew out of that phase, those dreams, and now they feel like figments of my imagination.

"We could have been…" Her words fade, hurt still thick in each syllable, as she sighs heavily. "It doesn't matter anymore, I guess."

I fight frowning. "I guess not."

She glances behind me again. "I should get going. It was…" Hesitation lingers for a few seconds between us. "It was a surprise to see you. But it was good."

Wetting my lips, I nod. "It was nice seeing you too. I'm glad you got the top spot. You earned it." Her eyes widen slightly before they go back to normal. She starts walking around me, but I don't let her get far before I say, "Are you happy, Nora?"

Looking at me from over her shoulder, I notice the surprise in her eyes. "Yeah, I am."

I nod once.

She adds, "Are *you*?"

My lips part, a small exhale escaping them before I shove my hands into the pockets of the hoodie I took from Kyler this morning. "I think for the first time since I had to leave, I am."

We look at each other for a while before she dips her chin and walks away.

I let out a tiny breath and pull out my phone to see a text waiting for me.

Kyler: *Reporters are surrounding the visitor lot, so I'm parked behind the old theater building.*

Kyler: *Be careful*

Normally, the thought of reporters being here would fill me with dread, but a realization strikes me from the short conversation I had with an old friend.

My old life was built out of fear and hesitation, where I was a shadow of a girl compared to who I am now. Stanford was my dream then, but it isn't what I want now. And as I walk toward the small lot where I know Kyler is waiting for me, I start to understand that dreams can change just as much as people can.

What I want now is sitting behind the steering wheel of a too-expensive car that I slip into the passenger seat of. What I want is for him to lean over, press a sweet kiss to my lips, and ask me how my day is.

And that's exactly what he does.

"What's the smile for?" he asks, sitting back in his seat, my lips tingling from even the briefest brush of his.

"Just thinking," I whisper.

He reaches for my hand, and I stop thinking altogether.

MIA'S GRIP on my hand tightens the closer we get to the hospital, and I'm not sure who's whiter right now—me or Dylan.

My weekly visit with her was cut short when her water broke, and in the rush to get everything they'd prepared, Mia safely to their waiting car, and me in the back seat where she was crushing my hand, we hadn't gotten to discuss whatever she'd called me about. At the moment, whatever it is doesn't seem so important even though she said it was.

"Did you text Kyler?" Mia asks through her rough breathing, one hand clenching her stomach while the other stays wrapped around mine. Dylan is weaving through traffic so fast I'm getting nauseous, but I managed to type out a quick text after getting into the car.

"Yes."

"My mother?"

I'd used Dylan's phone when he shoved it into my hand and said, "Tell everyone it's happening." Since he didn't give me a list of who that is, I figured he'd meant family. "Your mom is on her way and so is Harry."

Her eyes grow soft despite the obvious discomfort she must be in. "Thank you, Lenny Lou. Have I told you recently how much I love you?"

I smile. "Not recently."

"Well I do." She sucks in a breath and shoots her gaze toward her husband. "I swear to Jesus if you don't get us there in time and I have to deliver this fucking baby in the car, I will cut off your dick to make sure you never do this to me again."

Dylan cusses, his foot pushing down on the accelerator. "Shit, babe. Deep breaths, remember? Like the Lamaze instructor said."

Mia starts breathing, and I start sweating, and I'm pretty sure Dylan is shooting out a string of curse words that haven't been invented yet.

I'm surprised when Mia turns to me. "We didn't get a chance to talk like I wanted." Her expression pinches with pain.

"We'll have plenty of time to talk later," I reassure her.

"But I wanted to talk about you and Ky."

My face pales. "About…?"

She exhales a long breath, "Don't think I haven't noticed that—" A sharp groan escapes her parted lips. It takes her a few moments, a few silent, counted breaths, before she peels her heavy eyelids open again to look at me. "Just because I've been distracted with this little fucker doesn't mean I haven't noticed how you two have been. He actually goes out now."

"Babe," Dylan says with hesitated caution in his tone. "Do you think now is the best time to bring that up?"

"I'm using the distraction method, *babe*."

If Dylan could raise his hands in surrender from where they white knuckled the steering wheel, I'm sure he would.

I meet Mia's eyes, as she goes on. "The press is having a field day with all the pictures of you two together. I'm not sure what's going on between you guys, but I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me for—"

"Oh my God. *How much longer*?" Her head dips back against the headrest as Dylan speeds up.

"We're almost there."

“Mia?” Worry licks my tone, but she shakes her head and tries controlling her breathing.

Eventually, she picks her head up and rubs her stomach. “Why did I ever want to be a mom? This is awful. Dylan, remind me to buy my mother a shit ton of flowers when this is over.”

“Got it,” he murmurs from the front.

I see the hospital ahead, and squeeze Mia’s hand. “We’re about to pull into the emergency room entrance. Are you okay?”

She nods. “I’ll be good once I push this satanic watermelon out of my body.”

There’s a faint snort from the front that quickly turns into a half-assed cough.

“When you and Kyler decide to have babies, you should consider adoption.”

I’m choking on nothing but air as I stare at the woman who’s trying to sit up as Dylan parks in front of the double glass doors. “W-What?”

Her eyes roll at me, though they’re clouded by pain. I can still see the exasperation in them that reminds me of all the other times she’s knowingly, and silently, called me out on my bullshit. “Neither of you had to say a thing. It was all in that kiss. For the record, I called it.”

I’m speechless as Dylan climbs out and opens the back door. Shaking myself out of what she casually dropped on me, I get out too and help Dylan guide her into the hospital. As soon as a nurse sees her, they wheel a chair over and help her sit while Dylan fills out the necessary paperwork.

“Lenny?” Mia calls as they start wheeling her toward the elevators. “I have a confession to make. I didn’t need to go through that entire scene for the audition. I just needed to see for myself.”

I gape at her. What is she…?

“Kyler needed a push.”

I blink.

Then blink again.

Dylan shakes his head at her, brushing my shoulder. “Can you wait down here for Kyler and her parents? Mine won’t be here until tomorrow at the earliest. We need someone to bring them up to the labor and delivery floor. Number three.”

Number three. “Got it.”

He follows Mia, then pauses. “Whatever is going through your head about Kyler, about whatever the hell scheme my wife worked out, don’t. Don’t think about it. I know you and Kyler, and the more you think about whatever comes next, the more miserable you’ll make yourselves.”

I swallow. “Isn’t it wrong though?”

He goes to speak but gets cut off by Mia’s groans. Quickly he says, “Look at where Mia and I started. It worked out, didn’t it?”

Dylan winces when Mia shouts, “I’m going to murder you, Casanova.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

"ARE you sure you're okay to stay?" I ask Lenny quietly, even though the only two other people in the private room they sanctioned off for us are my mother and Harry. As soon as I arrived, the buzz of the hospital became apparent that Mia's labor is already in the news, not that I'm surprised.

She and Dylan talked about doing an at-home birth, but the amount of articles Dylan read online of everything that could go wrong swayed them to choose a safer environment. Unfortunately, that also means little privacy, even though Mercy Hospital is one known for its care of the city's richer, more famous, residents.

"Quinn is covering for me," she answers, eyes darting to where Harry is staring at her from across the room. His eyes instantly dropped to our hands when he walked into the hospital, the last one to arrive much to nobody's surprise, and hasn't left us since. Every time I lean in to say something to Leighton, I feel his eyes on us. One squeeze of her hand, a hand I'm still holding between us without a care in the world, got me to calm down enough not to say anything to him.

Mom hasn't seemed to notice since her pacing began. She's been buzzing about this baby for months, excited to meet her grandson and bury him with all the presents I know she has stacked in the baby's nursery.

Making conversation passes the time quicker. We've already been here for close to five hours, and when Dylan came in to say she was only three

centimeters dilated over thirty minutes ago, I figure it means we'll be here for a lot longer. "Your jackass of a boss won't have a problem with it? I don't want you to get into trouble."

Her eyes go back up to Harry for a moment before she brushes hair behind her ear and shakes her head. "He doesn't come in today, and Mel won't mind. She's been telling me to take time off anyway, and this is hardly something I'd get in trouble for."

We're quiet for a moment, my eyes scoping out the room before meeting Harry's. His narrow, his arms crossed on his chest, but neither of us says a word.

The clock in the room *ticks* loudly as we all fall into silence, with even Mom looking at the three of us with raised brows.

Eventually, I straighten, unable to take it anymore. "Something on your mind, Harry?"

His nostrils flare. "Care to explain what you're doing?" is his lackluster reply.

I don't stand down. "I don't know what you mean. You're going to need to clarify."

Leighton murmurs, "Ky…"

"No, Len." I tug our hands up and rest them on her thigh, not letting her pull away like I know she wants to.

Harry's neck turns red, and Lenny stiffens beside me. Squeezing her hand, I meet my sperm donor's eyes when he states, "I don't approve of this."

That makes me snort. "It's a good thing I don't give a shit about your approval anymore, or I'd be living a very boring life."

"You'd be living a fulfilling one."

Mom steps in. "Now is not the time—"

"Sorry, Mom, but this needs to happen." I know confrontation is the last thing that should be happening in a public place, but thankfully we're not in the public eye right now. I turn back to my father, whose spine is stick-straight, eyes glowering at the hand encompassing Leighton's, and say, "You haven't been able to decide what goes on in my life for a long time now, and it pisses you off. But your opinion about my choices stopped mattering to me years ago when I realized nothing I did would ever meet your standards."

My eyes shift to the girl sitting next to me, her cheeks pink, her eyes wide as she looks at me with worry etched into her gray hues. I take a deep breath and smile at her, my thumb brushing against the back of her hand, before looking back at the two pairs of eyes that watch me skeptically. “If I did everything you wanted, I’d be miserable. Leighton has always made me happy, so we’re giving this a shot.”

Mom’s throat bobs, and the concern I see on her face is better than the anger on Harry’s. Unlike him, she offers me the smallest smile. “I don’t know how I feel about it, but if that’s what you two want…”

Harry’s eyes snap to her. “Are you kidding me, Diana?”

Mom turns to him, jaw locked. “Do you have any right to judge two people from being together? None of us are perfect, Harry, least of all you. Let them have their chance.”

“It’ll be a media circus.”

“I don’t care,” I cut in, tightening my hold on Lenny’s hand when her fingers twitch. “If they want to judge us for seeing where this goes, then let them. But I’m not going to let their opinions bother me. We’re not doing anything wrong. Nobody…” *Nobody cheated.* I want so bad to say it, but I hear the tiniest inhale of a sharp breath beside me and think better of it.

I redirect the conversation carefully, keeping my voice even so we don’t attract unwanted attention. “One day, Leighton might decide that dealing with me isn’t worth it, but let her make that decision on her own. That’s all I’m asking. Not for you to approve. Not for you to give your blessing. Just that you accept it.”

Both my parents are silent, though Mom looks a lot more considerate than Harry. It’s Lenny who turns her body to me, her eyes scanning slowly over my face, her hand clenching mine, before her lips ever so slowly tilt up at the corners.

I don’t know if I loved Leighton the second I saw her at the bottom of the staircase, wearing that ridiculous ratty Violet Wonders t-shirt, or the second, third, or fourth time she waltzed into my life. All I remember is the way she looked at me, innocent, scared, apologetic, but determined to make the most out of the situation her mother put her in—put all of us in—no matter what anybody thought.

All I know for sure is that sometimes a person walks into your life that reminds you why it never worked with anybody else. It doesn’t have to be more complicated than that. It doesn’t have to be wrong.

It just…is.

Lenny peeks up at me from her lashes, her bottom lip drawn into her mouth, and a soft look easing her face. “I can’t get sick of the one person I’ve always wanted to keep.”

Swallowing over her soft-spoken words, I lean my forehead against hers and let out a quiet breath. “Will you tell me?” I whisper.

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me when to stop.”

If it gets to be too much.

“Tell me when to leave.”

If you realize you can’t do it.

“Tell me when it’s over,” I finish, drawing our palms up to cup her face, running a finger over her bottom lip and resting it against her chin.

What she says aloud is, “Always.”

But what she promises silently with those soulful eyes is, “Never.”

Only the cleared throat pulls us away, not because Harry looks uncomfortable, but because there’s a nurse trying not to gape at us from the doorway. Her face turns red as she quickly looks away when I meet her eyes, her gaze going around to all of us. “Mr. and Mrs. Casanova wanted everyone to know they’re now the parents of a beautiful baby boy. As soon as everything is set, I can guide you all to their room.”

Mom claps, Harry’s expression softens from the stoic look that’s been there since sitting down in this tiny room with us, and I look at Lenny.

Like always.

When the nurse leaves, it’s Harry who grumbles, “I guess the Bishop men can’t help but fall for the Grier women.”

He says it in defeat, but the words are more than I expect from the man who’s made my life a living hell from day one.

It’s an olive branch—one I accept with no hesitation knowing it’ll probably be the only one I get from him in this lifetime.

I look at Lenny, at her equally surprised expression, and take my first real breath choosing the woman in front of me.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

I'M DISTRACTED AT WORK, messing up inventory count and making Mel submit two separate orders to make up for what I missed the first time. She doesn't reprimand me until I accidently mix up three customer orders in a row and get sent home early.

It isn't until I get to the house when I let out the shaky breath I've been holding in. A lot has happened over the past few days. More pictures of me have surfaced online, people have stopped me on the street asking questions about Kyler, and a few have even brought up Mia and the baby even though nobody has announced his birth yet.

I knew this would happen, yet the overwhelming feeling breaks apart something inside me. The barrier that has contained all the feelings I've kept smothered suddenly cracks under the pressure of every weighted question, and I think about Mom.

I think about how often she'd feed into the media's taunts when we moved back to Phoenix. How I'd beg her not to say anything and she wouldn't listen. She could have made things easier, let us fade away from peoples' interest, but instead, she let it fester and grow.

The tears collecting in my eyes burn because I refuse to let them fall. Why now? Why feel the pain tenfold when I finally have everything I've always wanted—a home, a job, a college education.

Because Mom isn't here.

I choke out a sob. Guilt.

When the truth hits me square in the chest, the guilt shackles itself to me like an invisible limb. What I told Nora is the truth. For the first time in my life, there's a lightness in my chest that was never there before.

Because of Mom.

Because she held me back.

Because she was selfish.

It feels like being happy with Kyler should be a reward for every single time I had to rescue my mother from one of her many episodes, so why does it feel like my happiness is a punishment now?

Another sob escapes my lips, and only then do I hear, "Lenny?"

Jaw quivering as I try collecting myself, I lift my glassy gaze upward to see Ky watching me with concerned eyes.

"What's wrong?" He's in front of me before I can blink, fingers on my chin as he examines my face with a softness that melts away some of the shame eating at my insides.

When I part my lips, I struggle to find the words. All I manage is to shake my head, lips trembling.

"Lenny," he says. "Talk to me."

I swallow, the notion hurting as I meet his gaze again and feel the first tear slip down my cheek. Then the second.

A third.

"She's not here," I force out, voice hoarse as I fist a handful of the shirt he's wearing into my palms.

"Who?"

Shaking my head again, I lean my forehead against his shoulder and try counting backwards from ten. When it doesn't work, I try again. And again. He lets me do whatever I need to calm my breathing, but the gaping hole in my heart feels endless—unmendable the more I think about the woman who made life harder than she needed to.

I sniffle, not picking my head up, when I whisper out a raspy, "Mom."

Ky instantly wraps his arms around me and tugs until I'm pressed flush against the front of him. He holds me tight, biceps squeezing me with warmth and silent comfort, then he starts brushing his fingers through my tangled, curly hair. His quiet "shh, shh, shh" makes me ease into his body, still fisting his shirt as tight as I can, but the thoughts don't let up.

"She's gone," I tell him.

“I know.”

“She’s n-not coming back.” The tears start up again, sliding down my cheeks in rapid succession.

“I know, Len. I know.”

I squeeze my eyelids as hard as I can, my lips quivering until I can’t hold it in anymore. “I hate her.”

Ky tenses around me. “You don’t mean that.” His voice is quiet but certain. “You’re just upset right now.”

This time when I shake my head, it’s with conviction. “No, I hate her. I hate her, Ky. I hate what she did to me.”

He pulls away slightly, moving hair out of my face and behind my ear. “Leighton—”

I stop him from trying to convince me otherwise. “No!” Pushing off him, I glare past my blurred vision. “She *lied*. She always lied. She wasn’t a good person, Kyler. She wasn’t—” My jaw ticks as I swipe angrily at my cheeks.

“She was still your mother,” he cuts in.

My hands clench into fists, shaking. “She wasn’t a good one.”

He doesn’t say anything.

I sniff, anger bubbling higher and higher until it demands action. “I hate her,” I repeat, voice growing louder, surer.

“Len—”

The sides of my fists lash forward, smacking into his shoulders. “Why aren’t you arguing with me? You should hate her too! You never liked her.”

He stays quiet.

I deliver a blow with every sentence I grind out. “I hate her for not loving me enough. For not fighting. For f-forgetting me.”

He takes every hit without a word.

“I hate her for leaving me behind,” I whisper brokenly, the words no more than choppy exclamations. “Why did you let us leave when I was sixteen, Ky? Why didn’t you fight for me? You never liked her.”

His expression shadows over. “Lenny, it wasn’t an easy decision.”

“You *knew* how she was!” I hiss at him, feeling myself shaking. “And you still watched me walk out the door.”

He doesn’t say anything as I continue my taking out my anger on him. “You knew.”

“I did.”

“I’m angry at you.”

“But you don’t hate me.”

This time, I’m the silent one.

“And,” he adds quietly, “you don’t hate your mom.”

Eventually, he grabs my wrists to stop me from hitting him again. He holds them loosely, only enough to keep me still. His eyes are sad as they watch me breakdown, my legs giving out from under me.

Ky catches me before I hit the ground, picking me up and carrying me upstairs. I nuzzle my wet face against his chest and let my tears soak into his shirt. When he sets me down on his bed, he doesn’t let me go. He slides in with me, keeping me curled into his side while I let it out.

Everything I’ve felt since the accident.

Since coming to California.

Since realizing I’m on my own.

I choke out, “I miss her.”

“I know you do,” he murmurs, still brushing my hair in comforting strokes.

“I don’t hate her.”

He hums.

This time when I say it, I feel it in my bones, and the anger inside me releases. “I don’t hate her at all, Ky. Or you. But what you did hurt, and I pretended it didn’t for so long.” Sniffling, I feel exhaustion sweep over me. “I forgive her.”

I pause. “I forgive you too.”

MY BODY IS WRAPPED in a tangle of limbs. A leg with coarse hair scrapes against one of my soft calves, inner knee, and thigh, moving up, up, up until the bare knee is settled in the space between my legs. Sucking in a sharp breath as it starts rocking against me, I bite into my bottom lip as a hot sensation burns in the bottom of my stomach. We’re both laying on our sides facing each other, exactly how we fell asleep, chest against chest, with my face burrowed into the space between a soapy-smelling neck and shoulder.

His black t-shirt is still on, but at some point he must have gotten too warm and kicked off the sweatpants he was wearing when he crawled in bed, because that’s definitely a naked leg rubbing me right—*Oh.*

Wetting my bottom lip, I listen closely to his even breathing. I've heard it enough times to know he's still sleeping, unaware of where his leg is or what it's doing, and I have two options. Move away and hope it doesn't wake him, or stay right where I am. I know what the smartest option is, but the way my body reacts to the mindless movement clouds my judgement and my lips part when his knee applies just enough pressure to the very center of me that I flutter out a breathy moan.

And that…that clearly triggers something in him because suddenly I'm on my back and my arms are being pinned to the pillow on either side of my head and his body, his very much still asleep body, is moving over me. I'm about to tell him to wake up because I don't know what's going through his mind, if he wants this or if we're ready for this yet, but then he does something that shuts me up completely.

He rolls his hips into the spot between my parted legs and a very, very hard part of him grinds into the softest part of me. Lips still parted, my eyes roll back as his hands tighten around my wrists, keeping them where they are, and his breathing hitches when he repeats the same movement with his hips until it sparks something deep in my core.

Jaw quivering, my legs widen on instinct, letting him settle between them easier as he continues doing…whatever it is he's doing. Is he dreaming? Does he think…?

Tell me when to stop. I know I need to tell him to, but I don't. For the first time in…maybe ever, I let myself feel what his body is doing to mine. The way his hard length pushes against my thin sleep shorts does little to act as a barrier, and the seam of my pajamas only creates more friction against the bundle of nerves that makes me hum with more need.

Kyler's hands slide upward until our fingers our linked together, and we're holding hands on the pillow. I'm not sure what comes over me, but my lips brush the column of his neck lightly, testing the waters, before grazing another lush kiss on the underside of his jaw.

The little breath that escapes him accompanies his hips shifting upward until my body arches as he hits that one precious spot over and over like maybe, just maybe, it's on purpose. I want to hold onto his shoulders, dig my nails into his flesh, and ride the wave he's giving me, but I'm too afraid he'll wake up and stop. And I know there's a chance he doesn't know he's doing it but—

The growled “Leighton” that passes his lips changes everything, breaking whatever train of thought I’m lost in. My arms wrap around his neck as my teeth bite into his throat where my face is still buried, and his hips grind into me harder before…stopping.

His body turns to rock above me, on me, freezing. His breathing becomes nonexistent, and I know he woke up.

I say the words that break the silence, holding onto the fact he hasn’t launched off the bed and started apologizing. I don’t want him to. If anything, I want him to finish this. To let me feel what I’ve never felt with anybody before. Not even my own hand because nerves always get the better of me when I try thinking of the person I *should* have been touching myself to. Except it was never Chase’s face my mind conjured an image of when I spread my legs, dipped my hands in my shorts, and toyed with the little button of nerves that would set me off.

Shame would always fill my conscience, stopping me from continuing, and that same feeling of wrongness isn’t anywhere in my thoughts in this instant.

I whisper, “Please don’t stop,” holding onto him tighter, worried he’ll try to leave, to climb off me.

His body remains tense as he looks down, eyes wide as he sees what I can imagine is a flushed face and glassy eyes full of lust that, I think, matches the glaze in his. I’m no expert, but I’ve seen what it looks like when someone wants you. I saw it with the men Mom brought around, and I saw it late at night when I worked closing shift at the truck stop with strange guys lingering, and I especially see it whenever Mia and Dylan look at each other.

“I don’t want to stop,” I tell him, voice shaky like I’m waiting for the inevitable.

He doesn’t move. Not to push off me, not to leave the room, but he also doesn’t continue the blissful buildup I ache for.

Maybe later I’ll feel embarrassed for what comes out of my mouth next, but I can’t make myself care when the need building inside me is too much. I *need* Kyler. “I’ve never had…” Swallowing, I hold onto him tighter as his head drops into the crook of my neck, his breathing shallow. “I’ve never had an orgasm before,” I get out, noticing his forearms clenching from where they hold him up beside my head.

I think I hear a muffled “Jesus Christ” against my skin, but I’m too consumed in the hot air coming from his mouth that caresses my damp skin from what we’ve been doing. He groans when I arch my hips up to meet his again, trying to get the friction back to get myself off.

I’d say whatever I have to if it means getting back the feeling I was lost in, even if it makes me sound needy and desperate. With Kyler, right here in his bed, I’m both of those things. And maybe tomorrow when the sun is officially up, I’ll feel horrible for not caring, for *wanting*, but there’s little involving Kyler Bishop I’ve ever felt guilty about.

Not knowing who he once was to me.

Not knowing who he’s *become* to me.

Not when it feels like this.

Warm. Inviting. Right.

Home. For once, under Kyler, blanketed by his warmth and his choppy breathing full of lust and need, I feel at home.

“Please,” I say again, breathing in his calming scent and waiting, waiting, waiting for his resolve.

Thankfully, he doesn’t make me wait long.

He drops his body back onto mine, his weight coming down as one of his hands finds the back of my head, gripping my skull and tangling his fingers into my hair, as the other trails down my side until it hooks one of my legs around his waist.

And then, *finally*, he moves.

The sharp exhale as his thickness rolls into me can’t be stopped as I bury my face back into the crook of his neck like his is in mine. Except he’s trailing kisses along my throat, murmuring things I can’t quite understand and reveling in the way it feels when I meet his hips by means of groans and grunts.

My tongue dips out and licks his salty skin, and the answering choke rising from his throat has him grinding a little harder, a little faster, until he stops again. I think he’s about to stop completely, to talk himself out of this, when a hand lowers between us and he peels back with a question in his eyes. I’m not sure how I know what he’s asking, but I find myself nodding until his fingers are dancing along the hem of my shorts and dipping under the waistband until they brush against my skin. *There*.

Eyes fluttering closed as he touches the seam of my lips, I bite down onto my bottom lip to suppress the noises caused by his featherlight touch

until a pad of his finger pushes down on my clit. It feels…better than I ever remember. Better than when I do it, and better than any of the dreams—and there have been many—could have conjured even in my wildest imagination.

Kyler rubs the worked up nerves in slow circles, grinding his hips forward, his erection pressing against the opening of my clothed entrance until my body heats with an anticipation for more.

Moving my arms from around his neck, I run my fingernails down his back with one hand while the other cups his cheek. I don't know who moves first, but suddenly our mouths are aligned and I can taste his breath, still slightly minty from his toothpaste, before we close the distance. The kiss starts out soft, lingering, not willing to explore more than it needs to as his finger works my clit in the same torturous rhythm.

Then my other leg wraps around his hip until my ankles latch behind his back, arching for his fingers to move faster. My tongue darts out to flick along his bottom lip, then his top, until a moan catches in the back of his throat and suddenly our tongues are touching for the first time. Something inside of me clicks into place as we explore each other's mouths, our tastes, as his finger trails down to my entrance and slowly sinks into the heated wetness. Feet digging into his lower back at the tight intrusion, he hushes me with another kiss, deepening it, sucking my tongue, nipping, coaxing me to relax and let him make me feel good.

His "that's it, honey" and "so wet" and "feel so good" has my jaw quivering and my legs shaking, and it isn't until his thumb presses against me again as he begins working a single finger in and out of me when I feel it happening. The way I tighten around him and my stomach clenches, and my breathing hitches.

It feels like too much and not enough all at the same time, and he quickens his pace inside of me, applying more pressure, thrusting his hips against me until I bite hard into his bottom lip. The sound of his finger sliding in and out of me, the arousal, the need settled between my thighs, has me crying out, "Kyler!" as my body explodes around him.

He curses. His hips jerk against me in a sporadic way until he tenses and drops his head back into my neck, kissing the spot above my pulse as I try catching my breath. I make a strangled noise when his finger leaves me, and his breathing is hard against my throat and the pillow where his forehead lays.

We don’t say a word for a long time.

Kyler doesn’t move off me.

I wrap my hands around his neck, hugging him, holding him to me for I don’t know how long.

Eventually, he moves onto his side, pulling me with him until we’re spooning. One of his hands is flat against my stomach, the other under my head, which I use as an extra pillow, and holds my hand.

I’m not sure what time it is, or how long we lay like that, neither of us sleeping, when he says, “Lenny…” It’s the tone of his voice that has me tensing, and I could let him say what he needs to say, but I don’t want to.

Turning around, the first thing I see is the way his hooded eyes are looking at me. The second thing I see is the white, wet beads on his dark shirt. And when he figures out what I’m staring at, he closes his eyes.

I don’t know what I expect him to say, but my inexperience pairs with my anxiety, and I worry he’ll say he regrets this, that he doesn’t want to keep sleeping in the same bed, or holding my hand, or sharing any of my other firsts, but instead he wraps his arms around me, kisses the top of my head, and murmurs, “Get some sleep.”

And I’m not sure if it’s the softness in his words or the way his arms tighten around me even more that silently promises he’s not going anywhere, but eventually I do drift off.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

ONCE THE MORNING brain fog clears, everything comes rushing back to me. There's a full feeling in my chest that's hard to ignore, and a smile that's even harder to stop from forming at the corners of my tired lips. I expect the bed to be empty when I sneak a peek at the opposite side, but it's not. All six foot three of him is still there and he's awake, one arm still tucked around me, while the other is draped over his stomach.

He looks…contemplative.

There are a lot of things I can say—things I'm not certain he'd want to hear. But the longer we lay in bed pretending to be asleep and not saying a word will only make things worse. And I've learned spending too much time in your head can cause more problems than what may or may not exist already. So, I say the first thing that comes to mind, ignoring the early morning hoarseness in my tone. "I don't regret anything, and I'm hoping you don't either."

There are two reasons I'm sure he doesn't. For one, he's still here. Not downstairs cooking breakfast, or running five extra miles to clear his head, or God knows where else with people of the opposite sex that I don't even want to think about. The second telltale sign is the oddly…soft look on his face. One side of his lips are curved upward, creating that little dimple I love so much, and his eyes are light when they turn to look at me.

When he studies me, there's a swarm of butterflies that come to life in the pit of my stomach, and I don't give him the chance to ruin the moment. "Not that there's anything to regret, because people do that stuff all the time. I mean, *I* haven't obviously, but you have." His cheek twitches over my unintended insinuation that he's some sort of man whore. Backtracking, I sit up on an elbow. "You don't regret it do you? I know you were sleeping, but—"

"I wasn't."

My lips part to answer, but then I blink as his words settle in and I tilt my head in silence.

Kyler sits up, the top sheet falling off his chest and scrunching around his waist. The tee is still fitted to his body, with the stain from last night staring back at me. Biting into my bottom lip, my eyes trail back up his torso until I'm met with amused, warm brown eyes. "I wasn't asleep," he repeats slowly. "Not for the part that mattered. Not for…any of it, really. I knew who was under me because I could smell you."

"Smell me?"

His finger reaches out and touches a strand of loose hair before tucking it behind my ear, an easy smile on his face. "You remember those fruit smoothies that Mia used to make when she was on that all-liquid diet?" I nod, not sure where this is going because those smoothies tasted *awful*. They made Mia moody because that and only a handful of other things were all she ate for a solid two weeks. Kyler had to pay her to break the diet and eat something before she murdered one of us. Most likely him because I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut around her. "You have this fruity, floral scent about you. It's unique. Peaches, apples, and jasmine. So, yeah. Maybe I was asleep at first, but I smelled you, still knew who was underneath me the whole time and made the move anyway."

That still doesn't tell me if he regretted it, and he must sense the heightening anxiety rising from my pores because he shakes his head at me, tugging my body close to his like how we fell asleep last night. "I think we need to talk about something first, Lenny."

What could be more important than talking about what happened last night? When my body tenses, he sighs and places a hand between my shoulder blades, holding me to him, slowly stroking up and down my spine. "I don't regret what happened last night. But I'm not going to lie, okay? I wish it'd happened differently."

I blink into his chest, my muscles only easing from their tense stance a fraction. Okay. He didn't regret it. That's a start, right? "You don't?"

I'm not sure, but I think he chuckles, his hand never breaking from the rhythmic strokes along my spine. Instead of reassuring me, he lets out another small sigh, almost inaudible. "Harry knew," is what he answers with, causing my brows to pinch. "Not at first, but it was long before the pictures surfaced from the PI. Do you remember that day?"

How could I forget the day he's talking about? Most girls dream of their sweet sixteen parties and everything they're going to get. All I wanted was to spend time with Mia and Kyler, eat cake, and enjoy their company. Instead, I got kicked out of the one home I found comfort in, all because of Mom. Of her lie.

"Yes," my tiny voice says, taking a deep breath. Had I ever apologized to him before? I know I said I was sorry for what Mom did, but I never told him how sorry I was for not bothering to stay in touch when I could have, even if he didn't try harder either. "About the lie—"

"No. Don't say anything right now. I should have never hired anybody to check out Katherine's story because it's always felt like I broke your trust. It was never *you* I doubted. It was her. Her and her intentions seemed pretty obvious from the beginning. I never understood why Harry couldn't see that—why he played into her hand.

"I never realized that he knew too, not until after. Did you know that after you two left, he came back and looked for Katherine? I don't think he realized that she'd actually listen to him about going. Can't say I blame the guy. She never listened to anything he said. But he did look. He went to their room, searched the spare bedroom where she kept some of her extra shit, and then saw your room cleared out. He went off, Leighton. On me. Mia. Said I ruined everything because I couldn't keep my nose out of his business." He must shake his head, because I feel his chin move over the top of mine, back and forth. His hand pressing against my back tightens me against him, and I'm not sure if it's intentional or not, but I let him hold me however he needs because there's clearly more to this story.

"I can't believe I'm going to say this because I've disliked the guy since I was old enough to know what that means, but Harry liked you. I'm fairly certain he *wanted* to see you as a daughter, so he refused to accept the truth even after he figured it out. You've always been driven like him, like Mia, and he appreciated that. Respected it. The man had a lot of people working

under him, so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised he already had Katherine followed and looked into. But…

"He was too far gone, I guess, by the time they pulled up the actual paperwork on you. You've always been an easy person to love, even for someone who I always assumed was heartless."

I've never believed anybody was truly heartless, least of all his father. But I also never voiced that opinion because I knew how Kyler felt about the man. It isn't like I didn't understand where his frustrations came from. I'd seen plenty over the years of their relationship, or lack of one. His father wanted more for Kyler, and Kyler didn't want to be controlled. He rebelled. He did the opposite of what Harry wanted, and that put an even bigger wedge between them. I'm not sure they'll ever have the kind of relationship I had started forming with the man I once believed to be my biological father. Maybe it's because I wanted to think he was, to form something with him that couldn't be broken by my mother, but it obviously wasn't meant to be.

If he liked me so much, why not try getting us back? "I'm not sure that's true, Ky. He could have reached out somehow. If he…if he really hired somebody to go after Mom's past, then he could have easily found her new number or tracked the car he let her drive away in. He never tried finding either of us."

The responding silence leaves me wary of his thoughts. Anybody who internalizes them for this long must have something to say that I can't prepare for. He does little to comfort my locked shoulders as I pull away to look up at him. "Ky?"

His eyes are closed, but only for a moment, before his chin dips down. "I told him you were better off." Holding his stare with unblinking eyes, I feel something inside my chest deflate like a balloon being pricked by a needle. But before I can formulate a response, his hands twitch where they rest loosely on my back and says, "They were going to eat you alive here. You and your mother would have been targets. Everything stopped becoming about Mia and Dylan and their cheating scandal and all about you and how your mother lied. Harry was made a fool of in the press and had to do something about it, to make a statement. I'm not sure if you ever saw it —" I didn't. "—but it was…shit, Lenny. It was ugly. The media made his life hell knowing he couldn't remember how many women he slept with without protection to even figure out if he really fathered a child with one."

Not knowing what else to do, I simply stare and make a mental note to myself not to go searching for whatever statement he's referring to, because when it comes to Harry, I'm not sure I want to know.

"I thought letting you go was going to be for the best, so you didn't have to witness what was happening here. Things were tough for a while from what Mia said. I… Well, you know I got out of there as soon as I could. I kept to myself, only got photographed here and there over the following months until things died down. And they did eventually. There's always some other scandal to report. By the time the press got over what had happened, I decided it was best not to reach out. I figured, *hoped*, you were living a better life away from all the shit we put you through here. Honestly, if I'd known…" His voice cracks as he takes a long, deep breath. "If I knew what was going on with your mother, I would have come and gotten you myself."

How could he have known? He's putting too much blame on himself. Is it hard accepting that he told Harry not to find me? Not to find my mother? Yes. And maybe when I think about it later, I'll hold onto that twinge of hurt burrowing into my chest cavity, but I get it. Like always, Kyler was trying to do what was best for me. Stepping into his shoes, I would have done the same thing.

"I would have," he repeats with more conviction, as if I don't believe him. One of his palms skates up my throat, cupping my cheek while his thumb caresses my jaw. "Sometimes the things we think are right are actually the things that hurt us in the long run, and that means I failed you. I promised I'd never hurt you, Leighton. And I'm sorry."

"Kyler, you have nothing to apologize for." Cupping my hand over his, I lean into his palm and give him a reassuring smile. "I know why you did it. I'm not mad. A little hurt? Sure. But I'll get over it because we're here now."

"We could have been here sooner."

Does he mean here in this specific position or here in this time and setting? I'm not sure, and I bank it for later because that isn't the pressing matter at him. "Do you think Harry loved my mom? The real kind of love?"

Truthfully, I don't think there's a fake kind. I believe there are layers to love, some felt far deeper than others, but none that are phony. Plus, Harry is the blunt, no-bullshit kind of person who wouldn't fake anything because

he doesn’t need to, least of all love. But I had to know what Kyler thought anyway because it mattered to me.

Because I think it mattered to Mom.

“Yeah,” he answers quietly, pressing his lips to the crown of my head before adding, “I think he did.”

I don’t know why the expelled breath leaves me in relief, but it does. All the tension locking up my body leaves with it, and I rest my head against his chest again, my nose taking in his usual scent, before closing my eyes and listening to his breathing.

“Hiring that PI was the best and worst thing I did,” he tells me softly. “It was the worst because we had to lose time, but the best because I think time is what we needed.” I’m inclined to disagree with him, but he won’t let me. “I knew too, Leighton. I wouldn’t have hired anyone if I didn’t suspect. Even though I liked you early on, was glad to call you family, I still felt I needed to know what game Katherine was playing. To…I don’t know, do something about it. But when I got that information, the confirmation I already knew in my gut, I realized I didn’t want to use it if it meant the inevitable.

“There are a lot of things I’ve questioned about in life but wanting you in mine has never been one. I could handle your mom’s lies, deal with the way she treated the lifestyle we lived, if it meant keeping you. Because I did, Lenny. I wanted to keep you around. And I’m…” His words get thick, hesitant, and I feel his arm wrap around me again in a protective embrace. “I’m not sure when things changed after you came back, but they did. I want to hate myself for it, but I can’t. Even more, I want *you* to hate me for it but—” When I realize what he’s saying, my heart kicks up a notch or three in my chest. “—I don’t think you do. In fact, I think you feel the opposite. Like me.”

I’m not sure how I manage, but I croak out, “The opposite?” before breathing hard against his chest as one of his palms glides up my back, my neck, and cups the back of my head until his fingers tangle in my hair. I’m suddenly warm, too warm, and his lingering touch does nothing to help me.

“I think the Bishops are drawn to the Grier women,” he murmurs, words echoing his father’s, his fingers twitching in the strands of my hair. “Something about you makes us go crazy. We can act like real assholes sometimes. But you know what? I’m not going to make the mistake Harry did.”

My heart is in my throat now, drumming loudly, but not deafening his words when his lips travel down to my temple and press a soft kiss against it. “I’m not planning on letting you walk away easily this time unless it’s your decision.”

I choke out a laugh, thinking he’s crazy that I’d walk away from him now. It’s easy to say I won’t be walking away from him again unless he gets sick of me, and I hope that doesn’t happen any time soon.

“Want to know why, Leighton?”

I think I already know. But I want him to say it, to tell me the words that my heart is aching to hear. Words that I’m not sure Mom ever got in her last days from anyone other than me. So, I nod into his chest and wind my arms around his neck and wait.

Wait for what feels like an eternity before his breathy words brush against my skin. “It’s because I love the way you’ve always been dedicated to your mother, loving so openly and fully even when it wasn’t deserved.” I swallow down the emotion trying to suffocate me as a finger strokes the back of my neck. “And I love the way you know what you want to do with your life and how you want to succeed without anybody else’s help, even though everybody is willing to give you it if you’d only ask.” I find myself smiling into his shirt, clutching his shoulder blades. “Sometimes I look at you and wonder how I got so fucking lucky to know a girl with a heart so willing to be shared with me in any way possible, no matter what’s been done to it already. It makes me want to cherish it for life and make sure nobody hurts it again. I love you, Leighton Grier. All the pieces of you. Even the ones that love Violet Wonders.”

My laugh is watery as I grasp the fabric of his shirt and try evening out my breath before I dare open my mouth to match what he told me. It’s not the first time we’ve exchanged those words, but it’s the first time they’ve caressed my skin like smooth silk, causing a fire to start in the pit of my stomach and spread quickly. Putting to words what I feel for him is nearly impossible because I’ve loved him for years, in every way possible, with every label attached.

But I try. I try to articulate that feeling building, building because he deserves that and so much more. “I fell in love with the way you were always on my side even if I messed up,” I whisper, unsure if I can speak any louder than the quietest notch. “I could probably list all the ways I fell in love with you, and it would make me a bad person because all of those

ways unfolded when I was with…when I dated Chase. So, I'll say this and only this."

Licking my dry lips, I inhale and tip my head up enough to graze the tip of my nose along his throat until he shivers in my hold. "I fell in love with the way you touched me without even using your hands. It was the looks. The way you were so quick to forgive. How willing you were to fight even if I told you not to, and to apologize when you had no reason to say you're sorry. And the song. Watching you do what you love made me love you a whole lot more than I should have, but I couldn't help it. It's always been Kyler and Leighton, hasn't it?"

With no hesitation at all, he answers me with in a low tone that's husky and filled with a truth that we've never gotten to speak until now. "Yeah, Lenny. It's always been us."

And maybe we should be worried about the repercussions of that admission because the truth tends to have more consequences than any lie spoken.

Ours is a big one.

The lie that led us here…

His honesty is more than I could have asked for, and tingles of satisfaction prick every part of me as I smile to myself. But when I think about what I've done that bears admission, the smile wipes away and I feel the need to tell him what I've been too afraid of.

Blurting it out isn't what I had in mind, but my guilty conscious doesn't give me many other options when I open my mouth. "I sold your poster online for a lot of money," I tell him in a rush, cringing at how it all comes out in one long string of barely cohesive words.

When I dare pull back and glance up at him, he's already looking at me. Confusion mars his otherwise flawless face, his brows pinched. "What poster?"

The fact he doesn't remember only makes me feel a tiny bit better. It isn't like I pawned anything he specifically gave me. Technically, Mia gifted me the solo art that hung on my bedroom wall for years. He penned his signature in silver Sharpie that I would smile at sometimes when I looked at it. "The one that you signed for me. I know I shouldn't have, and I really didn't want to, but I…"

"You did what you had to do." He says it with a shrug, unbothered unlike I have been over it. I've been trying to figure out how to tell him for

a while now, and never found the right words.

"You're not…mad?"

One of his brows lifts. "Do you want me to be upset with you? I know things were tough, so I understand why you did it. Honestly, I forgot all about the damn thing. It was just a poster."

"That *you signed*." Frowning at him, I sit up and lean against the headboard, gripping the comforter to my chest. In hindsight, I shouldn't push the matter since he really doesn't look torn up about it, but I can't. "I've felt so bad about it, and I kept thinking you'd think the worst of me."

He blinks. Then does it again, but slower. I know when he opens his mouth, it's going to tell me some nicer version of "shut up, Lenny" because he's got that kind of look in his eyes as he stares me down. "Let me ask you something. Why not the necklace?"

Instantly, my hand snakes around the chain hanging from my neck. "It's special to me."

His nod is slow, pointed. "You sold something you knew you could get money from so you could what? Pay a bill? Rent? Buy food? I'm sure whatever you did with the money was meant for survival. Yet, you could have hocked off that necklace for some killer money if you really wanted to, and you didn't. So, no. I'm not going to be mad at you for trying to stay alive. Shit, I'll sign something here and now and give it to you to put up on eBay if it means you can get money from it. It'd definitely help with school tuition since you refuse to let me pay for anything."

My teeth dig into my bottom lip as I let my shoulders release from the hesitant stance they're in. The last thing I want is for Kyler to be angry at me. There have only been a handful of times when he has been, and it's always something I want to get past. So, I'm glad he's not upset or mad.

"Since we're being open here," he murmurs, tugging the blanket away from me until it falls somewhere by my feet. "I think we should continue. I want you to be honest with me, Len, okay?"

Reading the seriousness in his eyes before they leave my gaze to trail down my mostly bare legs in my short pajama bottoms, I find myself nodding even though he's not paying attention. He must sense my agreement, because he says, "Last night, you said you'd never gotten off before. Is that true?"

He thinks I lied about something as embarrassing as that? "Yes. Chase and I—" I wince, realizing I'm bringing him up even though Kyler looks at

my body with a tight expression that says talking about another guy is the last thing he wants. “We never did much. Some…some touching and stuff but never anything that, uh, you know. Led to *that*.”

When his eyes flick upward again, there’s something burning in them. “Did he ever pressure you?”

“No. Never.”

“Never made you uncomfortable?”

I’m not sure why he’s asking all of a sudden, but I shake my head. I *had* been uncomfortable whenever I thought about going to the next level with him, but not in a scared way. In an inexperienced way, where I knew I wouldn’t have a clue what to do once we made it to that point. A point most people would have surpassed long before we had.

And the thing is, I probably would have had my first orgasm with Chase if Kyler hadn’t walked in, because it *did* feel good. I was a nervous wreck when I realized what Chase was doing after kissing down my stomach until he got to my panties, and I couldn’t say a single word because they were all trapped in my throat when I saw his questioning eyes looking up at me.

It’d felt…good. Way better than I thought it would, and he’d said the type of things that I’m sure he said to other girls he’d been with because it made my body tighten and tense and fuzzy with a kind of need I’d never felt before as his tongue swiped over me.

Even though that night still makes me cringe over how it ended, I’m glad it did. End. Because the way I stayed in my head the entire time Chase was doing it wasn’t like what I’d experienced with Kyler last night, where I was very much aware of what he was doing, how he moved over me, and every feeling he pulled from his thrusting hips. *That* is what it should have felt like before, but it didn’t.

I’d been the one to ask Kyler not to stop.

I’d been the one encouraging it.

“It wasn’t that I was uncomfortable with Chase, but I wasn’t ready for things with him because I think I knew it wasn’t him I wanted to…” My throat bobs as I swallow, my eyes trying to stay latched onto his even though I want to look away. “He wasn’t the one I wanted to experience that stuff with. I think he knew it too.”

Ky’s nostrils flare as he climbs over my body, his mouth hovering over mine. I let out a surprised breath against his lips, giving him all the indication he needs to close the distance between us. The kiss is sweet,

slow, the torturous kind that still leaves me breathless as I let my lips follow his lead until I'm greedier for more.

Just as I start wrapping my arms around his neck to draw him in closer, he shakes his head and peppers kisses on one corner of my mouth, the other, then my jaw, until he's licking the column of my throat leading to my pulse. His tongue flattens against me first, tasting me, causing my neck to fall back so he can get better access. His teeth nip my skin, causing me to suck in a breath as he straddles me, sinking further and further with his mouth and hands.

"K-Kyler?" My breath is shaky when he suckles the bare skin above one of my breasts, which ache as his tongue dips into the crevice left available with my tank still on.

"Do you trust me?"

There's no doubt. "Always."

"Lift your arms," he instructs, waiting until I obey before he strips me of the loose material and leaves me topless. His eyes flash and stop my hands from covering my boobs, his gaze setting them on fire with a look of appreciation. "Fuck, honey. Better than I imagined."

Honey. Throat thick, I try saying something but get cut off by him covering one of my pebbled nipples and sucking it into his mouth. Arching up, I moan embarrassingly loud as my fingers find his hair. "Kyler that feels so—" *God.* I close my eyes and let the sensation of his mouth working the sensitive bud take control. The sound his mouth makes, the soft suckling, the wetness as he lets go of the nipple and works his way over to the over one, has me needing more. Through my hooded eyes, I watch his head bob up and down over my chest, one of his hands sliding between my parted legs to start stroking a single finger up and down the seam of my covered slit.

Following his hand, I begin moving my hips upward to get the perfect amount of pressure as he bites my breast. "*God*," I groan, digging my fingers into his scalp until he hisses. "S-Sorry."

He releases my breast. "Don't be. You need to pull my hair? Pull it. You need to dig your fingernails in? Hurt me. You need to ride my hand? Ride it. But I have a better idea." With a single kiss between the valley of my breasts, his hand hooks into the waistband of my shorts and tugs. "May I?"

It's almost embarrassing how quickly I nod in anticipation and rasp out, "Yes, please," but I don't dwell on it. If anything, my enthusiasm turns his

eyes into molten lava. He peels off my shorts in one quick motion, leaving me completely naked in front of him. My heart pounds so loudly that it hurts my ears, and I know my face is red when I watch him look at every bare inch of me.

"So beautiful." His eyes find mine. "You know that, right? You're so fucking beautiful, Leighton. Never thought I'd…" He shakes his head, blowing out a breath. "I want to do this a couple different ways."

My eyes widen. "What do you mean?"

He's on his hands and knees again, his legs on either side of mine as he sweeps down for a quick kiss on my lips. "I want you to come on my tongue, Lenny. You good with that?"

Am I— Another nod, this one breathless as he kisses me again and lets his lips and tongue and teeth linger for a little while before crawling down my body. His fingers brush up and down the sides of my thighs, slowly spreading my legs until I'm open for him. I want to close them when his intense eyes latch onto the trimmed curls resting right where his fingers begin to play, but he won't let me.

"Don't be embarrassed," he coaxes, pressing a kiss at the apex of my thigh. "You're beautiful, Leighton. Prettiest fucking thing I've seen in my whole life."

The look I give him has him propping up on his forearms to eye me back. I've seen the kind of women he's been pictured with, so the doubt is hard to hide. "I told you I'd never lie, remember? You want to know what makes you better than everybody else? Half the women who are beautiful have the ugliest personalities. They're selfish and greedy. Not you. You've always been better. Selfless. Willing to give anybody anything they wanted even if it breaks a piece of you. You will never compare. And as much as I hate to admit it, Katherine was right about your looks. You've got them. Makes me want to deck every guy who's noticed too."

My jaw quivers because I know he means that. Every word. And it makes me feel more exposed than I already am spread open for him.

"I want…" I reach out and tug on his shirt, giving him a shy look. "Can you take your shirt off?"

He grins and reaches behind him, peeling it off in one swift motion before tossing it over the bed somewhere with my discarded pieces. "Anything else?"

Slowly, I shake my head.

With one more kiss against the inside of my thigh, his mouth slowly trails over to where only his fingers have been before. My mouth parts into a wide *O* when his fingers part me and his mouth sucks my clit between his lips. The silent noises I make as he works me with his mouth are nothing I can compute. My hands find his hair again, threading into his already messy tresses, as his tongue slides down until it circles my entrance.

Fingertips digging into his scalp as he probes the tight hole, I arch up and cry out his name. It feels so good, so hot, and I'm begging him for more with every rock of my hips upward to meet his face. When his tongue leaves and his lips find my clit again, he sucks it harder, faster, and scrapes his teeth lightly against the bundle of nerves that leaves my legs dropping farther apart to allow his broad shoulders to sink further into me, over me.

The noises he makes has me rolling my eyes into the back of my head, and I don't mean to push his face closer to where I want him to stay, but I do. It's the low growl I'm met with when I grind against his mouth that has me gasping for air and trying to get him to start using his tongue in other places again. "Please," I beg, tugging on his hair, "Please, Ky? I need you there."

A string of whiney noises escapes me when he peels away and rises on his knees, his mouth and chin damp from my arousal that I'll definitely be embarrassed about later on. "Why did you stop?"

Lying flat on his back, he pats his chest with a wicked grin on his face. "Come here." I blink at him in confusion, legs numb and tingly as I get on my knees with hesitation. He says, "I told you I want to do this a couple ways. Straddle me, Len. Ride my face."

My eyes widen and heart picks up until I'm almost sure I'm at risk at having a heart attack. Can that happen at my age? I'm sure it has before, and that'd be mortifying to have to explain to the paramedics when they arrive. "You want me to…?" Telling him I've never done that is pointless because he already knows, so he just nods and beckons me over again, helping me get into the position he wants.

"Hands on the headboard," he commands, and it makes me want to squeeze my thighs if they weren't on either side of his head already. "Hold on, okay?" Before I can say anything, his mouth is there again, his fingers pulling me down onto his face.

When I look down, it's the hottest thing I've ever seen. His hair is sticking up in random places from where I've run my hands through it, and

his forehead is dotted with sweat as he moves his face and guides my hips to ride his mouth. My fingertips dig into the wooden headboard until they hurt as I find the rhythm that makes me feel good, better than good, as one of his fingers joins the assault on my aching center. Sucking my clit hard and fast, a finger enters me slowly, working in and out before a second joins. I bite down on my bottom lip so hard I taste blood as I adjust to the pressure of his digits but ride out the otherwise overwhelming pleasure that he's giving me.

And when I feel the familiar tightening in my stomach as I clench his fingers, I know what's coming. He groans when I grip around him and throw my head back as I grind against his face, trying to get the best angle before—

"*Oh my God*," I cry, jerking as I orgasm while his tongue and mouth and fingers soak in the juices that I feel between my legs. He rides it out, still holding me, still licking me and murmuring things I don't understand until I slump over, slide down him, and find his mouth.

I don't think before I'm kissing him with a fervor, ignoring the saltiness and dampness on his lips as he meets my tongue every single time. From my waist down is numb as he wraps an arm around the small of my back and holds me to him, exploring my mouth like he explored between my legs, and that thought alone makes me hot all over again.

When we break apart, I rest my forehead against him and try catching my breath. His other arm wraps around my upper back, right over my shoulder blades, as his face settles into the crook of my neck. His breath is heavy, hot, and I can feel his bulge twitching against me in the boxer briefs he has on.

He doesn't ask me for anything else, doesn't expect anymore. But I want to make him feel good too. I want him to teach me, to tell me how to make him explode like I did for him.

I already have Kyler's love and trust, but unlike what he previously believed, I *am* selfish. Because I want everything else too.

Without a word, I sit up and straddle his hips, reaching down and brushing my fingertips along the bulge. His neck strains as his lips part in heady breaths as I begin slowly working him, my hand unsure but trying. "Fuck. That feels good. Yeah, like that," his murmured words encourage me to reach into the band and wrap my palm around his silky soft shaft,

hesitantly jerking him up and then down again until he's cursing through his guidance.

Repeating the motion when I see the way his lips form a small *O*, I take in the flush of his cheeks and how the tendons of his neck bulge as he thrusts into my palm. I don't let myself think about it before squeezing him harder experimentally while my other hand works to try pulling his boxer briefs off. He only pauses a second before helping me, arching up and pulling them down until he's on full display in front of me.

Kyler is…beautiful. In a manly sort of way, of course. All lean muscles and drool worthy definition any runner would have. His thighs are muscular, parting when I grip him tighter in my hand and begin jerking him off without any restrictions, watching him twitch. His hand covers mine and starts setting a faster pace, jacking him quicker until he's steel under me and more wetness gathers between my legs as I listen to him pant.

Licking my bottom lip, curiosity takes over about what he tastes like. Will he be salty like me? Bitter? I don't think before I dip down and cover the mushroom tip of him with my mouth, sucking and licking the salty bead dripping from him until he shouts, "Fucking Christ!" I gag when he drives up, choking me with his hardness as he sinks deeper into my mouth, before stroking my hair and groaning, "Sorry. Wasn't expecting that. I— *Jesus.* Fuck. You need to stop. I'm not going to last long."

Popping him out of my mouth, I kiss the blunt head and watch it twitch again with fascination, before meeting his glazed eyes. "I want to," I whisper, not emphasizing what exactly before repositioning myself over him so he can feel how wet I am.

His hand comes up and moves hair out of my face, his thumb caressing my bottom lip. "Are you sure? We don't have to—"

"I want to." I nod for good measure, pecking a kiss against the pad of his thumb. "I'm sure, Ky. We love each other right?"

He sits up and surprises me with a kiss, this one hard like he's trying to prove a point. His teeth pull at the same lip he was just touching before sweeping his tongue inside my mouth and sucking mine until I'm moaning again. He pulls away only far enough to say, "Never doubt that. But we've already done a lot today, and I never want you to feel obligated. If you want to, I want to. There are condoms in the nightstand. If you don't, that's okay too."

I let out a tiny breath before kissing him lightly, nowhere near as skilled as him, but reach over to the nightstand in question and open the top drawer. My hands shake slightly as I take out a foil packet and stare for a moment, watching him take it from me and peel it open.

“Want to help me put it on?” he asks softly, pecking my lips again. I nod and let him show me what to do, guiding the latex over his length and covering it completely. It isn’t until he presses a kiss to my jaw and says, “Lie down,” when the nerves kick in.

Not because I don’t want to do this, because I do. I *really* do. More than anything I’ve ever wanted to do before. It’s about if he’ll feel good, or if I’ll do something wrong. What if I don’t make enough noise? Or move the wrong way? Or tell him the wrong thing?

“Hey.” His eyes lock with mine as he settles between my legs, hand combing through my hair in gentle, comforting strokes. “Get out of your head. We don’t have to do this. We can stop anytime you want. Feel me?”

“Okay.” I lean up and meet him halfway for a kiss, winding my arms around his shoulders and massaging the back of his neck with one of my hands. One of his reaches between us and plays with my clit, leisurely stroking me until I’m breathing heavy into his mouth. “Please?” I all but beg against his lips, feeling him align himself to my opening.

“I’ve got you, Lenny. Always will.” He slowly, slowly, *slowly* sinks into me. Just a little, until the feeling of being stretched more than his fingers can offer has me tensing, my legs locking at his side as my body tries expelling him. “Relax. Breathe. You doing okay?”

I nod against his neck where I bury my head, peppering kisses up and down his throat. “I am. I’m okay. You can keep going.”

His pause is only minor before he continues working his way in, stroking me with one hand, brushing the side of my leg in a coaxing manner with his other. It hurts. *God* it hurts. In the moment, I’m not sure why people like doing this so much. But then he kisses me, and suddenly his lips and his teeth and his tongue and his fingers are all I can focus on.

Same with his, “I love you” and his “You and me, Leighton” and the “never felt like this before” that gets me to loosen my muscles until he’s finally seated fully inside of me. He stops moving, letting me adjust to the fullness. My eyes are clenched as I wiggle my hips, feeling the bite of pain and extra wetness that wasn’t there a moment ago. I lost my virginity. Not

to Chase or some random guy who hit on me late at night after one of my many diner shifts.

With Kyler.

Kyler Bishop.

Maybe I should be ashamed, embarrassed, or something else, but I'm not. I'm happy it's with him—with someone I care about and trust more than anything in this world. And when I give him a single nod, a gentle kiss, he begins moving and making the pain turn into something else. It's still there, faint, a bit uncomfortable, but the burning that accompanies this huge milestone fades into heavy breathing and creaking bed springs and two slick bodies coming together over and over and over.

My lips part and his tongue sweeps in and his grunts and groans are mixed with my moans and pleas. Fingernails dig into flesh. Slick wetness sounds from where our two bodies meet with each slow thrust, and eventually we're holding hands and holding onto each other as his movements become harder, more frantic when I beg him to keep going, to love me harder, to show me how much he cares and wants this and wants me. His growl is deep and low and needy as his cock fills me, one of my legs wrapping around his waist, my heel pushing against his butt that makes him go deeper than before.

"Oh God," I whimper as his hips meet mine in an unrelenting rhythm, squeezing his hand so hard it may break. "OhGodohGod. K-Kyler? I think I'm—" The bruising kiss he gives me swallows the orgasm that follows him pinching my clit and jackknifing into me harder until my body shifts closer toward the headboard as it smacks against the wall once, twice, a third time to match his rhythm. If there were other people in the house, there's no doubt they'd hear the bed squeaking and our heavy panting and know exactly what's going on between us.

"You are squeezing the fucking life out of my cock, Leighton," his hoarse voice states right before he wraps an arm around my waist and holds our lower halves together before he enters me one last time and stays there until he spills into the condom.

I'm sweaty and sticky and sore and a bunch of other things when he gently lowers himself down and kisses me with so much sweetness that I don't know what to do with myself.

Spent, I feel my eyelids lower as he withdraws. I wince a little at the last sting of pain from the action, which he soothes with a wet cloth he brings

back from the bathroom after disposing the condom into the waste basket. The cloth has smears of blood on it after he's done cleaning me up, and my cheeks redden a little when he tosses it into the laundry bin in the corner of the room.

"You okay?" he asks, settling in beside me again before pulling me onto his chest.

"Perfect," I whisper tiredly.

We lay like that for a while, letting our breathing even out before his lips press against my temple. "Get some sleep. I can make us breakfast afterward."

I find myself nodding, already halfway to unconsciousness when I murmur, "I love you."

Right before I slip into sleep, I hear his husky voice answer, "Me too, Lenny. This is only the beginning."

I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

GORDY IS WAITING for me when I get back from my run Monday morning, perched at the kitchen island with a drink and laptop in front of him like usual when we set up time to talk. He nods at me while typing something as I go to the fridge and grab a water, downing half of it before wiping off my face and turning to him.

"Run ran late," I apologize, peeling off the band holding my phone on my arm and dropping it onto the counter. "Give me ten to go grab a quick shower."

Finally looking up at me, his brows raise after a quick glance of me. "You've got something on your face."

I just ran fucking ten miles, so I roll my eyes at him. "Yeah, it's called sweat. Maybe if you actually joined me like you keep saying you will, you'd know what that's like."

It's his turn to roll his eyes, a crooked grin forming as he leans back. "Nah, it's something else. Something I haven't seen in a long time. Is that… a *smile*?"

Deadpan, I glare at him. "I smile."

He snorts, closing his laptop. "Uh huh. Just like I go on runs all the time. Which, by the way, is the last thing I'd do with you after last time. You fucking ditched me two miles in."

What a drama queen. “I gave you money to get a cab ride back. You didn’t look so good.”

“You were running too fast!”

I’m full on laughing now. “You ran too slow. I told you I’d take it easier on you next time if you really wanted to—”

“No.” He takes a sip of his water. “What’s got you so happy all of a sudden? It sure as shit can’t be about the news I told you we’d discuss today. You cussed me out as soon as I mentioned signing on, and I highly doubt you’ve changed your mind in the three days since we’ve talked.”

Chuckling over his pointed 72-hour statement, I finish the water and set the glass down on the counter. Gordy and I have talked almost every day since we’ve known each other. Half the shit he texts or calls me about is work related, the other is because I have something to bitch to him about—whether it’s Harry, Mia, or Chase related, he’s heard it all from me. “I don’t know why you act like I’ve been such a miserable asshole lately.”

All he does is stare.

My jaw ticks. “You’re a dick. I haven’t been a miserable— Would you quit giving me that look? Jesus. You’re worse than Mia sometimes.”

Now he’s grinning wider. “So, she’s noticed too?”

Walking toward the doorway, I throw out a, “I don’t have time for this,” before escaping upstairs to wash off before going over what he came here for. More interview setups.

The one with Hot in Hollywood bumped my song to the number one spot, where it’s stayed. Sales have been good, Kalvin has been on my ass about doing an award show performance, and Gordy has been getting requests from other talk shows about being on to discuss life since I stepped out of the spotlight. If Gordy can take one look at me and see something has changed, I imagine the millions of viewers watching an interview with me would too.

I take my time drying off and dressing, looking at the rumpled bed sheets and blankets, indicative of the two bodies that have occupied it over the past few days. Even though she wouldn’t admit it, I could tell Lenny was sore—knew she would be after her first time. Like always, she brushed it off and fussed when I doted on her. One day she’ll let me take care of her without fighting me, and I can tell those walls are breaking slowly, but it’s still a work in progress.

Saying goodbye to her this morning felt different, the tug in my heart watching her head to school, then work after classes, told me how screwed I already am. If I agree to go on tour, to travel for award shows, I'd have to get used to saying goodbye to Lenny for longer than eight hours.

By the time I get downstairs, Gordy has a weird look on his face as he stares at his computer screen. Before I get to ask what his deal is, he says, "When are you going to tell me?"

As much as I want to play dumb, to keep Lenny as mine for a little while longer, I look over his shoulder at the extensive number of pictures he's scrolling through on some website I'm vaguely familiar with. All me and Lenny, and the headlining image is one of us at the hospital, hands clasped together, foreheads touching, in a warm embrace.

The type of embrace that's more than two people who used to be family.

"Is it really that surprising?" I counter with, stepping back and scrubbing a palm down my jaw. I shaved yesterday, but there's a significant amount of stubble that meets my flesh before I drop my arms to my sides.

For a while, I don't think Gordy is going to answer. His eyes don't stray from the pictures that someone, probably a nurse or patient, snapped of us. One of me holding Lenny to my side with an arm wrapped around her waist, one of me kissing the top of her head, and one of us peering down at the freshly wrapped bundle of blue in the little cradle. That one had to of been the nurse whose eyes lingered too long and shied away the second mine connected, and I'm sure it means that a picture of Roman Casanova—my six pound, four ounce nephew—was sold to the highest bidder as a first look exclusive.

I'm fuming. "I should get her fired."

"You should tell me what's going on with you and Leighton so I can clean this up."

I gape at him. "Clean it up?"

His hand gestures toward the screen again, flapping chaotically. "Yes! I wish you would have given me a little warning that you were going to get your head out of your ass with Leighton."

"I—" I stop myself, blinking at my best friend and cock my head. "What?"

Gordy sighs, closing his laptop and running a hand through his hair. It's gotten longer, a little less gray since Lenny became a frequent in my life

again. “Like you said, I’m not surprised. You and Lenny have always been close. Closer since she got back. Considering how you two were before—”

“Nothing happened before,” I nearly growl, his expression remaining the same despite my barking tone.

“I know that. Christ, Kyler.” He rolls his eyes like I’m being dramatic. “But that right there—” He waves his hand at me. “That response is going to get you into trouble. People are going to see those photos, know they aren’t just two good friends enjoying a new family addition, and then throw accusations.”

“We did nothing wrong.”

“Again,” Gordy draws out, “I know. But I’m telling you, as your manager, that this is only the start. And you can’t snap at everyone who is going to come after you, calling you and Leighton nasty names and who knows what else.”

My fingers thread through my hair. I knew this was coming. As soon as I made up my mind about Lenny, about what I wanted, what I hoped *she* wanted, I saw it as an inevitability. “Is it going to be bad?”

Gordy’s lip flatten.

“Fuck.”

I haven’t looked online or done anything on my social media pages since I holed up with Leighton in my bedroom. I’ve been too wrapped up in her smell on my sheets, her body taking up half my mattress, and the little noises she makes whenever I explore her with my fingers and mouth.

Like always, my best friend stands with a professional but exhausted look on his face as he slides his cell phone out of his pocket. I don’t know who he’s texting, but I can only imagine it’s someone on my PR team when he blanches at the screen. When he’s done, he glances up at me, eyes firm, expression cautious, when he asks me, “Is it for the long haul?”

Without hesitation I say, “It always has been.”

He rubs his lips together and then nods slowly, expelling a breath. “Good. Because Chase Matthews just spoke up about the images floating around.” There’s no need to pause to tell me how bad that is, but he does it anyway. “It’s not looking good, Kyler.”

I close my eyes as the not so subtle rise of anger bubbles in my veins. It’s how I felt when Leighton told me she was going on a second date with Matthews. It’s the same one I got when I saw him kiss her that night.

And the night I walked in on them?

Pure rage.

At Chase for having that first with her.

At myself for letting him.

At life for putting her in mine the way it did, ready to be torn down because of her mother, and now me.

Katherine was her destruction before.

But I was going to do everything I can to make sure not to destroy the life she's rebuilt after coming back to me.

"What can I do?" I ask, voice hard even after a few breaths.

Gordy sits back down, shaking his head as he loosens a sigh. "Guess I can't tell you to reconsider?"

"Not a chance in hell."

He watches me for a moment. "Good. She's going to need that dedication. I've got a game plan, but you're not going to like it."

There's only one reason why I wouldn't like something he had to say.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

LEIGHTON / PRESENT DAY

FINISHING my exam with a big smile of satisfaction on my face knowing all those hours of studying with Kyler paid off, I close the booklet and drop my pencil into my bag. Professor Adams doesn't look too surprised that I'm the first one to walk up to her.

"I was wondering if we could speak a moment before you go?" she asks quietly, cognizant of the other fifteen or so students hovering over their desks.

I nod and follow her to the far corner of the room where it's quieter for the others working. There's a bittersweet feeling rising in the pit of my stomach knowing this is it. My first semester of college is almost done, apart from one exam and one group presentation tomorrow.

Professor Adams breaks me away from my thoughts. "Do you have all your classes picked for next semester?"

The smile comes easily, a giddiness settling into my limbs like it did before the fall semester began. "Yes. I'm taking that Business Management class you suggested with Dr. Brinkley. Thanks for sending him that email. I would have had to take another class as a prerequisite to get in otherwise." And, honestly, I would have. Anything Marcia Adams suggested, I'd gladly do, even if it meant taking a stuffy intro class that doesn't sound fun.

"He's going to be glad I did," she answers kindly. As she promised, she's helped me figure out the best courses to take since the PR major is

flexible depending on what area of focus students are interested in. There are some general courses everyone has to suck up, but overall, it's a free for all when you get into the final two years of study, and my adviser and her have been flexible with helping me come up with a game plan for the remaining three and a half years I have at UCLA. "I showed a few of my partners the work you submitted, specifically the mock client proposal. They were all very impressed and find it hard to believe you have no experience for somebody who sees the business so clearly already at your age."

Blushing over the subtle compliment, I shift from one foot to the other. "I've done a few things to help some people I know and shadow a friend a little bit. He shows me the ropes when he thinks it'll benefit me."

Gordy has always been kind to me, but he's gone above and beyond what I expected him to when I asked about getting experience in the field. It started out as little things—giving me problems to find solutions for, guiding me in helping Kyler draft certain statements, or plan specific events surrounding his new single, and have gotten progressively larger.

"Anybody I know?"

"Gordon Fuller. He manages Kyler Bishop and a few other people. Um, he just signed a new client that's supposed to be really big news. Emilia Reinhard."

Recognition flashes in her eyes, followed by a small, knowing smile that I almost think I imagine. "I've heard of her. And him, for that matter. He does well with Kyler, so I'm sure he'll do great things for Millie too." She definitely knows his new client considering that's the nickname I've heard Gordy call her when he tells me about a few things he's booked her for—mostly television performances, but she's working on an EP now with the same label Kyler is with, which makes stacking meetings with Kalvin, the producer, easier for the management wizard who I've always looked up to.

"Can I ask," Professor Adams adds, "who the woman is you reference in earlier papers? You said there was a neighbor who influenced you to pursue this line of work because of the intricate stories she would tell, but I don't recall you saying a name. Some of the methods you use remind me of an oldie in the business."

Oh. Hadn't I? "Well, I always called her Ms. Wynona because that's what she told me to call her the day we met. She technically lived a couple

apartments down from me, but I saw her almost every day. I think her last name is—”

“Ramirez? Wynona Ramirez?”

My eyes widen. “You know her?”

Her lips form a gentle smile. One of awe, and pleased surprise which I know well. “A lot of people do, Leighton. Did you know she was one of the first women to dominate this industry? She worked harder than any other person I know to get to the top, representing people like Brooke Mayfield, Andrew Singer, and David Gould.”

Jaw dropping at the huge multi-billionaire names, I gape at her. Ms. Wynona made it sound like she worked with a few rising stars before calling it quits. She never talked about her career journey much, only how much she loved seeing the looks on her clients faces when their true talent was recognized as it deserved to be. Because of her, I wanted the same thing—to see the beaming faces of those I help build up, to celebrate every small and large victories, and to be a part of their journey for as long as they’d have me. “I…she never told me. I didn’t know that.”

The woman in front of me shakes her head in amusement. “I’m not shocked. Wynona was always a humble woman. It’s a shame she never came back after her husband died.”

I never met her husband, but I’d hear little tidbits about him when Ms. Wynona would go off on tangents, almost as if she was in a different world when she’d bring him up. I always thought she was some sort of cat lady who loved telling neighbor kids stories of her past. There was always such passion in every story, keeping me and whoever else would listen enamored. “I never met him,” I admit sadly.

Professor Adams nods once. “He’s the reason she decided to leave. Said something about finding the one to settle down with. Truthfully, I modeled myself after her, up until leaving my job for a man. But that’s Wynona. She loved him so deeply. Love at first sight, type thing. I never believed in that, but she sure did.”

That’s so…romantic. “I lost touch with her after I moved to California years ago. I tried tracking her down once, but the new landlord at the complex told me there wasn’t a woman by that name there anymore.”

I’d told Mom that I wanted to find her, which she scoffed at and told me it was a lost cause, but it didn’t deter me. I spent more time with Ms.

Wynona than I did with her, so why wouldn't I at least try figuring out where she was?

A sad smile greets me. "Unfortunately, she passed away a few years ago. A stroke, I believe. There was a dedication to her by many of the clients she made famous. She touched a lot of lives." The smile that's bittersweet, wrenched with grief, turns into something softer. "It seems like she still is. You were taught by the best of the best, Leighton."

Who would have thought I'd meet somebody like Ms. Wynona in a run-down apartment building who was actually well-known? Part of it doesn't make sense. I'm sure she had money to live somewhere far nicer, maybe even move back here where people knew her better after her husband died. I vaguely remember her saying there was too much tying her to Phoenix to move elsewhere. She'd disappear for hours at a time every afternoon, making sure she was always back by the time I got home from school to share a new story. She always looked sad until she'd start talking, then whatever made her eyes dim would seemingly disappear as she spoke. It makes me wonder if she'd spent the time away from her apartment to visit the man she loved a few blocks down at the cemetery.

Hearing the kind woman who always gave me the time of day when nobody else did has passed away makes me wish I'd tried harder to find her. To say what, I'm not sure. Truthfully, I think she would have said plenty for me. Given me a hug, maybe, like the one she gave me before I left. If I'd known it would be the last one, I would have made it count.

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news," my professor says, squeezing my shoulder. "Perhaps now will be a good time to tell you that I'm interested in offering you a scholarship."

A scholarship? "What?" I must not have heard her right, but the look on her face tells me otherwise.

"Yes. It's from the Ramirez Project, which funds students like yourself studying PR programs. Once awarded, it can be used at any institution, covering the entire four years."

A *full* scholarship? "You're joking, right?" Once upon a time I thought I'd be offered a full ride by being top of my class, but when those expectations fell through, I accepted I'd be facing a ton of student debt if I decided to pursue any type of college education—something I wasn't sure I'd go for if it hadn't been for Kyler.

“I’m not,” she assures me. “I’m also curious as to see if your interests have been homed in on where to work.”

Confused, my brows pinch. “What do you mean?”

“There’s a lot of opportunity on the east coast. The industry is saturated here because of the startup it takes, especially in entertainment. Don’t get me wrong, Leighton, it’ll take a lot of work to get where you want to be no matter where you choose to go, or who guides you, but I feel like you’d do very well in New York.”

Did she just…? “New York,” I squeak, struggling to swallow. I notice a few glances from my classmates before blushing and lowering my voice. “I wasn’t expecting that. Any of this. It’s…a lot. I’m flattered that you’d think of me, but would I need to apply for this? Or—”

“It’s yours if you truly want it,” she tells me earnestly. “I know when people have what it takes to be great, and you’re one of them. If you choose to stay here, the scholarship will still be yours, but I highly suggest considering the east coast. There are opportunities that await you wherever you go, Ms. Grier, if you allow yourself the chance to find them.”

I almost forget to breathe as she offers me the sage advice, which I soak in greedily.

Unsure of what to say, I find myself nodding when she tells me to think about it, then gives me her card with a personal email address on it. *A personal email.* From Marica Adams.

“Whatever you decide, know that I’ll be in your corner.” That knowing smile is back when she stands at full height again, flattening at her pencil skirt. “It appears you have many powerful people already there, but what’s one more?”

She tips her head in dismissal, which I take before she decides to change her mind, and stare at the card with her information on it.

It isn’t until I get to Delmar’s sometime later, in the spare car that Kyler finally got me to agree to use when he couldn’t take me places, when I let what she says soak in.

She knows who’s in my corner.

She knows *how* they’re in my corner.

And when I step into Delmar’s to greet my usual coworkers after clocking in for my shift, I’m greeted by a face who’s been hellbent on avoiding me until now.

One text tells me why before Chase even opens his mouth.

Kyler: *They know.*

When he approaches me, he doesn't even do his usual sweep over the black leggings and skintight tee or remark on the coffee stain I managed to get on my apron in record time. Instead, he holds up a magazine that has me and Kyler plastered on the front and says, "I'm only going to ask one time. Was this happening while we were together?"

Quinn and Harmony freeze behind the counter where they're helping an older customer with a gift certificate. I meet their eyes, heat blasting my cheeks, before looking back at the boy whose face is no longer friendly toward me.

"Chase—"

"For once," he cuts me off, voice thick with a desperation for the truth. "Just once, would you give it to me straight?"

Guilt clamps down on my heart when I meet his eyes because he can see right through me when my eyes melt into puddles of silent apology. Knowing how I led him on for longer than I should have is what makes me say, "I think it's always been him."

He's still, not blinking, not speaking a word. I'm grateful for his silence, seeing the audience we're collecting from the corner of my eye. There are cell phones pointed in my direction, a few murmured conversations from customers waiting for their order.

I could tell him what happened the day at Mia's, or that night in Kyler's room, but it wouldn't make a difference. Telling him it'd been going on for years would change the context, even if the truth is always the same.

I loved Kyler.

I loved him then.

I loved him when I left.

I loved him when I came back.

And I love him ten times more now.

"I'm—"

He drops the hand holding the magazine and shakes his head. "Don't tell me you're sorry if you don't mean it. I should have seen this coming a mile away."

"Chase," I whisper.

"Are you going to deny it?"

I say nothing.

He looks away, disgust, hurt, and something else all mixed on his face. Quinn clears her throat to gain my attention, and when I see what she's gesturing to with her chin, I pale at the cameras outside the café, pointed in the large windows.

Right at me.

At Chase.

"Ms. Grier," a voice I don't like hearing comes from behind me. When I turn toward Mr. Warren, my shoulders tense at the less than pleased expression on his face. He looks from me to the customers all watching my personal life unravel in front of them, to the paparazzi outside his building, before meeting my eyes again. "My office. Now."

Chase doesn't say a single thing when I peer over my shoulder at him. What do I expect him to do? Defend me?

I swallow. "I am sorry," I tell him quietly, untying my apron.

Mr. Warren told me he wouldn't allow for any disruptions from me. Mel has worked with me on days when press gets out of hand, keeping me in the back doing stock and inventory, or helping bake the pastries, but there's only so much she can do.

It's right before I walk into the back, following the smirking, beady-eyed, beer-gutted man that I hear Chase say, "Yeah. Me too."

And maybe I should have read into that then and there, because after I get fired, hand in my apron and nametag, and say goodbye to a wide-eyed, but not surprised, Quinn, and a somber Mel, I walk out into the parking lot to get bombarded.

"How long have you been cheating on Chase with Kyler?"

"Is this why you're back in California?"

"Leighton, can you explain when the dynamic between you and Kyler Bishop changed?"

"Is Kyler's new song about you?"

On and on it goes as I speed walk through the crowd. They're getting thicker, their questions louder, the flashes from their cameras brighter, until I hear a booming voice say, "Get back!" and do a double take when two beefy men that look oddly familiar begin parting the crowd.

The reason why becomes clear when I see Harry Bishop coming over to me, his aged face blank and unrelenting as he and one of his bodyguards guide me to the black car waiting.

"I drove here," I tell him.

“Someone will bring the car back,” he tells me gruffy, opening the back door and skillfully ignoring the questions being called out behind us.

I slide in first, followed by him, and I try to avoid looking out the window when the driver climbs into the front seat and takes off.

“How did you know where I was?”

He simply says, “Kyler.”

I blink, thinking I misheard him.

Harry shifts in his seat, the pressed suit he’s in making him look as intimidating as ever. When he looks at me, I try my hardest not to squirm, but I’ve never done well under his attention. “I suppose this is going to be a long-term thing considering he called me to help.”

“He did?”

There’s a moment of silence, followed by a terse nod. “Can’t remember the last time he’s done that. Shouldn’t be surprised he only does because it involves you.”

I’m not sure how to reply. There’s a lot of questions still lingering in my mind that have to do with him and Mom, but the words get jammed in the back of my throat. But before I can sort through my thoughts, Harry’s baritone voice cuts into the silence that’s slowly suffocating me.

“I have the name of your biological father if you’re interested.”

I stare.

He clears his throat. “It wasn’t listed on any of your paperwork. I double checked. Say the word, and I’ll get you the information.”

“Why?”

His head cocks to the side.

I shake mine slowly. “Why would you do that for me?”

For a moment, I don’t think he’ll respond. “I don’t know the reason Katherine kept the information from you. From what I read, he was a decent person.”

I hear one word. *Was.* “He’s…?”

Another sharp nod. “I’m sorry,” is all he says to the fading inquiry.

I swallow, not necessarily sad from the news considering I don’t even know his name, but still…hurt. Hurt that Mom never told me his name, or that I never got the chance to decide for myself if I wanted him in my life.

Until now.

Harry is giving me that.

“Consider it an apology gift.”

“I don’t need an apology,” I tell him honestly, withholding a sigh. I lean back against the seat, finally allowing myself to look out the window and watch the scenery pass.

The fact that the man who thought he’d fathered me for years is willing to give me what my mother never did tells me more than I need to know about him. “I don’t think there’s a point of me learning who he is. It wouldn’t make a difference,” I murmur, lips pressing together.

“He’s family.”

That makes me turn to face him. “So is Kyler, but you’ve always treated him more like an employee than a son.”

The man beside me blinks, a grayed eyebrow raising ever so slightly.

“I know it’s not my place,” I add, voice softer, hesitant. “But I never got to have a relationship with either of my parents, and Kyler has both of his. It’d be a shame if you didn’t treat him with the respect he deserves and miss out on what a wonderful person he is.”

Again, he’s silent.

I lift a shoulder, knowing there’s nothing more I can say on the matter. “Thank you for looking up my…for finding out who my biological dad is.”

He clears his throat. “You’re sure you don’t want to know?” Nodding, I fold my hands into my lap while he studies me. “For the record, I respect my son far more than he thinks. I have a shitty way of showing it.”

My brows go up.

“I know I’m hard on him, but he’s always had more in him than he’s allowed himself to show off. I only wanted the best for my son. Not for me, not for our name, but for him.”

This time, it’s me who’s quiet, and in the silence, he’s challenging me. I don’t fall for it, letting him get out what he needs to.

He doesn’t care if I believe him or not, but I do. I’ve never thought Harry was a horrible person. Disrespectful at times, but that’s just his personality. He’s blunt to a fault, no matter how hard his words are to hear.

Letting it go, I ask the only thing I want to know. The one thing that’s been on my mind since the day we left the Bishop manor in the rearview mirror, driving away to Mom’s untimely demise. “Did you love her?”

I can’t look up right away, but when I do, I see his throat bobbing as he looks anywhere but me. His jaw ticks, and with nothing more than his profile to go on, I’d say the man with a rock-solid demeanor is struggling. “As much as a man like myself can,” is all he offers me.

And it’s enough because I know Mom would have said the same thing.

When we finally get back to the house, Kyler and Gordy are already walking out of the door before I can step out of the car. Instantly, I’m wrapped in the arms of a man who smells like home, reminding me that this is worth it.

“Getting tired of me yet?” he teases, trying to lighten the mood.

I breathe him in, shaking my head and smiling despite the day’s events. “Never.”

When Harry follows us inside, it takes an awkward staring contest between the two Bishops while Gordy and I watch before the eldest one speaks up.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” he tells his youngest, sighing in a defeat I’ve never heard from him before. “I’m tired, son.”

The moment I realize I should let them talk one on one I pull back from Ky. It’s the low admission weaved with confidence that comes from the younger of the two that has me faltering by the staircase. “I’m fucking tired of it too,” Kyler murmurs, blowing out a breath. “You going to be good with this?”

I’m not sure what ‘this’ is since my back is to him, so I look over my shoulder to see Harry looking at me, while Kyler waits for an answer with arched brows.

All Harry says when he looks back at his son is, “You’re a Bishop. You’re going to love that girl even if I tell you not to.” There’s a pause, a minor shadow crossing Ky’s features, before his father adds, “Don’t screw it up, kid.”

I’ve learned by now, from the years of being around Harry in his many moods, that that’s as good as it’ll get.

It isn’t until later that night when I learn three things.

One is that Chase spoke publicly about why our breakup ended, leaving me to believe the reason he said he was sorry earlier wasn’t because he got me fired, but because he let his hurt win and talked to the world’s largest gossip blogger that feeds millions of subscribers the juiciest what have you in Hollywood.

Two, that Garrick berated his little brother’s impromptu interview when a pap asked about it, saying it was “fueled by that damn Matthews anger,” and that he “knows personal problems didn’t deserve to be out there like that,” before he shoved his hand at the camera in his face and escaped into a

tinted car. As soon as Kyler found out I was fired from Chase's outburst at Delmar's, it took me, Gordy, *and* Harry to get him to calm down before he got in his car and drove to Mrs. Matthew's house and made this worse.

And three, that Harry not only agreed to come to my rescue at Delmar's when Gordy found out the press was waiting for me there, but to make a statement to the media about what happened three years ago, refusing to allow any slander toward the progression of my relationship with Kyler. Realistically, I know it's to protect his son. But, according to Harry before he left, it's about "protecting the people his son cares about too," and I was tempted to hug him then and there if I didn't know any better.

Because he's trying, and that's all anyone could ask for.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

KYLER / PRESENT DAY

ON MY WAY home from Studio 51 after a grueling day of questions, meetings between Kalvin's people and mine, and an exhausted looking Gordy, my dash screen lights up with an incoming call that my Bluetooth announces is the "The Asshole Aussie" calling. The humor fades when I reluctantly pick it up, something we don't make a habit of.

My greeting is no more than a distant, "What do you want?"

"I know this is going to deter the progress we've made at becoming BFFs," he starts with, making my lips flatten as I drive through the slow traffic. "But I thought you needed to know."

"Know what?" Ignoring his previous comment will save us a lot of time from bantering, because I can hear the hesitancy coming through the call and know whatever it is, isn't about braiding friendship bracelets in the future. "Garrick."

I think he mutters something before sighing. "Listen, before you go off, know that I already told him he's a fuckwit. It'll come back on him one way or another, and he'll have to deal with it on his own. I can't get him out of everything he gets himself into. I've been lucky enough not to have needed to up until now."

Blinking, I crack my knuckles before gripping the steering wheel, suddenly knowing where the call is going.

“My brother got upset with how things went down with your girl and started running his mouth to the wrong people. You know how it goes, mate.”

Eye twitching, I count to three and exhale slowly. Do I know how it goes? Yeah. I’ve said a lot of shit to people over the years that I shouldn’t have. And I did it on purpose, just like this kid did, because I was pissed off. I can’t be a hypocrite and hate him completely, because I’ve been there. Ironically, with the fucker on the other end of the phone. “If this news is supposed to shock me, you’re a little late on the delivery.”

There’s a pause. “You knew?”

Snorting, I say, “Your kid brother went to Joey Morning about their breakup. I’m pretty sure people in China know about it.”

He pauses. “True.”

I roll my eyes. Slowing down to put in our gate code, I drive in and put the car in park, leaning back against the seat. “Thanks for the heads up, but it’s not necessary. If he wants to make it up, it’s Leighton he needs to talk to.”

Another moment of silence. “He knows. I don’t suspect she’ll be hearing from him for a while. Hate to say this, but I think he liked her a lot more than he let on. He’s a bit…”

“We’ve all been through it,” is what I respond with, trying not to make a big deal out of the situation. “For the record, Leighton wouldn’t have tried to make things work if she didn’t care about him in even the slightest way.”

This whole conversation is one I wish would end, considering it’s the kind of talk I’ve heard Mia and her girlfriends have over the years. The whole heart to heart thing isn’t for me, especially not with Matthews.

His chuckle is light. “You don’t have to tell me that, Bishop. She’s a good person. Anyone can see that if they meet her.” What’s left between the lines is that he has to look out for his own first, like I have to look out for mine.

It’s why I say, “I’m not going to pretend I’m not pissed at the punk for pulling this. If he cared as much as you say, he would have kept our private life private until we were ready.”

Now he’s laughing. Loud, abrupt, amused. My eyes narrow at the screen like he can see me. “Mate, something tells me you’re never going to be ready for your relationship.”

Now he’s just annoying me. “Is that all?”

“Aw, don’t be like that.” He snorts over my dry tone. “I’m the last person to judge you on who you’re with. I mean, there’s a kink for everything. I happen to like—”

“Don’t want to know,” I say quickly, seeing the front door crack open and familiar black hair poke out. “I’m hanging up now.”

His chuckle is evident. “Does that mean it’s still a no about doing—”

For Christ’s sake. Before he even finishes that sentence, I do as I say. The call drops as Leighton grins at me from the doorway, a baby in her arms that makes me realize for the first time that Mia’s car is parked in the driveway.

I watch her hold Roman with care, looking down at him and making little faces. Taking a deep breath, I examine the house behind her, the garden, the domestication of the moment.

That baby might not be ours, but she looks damn good holding one, and it makes me realize how bad I want that.

The family.

The wife.

The kids.

Wetting my lips, I get out of the car and greet her with a quick peck on the lips before looking down at my nephew. “Not going to lie, Len, seeing you holding him makes me want to practice making one for ourselves.”

Her eyes widen when I glance at her, her cheeks flushed. At the thought of what I plan on doing to her as soon as we’re alone, or because of my admission, I don’t know. But all I do is grin and watch her eyes fill with the same kind of lust that I’m met with every time I pull drawn out moans from her body at night, exhausting us both until we fall asleep and wake up in the morning to do it all over again.

“You’d want that?”

“With you? Fuck yeah.” I kiss her again, this time drawing it out. Leaning my forehead against hers and watching my nephew doze off in her arms, I murmur, “But it’s early yet. We have plenty of time to talk about the future.”

Mia pops up behind Leighton. “Are you two done corrupting my son?”

I chuckle. “With you as a mother, I’m fairly sure he’s been corrupted since the day he was born.”

My sister goes to dispute that, then closes her mouth in contemplation. Raising her shoulders, she swipes her baby from Leighton’s arms and

throws out a, “True,” before turning to go back inside.

I throw an arm around Lenny and follow my big sister in, closing the door behind us. That’s when the girl in my hold says, “Mia thought it’d be a good idea to invite your mother over for dinner. I thought maybe we should invite Harry too, if that’s all right. There’s something he’s getting for me.”

That draws my interest. “What is he getting for you?” I’m not offended that she talks to my father more than me. He and I are a work in progress that will never be perfect. If she’s comfortable speaking to him, asking him for things, that means she’s warming to the idea of help. It means that she’s willing to let people in, which is more than I could ever ask for from her.

She shifts, wetting her bottom lip. “He’s using some private eye to track down where Ms. Wynona is buried. I was thinking…maybe we could go to Arizona sometime and visit her?”

My eyes soften. “Of course.”

When she leans into my side, I press a kiss to the crown of her head. “Have you thought more about what Marcia asked you? It’s a big opportunity.”

“I’m going to email her and accept it.”

Smiling, I can’t help but wonder, “Have you considered more about the east coast? I know you put it on the back burner with everything else going on.” The truth was going to find its way out one way or another, we just entered the firestorm sooner than anticipated.

Some of the media has backed off since Harry did an interview clearing the air about him and Katherine, and Mia went to social media to play big sister, or “big sister-in-law” according to the post she made on Instagram that garnered over a million likes thanks to the picture she’d put of her holding Roman and me holding Leighton. All her caption said was, “Always meant to be a family.”

The way Lenny bites her lip has me even more curious.

“She said the scholarship was good anywhere, right?”

Hesitantly, she nods.

We talked in detail over everything her professor told her, and even though she asked what I thought she should do, I told her it had to be up to her. It’s her life, and I’ve derailed it enough. I’d go anywhere for her, support any of her choices like I know she would with me, but I want to make sure they’re decisions that will make her happy.

“I’d really like to stay at UCLA,” she finally tells me, with a confident nod. “It may not be Stanford, but I’ve given up that pipedream. Talking to Nora helped me realize that dreams change. So do people. I mean, I could probably transfer with the grade point average I have now, but my campus seems a lot more like…like me. *This* version of me. Does that make sense?”

“I think it makes perfect sense. Are you sure you’re going to be comfortable there though? I know how people can be.”

She offers a limp shrug. “It’ll blow over eventually. This isn’t the worst thing that’s ever happened to me, Kyler. There’s going to be a new story for everybody to obsess over soon enough. Nobody will care about us anymore.”

She’s not necessarily wrong, though I think there will always be people who care. Like Mia, who still calls herself victorious for her matchmaking skills. Or Harry, who doesn’t say anything about Leighton and me, but always looks at us longer than normal when we’re all in the same room. It isn’t judgment in his eyes, but something else that makes me feel a little bad about flaunting this. But then Leighton will blink up at me with those gray eyes, and I stop caring about what everyone thinks, because she’s the only one whose opinion matters to me.

“Anyway,” she adds quietly, “I like where I am right now. It’s definitely where I want to graduate, but I don’t know. Maybe it’s not where I’ll end up.”

Following behind her to the kitchen, I place a hand on her lower back and drop my things down on the counter. “What do you say about winter break on the east coast?” I ask casually, pulling off my coat.

“The east coast?”

I nod.

“Like…this winter break?”

Chuckling, I nod again. “As in, the break that you’ve officially started since your grades have been posted. It’s cold and the weather is kind of crappy, but I think you’d like it. It’s a change of pace and, who knows—” The smile I give her is one of support, knowing she’s battling herself on the other offer her professor brought up. “Maybe you’ll like it there. Find a job interning at a huge corporation with people you look up to.”

Now she blinks, lips parting as she catches on to what I’m not-so-subtly laying down. She’s cute when she’s oblivious. “You want to go to New York?”

“Do *you*?”

“For winter break,” she reiterates slowly.

I shrug. *For good.* “At least for now. I’m serious, Lenny. If you want to consider Marica’s offer, then why not check out the place? My house isn’t too far from the city. The traffic isn’t that different from here. Besides the weather, it’s like you never left L.A.”

She lets out a tiny breath, stepping toward me and wrapping me up in a hug. Her arms squeeze my midsection as her cheek presses against my fast-beating heart. “You would do that for me?”

Chuckling, I wrap one arm around her shoulders and the other around the small of her back, pressing her against me. My lips rest against her hair. “Why would you go to school here even though people will talk? Will gossip and say shitty, catty things? Or encourage me to do a show or two around the country for my fans when Gordy brought up the offers the other day?”

I feel her take a deep breath. “Because I would do anything for you, Kyler. Support you no matter what.” When she moves away enough to look at me, my eyes instantly go to her parted lips, watching them form the words that do me in. “Because you’re worth it.”

As much as I want to dive in and absorb what it’s like to kiss her, taste her, and hear her against me, under me, everywhere, I finish the point I’m making. “That’s why I would go to New York with you. Whether it’s for winter break, or after you graduate. You were given an opportunity to live the life you’ve always talked about, Leighton. I’m not going to stand in the way of that. I’ll be right by your side.”

I step toward her, cup her face, and trail my thumb over her lips.

“You’re mine, Len. I’d go anywhere with you.”

Before she can say anything else, I dip down and kiss her softly, reeling when she kisses me back, opening her lips and coaxing my tongue with her own. She pulls back just far enough to whisper, “I always have been.”

I can’t help but grin, pecking her lips, her jaw, her cheek, before nipping her earlobe and smacking her ass as I lead her to the barstool. “I know. And believe me when I say I’m going to remind Mia that every time she tries convincing everyone that she’s you’re favorite.”

Rolling her eyes, she lets out a soft laugh before sitting down and watching me get out things for dinner. I’m no cook, but Leighton has taught

me a few tricks of the trade like she always promised Beth she would, so at least what little I can make is edible. “So, New York?”

If this girl needs me to remind her how far I’m willing to go to make her happy, I’ll do it in a heartbeat, but I think the point is clear by now. “I’ll buy you some warmer clothes before we leave.”

When she tries to argue with me, I give her one single look before she sighs, relenting to the fact this is one argument she can’t win.

Because I take care of my own.

Of what’s mine.

And I think she’s finally getting that.

“Admit it,” I tease. “You love me.”

She pauses for only a fraction, leaning her elbow against the edge of the counter to prop her head up in her palm. “I do. But if I have to choose between you and Violet Wonders, it’ll be a tough call.”

“You little shit,” I laugh, lunging at her.

She squeals as I throw her over my shoulder and walk past my sister and Dylan in the living room who are playing with their son. Seeing them as a three-family unit makes me want to savor my time with Leighton as much as possible, because I know the day Len and I decide to start a family —*if* we decide to—then I’ll be splitting my love with everyone.

“Try to keep it down,” Mia calls as I take Leighton upstairs, grinning at us. She thinks she’s smug for getting us together, regardless of fate doing the bulk of the work. Not only does she call the script “magic” because of where it led us, but it got her the role. Her first venture into acting outside of reality TV.

I throw out, “I make no promises.”

“Ky!” Lenny scolds, smacking my butt.

I return the favor.

“Try to keep it down, babe,” I tell her as I drop her onto the bed and begin working her jeans down her thighs.

I don’t give a shit what Mia or Dylan thinks, or the world outside these walls.

“Violet Wonders, my ass,” I grumble, working the rest of our clothes off our bodies and showing her just how much she’d choose me every single time.

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EPILOGUE

LEIGHTON

"THAT WAS Garrick Matthews and Kyler Bishop with their latest number one hit 'Nobody Like Me'," the radio host says, making me grin from where I put the finishing touches on my newest bookshelf. "I heard rumors that they're going to perform their collaboration at the Billboard Music Awards next year. Kelly, have you heard about that?"

I roll my eyes. They've already performed the song at the American Music Awards, so there's no benefit of performing it again in Las Vegas. The shock factor is gone, especially since the song has been number one in the charts every single week it's been out for the past month.

Kyler and Garrick have recorded two songs together now. The first one was meant as a peace treaty between our families, especially since there was still a lot of tension speculated in the media between me and Chase. It took me and Gordy teaming up to convince Ky it could be a good move to show there's no bad blood before he finally greenlit the project. The second single was all them, though he insisted he did it for me, especially because all the Violet Wonders guys showed up in the video. I got to watch them shoot it, which means I was reliving my fifteenth birthday, except it was finally legal for me to drink the alcohol that Zayne poured me.

"I don't think I'd get my hopes up," Kelly, the co-host says.

"You tell 'em, Kelly," I say to myself as I glance at the wood structure in front of me. The top half of the bookshelf looks crooked and I'm fairly

certain it’s not supposed to.

The radio hosts keep talking. “Violet Wonders is set to perform their latest that night, and Mia Casanova is stepping back into the spotlight with a solo.”

One of the hosts makes a disgruntled noise, making me frown. “It’s a good thing she had something to fall back on since her show was officially shut down by the network.”

“Don’t get me started on those movies she did last year,” another one says. “It’s really no wonder Rotten Tomatoes scored it so low.”

I make a face and grumble, “Asshole.”

“Who’s an asshole?” Looking over my shoulder, I smile at my fiancé who’s leaning against the doorjamb of my new home office. He walks in and squats down beside me, pecking my lips. “Looks good, babe.”

When he realizes what I’m talking about, he stands and walks over to turn the radio off. I can tell by the look on his face he’s not happy with how they’re talking about Mia. Her acting career started off rough. The first movie she got a small role in ended up doing poorly in the box office, and the second one did even worse. A few people claimed it was because of her, and after a third flop, the media all seemed to agree.

She’s gone back to working on music when she’s not focused on her family. Roman is already two and she’s pregnant with her second child. Even though I know she misses the TV world, I think she’s content with going back to her roots. Harry even seems happier.

“Don’t listen to them,” he says with a sigh, staring down at my work. The face he makes tells me he sees what I do. “Uh, I don’t think it’s supposed to look like that.”

My lips turn downward. “I followed the instructions…”

He helps me stand it up, but it doesn’t last long before one of the sides falls over and the rest tumble with it. I barely have time to get out of the way before the project I’ve been working the last hour on is in a heap on the floor.

We’re quiet for a moment.

Then I say, “Don’t.”

He laughs anyway. “I told you that I’d help you get it built when I got home. You couldn’t wait for me?”

“I was bored.”

He kneels and digs through the pile of wood until he finds the instructions. “I forgot how much you hate winter breaks. You already redecorated our bedroom and the living room.”

“Like I said, I’m bored.”

When he looks up at me, there’s amusement flickering in his eyes. “You’re set on being stubborn, aren’t you?”

Shrugging, I sigh at the mess I made. “I was thinking if I got this done, we could go to Times Square and admire the decorations before they take everything down.”

“We can still do that.”

“But—”

“Babe,” he laughs, standing and pulling me with him. One of my hands goes to his waist and the other is captured by his as he lifts it up to admire the small diamond ring on my finger. He runs his thumb over it. “See this? This means that we can do whatever, whenever together. Why don’t we take a walk and then grab some dinner.”

I hesitate, only to glance at the ring he slid onto my finger over Christmas a few days ago. Both his parents, Mia, Dylan, and Roman were there, Mia with her phone pointed at us to capture the moment. He told me he didn’t expect us to get married anytime soon. I still have a year of school left before I can graduate, and an internship with Marcia Adams right here in the Big Apple.

All he said was, “Give me a someday,” to which I’d replied, “Always.” The caption-less picture Mia posted online went viral. Our story stopped being about two people who shouldn’t be together to two people who were always meant to be.

He pulls me in, dropping a kiss on my temple. “I promise I’ll build the shelf when we get back. You’ll have it by the time we go to bed tonight.”

Relenting, I nod. “Fine, but I’m holding you to it. If you break your word, I’m going to tell everybody that you and Garrick exchanged presents this year.”

He mock gasps. “You’d never.”

He’s right, I wouldn’t. Though it seems like the internet is shipping the bromance between the two singers as much as I am. “Does Gordy have an idea of when the tour will start?”

Kyler has been gone all day for meetings that map out his next big tour. Since it’s the first one since his newest album released, they’re expecting

big numbers, which means huge stadiums.

"We start in May."

"May?"

"The 25th."

I blink. But that's…

"Come with me," he says softly.

"On tour?" I squeak.

"I asked them not to schedule anything before your semester was done. We'll have the summer together on the road."

"You'd really want that?"

"Don't be stupid."

I frown. "But—"

"I put a ring on your finger for a reason," he reminds me again. "It's not because I don't want you around, Leighton." When I don't say anything right away, he sweetens the deal the best way he knows how. "Violet Wonders will guest in a few shows on the west coast when we're back. You can hang with them again. Tell the world what a big fan you are of them compared to me."

My jaw drops. "That happened once when I was fifteen, and technically I said I liked them better than Single Division."

His brown eyes sparkle. "Does that mean you're finally admitting you'd choose me?"

I stare at my ring. "Haven't I always?"

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KYLER'S INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Hot in Hollywood Interview Transcript

Penny Gomez: Mr. Kyler Bishop, everybody! Do you miss the sound of an audience like this?

Kyler Bishop: There's nothing quite like it, Penny.

Penny Gomez: And there's nothing quite like that song. It broke the record for most liked video on Instagram, the most watched video on YouTube in the first 24 hours and became the most downloaded song in the first week of release. How does that feel?

Kyler Bishop: I have to be honest. I wouldn't be able to celebrate any of that if it hadn't been for my team encouraging me to release the song.

Penny Gomez: As most of us know, I'm sure, you decided to take a break from touring and releasing for a while. There was a lot of speculation that you were heading into an early retirement. You were writing though, right? I mean, the credits to 'Cali on my Mind' are your name alone.

Kyler Bishop [laughs]: I've always enjoyed songwriting for myself and others. It was nice to step away from the spotlight and do my own thing for a while. Sometimes we need a breather.

Penny Gomez: I'm sure. You were selling out every single concert for the past two years and traveling worldwide. That has to be trying for every performer who packs their schedules. I have to ask, are you planning more tour dates? A new album?

Kyler Bishop: As of right now, I have no updates for you. I'm still taking it easy, trying to ease back into life here.

Penny Gomez: And how has that been going?

Kyler Bishop: Well, I recently bought a house. I get to see my family more often. I missed them when I was away, but it was what I needed.

Penny Gomez: You left rather abruptly after the scandal came out about the Grier women who moved in with you. There are rumors that the youngest, Leighton, is living with you again. Can you speak on that?

Kyler Bishop: Right now, I have no comment on that. What happened in the past has stayed there. My family has moved on from it. We're all happy.

Penny Gomez: And Leighton?

Kyler Bishop: She's doing great. That's all I'll say.

Penny Gomez: You can't blame a woman for trying. And speaking of, you know that everybody in this room wants to know if 'Cali on my Mind' was written based on anybody special.

Kyler Bishop: Is that your way of asking if I'm seeing anybody?

Penny Gomez: *Are* you?

Kyler Bishop [looking at audience]: I can't speak for her, but I'd like to think I am. It's something old, but something new.

Penny Gomez: An old flame?

Kyler Bishop: Something like that.

Penny Gomez: Is this confirmation that you wrote the song about her?

Kyler Bishop: I write my songs based on a lot of things. This one isn't just about one person. It's about the family I walked away from, my friends. You guys.

[Audience cheers]

Kyler Bishop: When I came up with it, I was sitting at home, thinking about everything I walked away from and why I did it. I wanted a fresh start, but I didn't want to redo everything from scratch. I wanted my old life back and the original people in it.

Penny Gomez: And did you get that?

Kyler Bishop: I got something better.

Penny Gomez: And what is that?

Kyler Bishop: I got a new life with the original people, and it's better than what I had before. There are a lot of things that weren't perfect when I left, but coming back, having time away to re-evaluate what I wanted, helped me see what was worth fighting for.

Penny Gomez: That sounds oddly romantic.

Kyler Bishop [laughs]: I've been told a time or two I'm a closet romantic.

Penny Gomez: This old flame sounds like a lucky girl.

Kyler Bishop: No. I'm definitely the lucky one. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't know how to separate the things that matter from the things that don't.

Liked Tell Me When It's Over? Leave a review on Amazon here! Every review helps an author significantly.

And keep an eye out for Garrick's story!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Any book takes a village to create from the very first page to the finalized last one, but this book took an entire city. It was by far the hardest to write and took the most drafts to get it to this final product.

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I also have to shout out my mother for being nothing like Leighton's. Real MVP right there.

To my readers, new and old, THANK YOU. This book means so much to me, and I'm beyond excited to come back into the world and write stories for a few of the other characters you met!

Remember to leave a review and make sure to pop into my reader group The Celestials to stay in touch with me!

Xoxo

Barbara

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste's obsession with all things forbidden and taboo enabled her to pave a path into a new world of raw, real, emotional romance.

Her debut novel is The Truth about Heartbreak.

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