

A STEAMY ROOMMATES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

girl going nowhere

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

B. CELESTE

GIRL GOING NOWHERE

B. CELESTE

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*To all the readers who wanted a smuttier side of B. Celeste. This one is
for you*

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“Unsteady” – X Ambassadors
“Hate Me More” – Canaan Cox
“Fed Up” – 92legend & Big Kuza
“There Goes By Life” – Kenny Chesney

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CHAPTER ONE

Blake

THE TELEVISION QUICKLY flicks off as soon as I slam the door behind me, but it's too late. I already heard the thundering impact from the bat and ball, followed by the roar of a crazed crowd, telling me exactly what my roommates were watching.

"I told you that you didn't have to do that," I call out, kicking off my heels until my sore feet meet welcome, cool hardwood. I let out a breath of relief and pick up the knockoff Louis Vuitton shoes and walk toward the living room.

Two of my three roommates are lounging on the couches, looking over their shoulders as soon as I stop at the open archway that separates the living room from the dining room and kitchen.

It's Brodie, who looks so much like Colton Haynes that he won a lookalike contest that got him one thousand dollars and a chance to meet the celebrity after his picture went viral, who rakes his blue-gray eyes over me with a frown. "What are you doing home already?"

He told me how badly he wished he was the one taking me out tonight as soon as I stepped out of my room, flattening my hands down my little black dress. And when I mean little, I mean *little*. If I hadn't put on weight, it probably wouldn't have looked so scandalous, but these days my body fills out all my clothes in ways it never did before. Some to the point I couldn't squeeze into them even if I sucked in, held my breath, and got a running start into the stubborn bitches that hug my widened hips.

Brodie Adams is a massive flirt. And any woman who shows a little skin, no matter how intentional, gains his attention. Even me—the roommate deemed "off-limits" when I signed my name on their lease. But did I sort of wish he was the one taking me out instead of my sleazy coworker? Yes. A thousand times, yes.

One heated look earlier, and he was positive I wouldn't be home until tomorrow morning.

"He wouldn't stop staring at my boobs," I answer, frowning at the memories of him conversing more with my Ds than *me*. And because it's been a long time since I've hooked up with anybody, I let him touch them after we left the restaurant. Then I let him do a lot more when we got to his car. I want nothing more than to shower and get rid of the scent of him after dumbly climbing onto his lap and riding him in an abandoned parking lot until we both got off.

He probably thought he won tonight, but it was me playing the game.

Both Brodie and his cousin Dante Harris, who's the quieter roomie of all of us, do their best to avoid glancing down at the biggest reason why my back hurts all the time. I used to have average boobs. Boring ones. Now they're huge, expensive to contain in bras I can only find in limited stores, and nearly give me a concussion the few times I force myself to go to the gym and use the treadmill.

Dante, who I can't always tell if he likes me or not, drapes his ankle over his opposite knee as he sits back on the couch. "Sounds like a douche. Is this the one you met at work? Trevor?"

"It was David," Brodie says, picking out a pretzel from the bag in his lap. "Or was David the one who asked for your number at the coffee cart?"

"Nah," Dante cuts in, throwing an arm over the back of the couch. "That was Tim, and if memory serves, he never texted her."

Brodie nods. "Oh yeah. She made us watch *He's Just Not That Into You* after that."

I cringe at the reminder of how pathetic my life has been since becoming a single mom. "Gee, thanks for bringing up my many failed attempts at locking a guy down. Yes, it was Trevor from work. No, I don't want to talk about it. But if you want to keep going on my track record, why don't we turn the TV back on so we can see another one of my past mistakes."

The cold challenge has them both backing down with soft apologies murmured under their breaths.

Smart.

Brodie sets his food down. "We were just seeing what the score was," he tries reasoning with me, not that he needs to.

We've been over this a million times. Everybody gets a chance to choose what to watch on TV, no matter what it is, like baseball. Despite their love for the game, they're loyal to a fault. So, even if they're rooting for the very man's team that I have a strong indifference toward, they'll never be Jonathon Dover superfans.

"Who's in the lead?" I ask.

The boys share a look.

Dante scratches his stubbled jaw. "Phillies."

Of-fucking-course. "Well, good for them."

"Blake—"

"I'm tired," I mumble, swiping at my heavy eyelids. "I know how much you love that team, so I hope they win. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

But I hope their right fielder takes a ball to the nuts, I add silently.

Turning on my heel, I walk down the hall that leads to the three rooms I spend the most time in when I'm here.

When I open the door to the smallest of them all, a closet that was converted into a toddler's bedroom, I'm not surprised when I see the lean figure in the rocking chair placed in the corner. The moonlight spills into the open window, and the white noise machine on the dresser plays a soft lullaby that puts me to sleep when I crash in here.

"You don't have to do that," I tell Finn, smiling at the way he cradles the sleeping three-year-old against his shoulder.

Finnley Wilder. When I moved into Brodie, Dante, and Finn's four-bedroom apartment in Queens almost three years ago, it was because of *his* ad I answered online. I'd been desperate after my previous living arrangement fell through and wasn't above begging them to give me a chance. With big, fat, ugly tears on the ready.

For obvious reasons, they'd been reluctant to agree. It was Finn who convinced his friends to give me a six-month trial and see how it went after Brodie and Dante protested that having a girl with a baby around would bring down their bachelor status.

And here we are, all this time later.

Oddly, we all get along well. Both Brodie and Dante work in sports journalism, so I used what little I knew about baseball to bond with them, hoping to win them over. And when a little too much tequila was consumed shortly after moving in, the truth about my past came to light. My midnight

confession about who Maia's father is changed their admiration for the Phillie's right fielder when they found out the length he went through to silence me about her existence.

I feel a little bad about it. Their jobs are to highlight people like Dover. The online magazine they work for, *Sports Pact*, did more articles on him compared to any other publication because of the record-breaking stats he and the entire Philadelphia team had in the past two years. Brodie chose to take on other stories featuring up-and-coming athletes after finding out the truth about the man they idolized. Dante stuck with whatever he was assigned, including Dover, for the money. I can't say I blame him. If I were in his shoes, I probably would have done the same if it meant a good paycheck.

"I know I don't have to," Finn tells me, carefully standing up and walking Maia over to the twin bed he'd helped put together with Brodie when it was time to get rid of her crib.

The guys have been wrapped around her little finger since we moved in. It didn't take long at all before her cute little face won them over. If it weren't for her ability to sleep through the night and be the least fussy kid I know, we probably would have wound up somewhere far less nice.

He sets her down with ease without waking her up, smiling down at her as she hugs the blanket Brodie gave her for her birthday last year when she was going through her *Little Mermaid* phase. It's pink and purple with mermaids all over it. Even though she's moved on to loving everything horse-themed, she's still obsessed with that thing because of who gifted it to her.

I walk over, wrap one of my arms around his, and rest my cheek on his shoulder. He's not much taller than my five feet seven inches and fits every stereotype known to man about tech nerds.

He isn't overly bulky like Dante or Brodie, but he's not scrawny either. Whenever we go to the gym together, he can outrun me on the treadmill and still musters the energy to lift weights before I even finish my workout. He wears glasses thicker than the ones I have to put on to read and has a collection of bow ties that I still tease him for whenever I get the chance. Brodie called him the Walmart brand Grant Gustin after Finn's favorite show, *The Flash*.

Weirdly, I sort of see it.

The software developer staring idly down at my daughter pulls in close to six figures a year, a far cry from the income I make working as a receptionist at the local doctor's office. It never made sense to me why he wanted roommates in the first place when he could easily afford to live on his own wherever he wanted since we're outside the city. But I also have to acknowledge that his career is a big reason why he's never upset about my rent being a little late or the few times I can't contribute to the smaller bills like electric or heat.

And the biggest thing I love about the softy standing beside me is that he hates sports. Which means I don't have to pretend like a part of my soul dies whenever a certain man pops up on the television screen being praised by sportscasters and swooned over by fans.

"She's getting so big." I sigh in disbelief, pushing my thoughts away.

He rests his cheek on the top of my head as we watch the little girl sleep peacefully. "She really loves the new bed."

The day they put together her big girl bed, I'd been inconsolable. Brodie brought me my favorite hot chocolate to comfort me, Finn bribed me with trash TV, and Dante hid in his room until I stopped crying because it made him uncomfortable.

"You smell like sex," Finn informs me.

I blush, wondering if I should deny it.

"That guy was using you, Blake," he says.

The disapproving tone in his voice has my lips wavering downward. "Maybe I was using him, Finn. Ever think of that?"

Pulling away, I don't bother looking at his face. The last thing I want to see is judgment. I've already been told by plenty of other people that I'm self-destructive. He doesn't need to be the next one to point it out.

"Good night," I tell him, squeezing his arm, pecking Maia on the head, and walking to my room.

I never thought I would have been the twenty-four-year-old who cried over her little girl getting a regular bed and getting her feelings hurt when people found out I had sex.

How did I get here?

Old memories of careless times resurface, reminding me exactly why I'm standing in an apartment with three men and a toddler.

It all started at the wedding.

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CHAPTER TWO

Blake

“ARE YOU HERE for the bride or groom?”

The question pulls me away from the ritzy country club decorated in white, silver, and purple decorations. It’s nothing short of beautiful. Floral arrangements are strategically placed at the end of every aisle of seats, a lavender carpet rolled out leading up to the dais, and soft classical music is playing from a small group of men with string instruments off to the side.

Emily Tilly always wanted a small, intimate wedding, and she pulled it off in a stunning way I knew only my best friend could.

My eyes go over to the equally stunning man who asked me the question. It’s safe to say he’s older than me from his defined features, but not enough to deter my attention. He’s attractive. Not in the devastating way that Patrick Dempsey is, but attractive, nonetheless. Masculine. Sure of himself, based on the lopsided smirk he gives me as my eyes do a lazy perusal down the length of his body.

He’s tall. Muscular. His clothes are fitted properly to his body, which tells me he probably has money and a tailor on speed dial. Broad shoulders. Sexy stubble covering a square jaw. Dark brown eyes that match the color of his hair lock with mine when I finally stop openly checking him out.

It’s only fair, considering he’s doing the same to me. The green silk dress my mother bought me lands mid-thigh on my legs, and the bodice hugs my curves to show off the hourglass figure I’ve been graced with. It doesn’t show much cleavage, though his eyes roam over my chest appreciatively anyway, before his attention lands on my face. I’m nothing special to look at—somewhere around average—with my long chestnut locks wavy from the wet braid I fell asleep in last night and big hazel eyes that tend to be on the grayish side more often than not.

“Bride,” I finally answer, shifting my weight on the heels that give me an extra couple of inches.

“Shame,” he says, grinning. His chin dips toward the groom’s side. “I’m here for the groom. Hector”—Emily’s soon-to-be-husband—“used to be my lawyer. Did me a lot of good.”

“Hector is a good man. I wouldn’t let him marry my best friend otherwise,” I reply. He’s ten years older than Emily and way more mature than any guy she dated before. It was admirable that he was never afraid to love her from the start.

We stand smiling at each other, both with a mutual up-to-no-good glint in our eyes that promises how the night will end, regardless of where we’re sitting during the ceremony.

And it does.

One short drive to his hotel room later and it’s nothing but mouths on mouths and skin on skin. Hands roam. Clothes are stripped. Noises are made. It’s a rush of kisses, touches and urgency as a condom is rolled on.

I’d be lying if I said it isn’t the best sex of my life. There’s no doubt the man is experienced and as confident in the bedroom as he is everywhere else. That Colgate smile flashing up at me from between my legs is devilish at best, like he knows I’ve never had it this good before. He knows exactly what will set me off and for how long, and how to draw out one orgasm after another until I’m boneless and gasping for air.

But three months later, and over a hundred dollars worth of tests and doctor’s appointments that have drained my bank account, I realize just how much that one night with a virtual stranger has truly cost me.

When I finally gather the courage to get his name and show at to the address Emily gave me with a sad look on her face, I realize exactly why my best friend looked the way she did after asking around about my one-night stand.

Jonathon Dover, thirty-eight. Famous right fielder for the Philadelphia Phillies.

Married for nine years with two kids.

When he opens the door and gazes between me and the ultrasound photos in my hand, I can tell he’s made his decision then and there.

And because I’m young, pregnant, and *scared*, I take the payout he gives me to keep quiet, sign the paperwork his suited-up team sends me to *remain* silent, and never see the major league baseball player again.

At least, not in person.

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CHAPTER THREE

Blake

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR a reason. And sometimes that reason is simply that you're horny and single, and you make a bad decision that you have to pay the consequences for later.

But there hasn't been *one* second in my life where I've looked at my fair-skinned, doe-eyed little girl with regret. Because, in a lot of ways, I think Maia Nicole saved me before I even realized I needed to be saved.

Even though I never wanted to be a twenty-one-year-old mother—or a college dropout—the brown-eyed girl who kept me up for the first eight months made me reevaluate my life for the better.

I never *loved* college, but I thoroughly enjoyed my time at the small state school I attended. And while I didn't mind the English degree I was studying, I had no idea what to do with it. I never wanted to be a teacher or a writer, but the subject was the only thing I truly enjoyed. I went to school lost, hoping to find something that fit me.

Deciding to leave and take the money Maia's father gave me to drop out, pay off my debt, and get us into a safe apartment with everything we needed was the smartest thing I could think to do.

For me.

For her.

For *us*.

Before Maia, I'd been careless with my life. Going out. Partying. Barhopping. I was reckless with my choices.

It's probably a miracle I hadn't gotten pregnant sooner. Because I was a train wreck waiting to happen, getting involved with all the wrong people and doing what the masses wanted even if it wasn't good for me. Way more drinking than studying. Living off an occasional high that probably would have gotten me addicted to far heavier things than the molly and ecstasy I'd pop with a few of my former friends.

When my parents caught wind of how I was spending my time at school, they'd warned me they wouldn't tolerate it. They told me if I got myself into trouble, they would only help me to a certain point.

And maybe it was the late-night reruns of *Dr. Phil* I'd found myself watching when Maia was too restless and finicky to sleep, but I realized far too late that I owed my parents a major apology for how carelessly I took their words. I thought I knew better—that I was young and invincible.

But you can't outrun your actions.

They'll always catch up to you.

When my parents found out the reason I was dropping out of college, neither of them seemed too shocked. I'm not quite sure what I expected from them. A place to stay? Help taking care of Maia? At one point, Dad had offered me my old room back. He even suggested converting the smaller guest room into a nursery. There was too big of a rift between Mom and I that made me too uncomfortable to accept it. I knew moving back home would only last so long before I permanently damaged what little relationship I had with my parents.

I've never kept them away from their granddaughter, no matter the circumstances of our strained relationship. They see photos of Maia regularly through social media or random texts I'll send to my mother when Maia does something cute. Once in a while, we meet up for lunch or dinner to catch up, and more times than I like, I drop her off at their house on the days she doesn't go to daycare. Never before getting lectured about making responsible choices, as if I'm going to skip work to go to a club and do Jell-O shots or snort something.

It's fair, I guess. Since the day I turned eighteen, I had a bad habit of making horrible decisions that my parents had to watch from the sidelines.

I find myself staring at the little girl who's happily munching on the assorted fruit I chopped up and put onto her favorite koala-shaped plate for dinner since she refused everything else I gave her.

Over the past few weeks, she's realized her favorite color is red, which makes trying to get her to eat things that aren't hard. But the guys always help me when she gets fussy, convincing her how good other food is regardless of its color. And because I'm fairly certain she's as in love with the three men as they are with her, it never takes her long to shove whatever they're offering into her mouth.

“You look deep in thought,” Finn muses, wearing his usual button-down and jean combo. He takes off the messenger bag that’s draped across his body and sets it on the counter, then walks over and presses a kiss to the top of Maia’s head before bending down and pecking my cheek.

His lips linger a fraction on my warm skin before moving away, offering me a tired but soft smile before he heads toward the fridge for a drink. “You okay?” he asks from over his shoulder.

I ignore the way his eyes train a little too hard on my lips and ask, “Shouldn’t *I* be asking *you* that? You had your big presentation today and I know you didn’t sleep well last night.”

He’d been practicing for hours, jittery over the potentially life-altering pitch he had to the CEO of the company he works for. “It went well, just like you kept telling me it would. I think I crushed it.”

I instantly beam, and Maia mimics my movements, going as far as clapping her hands.

Finn melts as he holds his palm in front of her to smack. “Thanks, Maia girl.”

She giggles at the nickname spurred from us singing The Temptation’s song “My Girl” and using her name to fill in the regular lyrics.

He pulls out the chair beside mine and drops into it, scrubbing his face. His green eyes are glazed from exhaustion and have shadows under them. “It’s going to be a couple weeks before I hear anything. *If* they want to move forward with my design idea. It’s a long shot but...”

“You crushed it,” I remind him, bumping my shoulder against his. “The hard part is done.”

Maia picks up one of her grapes and offers it to Finn with a wide smile on her face. “Eat.”

“For me?” He plucks it from her and pops it into his mouth. She claps again, refocusing on her food and ignoring us. Finn studies me. “What’s got you looking so down?”

My lips threaten to lower at the corners, but I fight it off. I hate Maia seeing me sad. Now that she’s talking, she calls me out on it. “Just have a lot on my mind. When I saw Trevor today at work...”

Finn’s lips turn into a small scowl at the sound of my latest failed dating adventure. It felt awkward when I saw him in passing this morning, slipping another girl his number at the clinic. Things like that never used to bother

me. If guys didn't choose me, I could find other ones who easily would after a simple smile in their direction. I'd like to think I'm sensitive because it's been far too long since I've dated or hooked up with anybody. It's clearly gotten to my head.

Finn wipes the frown away in record time for the sake of the girl sitting in front of us in her highchair. "I don't even know why you agreed to go out with him in the first place. He's always seemed like a tool to me from what you've said."

"You think all guys are tools." Including the two others that live with us. However, he's oddly less judgmental of Dante than he is of his own cousin.

"Trevor doesn't deserve you," he declares, staring solely at Maia. He fiddles with the bottle of water he snatched from the refrigerator. "I never understood that."

My brows pinch. "What?"

His shoulders tighten before he dares to glance in my direction. "You always go after guys that you know you'll never get anywhere with."

I don't do that. Do I? "That's not true. I—"

"What about Jeremy?"

Is he really going there? "Jeremy was a very nice guy. We just wanted different things."

He deadpans, "Jeremy lived in his parents' basement playing video games all day while claiming unemployment and fantasizing about you dressed as his favorite anime during sex. Try again."

Okay, that's out of left field and oddly specific. "I'm not doing this with you." I grab Maia's plate once she's done and walk over to the sink.

From over the water, I hear, "Why not? I'm trying to understand. You're beautiful. You're a wonderful mom to Maia."

"Dat me!" the three-year-old chirps.

"That's right, Maia. That's you. And your momma is a great person, right? She's kind, considerate, and deserves way better than the guys she keeps wasting her time with."

"Oh my God, would you stop using my daughter against me?" I shut off the tap water and abandon the dishes that I've been meaning to do since last night. I cross my wet hands under my arms and shoot him a pointed stare. "It doesn't matter what I do with my time or who I do it with. None of that

is your concern. Especially because you never want to discuss your lackluster dating life. At least I put myself out there. What about you?”

He meets my gaze, challenge flashing in his eyes as he mimics my stance. “It’s my concern when I see them take a little piece of you every time you come back from bad dates. I mean, *Trevor*? The guy has always been after one thing from you, and it isn’t intellectual conversation.”

I glance at Maia. “I’m not having this conversation with you, especially not in front of her.”

“Why? Because I’m right?”

“Finn—”

“Don’t do that to yourself again.”

I throw my hands up. “What am I doing to myself, Finn? Please enlighten me, oh wise one.”

His eyes go to Maia for a second, jaw ticking, before he stands and turns to me. “Random hookups aren’t going to satisfy you, Blake. Look where they got you so far. Do you really want to go back to that kind of life? You said you didn’t want to do that anymore. But what do you call this?”

My lips part as I suck in a sharp breath. This topic is usually off-limits for us because we didn’t know each other back then. Neither of us wants to hear about the other’s sexual endeavors. And I know for a fact the six-foot tech wizard looming in the middle of the kitchen has been getting just as little action as I have been. Who is he to assume I’m having meaningless sex with every guy who asks me out?

Before letting Trevor fuck me, it’d been *months*. The friskiest I had gotten with anybody involved my gynecologist and a pap smear.

“That’s what you think, huh? How dare I, a grown, single woman, revert back to my *easy* days?” I slowly shake my head in disbelief as he winces over my choice of words. I walk past him and pick up Maia, not wanting to look at his face anymore tonight. “Because that’s what you’re implying, right? That I slept with anybody who paid attention to me?”

“Blake—”

I cut him off because the last thing I want to hear is any more of his bullshit. “In case you’ve forgotten, the ‘kind of life’ you seem to be judging me for got me this precious human being. I’ve beaten myself up enough about my past and everything I’ve done in it. You don’t need to help.”

I hold Maia closer to me as I start walking out of the kitchen, stopping halfway to turn around when a bout of frustration boils the blood in my veins. “I thought we were friends, but friends don’t make each other feel bad about themselves. Even if I was sleeping with them, it wouldn’t be any of your business. It’d be between me and them. So, butt out of my life if you’re going to make empty assumptions. Especially when you’re no better.”

I don’t give him a chance to defend himself before walking out, nearly plowing over Brodie as he’s walking in. His eyes are wide as he watches me head toward my room.

Before I can close my door, I hear him ask Finn, “What the hell did you do to her, jackass?”

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CHAPTER FOUR

Blake

THE TELEVISION IN the doctor's office I work at has SportsCenter on, and if there weren't a handful of people watching commentary on the Phillies-Braves game in the waiting room, I would have changed it.

Thankfully, there's a steady stream of people coming and going that keep me busy checking them in, out, and scheduling follow-up appointments. It means I can drown out the background noise as much as possible. But my ears never fail to capture the one singular name tossed around.

"...astounding that Dover managed to catch it. He's a big reason why the Phillies took the game in the three-one win," the older of the two men on screen says. "And did you hear there's talk of his official retirement after the season ends? Not even six months into the season, and they're talking replacements."

My ears perk up.

The other commenter makes a noise. "Not surprised, Don. Dover is the oldest player in the MLB right now. He'll be forty-two this year."

"Excuse me?" someone says from in front of the counter, quickly snapping my attention away from the picture plastered across the TV.

I smile at the older woman. "Sorry about that. I'm a little distracted today."

"Distracted?" She gives me a knowing smile after her eyes go toward the screen. "He's definitely a looker, isn't he? My husband and I went to a game a few years ago with our grandson. I swear Jonathon Dover is even better-looking in person. And he's great with kids. Gave our little Mark a signed ball at the end and took a picture with the three of us. It's no wonder everybody loves him."

I do everything I can not to grind my teeth at the praise he's getting for doing the bare minimum with his fans. "I heard he's great when it comes to

kids.” *Especially making them.* Clearing my throat to sound relatively normal, I ask, “Do you need to make an appointment?”

She lets the subject change easily, passing me the printed paperwork with an after-visit summary and instructions on it. “Trevor says to schedule for six months. I don’t know how a pretty thing like you can stand to work here when you’ve got a physician’s assistant that looks like that.”

It takes everything in me not to make a face at her drooling over that douchebag. “I don’t know how I do it either,” I reply in my sugary sweet customer service voice.

Once she’s set, she waves me off after glancing at the TV one more time and then shooting me a wink as if I’m in on her little secret.

The next time I catch myself looking at the television, it’s with a twitch in my eye when the compliments keep coming for the man who paid me off.

“Hey, Blake,” Trevor greets, tapping on the counter to my workstation. “Can you help out this lovely woman for me? Dr. Emerson wants to see her in two weeks for another blood draw.”

My eyes go from the man who fractured my ego to the pretty blonde beside him who’s blushing at his charm.

Enjoy it while it lasts, I want to tell her.

Then I think about what Finn said, and one more glance in Trevor’s direction has me wondering why I’m so upset he doesn’t want me.

Everybody wants to be wanted, that internal voice answers me.

A twinge of pain enters my heart that I force myself to brush off. “No problem.” I redirect my attention strictly to the girl eating up Trevor’s attention. “Is there a time that works best for you?”



AT 4:35 IN the afternoon, I’m walking outside the small brick clinic when I see whose car is parked at the curb.

“What are you doing here?” I ask the boy I’m still irritated with.

Finn rubs the back of his neck. “You’ve been avoiding me, so I wanted to talk and clear things up. Figured we could grab an early dinner.”

I readjust my bag strap over my shoulder. “I have to pick up Maia from —”

“The guys are watching her,” he promises.

My brows shoot up. “You asked them to get Maia from daycare?” They’re all on her approved pickup list after insisting they wanted to help out. It’s not often they pick her up, but they’re never put out to do it when I ask.

“Brodie is picking her up since it’s on his way home, and Dante is working from the apartment today. They both said they’d be happy to watch her while I ‘make things right’ with you. They’ve called me out in it being awkward at home.”

It’s been three days since our spat in the kitchen. Whenever we pass each other, I make a point to stay silent. No eye contact. No conversation. Nothing. Is it childish? Sure. But he hurt my feelings and made me feel like some sort of cheap slut who got pregnant from one of my many casual flings. I know he adores Maia, and usually me, but his words still sliced into my skin.

“You hurt my feelings,” I tell him quietly.

His eyes are sad. “I know. Let me make it up to you. Explain. Everything came out all wrong.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Panera?”

Damn him. He knows their bread is my weakness. And because money is tight, I haven’t eaten anything besides a seventy-five-cent bag of stale pretzels from the vending machine. “Fine, but you’re paying.”

I’m not going to say no to my favorite kind of food, especially when it’s free. A free meal or two is always welcome in my world. Anything more feels like charity.

Twenty-five minutes later, we’re seated across from each other in the same booth we always occupy when we come here. A tray of food rests between us, making my mouth water.

I break apart the bread and dip a piece of it into my cream of broccoli soup, which was today’s soup of the day and half-off. “I don’t like fighting with you.”

He watches me stir my dinner. “I don’t like fighting with you. I wasn’t judging you for anything, I was trying to...”

When his words fade, I glance up from my food at him. He's staring intently at his chicken sandwich for a few seconds before leaning back in his seat. "I was trying to figure out why you'd go out with guys who weren't me."

My shoulders lock at the admission from him that I've never thought about before. I must have heard him wrong. "What?"

Pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, he nods and loosens a sigh before meeting my shocked eyes. "You know what I think about you as a person. I tell you all the time—"

"Because you're my friend," I quickly say.

His lips twitch at the panic in my tone. "Yeah, we're friends. But haven't you thought about the possibility of being more? We get along. I love your daughter. We've got a lot going for us."

My appetite vanishes as I lower my spoon onto the napkin beside my soup. "I'm not following here. *You're* the one who insisted there be a hands-off agreement between roommates once I signed on the dotted line and moved in. I love that you love Maia, and I adore you too. But..."

He doesn't need me to tell him I don't love *him*. There are some feelings you can't force, and that's a big one.

His fingers swipe through his hair, messing up the once-perfectly styled strands. "That's because I knew if I didn't, one of the guys would make a pass at you. I've seen how Brodie is with you. I just... I wanted to be selfish for once. If I couldn't have you, they definitely couldn't either."

Unbelievable. "Come on, Finn. Neither of them would try to—"

"How many times does Brodie flirt with you on a regular basis?" he deadpans. "If he had the chance, he'd make a move. Trust me, I know my cousin. And just because Dante seems laid-back and nonchalant about most things doesn't mean he's a saint. We're dudes. We see a beautiful woman and our instinct is to act on it. Put her in close proximity, and it makes things complicated."

I wave my hand at him. "Exactly! Which is why we agreed that any type of relationship, physical or other, was off-limits. Look what our fight did. It made things awkward for everybody."

"That's because you were avoiding me."

"You deserved it," I counter. How dare he put all the blame on me? "I'd already been having a bad week. You insinuating I open my legs for

everybody with a dick wasn't exactly a great way to end it."

His cheeks tint as a couple gives us a disapproving look from a table over. "I already told you I didn't mean it like that." He picks up his sandwich and stares at it before setting it back down on the wrapper it came in. "It's been hard seeing you go out with guys when I've always wanted to be in their shoes. I was jealous, and I said shit I shouldn't have. But you're right. I'm no better."

I drop my hands into my lap and try to process this conversation. "Are you saying that you like me?"

He blinks slowly, cheeks tinting. "If you're still confused about that, clearly I'm failing miserably at my intentions here."

His *intentions*? Oh, Finn...

Wetting my dry lips, I sit back in my seat and study him. There's no real reason why I wouldn't date him. He's attractive. Sweet. Respects me. Still, my gut is telling me not to play that game.

Because there's something about Finn that I can't put my finger on. And I'm not sure why that nagging feeling is there, but it's one I plan on listening to.

"It's a lot to take in. You're a great guy. But we live together and living together and seeing each other is a bad idea. If that's what you're even implying."

He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Trying to... What else would I be getting at, Blake?"

I point out the obvious. "Neither one of us has exactly been known for getting into serious relationships. You barely date. You never talk about the girls you do go out with when it does happen. And before you go spewing bullshit about me choosing guys who never want to settle down, I'm going to stop you. I've never openly went after anybody, *especially* after Maia was born, if I knew I was setting myself up for failure. I definitely wasn't going out with them for the sake of getting off. Even if I thought about it."

The couple beside us grumble under their breaths before taking their food and moving elsewhere with narrowed gazes.

I focus back on my *friend* and *roommate*. "It isn't easy dating when you're a single mom, especially under the circumstances Maia was born, and I don't expect you to understand that. While I get why you'd make certain... assumptions about my intentions with guys, I'm *not* that girl

anymore. I can't be. I've done nothing but try being the best version of myself possible ever since I found out I was pregnant. But when it comes time to tell a guy about her, it never usually goes well."

"Then they're jackasses," Finn declares.

I shrug. "Yeah, some of them. But they're human too. I wouldn't want to get involved with a single dad. It's a lot of pressure. You're not just bringing one person into your life you're bringing their kid too. Then there's possible parental drama depending on the situation. Obviously, with me, that's not so much the issue. But the explanation of it all, the mystery, the secret, it's an added layer of baggage that most people don't want. I don't judge them for feeling the same way I probably would in their shoes."

Finn is quiet, hopefully contemplating everything I'm saying. Things I don't openly talk about with any of the guys. They have their own lives, their own drama and needs and baggage. The last thing they need is mine.

"What I need most in my life is stability for Maia. She comes first. Always. Everything I've ever done for her since she was placed into my arms is figure out how to make her life the best it can possibly be. I *need* that apartment. The space. The security. At least until I can finish saving up for my own space for Maia and me."

"I would never make you move out if anything bad happened with you and anybody at the apartment. We're all old enough to be mature about shit."

"It's your apartment, Finn," I remind him sadly, knowing he wouldn't do anything malicious like throw me out. "I would have no right to stay if things went south. Whether we're adults or not, feelings can change people."

I'm met with silence as he looks off into the distance. Something flashes in those green eyes before he finally says, "Trust me. I know."

There's a distance to his face that makes me think he's not talking about the feelings he suddenly is telling me about. But I don't push him on it.

Picking up my bread, I break another piece off and swirl it in the warm liquid. "Dating me is never going to be easy. I don't envy any man that tries. I'm not sure if you noticed, but I'm sort of a mess."

My lame attempt at lightening the mood doesn't really seem to work that well.

Because Finn looks at me and asks, “You’re not even going to let me try to prove you wrong, are you? You’ve made up your mind.”

This time, it’s me who’s silent.

“You’re not the only one who’s life is messy,” is the last thing he says.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Five

“**Y**OU NEED TO take it back,” Dante tells me as he kicks my ass at the new video game he bought us. It seems pointless playing against him when he knows the ins and outs of every level. I’m pretty damn sure he used a cheat mod to give him a power boost when I went to get another beer.

I push my glasses up my nose. “That’s not something you can just take back, idiot.”

“Who says?”

Is he serious? I pause the game, much to his disgruntlement, and shove his shoulder until he looks at me. He looks like his father, which nobody is stupid enough to say to his face. His dad is an abusive asshole who’s deservingly behind bars for hurting his wife—Dante’s mother. Not that he says so, but I think the biggest reason Dante keeps to himself is because that’s what he was trained to do to survive growing up. Being quiet left him in the background where he was safe because being who he is only ever got him into trouble.

“I say. I think you and I both know once something is out, it can’t be taken back.” We share a tense look until his jaw tics at the unspoken implication. “It’s out there and she’s obviously choosing to ignore it like someone else I know.”

Again, he says nothing at the cool statement. What did I expect? He’s even more closed off than Blake is when it comes to expressing himself.

“If she wants to pretend like it never happened, then I will too. It doesn’t have to impact our living arrangements.”

He scoffs. “And you say *I’m* the idiot. Everything about you wanting to get with Blake changes things. What about our agreement?”

Here we go again with the fucking agreement. “Which agreement are we talking about here exactly?” I challenge.

His espresso-brown eyes darken. “You know damn well which one I’m referring to. The one with Blake. Not the—” He cuts himself off. “Let it go, Finn. I told you before, I’m done.”

Yeah, he’s told me that countless times, yet here we are. “Fine. The agreement with Blake is—”

“Still active so long as she lives here. If you keep fueling the fire, it’s only going to get out of control. She’s not the worst roommate I’ve ever had, even with the kid.”

He acts like he doesn’t get along with Blake, but I know him well enough by now. Probably better than anybody else in this apartment. It’s in his nature to keep his distance from people rather than invest in them. Another skill set engrained in him from childhood that I wish I could break.

“What happened to that chick you were seeing on and off for the last few months? Can’t you distract yourself with her? Or... someone else.”

Sabrina. A lawyer that I met when Brodie and I were at one of the local bars. She’s a nice person—low maintenance for the most part. “I got bored,” I tell him with a shrug, wondering if he’ll believe it.

He knows the other factors that influenced me to end my fling with her. She deserved better than someone who could only give her a half-assed effort. “And I hardly think *you’re* one to question how relationships impact our roommate situation. Don’t you think?”

It’s a low blow that he chooses to ignore with a clenched jaw. “Were you comparing Sabrina to Blake like you always do? Or somebody else? Because nobody is ever going to live up to the expectation you have in your head. You’re as doomed as Blake is when it comes to dating if you keep doing that.”

“Watch it,” I warn, squeezing the controller in my hands.

He rolls his eyes. Once, when Blake was drunk, she went on and on about how Dante’s eyes reminded her of two pits of despair wrapped in black satin. I think she did it because it made Dante uncomfortable, and Brodie and I laugh. But the poetic drunk wasn’t wrong.

His head shakes, the longer strands of his wavy brown hair falling into his eyes. He scrapes it back with his hand. “You weren’t wrong about Blake, you know. She dates guys who she doesn’t have to settle down with because she gets what she needs from them and sends them on their way. It’s no different than what any of us do.”

I don't want to hear him compare our situations when they're completely different. "She deserves more than that."

We deserve more than that.

"That's not up to you to decide." His eyes go back to the screen before he sighs. "Look, I like Blake just fine. None of us want to see her unhappy. But consider the fact that the way she lives *is* what makes her happy and deal with it. Be what she's looking for, not what you think she needs."

I'm quiet for a long stretch of time, wondering if it's advice he wants me to take for her sake or for his. "I'm not sure how to do that."

"It's not that hard. Be her friend. Be her roommate. But don't force it. Then she'll resent you for trying to make any type of relationship work for your benefit without thinking about hers."

He un-pauses the game, tongue darting out in concentration. There's something shadowed over his face, and I have a feeling it has nothing to do with Blake but whatever pieces of his past that he's rarely shared with any of us.



IT'S AROUND TWO in the morning when my bedroom door cracks open and light footsteps creep in. I know who it is before the door clicks closed and the mattress dips with extra weight.

"We said we weren't going to do this again," I murmur, voice groggy from sleep as lips trail along my neck. I arch my head to the side to give them more access as a hand reaches for the bulge quickly hardening in my boxers. "We said last time was it."

"One more time," Dante says, stirring a groan from my throat as his palm strokes my cock. My hips roll into him as invitation to grip me harder.

This started years ago. It used to be with a girl in between us—mindless threesomes to get off when we were out partying together. Then it turned into late-night rendezvous between the two of us to escape for a while.

I've never let myself wonder what it means. I never questioned my sexuality before. I know I like women. And I like men. More than that, I enjoy getting off.

The guy whose hand is jerking me off, though? I know he's been in an uphill battle for a long time. All thanks to the fucker he shares half his DNA with and the threats he's made. Dante's insomnia stems from night terrors of his past that he uses me to run from for as long as he can.

If this is the only time Dante can be himself, I'll happily let him use me.

Eventually, my boxers disappear, and his mouth takes over where his hand left off. My palms roam over the smooth skin of his back, trailing up his neck and to the back of his head, coaxing him to take me deeper until the head of my cock is scraping the back of his throat. His groan vibrates over my shaft, making my thighs tighten as I jerk up and fill him deeper until he swallows me past his gag reflex.

I wrap my fingers through his hair and clench hard as he deep throats me. "I'm close," I rasp, feeling the orgasm travel down my spine.

It never takes long with him. Truthfully, he's the best head I've ever gotten. Not that I'm surprised. Who better to know what a guy likes than another guy?

His hands fondle my balls, rolling them and coaxing me to come. And I do. My back arches off the bed as I shoot my load straight down his throat, holding his face down as I spasm underneath him.

Dante takes it all, riding it out until I fall back onto the mattress and drape an arm over my eyes as I curse under my breath.

I hear the nightstand open.

The wrapper.

Then the bottle.

When I move my arm, I see that he's watching me with a cocky smirk on his face. He knows how good he is. Hell, I've heard the women he brings over who also think his mouth is pretty fucking awesome based on their noises.

I sit up. "What was it this time?" I ask, wanting to know the reason he's in my room tonight.

His jaw tics as he passes me the condom and lube that we keep at the ready for nights like this. "I don't want to talk about it. Just fuck me."

My cock hardens almost instantly, knowing how tight he's going to be once I thrust into that tight hole of his.

Knowing he won't talk about it, I slide the condom on and lube it up before playing with his puckered asshole with one of my lubed-up fingers. I

push his face into my bedding and stretch him with my digit, brushing the spot where he needs me before entering a second finger.

He curses, wiggling his ass and arching his back to get a better angle. “I said *fuck me.*”

He’s on edge tonight. More than usual. Brodie rarely sees this side of him. It’s the broody version he relays to people. Even Blake. But me?

When the door is locked behind him, and the room is bathed in darkness, that version of Dante is long gone.

Which is good.

Because this one is more fun to fuck.

And that’s what I do.

The second I slide my cock in, I’m not gentle.

It’s fast.

It’s hard.

It’s sloppy.

Skin slapping.

Curses flying.

Loud grunting.

I’m glad Brodie decided to go on a hunt for pussy tonight because there’s no way he wouldn’t have heard us. His room is right across the hall. And Blake passed out in her room across the apartment hours ago as soon as Maia went down.

It’s probably a good thing that she sleeps like a log as soon as she’s out because Dante is being reckless. Loud. Demanding.

I spread his legs and angle him up further on his knees so I can go deeper, hitting his G-spot with every pump. His hand grips his cock, jerking off as I get him closer to the edge he needs to jump from tonight.

We always say it’s the last time.

But when he shoots his load onto my blankets and sheets, we both know it’s a lie.

And when I thrust into him one last time and empty myself into the condom, I know he’ll sneak in here again within days.

One more time.

It’s a lie we keep telling ourselves to hide the bigger lies we keep from everybody else.

I pull out and drop onto my side with a low grunt, swiping at my sweaty forehead.

He waits a few minutes to catch his breath before getting dressed and walking back out to whatever personal hell he's created for himself for when the post-orgasmic bliss wears off.

I glance down at my sheets and frown.

I'm going to need to do laundry again.

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CHAPTER SIX

Brodie

THE OFFICE IS always chaotic leading up to the final midnight submission deadlines at *Sports Pact*, which usually leaves everybody on edge. Case in point, the new intern is crying because one of the copy editors got the wrong coffee order. I get it. Caffeine is a necessity when you are hours away from your magazine going live online and three articles short of a full, polished layout.

It makes me grateful that I didn't procrastinate like I normally do. My article on the upcoming football season, now that the draft is over, was my easiest piece. Although I miss covering baseball, I don't miss the moral dilemmas I had when my boss told me to feature Dover the Dickhead as the lead-in. As much as I wish Dante switched focuses for Blake's sake, I get that it's busy work that feeds his bank account. Since he tends to support his mother too, regardless of my and Finn's opposition on that, I know he needs the money.

Growing up, I always felt bad for my cousin and the family he was given. His dad was the biggest asshole I knew, and his mother was trauma bound to him no matter how badly he treated her and Dante. It didn't matter what they did; Anthony Ramirez punished them for it. I hoped my cousin would grow up and distance himself far from both of them beyond taking his mother's maiden name, but his efforts to get his mom out are endless. Whenever I think he's successful, the woman goes right back to the man who beat her half to death.

I've learned to stop suggesting Dante do anything because he rarely listens. He'll have to figure it all out on his own, no matter how bad it'll suck for him.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts when a white Styrofoam coffee cup is held out in front of me, with thin, petite fingers wrapped around the middle of it. I know who they belong to as soon as I see the rainbow-colored nails.

Grinning, I look up at Blake and ask, “Did you let Maia play with your nail polish again?”

The last time she did it, my left hand was covered in pink glitter polish. Only two and a half nails actually got painted, and she damn near had a fit when I tried taking it off. So, I went to work with it on and took all the shit I received from the guys who saw it.

I still get gift cards to the nail salon as a holiday present from some of these fuckers. And every single time I do, I give them to Blake so she and Maia can get pampered since it’s not something she can afford to do often.

“She’s getting really good at staying in the lines,” is her reply, wiggling her fingers once I take the cup. Each nail is a different color. Some with more paint on them than others. I love how she doesn’t even bother correcting them. She showcases whatever her daughter gives her.

I take her hand and study them closer as an excuse to touch her. “I like the blue she chose.”

Blake smiles. “She said it made her think of you. I think she’s got a crush.”

Smirking, I shoot her a wink. “Can you blame the girl? I’ve always been told I’m a catch.”

The blonde letting me hold her hand finally pulls it back with a roll of her eyes. “Yeah, maybe the worm at the end of a fishing line.”

My free hand goes to my heart. “That hurts, babe. Are you saying I’m nothing more than fish food? I thought I was special.”

Humor dances in Blake’s hazel eyes. “Maybe to Maia, but...” The fake gasp coming from me has her laughing. “Fine. You’re special. Not many thirty-year-old guys help raise somebody else’s baby. But you’ve always been nice to her.”

As if it’s hard. Maia is one of the sweetest kids I know, not that I know many. Most of the guys I hang out with are single and childless, like me. “It isn’t like Maia makes it hard. She’s a sweet kid. You’ve done great with her.”

Blake looks away, but not before I see the slight shimmer in her eyes from the compliment. She never takes them well. I’ve always wondered why she acts like she doesn’t deserve to be given kind words, but I haven’t asked. I’ve heard how her mom talks to her. While she’s nicer than Dante’s troubled mother, she’s one of Blake’s biggest critics.

By the time she looks back at me, it's as if I never said anything at all. "I knew you had a long day today, so I wanted to drop that off before heading home to finish packing. My parents have Maia until I fly back Sunday night, so you guys will finally have the apartment girl-free again."

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little disappointed that she'd be gone for the long weekend, but I'm glad she's getting away. "I know you hate hearing this, but you deserve some downtime. It's good you're getting a chance to see Emily. She's always welcome here if she wants to spend time in your world."

Blake has never brought anybody around besides her mother, and that was only because Maia was going to stay with her grandparents for the day. It doesn't matter if Finn, Dante, or I tell her she can have people over, she comes back with the same thing. "I don't want to take up more space than I already have with Maia."

It's pointless to argue with her since I've tried hundreds of times before, so I don't bother. "Thank you for the coffee. I'm sure I'll see you before you go to bed, but if not, let me know when you've made it to Charlotte. Okay?"

Her lips curl up. "Yes, *Mom*."

I chuckle. "I care. Sue me."

Blake's eyes roam over my face for a moment as if she's trying to detect the lie. "You really mean that, huh?"

The fact she has to ask that is fucking sad. "I do. So keep me updated on everything, okay? I know you're not a fan of flying."

She blinks. "How?"

I try hiding my smile behind the coffee she bought me, which tastes like it's from my favorite spot on the main drag. Even though I only take it black, it's some of the best that's served in the area.

"You hid behind the throw blanket for most of the show we watched the other night," I answer, grinning when her cheeks pinken. It was Dante's turn to pick what to watch, and there weren't any games on that we wanted to tune into.

Blake straightens. "He put on *Airplane Disasters*! I highly doubt anybody would be smiling while watching it. If they are, they obviously need psychiatric help."

I'm not wrong, though. Even before the flights featured in the episode went awry, she was cringing and gripping whatever she could while watching the plane take off.

All I say is, "You'll be fine. I've always brought my headphones with me to listen to music during flights. Find a distraction."

She nibbles on her bottom lip. "Any chance I can borrow your headphones? The wireless ones?"

I open my desk drawer, pull them out, and pass them to her. "They're freshly charged, so you should be all set."

The tension in her shoulders eases slightly as she accepts them with a quiet, "Thank you."

Standing, I give her a peck on a cheek and a quick hug before stepping back. "You know I've got you, Blake."

We stare at each other for a while, her cheeks darkening a little more before she grabs my hand and squeezes it before stepping back. "Have fun this weekend."

"You too. Not too much, though, or you may not want to come back," I tell her playfully. When she glances at me, there's uncertainty glimmering in her eyes. I want to ask her what she's thinking, but I don't. I wouldn't get a genuine answer anyway.

With a quiet sigh, she turns to leave without another look in my direction, causing my brows to pinch as her curvy figure, emphasized in that damn yellow sundress, disappears around the corner.

"Dude," my desk mate Ethan says, leaning back in his chair with a sly grin. He gestures toward the hallway Blake walked out of. "If you haven't already tapped that, can I have h—"

"No," I all but growl, cutting him off before he can even finish asking. The dipshit sure as shit doesn't deserve to use her like he's used plenty of other women. I won't have it.

Ethan raises his palms. "Sorry. Didn't know she was already claimed."

My nostrils flare as I sit down, staring at the coffee she gave me.

Suddenly, I'm pissed off.

Because she *isn't* claimed.

By me or anyone.

But I damn well wish she were.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Blake

ANXIETY RIPPLES THROUGH my system as I check my phone one last time before boarding the plane. My parents promised everything would be fine, but it's the first time I've been away from Maia for more than a few hours to work. The past three years have been she and I against the world, and even though I'm excited to see Emily, I've been a basket case of nerves since my alarm went off this morning.

My parents are more equipped to handle the talkative toddler than anybody I know. The guys offered to watch her, but I knew it wouldn't have been fair to stick that responsibility on a bunch of bachelors who finally had their place back to themselves to do what they pleased with for a weekend.

Plus, I don't think my mother would have forgiven me if I deprived her and my father of one-on-one Maia time. They're obsessed with the pudgy-cheeked girl whose toothy smile can light up any room and probably would have gone to the apartment and taken her from the guys if I'd agreed to let the boys watch her.

I love how much my parents adore Maia. Before she was born, I worried they wouldn't want to be part of her life. It took no time at all for them to fall for her big brown eyes and radiant smile. There's no part of my little girl that isn't addicting to be around.

When I was eight months postpartum and struggling with the new version of me that I'd have to see in the mirror every day, I remember resenting how easily my parents showed their affection for my baby girl. Then I hated myself for being angry over something I should have wanted from the start.

"She's our granddaughter, Blake," my mother says in exasperation when I ask why she loves Maia so much. "Why wouldn't I?"

What I wanted to say is, "I'm your daughter. When did you stop loving me that way?"

But I know I've given her plenty of reasons not to.

Internally sighing, I let go of the thought. The important thing is that Maia is with two people who love her for the weekend. She'll get spoiled and have the best time. That's all that matters. All I can hope for is not to be grilled by my mother the second I walk into their house to pick her up. *What did you do? Where did you go? Did you see anybody? I hope you didn't drink.*

The fictional interrogation I'm making up in my head only makes me want to do all those things ten times more solely because I can. After all, my father and the boys told me to have fun.

Distract yourself.

It's been over a year and a half since I've seen my best friend, so I know this trip will be good for the both of us. She and Hector even upgraded my ticket to first class, hoping it would ease my anxiety during the four-and-a-half-hour flight. I've got Brodie's headphones, one of Finn's Xanax pills to pop before takeoff, and a silent prayer.

I'm staring out the window at the airport workers on the tarmac when I hear somebody stop at the empty seat beside mine. Peeling my gaze away from the people prepping for takeoff, I glance over at the occupant who will undoubtedly witness my nervous breakdown at some point during the flight if the medicine I take doesn't kick in. An early apology is at the tip of my tongue when I get a good look at my seat buddy, but I swallow it when my eyes lock on the ink running up his muscled, veiny arms.

Holy hotness.

I've only prayed once in my lifetime, and that was when there were complications during labor that put Maia—and me—at risk. I sort of assumed I could only ask for one thing from the man upstairs, but he just sent me something else in the form of a tall, sculpted package. I'll have to remember to pray more often. Maybe go to church once in a while, like my mother always urges me to do as a “thank you” for the piece of work sitting down a few inches away from me.

The sexy stranger busies himself with setting his carry-on down by his feet and settling into his seat, which gives me ample time to do a quick once-over of his profile. And it's a nice one—a *really* nice one.

I don't know if Henry Cavill has a younger brother, but this guy could be the Spanish version of him. Strong, smooth jawline that looks like it

could cut glass, high cheekbones I didn't know I could be envious of, and a perfectly straight nose. And when he turns?

Good lord.

The quirked smile he offers tugs up only half of his upper lip, revealing a deep-set dimple on his right cheek. It's friendly but knowing. "Hi."

Obviously caught gawking, I smooth my clammy palms down my thighs and force a semi-genuine smile at his greeting. "Hi. Sorry for staring, you're just—" I stop myself, cringing inwardly at what I was about to tell him.

Amusement flickers in the amber eyes scoping out my twisted facial expression. "I'm just what?"

Screw it. My shoulders drop from their tense stature as I settle back into the seat. "The old version of me would have come right out and said you're hot. Because you are."

The other half of his lip lifts. "Yeah? What about the new version of you?"

I think about it for a few seconds. "I'd just be creepy and stare at you and silently appreciate your looks in my head." Which I was caught doing. "I'm trying to change my ways. Not be so forward. It tends to get me into trouble."

"That sounds boring," he remarks in that yummy, rumble tone. He rests his arms casually on the armrests of his seat. "I think people should be honest about what they're thinking. It makes things easier in the long run. More straight-forward, don't you think?"

My lips rub together. Normally, I'd agree. If we knew what everybody thought from the start, there'd be a lot less confusion in the world when assumptions get twisted. "I'm not so sure people want to hear what goes on in my head most times. Do you know who the Tasmanian Devil is?"

Slowly, those bright eyes blink at me. "Like the *Looney Tunes* character?"

I nod. "Picture that, but in my head. It's a whirlwind up there. Not pretty."

His eyes unabashedly rake over the length of me, making me wish I was wearing more than just an old pair of black leggings and an oversized sweatshirt. The top hides a little bit of the weight I'm carrying in my

midsection but not the obvious size of my chest, if the arch of his eyebrows is any indication.

He pulls his gaze back up to meet mine and smiles wider. "I find it hard to believe that anything about you isn't pretty."

Smooth. "Are you heading to Charlotte too?"

His low chuckle seems to appreciate my subject change. "Yeah. It was a last-minute work thing."

My lips weigh at the corners in a teasing manner. "You mean I could have had this row all to myself if you didn't book?"

"I'd like to think it'll be far more entertaining with me here," he replies easily, lifting a shoulder encased by a tight green T-shirt. It highlights his brawny shoulders and massive biceps that may or may not be nearly the size of my head. Ink wraps around his right forearm all the way up past the sleeve of his shirt, making me wonder just how far it spreads along his bronze skin.

Fighting back a smile, I glance back out the window before he sees just how right he is. "Maybe."

Another small laugh is what I hear, pulling my lips into a light smile. It's been a while since I've flirted with anybody and even longer since I've considered doing something about it.

The stranger asks, "What's your name?"

I counter, "What's *yours*?"

When he's silent, I turn my head to see his cocked with interest. I'm not sure why his eyes are dancing with mischief, but I can't help but raise my eyebrows in challenge until he answers. "Rafael, but people call me Raf."

I study him. It's a fitting name for him. "Raf," I test, nodding. "I like it."

"Are you going to share yours?"

"It's Blake. No shorter version, sorry. There *is* an older woman who lives in my apartment building that sometimes calls me bitch. But, in my defense, it stems from the *one time* I took the last parking spot. She's hated me ever since."

Raf blinks a few times, then laughs. "You're something else."

"I don't make it a habit to steal parking spaces from little old ladies," I say, not that he probably cares one way or another.

"Blake is an unusual name."

"For a girl, you mean?"

He lifts a shoulder.

My head rests against the headrest as I loosen a short sigh. “I wish I could say I was named after Blake Lively because she’s been my woman crush ever since I can remember. But it’s really because my dad is obsessed with country music and loves Blake Shelton. He even rocked a mullet for a while. What about Rafael? Any special meaning behind it?”

The little hum that rises from his throat drowns out the flight attendants closing the door once everybody is on board and seated. “My mom is from Madrid. She moved to Chicago to marry my deadbeat dad, who she met when he was in Spain for a college trip with his buddies. I’m sure she regrets that trip now, considering everything the dick has put her through. Anyway, Rafael is just something that ties me to my Hispanic roots.”

“That’s nice. Not about the deadbeat dad thing, but...” He obviously knows that, so I let my words trail off. “Is he not around anymore?”

His eyes go to the tiny window to see what the workers are doing. “Not if I can help it. He did a number on my mother and me, then moved on to the next unsuspecting woman.”

I frown at his cool tone. “I’m sorry.” Not knowing what else to say, I settle into my seat and turn my head toward him. “I was just thinking about my parents. They’re good people. They probably just wish they had a different daughter.”

One of Rafael’s eyebrows pops up. “I highly doubt you could have done anything to make them wish that.”

“Maybe I murdered somebody.”

“Did you?” he counters easily.

“Only their pride,” I muse humorlessly. Shaking my head, I release a sigh. “I’ve made dumb decisions over the years. One of them led to some pretty heavy consequences.”

Rafael studies me, his eyes going from my eyes to my lips to the rest of my face as if he’s looking for something specific. “Drugs?”

Snorting, I murmur, “No. Maybe I should tell them at least I didn’t get hooked on cocaine, so they know how lucky they got with me.”

His low chuckle has him easing into his own seat. “I don’t suppose you’re going to let me in on whatever it is you did?”

If I were smart, I wouldn’t. But he’s a stranger. A free therapist, really. Some people use bartenders to tell their problems to; I tell random men on

planes who are captive audiences. “I hooked up with the wrong person and wound up pregnant and alone. Well, not really alone. I have my daughter, who’s the best kid out there. But the guy...” I make a face, thinking about Jonathon Dover. “It’s better he’s not in the picture.”

“Wow. A single mom.” There’s admiration in his tone that I’d like to think is because of his mother’s struggles based on his comment about his father. “You’re right. It could have been cocaine.”

Our conversation stops when one of the flight attendants starts going over safety protocols. It only makes me white-knuckle the armrests tighter as I picture us going down in a fiery crash like the plane in *Airplane Disasters* did the other night.

“Not a fan of flying?” Raf guesses after we’re told to buckle up before we begin to taxi.

“Yeah, about that...” My eyes widen when the plane starts moving. I have to pinch them closed and try to do the breathing technique that Emily reminded me of when we talked earlier. Last time I got on a plane to see her, I hyperventilated until one of the other passengers thought I was going to need medical attention. “I’m sort of terrified right now. I should apologize in advance for being stuck next to me because I’ll more than likely have a breakdown or three if turbulence hits.”

He doesn’t laugh or tease. Instead, my eyes startle open when a hand peels mine away from the armrest. My seat mate weaves our fingers together, offering me a soft smile. “Anytime you need to squeeze my hand, do it. You won’t hurt me.”

I gape at our hands. When was the last time I held hands with somebody other than Maia or my parents when I was little? I’m not sure I ever have.

Not with a guy. Finn wasn’t entirely wrong. The usual men I go after are looking for a quick fuck and an easy exit. Nothing more.

Rafael is completely relaxed as the plane starts moving down the runway. “I should probably ask if you have a boyfriend or something that could potentially beat my ass for holding your hand. I’d like to consider myself a lover, not a fighter.”

I swallow my nerves that are drumming to an erratic beat inside my chest. “Is that your way of confirming that I’m single?”

All he does is grin, revealing teeth that should be displayed in a toothpaste commercial that could rival the many Maia’s father has been

featured in.

My grip tightens around his as we start to lift off the ground. “No. There’s nobody who will beat you up,” I rasp hoarsely, refusing to look out the window as we ascend.

“Good. Then look at me.”

My head turns, and ever so slowly, I force my eyelids open.

That’s when he leans over and kisses me.

Distract yourself, a voice echoes in my head.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Rafael

I'VE HAD A hard-on since getting a good look at the woman whose mouth slowly opens for mine. Kissing her definitely was a dumbass move because now I need to find a way to talk my boner down or go to the bathroom and take care of it myself. Especially knowing that Blake can kiss.

Jesus Christ.

The second she responds to me, it's a clash of tongues and teeth. It's fucking hot. Definitely something I'll be thinking about for a long time.

My fingers weave into her sandy hair, cupping the back of her head and pressing her closer to me as she sucks my tongue with that taunting mouth of hers. She swallows my groan as I take back control of the kiss until we're pulled away by a cleared throat and a tap on my shoulder.

Drawing back, I take in her swollen lips and flushed cheeks as she nervously peeks at the flight attendant standing next to our aisle. When I look over at the pretty, dark-skinned woman in uniform, I shoot her one of my famous smiles. "Sorry 'bout that. My friend here is a little nervous. Figured I should distract her."

The word "friend" seems to resonate with the woman whose smile grows wider as she glances between Blake and me. I know what she's thinking. That she's got a chance. And maybe if I hadn't been seated next to the bombshell beside me, I'd hit on her.

She shoots me a wink before walking away to check on other passengers.

"She wants to fuck you," are the words that have my eyes bolting back to Blake. They're not spoken out of jealousy. Nothing about her expression shows anger or anything that would indicate she's pissed at me for even glancing at another woman after I made a move on her.

She's just stating facts.

I like that.

“Yeah,” I agree nonchalantly. I gesture toward the bulge evident in my jeans. “But my dick is very much interested in somebody else right now.”

Her hazel eyes move toward my erection before part of her heart-shaped lips tilt upward in pride. “I can see that.”

It’s clear to me that she has no idea who I am. I’m not recognized that often when I’m out, but I know the older man two rows ahead of us figured me out the second I boarded, and a younger guy who’s probably close to my thirty-two years subtly lifted his phone and took my picture five minutes ago.

But Blake?

She’s clueless about the current life-changing deal that my agent, Vanessa, is negotiating for me in Philadelphia. I like that about her too. It means she doesn’t give a shit about my hopeful move from the minors to the big leagues or the money I’d be pulling once the transition happens if my dream team signs me.

“Are you from Charlotte or just visiting?” I prompt, seeing her eyes warily glance out the window.

“Visiting.”

“A friend?”

She nods, eyes still stuck on the window.

“Blake.” I laugh, squeezing her hand. “Look at me. Trust me, it’s going to be better than what’s going on out there.”

She turns her attention to me, then our conjoined hands, and then frowns apologetically. “I liked your distraction before, but something tells me we may get charged with indecent exposure if we do that again.”

My dick twitches at the thought of the trouble we could get into with each other. “You’re probably right.”

“Thanks for that, by the way.”

Huh. I don’t think a woman has ever thanked me for kissing her before. “Any time.”

And I mean it.

Her leg starts bouncing as we’re told to prepare for takeoff, so I decide to reach over and move the shade down so that her view is blocked from what’s coming. “You’re torturing yourself,” I say.

She fiddles with her fingers, leg still bouncing chaotically. I bet if I put my hand over her heart, I’d feel it race.

“Tell me about yourself,” she replies. “I need you to distract me in potentially less illegal, but much more boring, ways.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything,” she breathes.

So, I tell her everything.

Mostly.



TWO AND A half hours later, I know three key factors about Blake Karr that have made this flight well worth the stress it caused—she’s terrified of flying, has a feisty attitude, and has one hell of a dirty mouth.

Telling her I don’t like coffee might as well have been me admitting I worship Satan every Sunday. “I mean, seriously? Who the fuck doesn’t like coffee? How do you *survive*?”

Fuck seems to be her favorite word, and it might just have shot up there as one of mine as well. Especially coming from those full, pillowy lips. Doesn’t matter the context.

“You really need to stop saying that.”

Her brows pinch. “What?”

“Fuck.”

Her eyes go to where the word impacts me most, amusement flickering in her gaze. “Are you hard *again*?”

I snicker at her brazenness. “Sweetheart, it never went away. It only gets worse whenever you say the word like an invitation. I’m going to need a one-on-one talk with it if you keep going.”

She gets the meaning instantly, eyes flashing with a heat that matches mine as she bites her bottom lip to fight off a smile. I already know this woman is going to kill me by the time we land, but what I don’t realize is how much when she glances around us. Some people are sleeping, some are watching movies on the screens attached to the back of the seats in front of them, and others are reading.

“Put your jacket over your lap,” she tells me, eyeing the leather jacket I grabbed before heading out with my haphazardly packed bag. When

Vanessa told me I was going to Charlotte, I had less than an hour before a car arrived to take me to the airport.

I still think this is a pointless trip since I'm on Philadelphia's forty-man roster. Meeting with new minor league teams feels like I'm jinxing myself before I get a chance to move up in the career I've worked hard for. After the callup in September, I have a chance at being put on the field. So my agent putting me at risk of pissing off the owners isn't sitting well with me.

Blake is the only thing making this trip worth it.

I clear my throat, but it comes out strangled as I eye her carefully. "Blake..."

Her head cocks. "The way I see it, you have three options. You can let me help take care of your problem right here and now, you can try to ignore it and sit uncomfortably the rest of the way to Charlotte, or you can go to the bathroom and deal with it yourself. But I think we both saw how long it took that older guy to come out of there, and the way he was holding his stomach tells me it wouldn't be a great place to get yourself off." She gets a thoughtful look about her. "Then again, it could kill the monster in your pants. It's your choice."

A pretty girl wants to get me off, and I'm hesitating. Not because we're out in the open. I've done much worse, way more publicly, when the moment struck. I wish I could say I'm a saint about respecting where I have sex, but I'm not. Sometimes desperation outweighs reason.

Which is how I find myself draping my favorite jacket over my bottom half and watching her lips curl into a Cheshire cat smile. It should probably make me nervous, but if anything, it makes me harder with anticipation. My cock is steel in my jeans as she repositions herself so it looks like we're cuddling. My arm instantly goes over her shoulder, tugging her closer.

Her palm flattens against my chest, feeling my pounding heart. She lowers her hand leisurely, peeking up at me through her lashes and watching me back. I can't see her mouth, but I'm sure it's tugged upward, knowing she's driving me fucking crazy.

"I should probably stop you," I murmur, breath catching when her hand disappears underneath the jacket and cups me over my jeans. I bite back a groan. "I'd like to think I'm a gentleman."

She snorts, stroking and fondling me. "Even gentlemen like their dicks touched."

True. So damn true.

“It’s too bad,” she says casually.

My eyes close briefly as her fingers move with expertise over the length of my shaft. “What is?”

“I’ve been told I give way better head than I do hand jobs.”

Her statement makes me choke on air, which I have to recover quickly from before I give us away. It’s damn near impossible when she’s giving me the chance to imagine her head bobbing over my cock, taking me deep in her mouth.

“You’re not playing fair.”

When she looks back up at me, it’s with a cocky smirk. “Considering it’s you who’s getting off right now, I’d say this isn’t about playing fair, Raf.”

Shit. “I’ll happily return the—”

“Just sit back and relax,” she cuts me off, popping open the button of my denim, dragging down the zipper as quietly as possible, and sneaking her hand underneath the briefs covering my aching dick.

I shift to turn my body far enough away from wandering gazes. It’s the flight attendants we’ll have to worry about, but since I’ve ignored all their advances so far, I’m pretty sure we’re in the clear.

I suck in a quiet breath when her hand snakes around my length and squeezes. “Christ, Blake.” The tendons in my neck tighten as I tilt my head back and try to keep the noises at bay as she pumps me from base to tip. If I look down and watch, it’ll be over all too soon.

I’m not quite sure I expected this to happen, even when we were flirting back and forth earlier. I never miss taking a shot at a beautiful woman when an opportunity arises. Most of the time, it doesn’t go anywhere, especially not when the shy version of Blake greeted me when I sat down.

But this version? I’ll take her any day.

Every stroke, pump, and twist of her fist takes me closer to the edge. I have to white-knuckle the armrests to keep myself grounded into the seat. My hips want to move—to fuck her palm.

“Going to come,” I say under my breath when she plays with the beads of precum leaking from me.

She reaches into her bag, barely stopping the torturously good rhythm over my cock to grab a...

“Is that a baby wipe?”

She winks at me. “I never leave my house without them. Something tells me they’re about to come in handy. Get it? Come. Handy.” She laughs lightly over her joke, jerking me faster and gripping me tighter in the perfect spot until—

“*Fuck.*”

The baby wipe undoubtedly becomes my best friend the second I empty myself into it.

We get back into less suspicious positions by the time the next passenger check happens.

I turn to my new favorite seat mate. “Let me return the favor. If not here, when we land. I’ve got a hotel room—”

“No.”

I blink at her quick, firm reply. “No?”

“Hotels and I don’t get along,” she mumbles.

My brows pinch at the ominous statement. “I want to return the favor.”

One of her shoulders lifts as she gives me a small smile. It’s empty, devoid of emotion to give away what she could be thinking. Similar to how she was when we first started talking. “Don’t worry about it, Rafael.”

This woman is an anomaly.

One I’d really like to figure out.

“How long are you in Charlotte for?” I ask her.

She doesn’t answer right away. For a second, I don’t think she’s going to. But then she lets out a tiny sigh and says, “Only for the weekend.”

I want to ask her to let me see her again.

I’d be willing to beg.

But when I see something in her eyes that I recognize, I hold back the request. Fear. Uncertainty. Before I had my career, I had nothing. So, I know what it used to feel like to be in her shoes.

So, I let it be to the fates. If we see each other again unprompted, I’ll make a move. Charlotte is a big city, but crazier things have happened.

When we part ways in the airport, I pull out my phone and snap a picture of her quickly before calling Vanessa. “I need you to do me a favor. And, no, it has nothing to do with baseball.”

My agent sighs. “Then why should I?”

“Because I met a girl.”

“Did she sign an NDA?”

Of course she wants to know that. Anything to protect me from ruining the deal that will make her and I both a hell of a lot richer. “No. I need you to figure out who she is. I sent you a picture of her. She’s from New York. Her name is Blake. She’s got a kid. That’s all I know.”

There’s a pause. “You’re not kidding.”

Unfortunately for her, no. “Hire whoever you need to and let me know what you find out.”

I hang up without feeling guilty since she’s the one who sent me here in the first place. The least she can do is hire the same private eye that I know she has in her back pocket.

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CHAPTER NINE

Blake

“**Y**OU DID *WHAT*?” Emily squeals, almost dropping her frozen yogurt. It’s our tradition whenever we see each other, no matter what time of year it is or how cold it is outside.

I make a face as I stare at my bland cookies and cream froyo. Normally, I’m more adventurous with my food, but my appetite hasn’t been strong since I climbed into my best friend’s car at the airport.

“It was an in-the-moment type of thing that made me feel young again.”

She snorts. “You’re twenty-four.”

“You know what I mean. It made me feel like the carefree girl I was before Maia.” I stick my spoon into the yogurt and set the cup down on the table. “I guess part of me was proving Finn right at that moment. I use men who I’ll never have to settle down with to feel good.”

My friend abandons her mid-afternoon snack to level me with a narrowed gaze. “You mean your sexy and nerdy roommate who admitted he has feelings for you days before you boarded a plane and gave a *stranger* a *hand job*?”

There’s no point in wincing or feeling bad about it now. What’s done is done. “When you word it like that...”

“Blake.” Emily sighs. “You know I love you to death, but you’re always self-sabotaging when something is going good. Remember David? He communicated consistently, put effort into seeing you, and wanted more than sex. And the second you realized how serious he was, you broke up with him. After what happened with Jon—”

“This isn’t about *him*.” My snappy tone makes her look doubtful. Shoulders drooping a fraction, I sit back in my chair. “David was great, but I’ve never considered settling down before becoming a mom. Hell, I never thought I’d be a mother. I know the *smart* thing to do is to get serious with somebody that I know is worthy of my daughter’s and my time.”

“But?” she guesses.

“But,” I reply, “I haven’t gone out with anybody that I want to introduce to Maia and be with for the rest of my life. Forever is scary.”

Emily frowns sympathetically. “Babe, you already have three guys who adore you and Maia that you can trust. They live with you. Including Finn, who knows the secret that comes with you and my adorable goddaughter. So, what is holding you back?”

Can’t it be as simple as not wanting to be with him? You can love people in so many different ways, and I love Finn in a platonic one. I’ve tried thinking about us together since he brought it up, but nothing about the scenarios I come up with feel like they’d last. We’d be stable financially, but emotionally?

I want to be with somebody who will offer every layer of love to my daughter’s life so she knows never to settle for less.

“Look,” Emily says. “I’m going to give you my opinion even though you haven’t asked for it. I think you should give Finn a chance. I’m not saying that because I always thought he was hot—don’t tell Hector I said that—but because he’s a genuinely *good* guy. He knows who Maia’s father is. He’s good with her *and* you. He has a great job, a nice roof over his head, and you two are friends. Who says one date would harm that?”

She’s never struggled with finding genuine men. Hector was only the second guy she ever dated seriously, and they’re married now. I wouldn’t expect her to understand my dilemma. “We’re roommates, and I’m not attracted to him like that. It would harm everything we’ve built in the past two years. Maia and I wouldn’t be able to stay there if it didn’t work out. I’m not disputing any of your points, I just want you to see it through my eyes. It’s a complicated situation.”

She’s quiet for a second, contemplative. I can tell she hears where I’m coming from. But I also know the chance of her backing down from her opinion isn’t likely. We went to high school together, were in the same sorority while I was still enrolled in college, and saw one another do a lot of crazy stuff.

My best friend may have had a wild side at one point, but she’s always wanted to settle down with a husband and kids. She’s a hopeless romantic who believes in fate and butterflies and happily ever after, like in fairy tales. It’s always where we’ve been the most different.

I wouldn't say I'm completely cynical about true love, but I don't believe sparks fly the second you meet "the one" or if that even exists. On a planet populated with over seven billion people, it seems highly unlikely there's one singular person out there for me.

When Emily speaks again, there's somberness in her tone. "I get that it can be scary, but what's even scarier is how easily you give yourself to people like Plane Guy. When was the last time you went on a serious date? One that led to a second where sex wasn't the endgame?"

She knows I've been in a dry spell because I've complained about it at least ten times in the last two months. It never used to be difficult to find a guy, strip each other down, and have a night of fun. But this year has felt... different. Like I need to try better, harder. I know it has a lot to do with Maia getting bigger and starting to understand things better than she used to. Bringing random people around her isn't what I want, especially if she can start forming her own opinions about it.

Out of everybody in my life, her opinion is the only one that matters to me. I need her unconditional love more than I need air. It's how I survive day to day.

"It's been a while," I admit quietly, staring down at my lap.

"I want you to be happy, babe. You're so deserving of it even when you think you're not. That asshole doesn't deserve to take anything away from you, and I'm mad that my wedding had a part of you two meeting in the first place."

I'm not. He gave me Maia. My reason in life.

"He changed your life without having to live with the consequences of his own actions. If he's not punishing himself, why should you?"

Her question sparks something in my chest. I've never thought of it that way before.

"What do you want in the person that could make you change your mind about settling down?" she asks, spooning more yogurt into her mouth.

Sitting back, I think about it while staring at my half-eaten food. "I read somewhere that the male version of you is your perfect match. Which makes sense, if you think about you and Hector. You two are basically the same person, even with the age gap. You've always been an old soul."

Emily's eyes dance with humor. "If that's true, then Brodie is yours."

Before I can help myself, my cheeks heat at the thought of the flirty man back in New York.

My friend doesn't miss the look. She hums, studying me a little too closely for comfort with those paralegal eyes that see everything. "Interesting," she says slowly, nodding as if she knows something I don't. "Let me ask you this. If it were one of your other roomies who admitted they had feelings for you, would you use living there as an excuse not to at least try?"

Dante would never admit he has feelings for me, so there's only one person she can be referring to. And the truth is, I might take the plunge if Brodie were the one who told me he had feelings that went beyond physical attraction.

Still, I lie. "I don't know."

Emily hums. Instead of pushing, she picks up her yogurt again with a subtle shrug. "Let's just focus on having a fun girls' weekend. It's been too long since we've done this without husbands or babies interrupting us. I have appointments for us at the salon, and I think Hector made reservations at that new Italian restaurant I was telling you about."

I offer a stiff smile, hoping she looks past it because I want to enjoy my time with her. No drama. No lectures. No thinking about the boys back home. "Sounds like fun."

CHAPTER TEN

Dante

THE LAUNDROMAT ON Third Avenue is a rundown piece of shit where many homeless and druggies come for warmth at night, which means it's the last place my mother should be calling me from.

As soon as I step in, the scent of piss and body odor assaults my senses. I search the room for the woman I could barely understand on the phone because of how hard she was crying until I see her sitting in the corner by herself.

Walking over, I kneel in front of her until she breaks from whatever mental trance she's in. Her brown eyes are red and puffy, but otherwise, she looks fine.

"What happened?" I ask.

Beside her is a stack of clothes, mostly pieces I recognize from her wardrobe. I've had to move her enough times to know what the inside of her closet looks like. There are a few articles mixed in that look like men's underwear, making my nose twitch.

"Mom?"

She sniffles, reaching out to brush my face like she used to when I was younger. "My beautiful boy always comes to save me when I need him to."

Sighing, I pat her hand and stand up. "I left work early because you scared me. What are you doing here? This place looks like it should be condemned. Don't you have machines in your building?"

Guilt drops her lips into a frown. "It's complicated, baby boy."

Christ. Here we go again. "What's so complicated about using the machines at your building? They do regular maintenance on them. I made sure of that before I co-signed the lease."

Which Brodie told me *not* to do, considering what happened last time. When Mom bailed on her apartment to move in with some lowlife that was barely any better than my sperm donor, it was me who had to pay the fees

for the broken lease. I told myself I wouldn't help her again if she pulled that bullshit, but I couldn't say no when she showed up battered and bruised after a run-in with my father.

"I don't really like that apartment anymore," she finally tells me. "The woman across the hall is always reporting me about noise complaints."

For fuck's sake. "What noise complaints?"

She doesn't answer.

"Mom. What noise complaints? Is your TV too loud? Are you fighting with somebody? Tell me. Because we both know it's not you who's going to get penalized for it if it keeps up."

That guilty frown deepens. "I didn't want to tell you like this."

My shoulders go rigid. "Please tell me it's not what I think it is."

She stands quickly. "He's different, baby."

He. Anthony Ramirez. "How many times have you said that in the past thirty years? The man almost fucking killed you, Mom. Do you really want to go back to that? Because, one day, you're not going to make it out alive."

Her expression changes in a second, from sadness to somberness. "Don't use that tone with me, Dante. I'm still your mother. We rarely even fight anymore. That old coon across the hall likes making a fuss out of nothing. Tony barely even raised his voice this time."

I can't wrap my head around this. "You have a restraining order out against him. Do you not remember that? I took you to the police to get it done so they could see what he did. They *arrested* him."

Like always, she's quick to jump on his defense. "He got out early for good behavior. They wouldn't do that if he wasn't a changed man."

If the jail has limited space, they get rid of anybody who didn't commit a heinous crime. I've heard about it on the news before when the community complained about crime rates going up.

"You called me crying because of him," is my last valiant effort to get her to open her eyes.

She shakes her head. "No, no. It's not like that. I got upset because I ran out of money. It's my fault. I can't finish the laundry or get back home because he needed to borrow the car."

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I squeeze my eyes closed and take a deep breath before I say something I'll regret.

“It’s just a couple hundred dollars,” I hear her say, feeling her hand brush mine. “You understand, don’t you? You’ve always been good about taking care of me. That’s how I know you’ll make such a good husband someday. Any girl will be so lucky to have you in their life.”

Her words are a punch to the gut that hits harder than my father ever could. “I don’t have a lot of spare money, Mom.”

When I open my eyes, I see her staring at me with those pleading dark hues focused on me. Why the fuck can’t I walk away from her? “Please? I won’t ask again. The gas station said they’d give me more hours starting next week. It’s just until my next paycheck. I promise.”

I promise.

Promises never seem to hold in our family.

I learned that from her.

Still, I get my wallet, pull out a handful of twenties, and stand stock-still as she wraps those frail arms around me.

“I love you, Dante,” she says into my chest.

Forcefully, I hug her back.

But it’s in complete silence.

Because, deep down, I know she doesn’t deserve to hear those three words back. Not when I don’t mean them.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blake

IT'S BAD ENOUGH that Emily paid for my manicure and new hairstyle, featuring a shorter trim to get rid of all the split ends I've been ignoring and fresh highlights that soften the dark brown, but the dress is next level. I flatten my palms down the front of the tight plum number and frown when we walk up to the front entrance of L'Artusi.

"This place looks expensive, Em."

My best friend waves me off. "Hector took care of it. This has the best Italian around. You can't miss out on it while you're here. And look how beautiful it is!"

It is gorgeous. The second we step inside, the quiet yet somehow romantic atmosphere tells me this would be a perfect date spot. That is, if your bank account has more than a hundred dollars in it.

Which is exactly why it makes no sense why we're here, of all places. New or not, this is something she and her husband should go to, not us. "I think I saw a pizza place over—"

"Blake." My friend turns to me while the hostess speaks to an older couple dressed as nicely as we are. "Let me do this for you. I know you're short on money. This trip was my idea, so I want to treat you. Hector does too. You know we both adore you."

That's the problem. "I feel bad. I can't repay you—Don't start with me. I know you're not asking me to. But it's difficult."

She smiles. "I know. You're prideful and stubborn. I both love and loathe that about you. Just let us do nice stuff for you without complaining. Plus, your ass looks amazing in that dress. I'm glad I got it for you."

My ass *does* look good. "This place looks like it cost at least twenty-five-dollars a plate for two pieces of lettuce and some drizzle of dressing."

Emily rolls her eyes, weaving our arms together as she tugs me toward the hostess table. "Do me a favor and don't look at the menu. Because then

you'll be even sadder when you realize it's *one* piece of lettuce and drizzled dressing on top of it."

I groan. "Not funny."

She bops my nose. "I thought it was."



I SEE HIM sitting with two older men, all wearing business casual attire and stern faces. Whatever conversation they're having, it looks serious. And based on Rafael's tight expression, he's not enjoying himself.

"Did you hear a word I said?" Emily asks, sighing as she sets her wine down.

Forcing my gaze away from the man my hand became well acquainted with a day ago, I offer my friend an apologetic smile. "Sorry. I thought I saw somebody I knew..."

Her face pinches with doubt. "Who could you know here other than Hector and me? Oh! I did hear that they're shooting a movie nearby. Maybe it's an actor from there. Who are you looking at?" She turns in her seat to scan the room.

"Never mind," I say quickly. It's obvious she disapproves of my flight escapades, so telling her that Rafael is here would be a bad idea.

She groans. "It's him, right?" The annoyance in her tone has my body locking as her eyes trail in the direction of Rafael's table. "The white-haired guy who looks constipated?"

I don't know if I should be relieved or insulted that she thinks *he's* the one who caught my attention. Not that I haven't dabbled in older men before. Just not *that* much older. The guy she's staring at is old enough to be my grandfather.

When she faces me, there's a frown curling her lips. "I guess it makes sense that you recognize him. He's been in the headlines for buying out a minor league baseball team here, but he's wedging a foot into the door of the majors. I know you pretend like you don't keep up with baseball since you know who, but..."

Why is Rafael talking to him then? It leaves a heavy feeling in my stomach. He must be another athlete. Realizing I must have a type, I frown.

She reaches over and squeezes my hand. "If it makes you feel better, it doesn't look like their conversation is going well. But did you see that hottie talking with him? He's totally your type."

If she only knew...

"Yeah, he's cute."

She rolls her eyes. "Anyway, I was telling you that Hector and I had the kid talk."

My eyes widen. "Really?"

Her head nods lightly. "It's time. We've discussed it before, but both of us have been so busy with work. He's been trying to take on fewer cases, and it isn't like my job is that demanding. We're in a good place, so I want to try."

"Emily, that's amazing." We always thought she'd be the first to have a family, but life has a funny way of throwing curveballs.

No pun intended.

"Does Hector still want five kids?"

Her nose scrunches. "I told him I'd consider three. Max. He seems to think he can change my mind, but he's forgetting that I have to carry them. My body will never be the same."

Men. They get the easy end of the deal. All they need to do is pump a few times and let us handle the rest. "I'd like to see him push out a watermelon-sized baby from his penis. I bet he'd change his mind really quick after that."

We both grin at each other.

My eyes wander back to the table Rafael was sitting at, but it's empty. Eye twitching, I scratch it away and refocus on my best friend. "Does this mean Maia will have a little friend soon?"

"Hopefully. But..." Her throat bobs as she stares down at her empty dessert plate. "We've been trying for months, and so far, nothing. I had a mild breakdown last month about it and went to see a specialist."

I gape at the new news. "Why didn't you tell me?" I think about it, feeling my shoulders drop. "Is that the appointment you mentioned a few weeks ago? You barely said anything about it. I thought it was an annual checkup."

One of her shoulders lifts as she shoots me a sad smile. "I didn't want to freak out too soon if it wound up being nothing. She told me everything was

fine and that sometimes it takes time after being on the pill for so long. Plus, I've been stressed, so it could be a factor."

"Of course," I quickly agree.

"But what if it's not?" she whispers.

This time, I squeeze her hand in comfort. "I know it has to be hard, but you'll get through this. If the doctor told you everything was fine, then believe that. I'm sure if you're in your head about getting pregnant it'll mess with you."

She reluctantly nods in agreement.

"*When* it happens, I'll be right there by your side. I'll throw you a kick-ass baby shower like the one you threw for me."

Skepticism takes over her somber expression, and I know what she's going to say. "You hate planning parties. Remember that birthday bash you insisted on taking lead on for Veronica's eighteenth birthday?"

I cringe at the memory of the curtains catching on fire when I set the cake too close to them. In a rush to put the fire out, the table got knocked over with all the food on it. Cake included. "Yeah, that didn't go well."

"It was a disaster."

"But I'm better now! More responsible."

I want to remind her of the amazing second birthday party I hosted for Maia. It was Cookie Monster themed because she was obsessed with everything blue and sweet last year. I may have gone a little overboard; at least, that's what my mother told me when she saw how much I'd decorated the apartment, but the birthday girl had a blast, and that's all I cared about.

My best friend slowly nods, shaking herself out of the negative mindset. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. Do you want anything else, or do you think you're set?"

I glance at my plate, left with only crumbs from the chocolate cake I ordered. "I'm good. I just need to use the restroom before we go." We went through almost an entire bottle of wine between the two of us on top of water to make sure we were good to get back to her place.

She deals with the check, despite my argument through the meal, while I head toward the restrooms in the back.

A few minutes later, after drying off my hands and checking my hair and makeup in the mirror, I leave the bathroom and let out a yelp when a hand wraps around my arm.

“I thought that was you.”

I’m pulled into a tiny alcove, where I get pressed against a wall by the man I was staring at earlier.

“I thought you left,” I tell Rafael.

His lips quirk up at the corners, probably pleased that I noticed him. “Not until I said something to you.”

“Well... here you are.”

“Here we are.” He says it like a challenge as we lock eyes.

Mine narrow suspiciously. “So what?”

“So,” he prods casually. “We probably shouldn’t have bumped into each other again. Yet here we are at the same restaurant.”

I shrug. “Maybe you’re stalking me.”

Amusement lights up his eyes. “Maybe. Or maybe *you’re* stalking *me*.”

“Guess we’ll never know.”

“Guess not,” he agrees lightly.

We stare, but there’s something familiar about his eyes that I can’t quite understand.

I clear my throat, jabbing my finger behind me toward the dining room. “My friend is waiting for me, so I should go.”

“Give me your number,” he says quickly as I slip away from his hold. “Or I’ll give you mine.”

My brows pinch at his offer like it’s a foreign one. Plenty of men have asked for my number, and sometimes I’m dumb enough to give it to them. But since the last guy I slipped my number to was sleazy Trevor, I’ve been pickier about handing it out. “Why would we exchange numbers?”

He levels with me, those familiar eyes darkening with a lust I know well. “Because I’m determined to repay the favor,” he replies in a low tone as people pass by us to get to the bathrooms. His heated gaze pinning me to my spot. “What’s the harm, Blake? We exchange numbers, flirt, maybe hookup if we both want to. Doesn’t sound so bad to me. We’re only here for the weekend, anyway.”

Of course, it doesn’t sound bad.

In fact, the possibility gets me way more excited than I wish it did. Everybody told me to have fun this weekend, and the old version of me would take him up on his offer to do exactly that. But this is my weekend with Emily, which I rarely get now that we’re both older with our own

responsibilities. It's not right to ditch her and decompress by letting a hot guy bury himself inside me.

I let out a genuine sigh. "Unfortunately, there are certain parts of me on lockdown for the weekend. I haven't seen my best friend in a while, so spending time with her is more important than whatever this is between us."

Even if my insides are crying over it.

Being a responsible adult sucks.

"Your number," he tries anyway, plucking his phone out of his pocket.

My eyes narrow. Does he not get it? "You're determined. I don't know if I should find that sexy or annoying."

A grin is the only thing he gives me.

I think about it.

Two seconds.

Four seconds.

Ten seconds pass.

I don't know why I do it, but I sigh and give him the digits.

A victorious smirk flashes on his face as he dials the new contact in his phone until my purse begins buzzing from an incoming call.

"Really?"

"Had to make sure it was really your number," he remarks unapologetically as I grab my phone. "Now you have my number. Save it under 'Guy with Blue Balls.'"

I snort at the remark. "That's scientifically not a thing, and I definitely made sure your balls were perfectly fine last time."

He leans in, planting a hand against the wall by my head, and stares down at me. He's much taller than I thought, especially when those pretty amber eyes pierce mine. "Oh, trust me. I remember."

I swallow at the low tone of his voice that caresses the small distance between us.

I want so badly to stand on my tiptoes and press my lips to his just to see what they taste like. They're inviting. Fuller than a lot of guys' lips usually are. I bet they're delicious.

No. I take a step back. "Goodbye, Rafael."

"It's just Raf."

I look over my shoulder at him as I walk away, pausing only momentarily. "I'll forever remember you as 'Guy with Blue Balls.'"

He chuckles as I wave at him and find my way back to Emily.

She offers me her arm, clueless of how far I've come simply by turning a man down. "Ready?"

I don't look back, no matter how big the pull is. Wrapping my arm around hers, I smile. "Yep."

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Finn

IT'S BEEN A shitty day, and it only gets worse when I get home and see the somber look on Dante's face.

I drop my bag onto the counter, noticing the small pair of shoes that have been absent for the past few days placed neatly by the door, and turn my attention back to the man clenching a bottle of beer in his hands at the kitchen island. "What's wrong?"

His jaw tics for a moment before his fingers loosen on the glass sweating with condensation. "I need a favor," he murmurs under his breath.

It's not often I hear those words, so I know they must mean something. I bump his arm before dropping into the stool across from him. "Sure, man. What?"

His teeth grind before he says, "My half-brother needs a place to crash for a week or two. Nothing permanent. He called a few hours ago."

No shit. He's mentioned his brother a couple of times. They're not close, but they check in on each other occasionally. It's better communication than he has with the rest of his family. I can't remember the dude's name, but he sends holiday and birthday cards here and always seems decent the few times I've heard him and Dante on the phone.

"Are *you* okay with that?" I ask carefully. I couldn't care less. The couch pulls out for guests in times like these.

He pauses. "Guess so."

I snort. "Real convincing. What's he up to that's bringing him to New York?"

My roommate lifts the beer to his lips and takes a long swig. "He's got a job lined up in Philadelphia but is waiting to get a place figured out. Kind of surprised he wants to stay here while he waits to hear back, but he said it'd be good to see me."

When I asked Dante about him once before, he said he was in the sports industry like him. I figured it meant he was a journalist too. It wasn't my business to push. "Philly is nice," is all I remark.

I understand why he doesn't talk about his parents. His dad has been to prison for domestic abuse on more than one occasion, and his mom reaches out to him only when she needs something. His brother seems to be the only person he gets along with relatively well, yet I barely know anything about him or their relationship.

And just when I'm tempted to ask, Blake walks in with Maia clinging to her. Dante presses his lips together, shooting me a warning look that tells me not to bother prying.

My lips twitch downward before I turn to the girls we've missed around here. Blake's hair is different, and the tired shadows normally under her eyes are gone. "Hey. Did you have a good weekend?"

She smiles, pecking her daughter's cheek. "I did. Emily and I both needed it. But I missed this little monkey." She tickles Maia until the little girl squirms with fits of giggles and unlatches her arms from around her mother's neck.

"It was weird without you here," I admit, smiling at the two of them.

Dante grunts before pushing off the stool and grabbing his drink. "I'll let him know it's cool to come. Thanks, man." He dips his chin at our other roommate without really paying her any attention as he walks by. "Blake."

Once Dante's closed in his room, Blake turns to me. "His brother?" she guesses, setting her daughter in the booster seat I pulled up to the table for them.

I nod. "Did he ask you about it already?"

"Yeah, when I got home. He seems... off about it. Should I be worried? I've never met his brother and his family history seems complicated from what I've heard. I'm not one to judge or anything, but..."

I stifle the snort. "Complicated," I muse dryly, watching her grab food from the fridge and a cutting board from the cabinet. "That's a good way to describe it. But no. There's no reason to worry. His brother is good. A lot like Dante, I think."

She doesn't seem particularly sold on it, not that she and Dante have anything against each other. He's quiet, and she doesn't push him to say

more than he offers when they do converse. He likes that about her because most people aren't as lenient with his silence.

I watch as she prepares Maia's dinner, lips twitching as she carefully cuts the crust off the sandwich since we both know Maia girl wouldn't eat it otherwise. Reaching over, I pluck the crusts from the board and wink when she glances at me with a sheepish smile.

"Your hair looks nice," I compliment, playfully flicking one of the blond highlights. "It makes the gray in your eyes stand out more."

She looks refreshed, something I haven't seen her be in a long time. The guys and I try taking turns watching over Maia to give her small breaks, but I know it's not like having an entire weekend to relax and catch up on sleep.

If that's what she was doing.

My nostrils twitch at the possibility of her doing anything else. It's not my place, though. "So, uh, what'd you two do?" She hadn't messaged any of us all weekend. I'm sure she spoke to her parents regularly to check in on Maia, but that's it. Whatever happened while she was away is a mystery I'm itching to be clued in on.

After she passes Maia her dinner, she turns to me and starts cleaning off everything. "We did girly things. Gossiped. Got our nails done. Obviously, our hair. Thanks, by the way. I forgot what getting doted on feels like." She lets out a soft sigh, pausing as she runs water over the soapy board in her hands. "It was nice to get away and see her. There's a lot I miss about having her around. Not that you guys aren't great."

"We know our company isn't the same as having Emily around," I reason.

She momentarily studies Maia, who's happily munching away on her turkey sandwich and fruit without a care in the world. "Sometimes I feel bad for missing the days when it was only Emily and me against the world." Her eyes meet mine, glazed with somberness. "Does that make me a bad mom? I love Maia, obviously—"

"I wuv you too, Mama!" Maia chirps happily.

A smile quickly forms on Blake's lips that mine matches over the toddler's easy proclamation.

"It makes you human," I assure her, grabbing a dish towel and drying off what she washes. "I'm sure I'd feel the same way if I were in your shoes. Can't relate, but I can at least try to understand."

She's quiet for a moment. Whatever crosses her mind is temporary. Brushing it off, she finishes the dishes and asks, "What were you guys up to this weekend?"

I think about Dante and the two nights in a row we spent tangled in the sheets and covered in sweat. We took turns getting off because we both needed it. And, like always, we never said why.

Despite that, I crack my neck and put away the dishes in their rightful places. "Uneventful."

She frowns. "No dates?"

I wet my lips. "Nah. Wasn't feeling it."

Since she doesn't bring up our one-on-one at Panera, I don't either.

Doesn't mean I don't think about it.

"What about you? Did you—"

"What a good girl, Maia," she coos, obviously not paying attention to me as she coaxes her daughter to eat more.

Pressing my lips together, I sigh and finish putting away the dishes.

It's not worth the answer, anyway.

Not when my mind has been wrapped around the man down the hall who I spend more nights than not with.



BRODIE IS DRUNKENLY hitting on Blake again as they watch their favorite singing competition in the living room. Not that he doesn't hit on her sober. He's just a lot louder about it after a few too many.

Dante is watching them with curious eyes, his attention only drifting away when his phone lights up with a name across the screen that I can't quite make out. He curses under his breath and closes himself in his bedroom, leaving the rest of us listening to a woman dressed like a monkey belt out lyrics. Whoever created this show must have been on drugs. But do we tune in every week? Hell yeah.

Brodie drapes an arm around Blake's shoulders, tugging her into his side. "I'm telling you, woman, that's Demi Lovato."

"There is *no* way that's Demi!"

“What are you willing to bet?” he asks, his mouth tilting upward into a mischievous grin. “I think we could make this interesting. I’m thinking a kiss. Or maybe a blow—”

“Knock it off,” I warn him, smacking him in the face with a pillow.

Blake giggles as his arm loosens from around her. She stays tucked into his side, practically cuddling him despite the lack of entrapment. They’ve always gravitated toward each other, and I’ve always thought it was innocent. Until recently.

My nose twitches as Brodie catches my eye and winks, knowing he’s pissing me off.

Fucker.

I don’t have time to remind him to keep his hands off her before Dante comes sulking out from his room, rubbing the back of his neck. “Sorry. My mom called.” Both Brodie and I look at him with our brows raised. “And my brother texted me. He’s going to be here tonight. Probably late. I’ll stay up to let him in.”

The quick subject change doesn’t go unnoticed by anybody in the room. Since he won’t tell us what his mother wanted, all I say is, “Okay. Tell him he can help himself to whatever’s in the kitchen.”

Dante doesn’t meet my eyes as he takes the seat he had before, his leg bouncing as he stares absentmindedly at the TV screen.

I don’t bother asking if he wants to talk about it because I already know the answer. He’ll scowl, grunt, and find something else to talk about or ignore me altogether. Sometimes it bothers me, but I’ve mostly gotten used to it by now. Not everybody wants help handling their demons.

Brodie tugs on Blake’s hair. “How do you feel about this? It’ll be a total sausage fest in here.”

She smirks, smacking his hand away from her head. “Sounds like a really bad porno.”

His eyes light up mischievously as he leans in to tweak her nose. “Or a really, *really* good one.”

Dante sighs heavily but that’s it.

I catch Brodie’s eyes and glare.

Blake elbows him in the ribs and makes him grunt, putting space between them to ease the tension in my shoulders.

It's obvious Brodie would hook up with Blake the second she gave him the go-ahead. I've seen both their eyes lingering way too long on each other. We've all stared at our pretty roommate—it's hard not to. It isn't often she returns any of the looks.

"So, what about the bet?" Brodie pries.

"You can't bet a blow job," she replies casually, gesturing toward her bottom half. "Because I'm going to win. So, no cock-sucking for you."

Brodie groans at her mouth. "Babe, what have we said about you using that language around here?"

She bats her lashes innocently. "To do it more often so you have more things to jerk off to in the shower?"

Dante snorts this time, shaking his head as he finishes off his bottle of water.

My cousin chuckles, unfazed by our roommate's quick retort. "That sounds about right. I'm running out of material to whack it to."

I'm tempted to hit him with the pillow again but opt not to. "Quit it, dude. Nobody wants to hear about what you do with your dick."

"Especially since we share a shower," Dante agrees.

"Blake does. Right, Blake?"

She pats his chest. "If that's what helps you sleep at night, sure."

I roll my eyes at them. "I'm going to do some work," I announce, stretching my stiff arms.

Blake frowns at me. "It's almost nine o'clock. Can't it wait? We haven't even found out who's being unmasked yet."

I'm not going to tell her the reason why I'm ditching them. But based on the gleam in my cousin's eye, he knows damn well what he's doing. "Yeah, I'm positive. Fill me in tomorrow about who goes home. But it's definitely not the Demi imposter."

"Ha!" Blake gloats to Brodie. "I'm not the only one who thinks it isn't her."

My cousin throws his hands up. "What happened to dicks before chicks?"

Instead of answering, I clap Dante on the back, flip Brodie off, and walk away with at least one set of eyes watching me up until my bedroom door clicks closed behind me.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Blake

I KNOW THE second my eyes peel open that I'm not going back to sleep anytime soon. Groaning into the pillow, I flop onto my back and stare at the ceiling. I put glow-in-the-dark hearts up there because it calmed Maia down when I used to let her sleep with me, even though my mother scolded me for doing it.

I'm not sure why I woke up this time. For almost a year after giving birth, I'd be too anxious to sleep—like at any second, something bad could happen to Maia if I wasn't watching her. It took a long time to realize she'd be perfectly fine if I crashed for a few hours.

Still, that familiar jittery feeling fills my limbs making me too restless to lie here.

Slipping out of bed, I tug on a pair of shorts under my oversized tee and sneak out of my room. After checking on Maia, who's dozing peacefully in her tiny room beside mine, I head toward the kitchen. I always have snacks stashed for times like these, with every intention of watching trash TV until I'm ready to go back to sleep.

What I don't expect is a familiar face taking up the pull-out couch watching a late-night infomercial on the television.

"What are *you* doing here?" I hiss, not wanting to wake up my roommates. My feet are frozen to the floor as I stare at the tan-skinned man whose dick my hand was wrapped around thirty-thousand feet in the air.

Rafael turns to me, taking in what little I'm wearing. If he's as surprised as I am that we're in the same apartment, he's really good at pretending otherwise.

This can't be happening. "Are you stalking me? Is this all some messed-up dream?"

Half his lips kick upward. "I'm flattered that I'd be featured in your dreams," he says, leaning back against the pillows somebody gave him. "I

was told everybody agreed to let me stay here until my apartment was ready.”

He was told—

No way.

“*You’re Dante’s brother?*”

The other half of his lips curve up at the corners. “In the flesh.”

And flesh is right.

He’s shirtless. Who knows what he has on under the blanket Dante must have given him when he arrived. But what is exposed is... dangerous. Taut muscles covered in ink, broad shoulders, and—

“You’re one of the roommates,” he states, not questions. He mutes the TV and shakes his head. “You never texted me, by the way. I was waiting for it. Even thought my phone was broken. Felt like an idiot when I realized you were ignoring me.”

He’s clearly never been rejected before.

“I told you before, that what happened was fun, but it was supposed to be a one-time thing. It wasn’t meant to extend past North Carolina.”

His eyes roam over me again, giving special attention to my thighs. “Is your pussy still on lockdown?”

I cross my arms over my chest, not willing to let him see what his question does to my nipples. Or the rest of me. “Why do you want to know?”

“Seems like this is a second chance. We keep bumping into each other, you and me. Don’t you think that’s worth exploring?”

Scoffing, I say, “That’s because you want me to get you off again.”

He shoves the blanket off his body and swings his legs over the side of the mattress. The only thing he’s wearing is a tight pair of briefs that leave little to the imagination, even from where I’m standing across the room. They’re tented in the front as he stands to his full height. “That’s where you’re wrong, Blake. It wouldn’t be me getting off this time.”

I blink, not moving an inch. “I don’t understand why you want this so bad. We don’t know each other. You hardly look like the kind of guy who buys into fate. So, what gives?”

He walks over confidently, pace slow, and smirk lifting half his lips upward as he stops just in front of me. “It’s not very often that a pretty girl

gets under my skin, but you have. Especially not one that's piqued my interest from turning me down."

This is a cat-and-mouse game to him, then. One I've played many times in the past. Which one of us is the cat in this scenario? "What are you even doing here, Rafael?"

My attempt to deter the conversation works, but the glaze in his eyes remains. "It's been a while since I've seen Dante, and I have time before I need to be elsewhere for work."

I'm quiet, hoping for him to enlighten me. Dante hasn't said much about his brother's visit since he asked if it was cool with us that he stayed here. Out of the three guys, he's the wildcard for me. He's not rude but not overly nice. He never flirts. Half the time, it feels like I'm the one starting conversations with him. But it works. I know what it's like to set boundaries, and that's what he's done with me. He doesn't offer, so I don't ask.

Rafael's head cocks. "I think if I kissed you right now, you'd let me. You want to know how I can tell? Because you've got a glint in your eye that's been there since you saw how hard I am."

It's a bold statement.

And not an untrue one.

I'm horny and have easy access inches from me. How could I not entertain the idea?

That doesn't mean he needs to know that. "I told myself not to do this anymore."

"What?"

"Random hookups."

"Why?"

"Why do you care?"

"Because I like you."

Oh, please. "You don't know me."

"I'm trying to," he counters. "Why aren't you into hookups anymore?"

I think about Maia. About Emily. My parents.

"It's not that I'm not 'into them' anymore. It's just time to get serious. There are people expecting a lot from me these days." The thought makes me blanch. My sexuality has always been something I've worn proudly—like a badge of honor. When I wasn't a mother, that didn't seem like such a

bad thing. Now people see Maia with me and expect me to change what makes me... me.

Sexy.

Confident.

Strong.

The thing is, I'd do anything for my daughter. I'd give it all up. The men. The sex. Everything. But then I'd be trying to fit myself into a mold made for somebody else. Dating boring men. Settling for a boring job. Nothing about my life would be exciting.

There'd be no rush.

No fleeting feeling of being chased.

No crash when it goes wrong.

Those waves of emotions used to be the fuel that drove me forward. That's why I go after the kinds of men who offer me so little. Because it makes me *feel* something. It reminds me that I'm worth something to somebody outside of Maia. Even for a short period of time.

Rafael takes a dangerous step closer until our toes are brushing. "What do *you* want?"

To feel something, I want to say.

If I tell him the truth, I'll be letting down a lot of people.

But not myself.

My manicured fingertips trail up his bare chest, making his eyes darken. "I don't think you can handle what I want. I've been told I'm a lot."

That smirk reappears. "Try me. It can be one night only if that's what you want. Nobody will have to know."

My lips part as if to reject him for the final time, but no words come out. Not a yes. Not a no. Nothing.

A few seconds pass, and the tension between us grows. My heart starts hammering in my chest the longer we stare until a silent agreement is made.

His lips crush mine, backing me up until I'm pressed against the wall. His fingers weave into my hair, cradling the back of my head before fisting strands and forcing me to tilt back to give him access to my throat.

He peppers kisses down to my collarbone and back up, biting down until there's undoubtedly going to be a mark left behind. "I have a feeling," he murmurs against me, swiping his tongue against my skin until I shudder a breath. "That this is going to be a very fun night."

I swallow my yelp when he yanks my legs up to wrap around his waist. He wastes no time tracing his fingers along the seam of my shorts before slipping one of his fingertips inside the material. I have to bite my bottom lip to keep the noise I make at bay when he starts skillfully playing with the bundle of nerves that awaken a part of me I've tried suppressing.

His hips thrust forward, pinning me into the wall. I can feel how turned on he is, but he makes no effort to do anything about it as he teases me until I'm cursing under my breath for him to fuck me here and now.

With his fingers.

His tongue.

His cock.

I'll take anything.

His lips return to my neck, sucking, nipping, and kissing as he teases my entrance. He's torturing me on purpose, and I'm tempted to grab his hand and show him exactly how to use it.

But then he thrusts two fingers inside me, and I arch forward at the sudden fullness. His hard cock brushes the inside of my thigh as he starts pumping.

When he hears the noises his fingers are greeted with as he picks up the pace and fucks me against the wall, the cocky smirk on his face stretches wider up his lips.

"Don't look so smug," I say, tightening my legs around his waist.

His lips take mine again in a brutal kiss as he hooks his fingers and makes my eyes roll back from the spot he's hitting. "Seems I have a reason to be by the sounds of it."

I can't even tell him to shut up because I'm too focused on trying to keep quiet. My arms go around his neck, pulling him into me. It's then I look past his shoulder at Dante, watching from the hallway that leads to his room.

One of his hands grabs ahold of himself as he watches us, his head cocked, seeing what his brother is doing.

It wouldn't be the first time I've done something sexual while somebody else watched. If I had any decency, I'd be ashamed, especially knowing my three-year-old is sleeping soundly, not that far away.

But I don't.

Because I feel sexy again.

Desired.

There's nothing hotter than knowing what control you have over not one, but two men. So I lock eyes with Dante and shoot him a wink as I start grinding down on his brother's fingers, riding him until it's obvious how aroused I am.

And Dante begins stroking himself.

Whether Raf knows we have an audience or not is a mystery, but I don't give it away. Not when I feel my stomach tighten with an impending orgasm that I quiet using Rafael's mouth.

Crying into his lips as he thrusts into me through the spasms, I tighten my hold around his body until I'm fully sated.

It's only then I pull away and say, "I think your brother liked that almost as much as I did."

Rafael freezes only for a second before glancing over his shoulder. His fingers stay inside me for a second longer before moving to grip my ass, kneading into the exposed flesh from my shorts.

I see those lips curve up.

"I think you're right," he agrees.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dante

*F*UCKING HELL.

Watching the two of them against the wall shouldn't have been as hot as it was, but I'm seconds away from coming in my hand while staring at the ecstasy masked over Blake's face. I'd like to think it's because the man responsible for causing it shares our father's strong genes, which makes picturing me pinning her against the wall that much easier.

At twenty-nine, there aren't many things I haven't experimented with in life. I've tried my fair share of drugs, sexual partners, and everything in between. Watching people fuck is a favorite pastime of mine. I just never thought that'd include my half-brother.

Turns out, I still can surprise myself.

They whisper something to each other before Rafael lets Blake down and turns to me. It's Blake who smiles first with those hazel come-fuck-me eyes that she flashes to everybody. The annoying thing is, I don't think she means to do it. Some people just have it, and she's one of them.

Go figure she lets the newbie in the apartment have a crack at her when the others have been trying for months. Maybe if Finn had put the rule in place not to touch her, moves would have been made by now. But it's obvious that his motive wasn't only for her benefit. It's for his too.

"Enjoying yourself?" Blake asks, grinning as her eyes wander down to my hard dick.

I scope out the tiny pajamas she's in. "I should be asking you that, shouldn't I?"

Her lips curl wider, making the mischievous glint to her eyes shine that much more. "I think you already know the answer which is why you didn't bother asking."

She's got me there. My eyes go to my brother, whose focus is on Blake. I don't blame the guy for gawking. There aren't many guys who don't do a

double take at the girl whose confidence shines in every way possible—how she walks, talks, and looks. It's all there, taunting us, every single day. And maybe if circumstances were different, I'd appreciate it a lot more than I do.

But one phone call from my mother earlier quickly reminded me of the reality I was dealt with instead. When I was little, my mother suffered a lot of arguments, bruises, and broken bones because of the man who disapproved of me. *"See what I had to do, you little shit? Start acting like a man, and I wouldn't have to hurt her. I won't raise any kind of boy, you hear me?"*

Any time I hear my mother cry, I'm brought back to the hopeless time when it felt like who I am brought her the most pain. I thought watching my biological father being carted away in handcuffs meant it was finally over, but after the third time, I realized I was living in purgatory.

So, fuck it. If this is the life I have to live, I'll enjoy beautiful women like Blake. There are worse ways to live, even if it's all a mask.

"You two seem... well acquainted," I remark, trying to ignore the boner I'm still sporting despite the nagging feeling in my gut that tells me not to entertain this conversation.

It's Rafael who answers. "We met once. Over the weekend, actually. Didn't realize she was the Blake you told me about."

That has my roommate in question turning to me with arched brows. "Do you talk about me a lot to people, Dante? And here I thought you didn't like me." There's curiosity mixed in her teasing tone that tells me she genuinely wants to know.

If she honestly thinks I don't like her, I feel like a jackass. "I never said I didn't like you."

To which she remarks, "You didn't have to. Actions speak far louder than words ever do."

Have I been that much of an ass to her? Sure, we don't talk as much as she does with Finn and Brodie, but it's nothing personal. Hell, I'm saving her from the shit show that is my life. I'm sure Rafael can attest to that. He didn't have to deal with the misfortune of growing up with our father because Anthony Ramirez moved on to my mother shortly after getting her pregnant, but he knows damn well what an asshole he is regardless.

Does Blake know what my brother does for a living if they've spoken before? He usually brags about his position in the minors any chance he gets. It's how he's always gotten women. And I've never pegged Blake as a jersey chaser, especially after what her daughter's father did.

Silently, I decide she has no clue.

And I don't know if I like Rafael keeping it from her, even if there's no obligation for them to share personal stories. He knows she's a single mom, that much I shared when I told him he could only be here temporarily so long as he kept it down after Maia went to bed. Who fathered her is a story that isn't my place to talk about.

"Do you make it a habit to watch people?" Blake asks next, her hands scraping down my brother's chest.

"Only when I'm interested."

If Blake is surprised by that, she doesn't let on. Instead, she walks over to me, dragging my brother along and stopping just in front of me. "Is that so?"

I simply hum, eyes pointed downward at her before they drift to my brother. He steps closer until he's pressed against her back, a sharp little inhale being sucked in from the girl in the middle.

"What are you doing, Blake?" I ask, seeing the way her eyes go down to my erection. This is a dangerous game she's playing, and I'm not sure she's up for what would happen if she makes a move.

Her throat bobs with an uncertain swallow. "I don't know," she admits. When she peeks up at me through her lashes, there's a fire in her eyes that I doubt could be doused. I've seen it before when I've looked at myself in the mirror. We're one and the same, her and I. "But I can tell when somebody is struggling because I am too. You and I are both on the edge. So, the way I see it, we can both ignore it and suffer, or jump and deal with the consequences later."

Everything about those options scares me.

I suppose it takes a broken person to see one.

"Would it be breaking the rules if you watched me with somebody else?" she asks, fingernail slowly trailing up my stomach, between my pecs, and landing on my collarbone. The subtle touch makes my dick twitch, which I'm sure she feels when Rafael steps her into me until she's pressed between our bodies.

I guarantee he's as hard as I am right now.

Jaw ticking, I capture her wrist before she can move her hand to touch God knows what next. Even if it kills me. "Finn set those rules up for a reason. I'd hardly be a good friend if I broke them."

Friend. The term for Finn doesn't sit well with me, but I have nothing else to call him.

"I'm asking you to watch," she says. "It'll be your choice to take the dive or not."

This time, I'm the one swallowing hard. "I don't know if I can."

Not because of my brother being part of it, although it should be a factor. I've done things with a lot of people I probably shouldn't. The problem is, I don't know if I'd only be able to watch. The temptation would be there, too much to hold back from. This is a distraction for me—the kind of man I was told to be. Powerful. Desired. Dominant.

Rafael leans down and brushes a kiss against Blake's collarbone, then trails his lips to the crook of her neck and sucks the skin. I watch, fingers twitching around where they still hold on to Blake's wrist and groan when I see her drop her head back to give him more access.

"Dante?" she breathes shakily. Her eyes lock with mine before she whispers, "I don't want to be good tonight. I don't think you do either."

Fuck. Me.

Those seven goddamn words shatter whatever reason I had to tell her no. I don't know what got into her tonight, but I know I've been there before. The nights I've crept into Finn's room were the ones I didn't give logic a second thought.

I wanted to feel good. I wanted to forget the demons that haunted me. If giving Blake this means helping her with hers, I'm willing to deal with the consequences tomorrow.

Before anybody says another word, I close the distance between us and kiss her. Rafael wraps his arms around her waist to hold her still while we nip, nibble, and tease her skin, mouth, and body until we're guiding her into my room.

Once the bedroom door is closed and locked, I pull back and look at the two of them. "This stays between us. We don't say a word after it's done."

The same arrangement is in place for Finn and me, so I feel good about it. And based on the lust-driven expressions they give me, I'd say they're

okay with it too.

“On the bed,” I tell Blake, grabbing her throat and guiding her to walk backward to the bed. I squeeze once before pushing her down until she’s sitting on the edge of the mattress.

Rafael climbs onto the bed behind her and moves her hair away from her neck before pressing kisses along it. She shivers when his teeth nip her ear, tugging on the lobe before he whispers something that makes her blush.

Blake’s eyes find mine, staring as I loom over her before her hands move to the waistband of my shorts and tug them down. When my length bobs free, her eyes widen. “Hell,” she murmurs. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

Pride swells in my chest. “Wouldn’t be the first time I heard that.”

I’m about to make another comment, but it gets caught in my throat when she wraps one of her small hands around the base of me and takes me into her mouth. I thrust my hips forward and listen to her gag as she takes me further down her throat, only making me harder as she works me with her tongue.

And fuck, does it feel good.

Rafael reaches around her and spreads her legs, working the spot between her thighs that has her moans vibrating around me. My eyes roll as I wind a fistful of her hair around my palm and move her head to the perfect rhythm, watching her choke on me from this angle.

“You’re doing such a good job sucking my dick,” I praise, tugging on her hair to get another noise out of her.

My brother moves her shorts out of the way to get access to her pussy. I can hear how turned on she is from their little show in the hallway, which is going to make this even better.

I pull her away from my dick and caress her cheek with the pad of my thumb before bending down and kissing her again. She gasps when I flip her over onto her hands and knees, positioning her to face Rafael’s lap.

Stroking down her back, I say, “Go ahead, Blake. Show my big brother just how good you are with that mouth of yours.”

A little shiver rakes down her spine as she works Rafael’s pants down until he’s freed too, all while I strike her ass cheeks on full display from her shorts. Massaging each one as she goes down on my brother has me aching to be inside of her, so I play with her pussy the same way my brother did to prep her for me.

Rafael's guttural groan breaks through my concentration, his head tilting back as she sucks him off. "Fucking Christ, Blake."

I smirk. "Good, isn't it?"

He meets my eyes. "This might be the best head I've ever gotten," he admits, palming the back of her head as she bobs over him.

I step closer to the bed, peeling her shorts down her legs and helping her out of them so she doesn't break her focus on Rafael. When the clothing is discarded on the floor, I spread her legs further apart and position myself between her legs.

Rafael coaxes her as I inch myself in, holding her hair as she stills over his dick to adjust to me. No words can describe what it feels like to be inside her. It's hot. Wet. Tight. She can't take all of me, and I find that even fucking hotter as I slowly pull out and push back in.

Her back arches to give me more access, clearly having trouble focusing on Rafael. "That's it," I tell her, gripping her hips and watching as she takes my brother back into her mouth. "You feel amazing, Blake. Better than I imagined."

The noise I'm met with has me twitching inside her, growing harder until I decide to pick up the pace. And every time I thrust forward, I'm met with the sexiest fucking choking sounds as she tries getting off Rafael.

His grip on her hair changes, and I know when a man is about to come because I've been the cause of it more than a handful of times at this point. He's on the brink, and something tells me it won't be the first time tonight.

"Fuck, Blake," he groans, arching his hips up and making her choke on him again. "I'm going to come soon. If you don't want it in your mouth—"

He's cut off by her taking him deeper, and I can only imagine what getting deep-throated by her is like. That's all it takes before he's arching up and unloading, lips parted in a silent orgasm that she swallows all of.

It's the fuel I need to go harder, faster, until the sound of my hips slapping against her ass fills the room. I've always gotten off when I see other people feeling good, especially when I'm the reason.

When her mouth is free, I lean forward and grip her hair again, burying her face into the mattress and fucking her until the bed starts creaking. Rafael watches in blissed sedation, sporting a semi that I'm sure will be fully erect soon enough, thanks to all the porn-like noises Blake makes

every time I enter her. Not even the sheets muffle her, making me wonder how long it'll take before we're discovered.

And that's the thought that has my balls tightening and my dick pulsating with the threat of an orgasm of my own. Turns out, I want people to know what I'm doing. Brodie would high-five me. Finn would probably murder me. It's a risk to do this for so many reasons, but losing him would be the biggest.

Brushing that off, I put most of my weight on the woman underneath me as I jackknife into her pussy, reaching around to tweak her clit and help coax her to feel as good as she's making me.

Her hand finds mine, helping me build the friction she wants exactly where she needs it until her legs start to shake. When she starts to grip me, it's all I can take before I'm grinding into her like a madman and pulling out just in time to explode on her ass and back, coating her with spurts of my cum.

I help her get into a relaxed position, eyes flaring when I see how much of myself I spilled onto her. Rubbing her red ass, I press a kiss against each cheek before moving them up her back, spreading my cum over her skin. "You were such a good girl taking my dick."

Nipping her neck, I feel her moan before her eyes find mine from over her shoulder. "I didn't realize how much I liked being told that until tonight."

"Happy to help you explore your kinks."

She manages to sit up, her focus turning to my brother, who's watching us with interest. I don't know what she's doing when she gets onto her knees and inches toward him, kissing him with a gentleness I certainly didn't show her. His palm comes up to cup her cheek, then moves to the back of her head as he kisses her back.

Then she's on his lap, her hand on his dick again, stroking it until it stands to attention. He sucks in a breath when she sinks onto him, taking him inch by inch until she's seated. "Your turn."

Rafael looks at me, but all I do is shrug. I'd be lying if I said my dick wasn't already getting hard as I watched her start riding him. It starts slowly, then gradually builds. His hands go to her hips, lifting her up and dropping her down. It's obvious she's still full of me, the sound of her wet pussy echoing in my room for all of us to hear.

It might just be my favorite sound.

Kneeling onto the bed behind her, I move her hair and hold it while Rafael and I take either side of her throat with our mouths. She drops her head back, using me to rest it on as we nip, suck, and kiss her, all while she works my brother inside her. I grab one of her breasts, squeezing and kneading it before moving to take one of the pebbled nipples into my mouth and sucking it.

“Shit,” she curses softly, threading one of her hands into my hair and tugging on the strands that I really need to cut. Right now, scheduling something with my barber is the least of my worries. I like how she pulls it, especially when I bite down on her boob. She jerks, causing my brother to growl with approval before he starts thrusting harder from underneath.

My mouth finds her ear. “Do you like having two brothers get you off?”

Her lips part, and her eyes squeeze closed, not able to answer me as Rafael takes complete control, using her body to pleasure himself.

“I know she does,” Rafael answers for her. “I can feel her clench my cock tighter than ever. It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

I tug on her ear and swipe my tongue down her throat before reaching around her to rub her clit in circular motions. They both make the same noise, telling me they’re enjoying it equally.

“Come on, Blake. Come for us,” I coax, wanting to watch her get off again.

My brother curses under his breath, sweat dripping down his skin as she holds on to his shoulders and matches his thrusts every time while I tweak, tug, and rub the little button that’s bound to detonate her.

And it does.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop,” she pleads, and I don’t know if she’s talking to him, me, or the both of us.

I’d like to think it’s the latter.

So, we don’t.

We keep moving, kissing, touching, and nipping until they’re both breaking apart around each other while I watch, just like I did in the hall.

I press one last kiss against the back of Blake’s head before stepping off the bed. Maybe I should feel something more, but there’s a hollowness in my chest where the excitement was in the moment.

So, distantly, I say, “I’ll grab a couple towels.”

I let them have their moment while they catch their breaths and unlock my door to head to the bathroom outside the hall.

When I see Brodie standing there with arched brows holding a glass of water, I don't need to overanalyze anything to figure out what he knows. Because he looks around me at the cracked door to see the occupants on my bed before slowly shaking his head with curled lips.

I don't say anything.

He looks away, jaw grinding, with a dark look in his eyes. Then he says, "Using her isn't going to fix your problems."

Eyes flashing, I stand taller. "I didn't ask you for your opinion."

Brodie meets my eyes. "I've seen you self-destruct before. Don't pull Blake down with you if you're planning on hitting rock bottom again because of everybody else. She doesn't deserve that."

"Ah," I muse dryly. And here I thought my cousin was concerned for me. "You're jealous because you want her for yourself."

His nostrils flare, but he doesn't confirm or deny anything. Not that he has to. It's obvious he likes Blake as more than a friend. They flirt, but it's hardly innocent on his end.

Am I a dick for fucking her knowing that?

Probably.

But I refuse to feel bad.

Brodie steps toward me. "You need to figure your shit out sooner rather than later. I love you, Dante. We're family. But I'm tired of seeing all the ways you lie to yourself. One day, you won't have anybody left because you pushed us all away."

With that, he raises his water glass and disappears into his room.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Blake

I WAKE UP sore but sated, which is the only thing telling me last night wasn't a dream. It takes approximately thirty seconds before the guilt settles in, leaving me lying in bed staring at the ceiling, feeling like the cheap whore I'm fairly certain my mother thinks I am.

Last night should have never happened. When I snuck out of Dante's room, the rest of the apartment was quiet. It'd been as if nothing occurred, and I liked that.

Hopefully, that's what the atmosphere is like today because I don't feel good about my choices. I thought I'd feel as confident as I did years ago when I did something scandalous, but instead, it's the opposite. For the first time ever, I think, *maybe my mother is right*.

And that's a scary thought.

"Good morning, baby," I greet Maia after slipping into her room with a tired smile. She's rubbing her eyes and looking as tired as I feel. "Are you excited to see your friends? I hear it's going to be beautiful, so I bet you'll play outside today."

Unlike me, Maia gets along easily with everybody. She already has a group of little girls she loves playing with at preschool. She even shared her favorite doll with them last week. The teacher said if she gets one more gold star, she'll be the next student of the week.

I should have known my kid would be an overachiever.

"Tired, Mama," she murmurs, still lifting her arms for me to pick her up anyway. As soon as she's in my arms, all the tension from the night before leaves my body. I love the effect she has on me. All my worries and issues wash away the second those little arms wrap around me. It's the only hug that has the magical ability to make me feel completely at ease.

"Me too, baby girl," I reply, snuggling against her. "If I could stay home and cuddle you all day in bed, I would."

I carry her out like I do every morning, smiling at Finn, who's already at the table with his coffee. Maia's booster seat is by the table, with her favorite animal plate ready for food by the stove.

"Thank you," I say, setting her down.

"No problem. Sleep okay?" He sets his phone down and drags his coffee closer to him. It's an innocent question that brings back not-so-innocent thoughts.

Clearing my throat, I offer him a smile as I prepare some eggs for Maia. "I did. You?"

He shrugs. "Same old. I started a new documentary last night that you'd like. It's about Waco, Texas. I stopped after the first episode because I figured you'd want to watch it."

My eyes flash. "Ooh. Tonight?"

His lips curl into a soft smile. "I'll be home by six. We can watch it after you put Maia down. We may need to fight Brodie for the remote though."

We have a TV policy where everybody gets to choose what to watch on certain nights. "It was his turn yesterday."

"True. But," he points out, "he put on *your* favorite show. He'll use that against us. Documentaries aren't his thing."

Neither are people wearing masks and singing, but he learned to enjoy that after I got him to watch a couple episodes of the first season. "I'll make sure to bat my lashes at him then. That usually gets him to change his mind."

I expect Finn to laugh, but I'm greeted with silence instead. When I look over my shoulder at him, I frown at the pinched expression on his face.

Aren't we over the awkwardness? I scoop the scrambled eggs onto Maia's plate and set the pan down. "Come on. You know I'm only kidding. Don't look so constipated."

I reach for the fruit in the fridge and pick out my daughter's favorite before throwing a grape at Finn's face playfully. He usually laughs, but not today.

"You were flirting with him when we were watching TV," is his terse reply.

"I flirt with everyone," I reason, popping another grape into my mouth. "You should know by now it's nothing personal. Hell, I flirt with Dante, and we both know he doesn't like me."

Finn's eyes bolt to mine. "Why would you say that?"

The alert in his tone has me staring a little harder at him. "He's... Dante. Unlike Brodie, he doesn't really express himself that often. Sometimes I wonder if I annoy him or amuse him."

Finn looks away, slowly nodding. "If he didn't like you, he wouldn't talk to you."

I've learned as much over the years. Last night was evident that he liked me enough to cross boundaries we definitely shouldn't have. Rolling my shoulders back, I focus back on Maia. "More?"

The cutie with bedhead nods. "I want more, Mama. More, more, more!"

I scoop more food onto her plate even though I'm positive she won't eat it. I'll eat whatever is leftover before going to work so it doesn't go to waste. It's why my diet consists of crust, half-eaten fruit, and cold eggs. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable by bringing up the flirting thing."

Finn snorts as he stands, grabbing his travel mug and dumping the remainder of his coffee into it to leave. "I'm not uncomfortable."

"Fine. You're mad. Is that better?"

He turns to me and stares for a second before shaking his head. "In this apartment, I'm always feeling something."

What is that supposed to mean?

Instead of explaining it, he walks over and gives me a one-armed hug. It feels forced, so I don't return it. "Waco tonight. I'll pick up popcorn from the theater on my way home."

I blink. "We have popcorn here."

He ruffles Maia's head before picking up his messenger bag and draping it over his shoulder. "But I remember Brodie saying that you preferred the movie theater kind with extra butter."

Brodie noticed that? There have only been a few times I've stopped by the theater to get a small popcorn. It's too expensive to do it often, so I only go when the guys and I are planning movie nights when something new drops that we want to rent.

Brodie enters the kitchen as Finn walks out, calling, "See you tonight. Have a good day at work."

I wipe off Maia's face, which is covered in smashed berries and remnants of scrambled eggs, and look over to the man who pays attention to

my snacking habits. "I'm probably going to make another pot of coffee if you want some to take with you."

Brodie leans his back against the counter and crosses those giant arms across his chest with an arched brow. "I know what you did last night."

His statement gives me pause, causing my eyes to dart up to his in high alert. There's no way. Is there? I wasn't necessarily quiet, but I wasn't loud either. It could have been anybody in Dante's room.

Brodie must know what I'm thinking. "Don't try to deny it. I saw you in Dante's room."

Heart dropping to the bottom of my stomach, I set the dishrag down. "So what now?"

His other eyebrow raises in curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"Are you going to rat on me? Judge me?"

When I see his lips curve upward, I know he has no intention of tattling. But something tells me whatever he's thinking is hardly innocent. "No. I am, however, going to use this to my advantage."

I make a face. "Is this your way of saying you want to hookup or something? Because I'm feeling pretty fucking terrible this morning."

Brodie turns to give me his back as he prepares the coffee. "As much as this is going to shock you, no. Don't get me wrong. I'd love to get you naked. But it's not going to be because of blackmail. It'll be when we both want it." He looks over his shoulder and winks at me, then goes back to making coffee. "It's fun to flirt with you because it gets a rise out of the guys. Finn, especially."

It'll be when we both want it.

He sounds so sure.

"I'm not following where you're going with this conversation. What is it you want to use for your advantage?"

Once he flicks the machine on, he turns on his heels with a smirk on his face. "You."

I blink. Slowly. "Still not following."

Brodie chuckles. "I'm not trying to hook up with you, but that doesn't mean I don't want the guys to know that. It'd be better if they thought we were."

Clearly, my lack of coffee is getting to me because the big brute is making no sense. "Won't that cause a stir? The whole point Finn put that

rule into place was so we didn't cause any drama."

"*Finn*," Brodie replies, "is hardly one to talk. He's got secrets of his own. This place has thin walls, Blake. You should know that by now."

"Meaning what exactly?"

He taps his head. "Meaning I know something that I don't think you do about the resident computer nerd. And if he tries telling me I'm out of place for putting the moves on you, he'll have to come clean himself. It's time we were all real with ourselves around here. Too many lies are going to tear us all apart."

What is he talking about? "If you know whatever his secret is, why not tell me? We're too old for games, Brodie."

He grabs two coffee mugs from the cupboard and sets them down by the brewing coffee maker. "It isn't my place to say. It's not only his secret, anyway. It'd impact people's lives. You know what that's like because of Maia."

Fair.

"That's why he needs a little coaxing before everything going on in this place doesn't blow up in our faces," he concludes.

It's still unfair he's keeping me in the dark. I don't see how pretending we're fooling around could help Finn admit whatever it is Brodie knows. Nothing could get me to crack about Maia. Her safety is everything to me. If Finn's secret is similar, I doubt I could be the one to break him.

"In the meantime, don't sleep with Dante or his brother again," Brodie tells me. There's no judgment in his tone, but it's gruff with an unrecognizable emotion. "They've both got their own issues they need to sort out with family. You're better off leaving them to it instead of inserting yourself."

His warning leaves me frowning. "I wasn't planning on repeating last night." Looking around, I ask, "Where are those two, anyway?"

"They went out for breakfast." Brodie gives me a wary look before sighing. "Look, it's not my place, but I'm going to say it anyway. You need to be careful. Their family isn't the best because of their dad. Both of their moms are a mess. You don't even know the half of it. And Rafael... Well, he's a decent dude. But it wouldn't be good for you to involve yourself with him considering his world."

Nothing he's saying this morning is adding up. I've been warned away from guys before, but for reasons I understood. They were douches. Players. Mooches. Nothing about Rafael screams any of those things to me. Not that I know him.

Not that I *want* to, for that matter.

One night. That's what we agreed on.

"And what is his world?" I pry.

His lips twitch. "One you've never approved of. Trust me."

I don't have time to dig into this because I need to get Maia and myself ready for the day. "Are you sure you're not just saying this to have me all to yourself?"

That has him grinning again. "Sorry, babe. You'll have to be patient if you want all this. It'll be worth the wait, though."

My eyes narrow. "Who says I want anybody?"

After pouring our coffees, he passes me mine and replies, "Don't we all? We're human. We crave companionship and trust and love."



THERE'S A GROUP of elderly men in the waiting room circulating the flatscreen playing ESPN. I tried switching it to Animal Planet earlier, but Mr. O'Leary, the cranky old bastard who comes in every other week with a new ailment, made a fuss that got me scolded by one of the doctors.

"*I ain't got much to live for,*" he told me with his usual wrinkled scowl. "*Let me have the one thing I've always liked.*"

It's quiet here today, so my eyes keep gravitating toward the screen every chance they get. I've already cleaned the office, reorganized the waiting room, and helped my coworker Gretchen figure out the new scheduling system. Nothing seems to distract me from listening in on the latest MLB news that's stirring the captive audience.

"Can't believe they're trading Ross," Joe says. I'm supposed to call him Joe, but he refuses to answer to anything other than Mr. French. "*Mr. French was my father, and the man was a jackass. It's bad enough I have his looks, don't want his name too.*"

It reminds me of Dante's outlook with his father. Rafael, too, I guess. My mind still hasn't quite wrapped itself around the fact they're related.

Before I can think too deeply about it, my train of thought is broken by collective groans and curses. "They're bringing in young blood who doesn't even have half the batting average Ross does. Who the hell are they kidding?"

O'Leary chips in with a disgruntled, "They might as well kiss the World Series goodbye if this is true. Ain't no way they're making it anywhere close this season."

My brows pinch. I know Peter Ross is one of the leading players for the Phillies. He's the second most-talked-about person on the team. The first being the man Maia shares half her DNA with.

"Christ. Is he even old enough to shave," another one of the men cries out. "The kid has a babyface. I've got socks older than him."

I'm about to look at the screen to see who they're talking about when somebody walks up to the counter. "Ready to check out, Rosie?"

The woman with a sweet name is anything but. It's why I like her so much. In a world of two-faced people, she's one of the few who will give it to you straight. Even when it's brutal. "I wouldn't be standing here if I wasn't."

I chuckle and accept the printed paperwork she was given. "It looks like Dr. Michaels wants to see you again in three months. Is there a day and time that works best for you?"

The older woman who can't be a day under seventy says, "As long as I'm still alive. Not like there's anything else I've got going on."

I've always had a soft spot for the elderly. Probably because my grandmother was a feisty woman, just like Rosie. She was the one who would talk me down when my mom pissed me off. When she passed away, it hit me hard.

"You'll live forever, Rosie."

She scoffs. "I sure as hell hope not."

Snorting at the remark, I give her a few dates and times to pick from and submit the one she said works best for her. "Here's a card so you have it, and it looks like you need bloodwork done before you leave today. You can sit over there by the lab. They'll call you when they're ready."

“Sitting isn’t good for my sciatica,” she informs me. “And I don’t want to be next to the buffoons drooling over the pretty boys on the TV. I never understood the appeal. All they do is hit balls and run in circles to earn points.”

That might be the best description of baseball I’ve heard yet. “Dr. Michaels wants to check on a few levels today while you’re here, so you don’t have to come back before your next appointment. Unless you want to see my pretty face again, in which case I’m flattered.”

Rosie gives me a once-over before those painted lips that are done a little too strongly curl downward. “You could use a haircut and a little more makeup, but I suppose you’re all right.”

With that, she hobbles over to the bench seat by the lab door, leaving me sitting back in my seat.

It’s one of the men by the TV that decides to console me from the backhanded compliment. “If I were thirty years younger, I’d date you.”

I roll my eyes. “You’d date me now if you thought you had the chance, Joe.”

All he does is grin while a few others chuckle and smack him knowingly. Rumors don’t take long to spread around here, and I know there’s been a girl not much older than me hanging around him lately.

“Hey!” I hear called out by the others, causing my brows to pinch when the screen changes to a different channel.

I look around to see where the remote is when I see Rosie holding it. Even the men know not to mess with the woman smirking at them as a cooking show plays.

Shaking my head in amusement, I slide off my chair and grab my phone from my bag to look at the messages I’ve ignored all morning.

There are a few missed calls from numbers I don’t recognize, but no voicemails. I make it a rule not to call anybody back I don’t know unless they tell me who they are.

After returning a few texts from Emily, I slide my phone into my pocket and get back to work as the next patient comes to the desk.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rafael

SWIPING A PALM down my face to fight the lingering exhaustion, I stretch out my legs and watch my brother caffeinate across from me. The café he chose is nice. Private. I can see why he likes coming here.

“You’re quiet,” I comment, grabbing my own cup of plain black coffee. It isn’t often I drink it because it makes me shaky, but I’ve got some time to enjoy it before proving to the team what I’ve got to offer.

Dante scratches the column of his throat, staring down at his coffee. “Brodie knows what happened.”

He’s always been close with his cousin. They grew up together, went to the same schools, and share a lot of the same interests. Brodie got the job at *Sports Pact* first, then convinced his boss to hire Dante. I used to be jealous of their friendship because I didn’t have anything like it. Dante and I may have the same father, but we’ve always had different backgrounds. I was stuck caring for my mother after every meltdown and relapse, while he was out living like any other boy his age.

“I’m sure he’s done worse,” is my response. The guy looks like a walking fuck boy who’s probably had a threesome or two in his day.

Dante’s eyes narrow. “It’s not about that.”

All I do is stare.

He sighs. “Brodie has had a thing for Blake since he met her. We all had a hands-off agreement after she and Maia moved in. Last night shouldn’t have happened.”

Ah. He feels guilty.

If there’s one thing I’ve had to overcome in this life, it’s that guilt gets you nowhere fast. You can’t change the things you do, so why dwell on it? If I let myself feel bad about the choices I’ve made, I wouldn’t be where I am.

I sure as hell won't tell him that I asked my agent to hire a PI to get info on Blake. "From what you've said, he can get any girl he wants. I highly doubt this is going to bother him for long. He'll go out, see some chick with big tits, and all will be well in the world again."

I expect him to laugh, but he doesn't. Instead, Dante shakes his head. "Blake is different. She's not the type of woman Brodie is going to forget about, not even after what we did with her."

Oh, I know. It took two days to hear from Vanessa about what the private eye dug up on the blonde Dante is referring to, including where she lives, which I could hardly believe when I saw the address I'd sent Christmas cards to before. The little details are boring—her parents' names, where she went to school, who her friends are.

Then it got interesting. She was a wild child with quite the past if her rap sheet had anything to say. She was arrested for shoplifting twice and once for drinking underage. The first two times, she was bailed out by her parents. The third time, it was by her best friend, Emily. It seems like her parents decided to step back from how she lived her life.

According to the timeline Vanessa gave me, there was a short period of time when she went quiet. No posts. No arrests. Nothing.

Then she was tagged online with a kid. Normally, I wouldn't read into it. If what she told me on the plane is any indication, she slept around a lot in the past and dealt with the consequences.

But then I saw the grainy photos Vanessa forwarded me from right before she went MIA. In them was Jonathon Dover and a blurry girl that looked like Blake. The date attached to them was pre-baby, which made Vanessa much more excited about the situation I asked her to investigate.

"Go stay with your brother to find out more," she tells me over lunch. "This could be good for the both of us. If he's the father of that baby, we can use it as ammunition. He's the golden boy that you're up against. If you want a cemented spot on that team, you need to use whatever you can to get there. They'll trade if they decide they want someone with less controversy surrounding them."

I'd like to think I'm a smart man. I've worked and trained hard to get where I am without blackmailing anybody. But I know she's right. The majors are competitive. Very few people get the chance to move forward in their careers, so I need any help I can get. Do I think one little cheating

scandal will get him enough negative attention to get traded or kicked off the team? No. There have been far worse scandals to hit the MLB over the years. But fathering a kid with a mistress? It'll ruin his reputation. Put doubt into people's minds.

I'm not proud to use Dante because I want a good relationship with my brother, but I also want to be the biggest player on the Philadelphia Phillies, and I can't do that when the golden boy is constantly being praised in the media every day.

"You seem to like her," I note, causally sipping my coffee.

His eyes flash. "Not in the way Brodie does."

What is his deal with Brodie? "Did he say something to you to make you feel bad about this? It isn't his business, Dante."

His jaw tics. "We're friends. Family. We all have to live with each other ____"

"You can afford your own place," I cut in. "I can help you if you need it. I'm going to get a good payday soon with this deal."

The way he looks at me tells me that's the last thing he wants, which I'm not surprised by. He's always been prideful. "I'm not taking handouts. That isn't even what this is about, anyway."

My brows raise with curiosity. "Then what is it about? Why don't you want to leave? I know you make decent money at your job. You don't have to pay full rent or utilities, and you walk everywhere. I don't get it, man. *Is it Blake?*"

When his nostrils flare, I study him a little harder because there's something I'm obviously missing. "For Christ's sake, Raf. This has nothing to do with Blake."

I blink, absorbing his cool tone.

He pinches his nose. "Fuck. Sorry. I'm on edge because of all this bullshit with Mom and Anthony. I wish that fucker would have died during that last fight he got into in prison. When Mom got the call saying he'd been stabbed, I thought it was over. How screwed up is that?"

I get it. It didn't exactly break my heart to hear he'd gotten hurt. "Men like that will live forever. The only thing we can do is distance ourselves from it."

He shakes his head. "Easier said than done. Your mom got out. Mine keeps going back, no matter how hard I've tried getting her to stop."

Sitting back, I toy with my coffee mug. Maybe his life isn't as bright and shiny as I thought. I heard a lot of gossip about Dante growing up but was never sure if it was Mom's bitterness talking or the truth.

Either way, there's more on his mind that he's not telling me. "You know you can tell me anything, right? If you want to talk..."

Dante doesn't make eye contact with me but stares off at the people walking by. A contemplative expression shadows his face as if he's debating his options. I'd like to think he knows he can trust me, but can he?

You already know the answer to that, my inner voice responds for me.

My bet is that Dante's intuition is telling him to pipe up when he says, "There are some things about me that I don't even understand. Using Blake, using—" He stops himself abruptly, rubs his lips together, and corrects himself. "Using people to distract myself never works. It only makes it worse. Blake doesn't deserve that. Brodie is right."

He's obviously fighting demons I haven't seen yet, and there's nothing I can do.

"One thing is for damn sure," he tells me, picking up his coffee. "If nothing else in life, I'll always have my morals. I'll never be like that asshole who used our mothers to get what he wanted."

The statement sends a low blow to the stomach without him even knowing. I have to hide my clenched jaw behind my mug, forcefully taking a sip to calm down.

Because he may not be like our father, but that means I am.

Thankfully, my phone goes off with Vanessa's name flashing on the screen. "Excuse me," I mumble, standing to take it far enough away so he can't hear. "What?"

"Is that any way to greet the person who's going to get you everything you ever wanted?" she asks, a foreign chipperness to her voice I'm unfamiliar with hearing.

She found something. "What's going on?"

"It's all connected," she informs me as if I'm supposed to know what that means. "Those pictures I sent you are tied to other images from Emily Hernandez's wedding album dated almost four years ago. Who is Emily Hernandez? Blake Karr's best friend. She was at her wedding. So was Jonathon Dover, who worked with Hector Hernandez, the groom. That's

how they met. That's how the affair started between your little plane buddy and soon-to-be teammate. We've got him."

Jesus. I look over my shoulder at my brother, who's still people watching. "What does that mean?"

"It means that you were put on that plane for a reason, Rafael. I'm not one to believe in fate, but you were supposed to meet that woman. I guarantee you there are others who will come forward once the story breaks."

Story breaks? "What story?"

"The one we're selling to the media. I've already got a few bites with big numbers attached."

I stand taller. "I thought we were taking it underground. Using it when we needed to."

Vanessa is quick to butt in. "We need to use this now and strike while the iron is hot. I'm not going to sit on this information so you can bond with your brother."

This is what I wanted, so why do I feel a weight on my chest? When I glance back at the man I share half my DNA with, I see the darkness in his eyes. Will this make it worse? "Can you at least give me a few more days?"

The hesitation I get from her isn't a bad sign. It usually doesn't take her long to tell me no. "Fine, but you better use that time to your advantage. Get some information from your brother. Maybe even from Blake herself. I'm going to shop the story and see if a more reputable news source will offer us more money than the tabloids have been."

I'd say I've already gotten everything I can from Blake. "This wasn't what I intended when I asked you for information on Blake," I point out.

Vanessa hums. "Well, it's the hand you were dealt. What do you want out of life, Rafael? A pretty girl on your arm who already has history with another baseball player, or a career that will ensure you financial stability for the rest of your life?"

I want to ask why it can't be mutually exclusive from one another, but I don't. She'll tell me getting distracted by Blake will hurt my chances of becoming the next best player everybody talks about. And she's right. My interest in certain women in my past has certainly rocked the boat a time or two when I shouldn't have let it.

I'm too close to risk it now.

“Now,” she says, voice softening. “Finish whatever it is you need to do there and come back home. The bed is cold at night without you in it.”

I close my eyes. It was never a good idea to start anything with her, to begin with. We have an open relationship that she tolerates because I make her money. But she’ll always have a hold on me that nobody will understand. Not even I do half the time.

Hanging up, I walk back over to Dante. “You ready to head back? I’ve got some stuff I want to do and need my laptop.”

He looks up at me. “You good?”

No. But I will be.

At his and his roommate’s expense.

“Never been better, brother.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Blake

MAIA BOUNCES ON the carpet, clapping her hands and pointing toward the book for the millionth time. “It’s already past your bedtime,” I tell her, feeling exhaustion weigh down every limb.

“Again!” my stubborn mini-me says anyway.

We’ve read *Book of Colors* so many times tonight that I’m going to have nightmares of a yellow sun with a face like that creepy one in the *Teletubbies*. That show haunted me as a child, like the one in this stupid book is bound to.

Setting the book onto the dresser, I lift my squirming toddler and put her to bed. “We can read it again tomorrow, but you need to go to sleep. You’ve got a play date with Lucas in the morning that you need to be rested for. Grandma is taking you while Mommy works.”

Maia’s lip quivers, and the dark eyes she gets from her dad glaze with the threat of tears. If she does, I don’t think I can handle it.

“Please don’t cry,” I beg, leaning over to kiss the top of her head. “When I pick you up, we’ll read all about the blue skies and the green grass and even go to the park to see how many of the colors we can find. Okay?”

Swiping the back of her hand over her eyes, she sniffles back tears and lets me lay her down. As soon as I tuck her under her favorite blanket, she looks up at me with a tiny smile.

I let out a relieved sigh. “There’s my baby girl,” I praise, tweaking her nose until she giggles. “I love you, Maia.”

By the grace of God, her eyelids get heavier with each passing second. “Love you, Mama.”

I’ve learned to wait a few minutes after she goes down to sneak out or else she stirs and makes me go through the entire process all over again.

It isn’t until I’m creeping out of her room that I hear, “There you are.”

Shoulders sagging, I look over my shoulder at Brodie. “I’m not in the mood for whatever you have planned for the night,” I warn him.

I’m ashamed to admit that I’m ten seconds away from crying. I can feel the floodgates weakening as my roommate stares at me with concerned eyes. There’s nothing worse than people seeing you vulnerable.

Then he asks the question that makes it ten times worse. “What’s wrong?”

Nostrils flaring as I fight back tears, I hiccup and shake my head. How could I get him to understand that I’m tired? Not just the normal kind, but the defeated type? It was a long day at work with difficult clients; Trevor was harassing me, Maia was extra fussy the second I picked her up from daycare, and my mother has been hounding me about a million different things that have no prevalence in my life.

I hear Brodie follow me as I walk past him to my room. There’s no way I want Maia to wake up hearing me cry about how exhausting it is being a mother. Because I love her. So much. But days like today, I wish it was easier to balance it all.

Brodie closes my door behind him and walks over to where I’m standing in the middle of my tiny bedroom. “Talk to me, Blake.”

Instead of doing that, I start crying big fat ugly tears. If I could see past the blurriness, I’d probably find a horrified expression on Brodie’s face. But instead of being awkward, he pulls me into his arms and rests my cheek against his shoulder, not caring that I’m soaking his T-shirt.

“I’m so t-tired,” I stutter, wrapping my arms around him and sinking into him as he strokes his fingers through my hair. “I’m tired and I’m frustrated. And I have no r-reason to be.”

Brodie’s hand pauses in my hair. “You’re human, Blake. You’re a single mom doing her best to raise a little girl. That’s plenty reason.”

Sniffing back tears, I squeeze his waist. “I’m so afraid of failing her.”

He continues brushing my hair, resting his chin on top of my head. “Nah, you couldn’t do that. Look at how hard you’re working to give her a good life. That alone says she’s in capable hands.”

Why is he being so nice to me? Pulling away, I use my wrists to wipe my eyes. “I self-destruct and put myself into positions I shouldn’t to stop feeling for a while.”

We both know what I'm referring to based on the way he slowly nods. "None of us in this apartment are perfect. Trust me. We all do shit we probably shouldn't, including with each other."

Guilt droops my shoulders.

Brodie tilts my chin up to meet his eyes. "I don't want you to feel bad about anything. You're an amazing woman and mother. Nobody can say differently when they see how Maia looks at you. It's okay to be tired and angry. Pretending like you're fine is only going to make it worse the longer you bottle up your frustration. Then where would you be?"

He moves his hand to cup my cheek, brushing his thumb along the damp skin.

Trying to crack a joke to ease the mood, I put my hand over his and say, "I'd probably be in your room trying to distract myself."

He chuckles, not taking me too seriously. "Damn. A missed opportunity."

Before I can reply, my bedroom door opens, and Finn walks in, saying, "I loaded the Waco—Oh." He stops and stares between Brodie and me standing much closer than we normally do. His hand grips the doorknob. "Uh, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt anything."

His voice sounds strange.

"You weren't," I assure him, patting Brodie's hand and stepping back.

Brodie offers Finn a lopsided grin. "I was just comforting our girl. My presence makes even the worst days some of the best."

I roll my eyes at his dramatics.

Finn, on the other hand, stares at Brodie with a locked jaw. He doesn't seem to find his mischief as innocent or amusing. Which was the goal, I guess.

"I'll leave you two to it then," Finn says, spinning around and closing the door harder than necessary.

"Well..." Brodie turns to me with raised brows. "That wasn't quite the plan I had in mind, but it worked. We got a rise out of him."

Right before I sit on the edge of my unmade bed, I hear Maia call out for me. Probably because she heard the door slam with Finn's exit.

Jaw clenching, I close my eyes and count to three. She won't go to sleep until I check on her, so there's no point in hoping she'll knock herself back out if I wait it out.

“I’ve got her,” Brodie promises. “Take the night off. I’ll keep an ear out for her if she fusses again after I get her back down.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I know I don’t.” He presses a kiss against my cheek and smiles. “But I’m offering, so accept the help and stop being stubborn.”

I swallow. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, babe. You know that.”

As he leaves, I wonder why there can’t be more Brodie Adams in the world. If I’d gotten into this situation with one of them, it’d feel a hell of a lot less dooming.

My phone goes off with a news alert that I set up a long time ago because I’m a masochist. Anytime Jonathan Dover’s name makes headlines, I know about it. Except this time, my stomach plummets at the announcement.

Philadelphia Phillies Right Fielder Jonathon Dover Expecting Third Child

I scan the article, scoffing when I see the quote they published from him. “*We’ve always wanted three kids, so we’re excited to finally welcome the newest addition to the family.*”

What a fucking joke.

Anger bubbles under my skin as I see him referenced as *America’s Favorite Family Man*. If I could scream the truth from the top of my lungs, I’d do it in a heartbeat.

But then I’d put Maia at risk. Her financial future would be gone, all thanks to me.

Right before I switch my screen off, I see another number pop up that I don’t recognize. Debating on answering it to see who keeps trying to reach me, I realize I’m not in the mood to deal with anybody else today. So, I let it go to voicemail and set my phone face-down on my nightstand.

One thing I know for sure is that I will not be the reason my daughter doesn’t have a future. Unlike me, she’ll always have my support. No matter what she does.

Especially since she won’t have her father’s.

I hope I’ll be enough for her.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rafael

TUGGING AT THE collar of my button-up, that's a little too tight thanks to the silver tie underneath, I reposition on the chair and feel the narrowed glare of the woman beside me. "Stop fidgeting," Vanessa hisses under her breath.

Her smile reappears as she daintily shakes hands with an elderly man who spent most of the dinner staring at her tits while she talked business. If she cared about being ogled, she didn't let on as she negotiated a bigger number on my contract.

"My tie is choking me," I mumble back, forcing my hands to remain by my sides. "I look like a damn fool in this getup."

Vanessa slowly turns to me with a no-nonsense smile, one of her hands drifting to my thigh under the table. "If you want to play with the big boys, you need to present yourself in a certain way. I got you an additional quarter of a million dollars because these men like what they see. Be grateful."

I'm sure they like my stats a hell of a lot more than the suit she made me spend an arm and a leg on.

"The owners like winning," I reply, rolling my shoulders back. "And I'm damn good at that. That's why they decided to take me on."

She hums, glancing around the room where the men we've been schmoozing with are talking amongst themselves with tumblers of expensive liquor in their hands. "You're also damn good at charming people, just like I am. How's that going anyway?"

I pick up my scotch and swirl the amber liquid. "I told you I'm not fishing for more information, Van. The circumstances with my brother are tense enough, I don't need to go after his roommate more than I already have."

She scoffs, finishing off her wine. "Oh, please. People have done far worse than seduce a pretty girl for information. It's innocent."

Dante has barely spoken to me since I pressed him to talk to me about what's been going on in his life, so I've been treading lightly around him. "I still don't think releasing a story is a good idea. What if it comes back on us as the leak?"

The mischievous grin spreads her red lips as she inches her hand up my leg. "Nothing is kept secret forever, Rafael. Let that be a lesson to you before you knock up a random girl and pay her off to keep quiet about it."

I don't know Blake well, but I respect that she hasn't gone after him for more money. If she did, she wouldn't be living with three men or driving the piece of shit car that only works half the time and makes her rely on public transit to get around. If circumstances were different, I'd still pursue her because she's nothing like other girls.

Gently moving her hand away from where it's sliding to my dick, I say, "Even if everything came to light, it's not going to get a reaction from Dover. He paid her off because he doesn't give a shit about Blake or the kid."

"On the contrary," my agent counters. "He cares so much about his squeaky-clean reputation that he made sure she wouldn't be a problem."

Shaking my head, I sip my drink and set it down on the table. "The last thing I need is for people to question why I made the team. I want the world to know I got a spot with the Phillies because of my stats, not because I blackmailed my way there, and they were desperate for better headlines."

Humming, she scoots her chair out and turns to me with one of her fake smiles that she offers everybody. "You hired me to make you the biggest name in the MLB, so we do it my way. Remember who got you this far. You may be good, but you weren't being scouted by anybody outside of the minors before you started sleeping with me."

Teeth grinding, I watch as she stands, flattens her dress, and walks to the owner of the Phillies with a little extra swivel to her hips.

I guess Dante is right. The apple doesn't fall that far from the tree because my father would have done this too, in a heartbeat.



DANTE PASSES ME a beer before sitting on the armchair with his drink. "You look like shit."

Chuckling, I rub my sore neck. "Haven't been sleeping well."

He takes a swig of his beer. "How's the apartment hunt going? You narrowed it down to two last time we talked."

"Vanessa is helping me get the two-bedroom right outside of Philadelphia." Popping the cap off the beer, I take a sip and stretch my legs out. "I really appreciate you letting me crash here until I get my shit together. I met with everybody today, so the new gig is feeling more official."

The seven-figure number printed on the papers still makes me wonder how the hell I got here, where I always dreamed of being one day. Vanessa may have gotten me the extra money with her scheming, but I know all my hard work over the years is the ultimate reason I was able to sign on the dotted line.

"It's no problem," he answers, watching the Doritos commercial on TV. "I'm glad we got the pullout. Before Blake moved in, her room was where guests used to sleep."

He couldn't have offered me a better opportunity to ask about her. "What's the deal with Blake, anyway? Obviously, her daughter's father isn't in the picture, so where is he?"

Dante shakes his head. "I don't know why you want to know, but it's not worth asking. What happened the other night needs to be a one-time thing, especially with everything you've got going on. Trust me."

My brows pinch, and I can't help but move my focus from the television screen to his direction. I didn't peg him as the protective type, especially of someone as strong-willed as Blake. She doesn't need anybody to look out for her when it's obvious she can do that just fine on her own.

"Is the father trouble or something?"

My brother rolls his eyes, drinking more of his beer. "Compared to ours, the guy is a saint. Just a selfish prick who stuck his dick where it didn't belong."

Slowly nodding, I try figuring out how to spin the conversation to see what he knows. "That's got to be hard for her, being a single mom and all. She's young."

“So were our mothers when they had us. I don’t see why it matters to you,” he finally replies, staring at me. “Weren’t you seeing some chick a month ago that you were dick struck by? You should focus on her, not Blake.”

The girl he’s referring to was hardly wife material, but she definitely knew how to get me off. Any man would be dick struck by somebody who could move her hips like that.

“Brianna and I weren’t dating,” I tell him, noting how easily he changes the subject. It’s obvious he isn’t going to feed me any information on Blake or the man who gave her a kid. “It was casual. She wanted more, but I knew it wasn’t going to work, so I ended it.”

Dante watches the screen absentmindedly. “How’d that turn out for you?”

My lips twitch. Between her reaction and Vanessa’s, it wasn’t great. “She keyed my car. Thank God I’ve been riding that Buick to death. If it were something newer, I may have cried.”

He chuckles, saying nothing.

Scratching my eyebrow, I crack my neck and clear my throat. “I’ll be out of your guys’ hair soon enough. If all goes well during training, I’ll be put out to play in the fall. Plus, the apartment will be ready for me to move into within the next two weeks. Sooner, if Vanessa has her way.”

My brother smiles at me. “You deserve everything you’re getting, man. All the work you’ve put in is paying off.” He switches gears. “Have you heard from your mother recently?”

My mother has been mentally and emotionally battered so many times by Anthony Ramirez that she uses pills to check out of reality more days than not. I swore I’d get her help when I had the money, and I’m determined to stick by that as soon as the check clears my bank.

“Not in about six months. Heard from Anthony, though.” He doesn’t seem shocked by that tidbit of information. “He saw my name on ESPN and wants to congratulate me personally on the career change.”

Dante deadpans, “Was that before or after he asked for money?”

I click my tongue. “After.”

“Figures.”

We sit in silence, watching the court show playing.

Not knowing what else to say, I slide toward the edge of the chair to find something to do. I have calls to return that I've been ignoring all day. Business meetings always take a lot out of me, and they've been nonstop to get the contract cemented.

"Blake has been through a lot," Dante tells me as I stand, causing me to look over at him. He's still watching TV. "She's gotten herself into some tough positions with people she should have never involved herself in. Maia's father is well-off with deep connections, but none that he uses to help her. It's better that he's absent. She doesn't want to live the life he does."

I can admire that. "She's an interesting girl," is what I say, choosing my words carefully. "I can see why all of you like her so much."

His eye twitches. "My eye isn't on her."

"Then who's it on?"

Before he can answer, the front door opens, and Finn walks in. Dante's eyes go to him and stay there without saying a word before he sinks into his seat, downs the rest of his beer, and remains silent the rest of the night.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tim

DANTE IS LEANING against the side of the building with a cigarette in his mouth when I come home from work. He's unfazed by the trickling rain dampening his shirt, swiping wet hair out of his face as he takes another drag.

"I thought you quit," I say, stopping a few feet away from him.

He turns his head away from me to blow the smoke out. "I started again," he murmurs.

Something happened. "Who was it this time?" I ask knowingly, readjusting my bag over my shoulder. "Your mom? Dad?"

Dante stares down at the cigarette before shaking his head and bringing it back to his mouth. I try not to focus too heavily on the way his lips wrap around the end, but it's hard when I know personally how good that feels. "Mom called me asking for money again. This time it's because her rent is due. Last time it was her water bill. The time before that, it was her electric. She called at five this morning when I was still half asleep. I told her to ask Anthony for it if she needed it that badly."

Shit. I know better than anybody what he's like when he hasn't gotten enough sleep. It's like poking a sleeping bear. "How'd that go?"

"She told me I was a terrible son."

What a bitch. "You're not. You know that."

All he does is shrug.

Sighing, I take the cigarette from him and inhale some of the nicotine. Coughing, I pass it back to him as he watches me curiously. "Have you considered my offer? I know some good lawyers that could probably help your mother. All we need to do is set up a time for them to meet."

He pushes off the wall, using the brick to put out the cigarette butt. "That would require my mother to want help, which we both know she

doesn't. If a restraining order isn't going to stop her from seeing that shithead, nothing else will."

Even though he's right, I want to do something to ease the pressure constantly weighing him down. "Have you asked Rafael if—"

"No," Dante cuts me off. "I'm not asking him to help me with anything."

I lift my palms in surrender. "It was just a thought. He's got a little more resources than you do, that's all I was getting at. There's nothing wrong with asking for help from people who can offer it."

Dante's eyes harden. "Well, I have no intention of using him for anything. I'll figure it out. I'm used to it."

It's pointless to argue with him, so I choose to let it go. He's angry, so he won't listen to logic, no matter how helpful it could be.

I jab my finger toward the apartment. "I'm going inside. You coming? Or do you and Rafael have plans tonight?"

His eyes go toward the street, studying the people speed walking to escape the rain. Sighing, he swipes a palm down the side of his jaw before turning to me. "Raf has a business thing tonight."

Slowly nodding, I step toward the door. "Do you want a beer? Brodie bought some more last night. Or we could go to the Oak Tavern to get out for a bit. It might be good for the both of us."

Because we sure as shit can't be trusted home alone together.

When Dante meets my eyes, I see the same broken man I do on the nights he creeps into my room. "I don't want alcohol right now."

I know that tone and what's on his mind.

Still, I ask, "What *do* you want?"

He looks up at the building. "Blake isn't home yet either."

"It's Wednesday," I tell him, tongue wetting my lips. "She gets out of work later."

The noise that rises up his throat hardens my cock instantly. Because I know what we're about to go upstairs to do.

Dante steps toward me. "Fuck me."

"Dante..."

He closes the distance, blocking my body from view of the street and grabbing the obvious erection trapped behind my denim. "You want it too, don't pretend you don't."

That's all it takes before the guttural groan escapes my throat. It fuels the quick walk up to our apartment, the anticipation thick between us. I barely have time to set my bag down before he's on me, mouth crushing against mine, guiding me to my bedroom.

His hands are on my shirt, stripping it off me, then my jeans, peeling them down my legs along with my briefs. My fingers dip into the back of his head when he drops to his knees and takes me into his mouth, working my shaft with his hand and tongue until I'm as hard as I've ever been.

"Fuck, Dante," I moan, thrusting deeper into his mouth until he gags on me. Tugging on his hair to pull him up, he lets me undress him with eager hands, helping me with his jeans until we're both naked and hard in front of each other.

We don't bother lying to one another this time by saying it's the last time. Like his nicotine addiction, it's not something we can quit.

Not when we feel what it's like to get off using each other. His mouth and hands on my dick, his fingers teasing my ass, his teeth against my throat, and hot breath against my ear as he pumps me.

Nothing but our heavy breathing fills the room as I drop him onto the bed and bend his legs toward his chest so I can get where he wants me easier.

The nightstand opens.

The bottle of lube appears.

He stops me from ripping open the condom, slowly shaking his head before taking the foil packet and dropping it onto the floor with our discarded clothes.

I watch him carefully, hesitating only long enough to make sure he wants me inside him bare before stroking myself with the lube and making my move. His jaw locks as he takes me inch by slow inch, the tendons in his neck popping as he grabs his legs to move them up and take me deeper.

There's nothing that could compare to how tight he feels as he clenches around my dick, squeezing me until the threat of orgasm crests.

A curse escapes my lips as I pull out and work my way back in, one of my hands going to Dante's throat and grabbing it like I know he likes. And, like always, he puts his hand on top of mine and makes me tighten my hold until I'm choking him.

His dick becomes steel between us the second my fingertips dig into the columns of his throat. He strokes himself, twisting the tip until precum leaks from it, and he uses that to coat himself.

I reposition so I'm hovering over him, getting a better angle to fuck him faster. He curls one of his legs behind me, coaxing me to take him as hard as I want. We work each other at a fast, silent pace until our groans fill the room and synchronize with the slapping skin.

"Coming," I tell him, the telltale tingle down my spine the only warning I have before I'm thrusting and emptying myself inside him.

My string of cum detonates him until he breaks apart in front of me, some of his seed spilling onto my chest as it shoots out.

We stay like that, me slowly softening inside him as I remain above his sated body. I reach up and stroke his tight jaw until it loosens, a small breath escaping him as my thumb caresses his chin. He closes his eyes and catches his breath, one of his hands grabbing my arm and squeezing only once.

Dante has never been a man of words.

Only actions.

And right now, he's thanking me.

I pull out, moving off of him and dropping by his side. We lie in silence, staring up at the ceiling.

After a few minutes, I feel his hand move ever so slightly until our pinkies brush.

I swallow. "Are you okay?"

His pinky stops before it curls around mine, moving away again before he sits up. Without looking at me, he starts collecting his items from the floor and murmuring, "Better now."



BLAKE KNOCKS AT my door hours later, staring at the candle she bought me for my birthday. "It smells like sex in here," she muses.

I stop reading the paperwork laid out on my newly made bed to look up at her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She snorts, pushing off the doorjamb and walking in to study all the papers spread out in front of me. “I know what sex smells like, Finn. This candle barely has any scent left, so it’s not exactly covering it up.”

My teeth grind. “Can we not talk about this?”

Her eyes peek up at me before she nods, grabbing one of the papers. “Sorry, Mr. Testy. All I was going to say is that I’m happy for you. You deserve to find a good girl.”

Girl.

As opposed to who? Her? To somebody else?

Dante?

Instead of indulging her, I say, “You and Brodie have certainly gotten cozy.”

She obviously isn’t a fan of the subject change. “What is all of this? You already work more than anybody else I know. It’s not right that you have to bring more of it home.”

Sighing, I scrub a hand down my face and move my focus from my laptop to her. “I really don’t have time to talk right now, Blake. Is there something you need?”

I don’t miss the hurt that momentarily passes on her face before she wipes it off. She’s never liked being vulnerable around people. She’d rather be seen as a total hard-ass, so nobody knows how much of a reaction they can really get out of her.

Clicking her tongue, Blake sets down the paper and steps back. “You’ve been a real ass lately, you know that? You woke Maia up the other night with your temper tantrum, you’ve given me the cold shoulder in the mornings, and now this. What did I do to you? Is this because I won’t date you? Because I thought we were past that.”

Is that what it all boils down to? I wish it were as simple as my ego being bruised. Then I could brush it off and find somebody willing to give me a real chance—something Blake isn’t able to. “Maybe I’ve got a lot going on at work. Did you ever think of that? I come home to relax and have to watch Brodie drool all over you and Dante stare like he can get in on whatever action is left, all while you soak up the attention. This is supposed to be the one place I can come and decompress, and everybody is pushing me past my limits.”

She blinks, surprised by my cool answer. It's all true, but she didn't need to know it. My issues aren't hers.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. "I'm sorry for waking up Maia." That wasn't cool of me, and Brodie chewed me out for it the next morning. "I have been stressed because of a lot of shit going on at work, and I just need..."

What? Space? Time?

I don't even know the answer anymore.

Blake, apparently, does. "Fine. I'll leave you alone so you can get back to it. I'm not trying to make your life miserable. I want to be your friend and help you however I can. But I can only do so much when you shut me out."

Fuck. I'm doing exactly what Dante is.

"You're not making me miserable."

"Just annoyed," she counters dryly.

I look away. "I'm sorry."

There's a pause between us.

She walks to the door and says, "I really don't believe you." Before she leaves, she adds, "I ordered Chinese. I got your favorite. I'll leave it in the fridge for whenever you want it."

Closing my eyes as she disappears, I pinch the bridge of my nose and murmur, "You're an asshole, Wilder."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Blake

MY PHONE LIGHTS up with another unknown number flashing on the screen. It's the third one today, but nobody leaves a message. Frowning, I click the button on the side to silence the ringer and turn back to the doctor leaning against the counter.

"There's already a waiting list for new patients," I tell Dr. Emerson, popping another carrot into my mouth.

The woman I've worked for the past two years gives me a deadpanned look. "You're an employee, Blake. And your daughter is overdue for a checkup. Next time, come straight to me."

I've never liked special treatment. "She's up to date on all her shots. I figured I'd wait my turn because there have been people waiting to get in."

Emerson steals one of the carrots I'm nibbling on and points it at me. "Most of those people have found doctors elsewhere and never removed themselves from the list. We have openings. Bring her in next week when you can."

I smile at her. "Okay."

She gestures toward the basket of lollipops we keep for the kids that come in. "And let her have some of the candy we keep for the kids before you eat all of it."

My cheeks heat guiltily. I take some suckers when things are slow. "I restock them," I defend.

Maia gets her sweet tooth from me, which my mother berates me for all the time. That's why I tell my little sunshine to keep it between us whenever I sneak her candy. "*It's our secret,*" I tell her. *To which she always replies, "Secret! Shh."*

Dr. Emerson grins. "Put her into my schedule on Tuesday. I'll even stay later if it's easier for you. I know finding childcare can be difficult."

She knows my parents tend to watch her on days she isn't in preschool and that my relationship with them is strained at best. My mother has a reputation for being stubborn, and thankfully, Dr. Emerson has seen it firsthand. It makes me feel validated after years of being called melodramatic by the very woman who I get my looks from.

"Thank you," I tell her. "I appreciate it."

My boss waves me off. "Maia is precious. It's always a pleasure to see her. We even got new unicorn stickers we'll give her first dibs on."

I groan. "The last time you gave her stickers she stuck them on everything, and I couldn't get them off. Go easy on me before my roommates kick me out for her beautifying their things again."

They love Maia as much as I do, so I doubt they'd care. Finn would go to work with his computer bag decked out in girly stickers any day of the week if she decorated it for him. And Brodie still lets her practice painting his nails every so often. She gets more nail polish on his skin and the carpet than on his nails, but it never bothers him.

And Dante... well, he's gentle enough. He's never made Maia feel unwanted, and he's always entertained her whenever she's around him. I doubt he'd walk around sporting anything pink and frilly if she asked him to, but I can't blame him.

Trevor walks up to Dr. Emerson and me. "Hello, ladies. How are we doing today?"

I have to withhold snorting when I see Emerson roll her eyes at the young physician's assistant.

My lips waver when she says, "I'd be better if you submitted the inventory report like I've been asking you to do for the past week."

Trevor stands straighter. "Er, right. Sorry. I've been busy. I'm sure Blake has told you that I've taken on more patients."

Both of them turn to me.

A calculated smile lifts my lips. "Oh, yes. I have it on good authority that Trevor is very hands-on with all of his patients. The women who come to the counter always praise how thorough he is in the examination room."

Humor lights up Emerson's eyes as Trevor shoots me a look and walks into the back room. When it's just us ladies again, she says, "Do me a favor, and stay away from that one from now on. You're far too good for him."

Blushing, I lean back in my chair. “You don’t have to worry about that anymore. Lesson learned.”

She pats the desk and gestures to my phone that’s lighting up again. “Good. I’ll leave you to it, then. And answer your phone. It could be important.”

When I look, I see my mother’s name on the screen this time. She isn’t who I want to talk to, but Dr. Emerson is right. “Hey. Is everything okay?”

My mother’s sigh is as heavy as it always is when I annoy her. “You need to clean out your voicemails. It says there’s no more room left. What if this were an emergency and I couldn’t leave a message to let you know?”

That explains why nobody is leaving me voicemails after calling. “You could always text me whatever is wrong,” I reply. “Is there an emergency?”

There’s a pause. Then, “Well, no. But it could have been.”

Point taken. “I’m at work, Mom. Can you tell me what this is about so I can get back to it?”

“I wanted to know if we could take Maia out to dinner tonight. Our neighbor’s daughter is having a party at The Regence and invited her. It’ll be good for her to be social and meet people.”

As if I keep her isolated? “What time is the party? I’m trying to get her to bed the same time every night. If her routine is messed up for even one day, all that work will go out the window.”

“Honestly, Blake,” my mother says in exasperation. “It isn’t like we’re going to keep her up until midnight. It’s a children’s party, for crying out loud. It’ll be over by seven.”

I frown. “Her bedtime is seven thirty.”

“Then we’ll keep her overnight so you don’t have to bother putting her down.”

“No, that’s not what I—”

“Perfect! We’ve got everything she needs here, so I’ll call you in the morning to let you know when she’s ready. Clean out your voicemail.”

She hangs up before I can even ask to speak to Maia, making me stare at the phone. Shaking my head, I set my cell down and grab another carrot.

The rest of the workday goes by quickly, ending relatively easily compared to others. There aren’t any rude or demanding patients that give me problems, Trevor leaves me alone, and closing goes smoothly without any late phone calls or emergencies to deal with.

As I'm walking to the train station, I get another phone call from a number I'm unfamiliar with. Even though I cleared out my voicemails, which were primarily all missed calls from my mother over the past six months, I decide to answer this time. "Hello?"

"Can I speak to Blake Karr, please?" a woman asks.

My brows pinch. "That's me."

The hesitation in my voice must be obvious because the woman on the other end speaks softer. "I hope this isn't a bad time. I'm calling in regard to Jonathan Dover."

For a brief moment, my heart spikes. Why would anybody be calling because of him? He didn't want anything to do with Maia or me. Is he trying to take her away? File something against me? *What if he wants custody?*

Shakily, I say, "I'm sorry, ma'am. I don't understand."

It's better to play dumb instead of giving away any information. The phone calls were from different numbers from New York, California, and a few other states. Nothing from Pennsylvania, where he's from. Wouldn't one of his lawyers be from a firm where he lives?

The next thing the woman says makes her sound far less kind. "Ms. Karr, my name is Sophia. I work for Star Magazine. Your name has been brought up by a reputable source of ours regarding a potential affair between you and Mr. Dover that dates back to 2020."

My eyes widen. *What the fuck?* The stunned silence doesn't bode well for me if she's reading into it, but it's hard to process. Who would know about me and that asshole? The whole point of him paying me off was so nobody would know a thing.

Clearing my throat, my shoulders tense with alert. "I'm really not sure what you're talking about. The name sounds vaguely familiar, but—"

"Ms. Karr," she cuts me off, "You and I both know that we're talking about the Philadelphia Phillies player. He's been in the news quite often lately. And one way or another, a story is going to be published about this. I'm giving you the opportunity to tell me what the real Jonathon Dover is like, because I have a feeling it isn't the one that the media loves to boast about."

Don't take the bait, the voice inside my head tells me.

I start walking again, not wanting to miss my train or wait for a new one. “Sophia, I’ve never been a sports fan. The closest I’ve been to a famous person is when I was fifteen and got tickets to a Bon Jovi concert. And, unfortunately, I was in the nosebleeds.”

If she believes it or not doesn’t matter. It’s a white lie. I did go to see Bon Jovi in concert as a teenager, and we had horrible seats. There are bad pictures of me taken by Emily’s mom with the singer in the background. It was her favorite singer, and the three of us had an amazing time.

Every good lie holds a semblance of truth.

I think the tabloid writer sighs, but I’m not entirely sure. “We’ve been told there are pictures that they’re willing to send that could implicate you. I’m not sure what those photos are yet, but if they show you in it, that would be unfortunate for you and this narrative you’re telling.”

Yes, it would be. “Well, I’ve always been told I have one of those recognizable faces. I’d be flattered if somebody thought I could pull somebody who sounds as important as *Mr. Dover*.”

I want to vomit saying that, but I refrain.

Deep down, I’m freaking out. I don’t know what pictures have surfaced or who would have them. He and I have never taken any together because we got right down to business the one time we got together.

She hums. “He’s quite the family man. Rumors like this could change a lot for him and his image if people step forward.”

I’m sure that’s true, but it won’t be me. The last thing I want to do is put Maia on the line just to carry out some vendetta. “Then it sounds like your magazine is about to make quite a bit of money from whatever this is. But I’d like to be left out of the drama. I’m nobody, Sophia. And, frankly, I don’t want to be included in this in any way possible.”

Celebrities get slandered all the time in publications, and some of them have been able to sue. I’m sure if I talked to the right person, I could get this thrown away if that’s what it comes to.

Unless there really are pictures.

But I can’t think about that. Because the possibility of my reality crashing around me is too much to bear. All I want to do is forget about the past and move forward. Save money. Give Maia everything she wants. That’s why I agreed to the arrangement with Dover. I signed on the dotted line and walked away like a good little girl.

“Is that really who you want to be, though? A nobody?” she questions. “A girl going nowhere?”

Those words strike me like an invisible whip.

“If that’s how you see me and my lackluster life, then I suppose it is.” What is my alternative? Selling myself out and being known as the girl who fucked a married man and got pregnant? I’d be dragged through the mud more than he ever would, no matter his part in the messy situation. “I wish you the best of luck with this story, Sophia. But I’ll be of no help to you with it.”

In a sugary sweet tone as fake as mine, she replies, “Thank you for your time, Ms. Karr.”

When the call ends, I stare at my screen and feel my heart drop into the bottom of my stomach. “Fuck,” I whisper aloud, feeling my heart race a little too fast. “*Fuck*,” I say even louder, clenching my eyes closed.

Anxiety bubbles under my skin for all that could unfold from this. I said nothing. Did everything I was told. Remained silent. But what if Dover and his team don’t believe me if this really makes headlines?

Hands shaking from panic, I put my phone in my pocket and blow out a long breath. “Head in the game,” I tell myself. Maia needs me right now. I can’t break down and risk it all because of one tabloid writer.

Then my phone rings again.

And again.

And again.

And by the time Maia is in bed, sucking her thumb after about three re-reads of her favorite book, I’ve got ten voicemails from different reporters until I break down in the shower where nobody can hear me.

But as soon as I step out of the bathroom and bump into Brodie, it’s obvious to him something is wrong when his eyes lock with my bloodshot ones.

“Who do I need to kill?” he all but growls.

My jaw quivers.

I fight the tears as hard as I can but fail.

Suddenly, I’m pulled into two strong arms until my face is pressed against a soft cotton tee. I feel his fingers in my damp hair, brushing the strands I haven’t tended to yet.

“Let it out, baby,” Brodie says softly. “I’m right here. Tell me what you need, and I’ll do it.”

Those are dangerous words.

Fear sinks its claws into my chest, forming a black hole that I’ll easily get sucked into if I let it take over. So, I look up at him and tell him to do the one thing that can pull me out before it’s too late. “Kiss me. *Please*.”

Even through the blur of tears, I can see indecision masking Brodie’s face. His eyes give him away—he wants to. The blueish-gray color darkens like an oncoming storm, and I can tell he’s thinking about what would happen.

My palms find his chest, moving their way up to curl around his shoulders. When I dig my fingernails in, I see him shiver. Those stormy eyes turn lethal as they pierce mine.

“Blake...” His voice is low as his hands find the small of my waist and squeeze. “I don’t know what happened today, but I do know that this isn’t going to fix it.”

I blink, wondering if he’s saying what I think he is. I’m not sure until his fingers tighten around my waist one more time before dropping back to his side.

“God help me,” he murmurs with a long-winded sigh. Reaching up, he uses the pads of his thumbs to wipe off my damp cheeks. “I’m not going to kiss you right now. Not because I don’t want to, but because *when* I do, it’ll be because you want it. Not because you need it.”

My lips part to reply, but silence is all he’s rewarded with.

Brodie flashes me a sad smile that barely meets his eyes. “Yeah, I know. Guess I can surprise myself too.”

Swallowing down the subtle rejection, I take a step back. “I could just go ask someone else to distract me if I really wanted to. Finn. Dante.”

It’s a fact, not a promise.

Brodie studies me for a second before slowly nodding and swiping at his jaw. “You could. But if you care about me, you won’t.”

And there it is.

A silent ultimatum.

Them or me.

I have to look away because his gaze is too intense for me to keep contact with. It’s quiet in the house. No TV. No music. No conversation.

Brodie turned me down even though we're alone. Nobody would have had to know. Still, he didn't make a move. Didn't cave.

Letting out a fragile breath, I say, "Somebody knows about me and Maia's father."

In my peripheral, I see Brodie's stature go rigid. When I finally peek in his direction, his teeth are grinding. "Who?"

Weakly, I lift a shoulder. "Some random tabloid. I've been getting harassed for weeks by numbers I don't know. The woman said a reputable source told her about my affair with..."

Brodie curses under his breath. "Did they mention Maia?"

I shake my head. "No. But if they really do know. If there are pictures like they said..."

"Hey now." He stops me. He lifts my chin to meet his eyes, which are much softer than before. "I won't let that happen. None of us here will. Okay?"

There's no way to promise something like that, but I find myself nodding anyway.

After a few moments of us staring at one another, I ask, "You're really not going to kiss me, are you?"

He lowers his hold from my face, a somberness taking over his features. "No, I'm not." Before I can ask why, he closes the distance, presses his lips against the top of my head, and says, "I respect you too much."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Rafael

EVERY MUSCLE IN my body screams after the first full week of training with the team. I'd like to think I'm in the best shape of my life—something I've had to be to get where I am. The MLB doesn't want the weakest or slowest players; they want the ones who have trained to win. It's the only way to get a spot playing in front of millions of people. They have plenty of other guys waiting for their chance on the roster, so I sure as hell am going to give them all I've got.

I cringe when somebody slaps my back and sidles up beside me as we leave the complex. "Coach either has it in for you or thinks you're going to be the next me."

When I see who's talking, I have to hide my disdain behind a phony chuckle. "There can only be one Jonathon Dover," I tell the egotistical dickbag looking down at me like I'm not shit. I know for a fact his people have been tipped off about the articles written about him. Vanessa told me he hires specialists who shut these things down before they go to print all the time with a big, fat check.

Part of me hopes the payoff works like I'm sure it has plenty of other times bad press has nearly come out about him. I have a bad feeling this is somehow going to come back on me if the allegations come to light.

Dover doesn't think anybody knows about half the shit he's done based on his cocky smile, but I'm pretty sure everybody does. They're just smart enough to keep quiet about it because it won't benefit them. Me? I've got everything to gain from his fans turning against him if they find out he's not the saintly family man he's painted himself to be.

The douchebag in question grins. "People are betting on when I'll announce my retirement. It never fails. Once athletes reach a certain age, everybody starts searching for the younger version of them. Coach has heard the talk and wants to make sure he's got a replacement ready."

That's what he thinks I am? Just some young rookie looking to fill his shoes. "Who knows," I joke. "Maybe he'll see how good I am and offer to pay you out of your contract early. Give you time to spend with your growing family since that's so important to you."

For a split second, the remark hits exactly where I want it to. His eyes flash with warning before narrowing. He doesn't like anybody threatening what he's built, but he's so cocky he doesn't know there are people already working on it.

The problem with people who think they're invincible is that they never see their own demise coming. Which means the fall is that much harder when it finally strikes.

Well, good fucking riddance.

Dover grips my shoulder like we're old pals, but the tight hold is anything but friendly. "I hear you're good, but it's going to take you a long time to get where I am, kid. I wouldn't buy a Lambo yet if I were you."

Kid. He's not much older than me, but I don't bother pointing that out. I'll play his game for as long as it takes. "You're probably right. I've got a lot of work ahead of me."

He smacks my back and laughs when he sees me flinch. "You should go see Samantha over in the PT office. She gives a great rub down if you catch my drift."

My jaw tics.

"She'll help you with those muscles, is what I mean," he corrects, shooting me a wink before sauntering off to where his expensive car is parked.

It isn't until I'm sitting in my beater that I see Vanessa's name pop up on the screen. The woman is suffocating me, but every time I ignore her call, she'll blow up my phone ten times worse until I have no choice but to talk to her.

She's been checking in every day since practice started to make sure I haven't fucked up yet. Mostly because I spend half the time we're on the phone complaining about what an asshole Dover is to everybody. The fact he hasn't been kicked off the team is astounding. I guess that's what happens when you make the team one of the leading champions in the league.

"I haven't punched anyone yet," is how I greet her.

Her laugh is sultry. “That’s good because we don’t need any competing headlines for the next few days. Be on your best behavior or I will castrate you.”

She can only mean one thing. “You officially sold the story,” I say, scrubbing my eyes.

I knew it was going to happen; I was just hoping I had a little more time before the potential fallout. Dante is going to see firsthand what this will do to his roommate. It’s not my problem, but I know he’ll make it one of his.

“This needs to happen. I already promised you a fair share of the check they cut. It’ll be wired into your account by next week.”

That’s not what this is about. “What am I supposed to say if Dante asks about this?”

“I don’t see why you’d say anything to him about it at all.”

“Dover is my teammate,” I state. “There are bound to be questions. Like if I’ve heard anything from locker room gossip. You know how the guys talk. Dante might think Dover has said something about it. If he calls me out—”

Vanessa sighs. “What, Raf? What could your brother possibly do if he calls you out on a lie? I’ve told you before. Deny knowing anything. This isn’t your mess, it’s Dover’s. The rest will fall into place.”

Gripping the back of my neck, I say, “If I didn’t give a shit about anybody else, I’d be just like Dover. It’s bad enough I’ve agreed to go this far.”

“Oh, please. If you were like Dover, you’d be using your position to fuck women and pay them off for their silence. Have you done that?”

Teeth grinding, I grumble, “No.”

“Then you’re nothing like him.”

There’s nothing I can say without her finding an argument, so I clam up. The money will be worth it. It’s more to put toward Mom’s treatment plan once I find a good facility.

Maybe Vanessa is right, though. Dover does whatever he wants because it suits him. I’ve made my choices because it helps my mother.

That has to be good enough.

“Oh, and Rafael?” Vanessa says, pulling me from my head. “When you stop by later, bring the wine I like. We’ll celebrate.”

Nostrils flaring, I sink into my seat. “I had plans tonight with a few of my teammates. The ones *you* told me to befriend.”

A thoughtful noise comes from her. “Cancel them. You’ll be busy.”

Working with her is like signing a deal with Rumpelstiltskin. You have to be careful what you wish for because there will always be consequences.

She’s reminded me of that daily.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Blake

THE BOTTLE SLIPS from my hands and gets caught by two quick hands that magically appear out of nowhere. Eyes trailing upward to see who saved what little remains of the wine, I frown when I see how Brodie stares at me.

“Should I ask how much of this you’ve had?” he asks, swirling the cheap liquid I stopped by Liquor Depot to buy after work. He takes a swig of it and makes a face. “This is fucking gross, Blake.”

“It was six dollars,” is my slurred response, reaching out and doing the same grabby hands motion Maia does when she wants something.

Brodie shakes his head, amusement brightening his eyes as he passes it back to me. “Tell me what’s going on. I haven’t seen you drink like this in... ever.”

That’s because I stopped drinking like I used to after having Maia. Minus the first time I ever got drunk on tequila and spilled my biggest secret to my roommates, I rarely drink. When they have beer, I have water.

But my mother has Maia again for the night while I have a mental breakdown here after seeing the magazine rack at the store when I stopped by to pick up something cheap for lunch. The pictures plastered on *Star Magazine* were obviously of Jonathon Dover with his hand on the small of a blond girl’s back. Although it’s grainy, the picture of the mystery woman in a familiar green dress is clearly me.

Picking up the stack of magazines I bought off the rack to sell them out, I hold it up for Brodie to read the bold lettering on the front. *Mystery Woman Spotted with Jonathon Dover. Read about the affair inside.*

Brodie curses, taking the magazines and opening the top one to skim the article.

The next sip of wine I take doesn’t taste nearly as good now that Brodie has pointed out how bad the quality is. “I think something bad is going to happen,” I tell him, wiping my mouth off with the back of my hand as I

watch him read. “And my mom is going to tell me ‘I told you so’ and lecture me on every bad decision I’ve ever made.”

I slide off the stool I’ve been occupying and sink onto the kitchen floor, where it’s cool. Pressing the bottle against my overheated skin, I groan when I think about what’s going to unfold in the media.

Brodie’s brows pinch. “They don’t name you or Maia in this,” he tells me, lifting it up as if I haven’t read it a million times. “These pictures could be of anybody. Half the blondes I know look alike.”

A numbness takes over my body. “But I know. You know. Finn. Dante. *Him*.” If Dover’s team thinks I leaked this information, it could come back on me. I signed an NDA. What if they sue? I have nothing to give them. I’d be screwed.

He tugs up the material of his jeans to squat down so we’re at eye level. “That’s barely anybody in the grand scheme of things, Blake. What’s the worst that can happen? This could have been so much worse for you, but they’re putting the blame on him.”

My jaw quivers, and I say the words I hoped I’d never have to. “But that journalist knew my name, which means they *know* it’s me. Somebody out there outed me. This isn’t over. I can feel it. And if... if Dover thinks I had something to do with it, he could come after me and Maia and make my life hell. I can’t afford that.”

He takes my hand, weaving our fingers together and stroking my skin to calm me down. “I understand why you’re upset, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“I keep getting calls from people that are going to break other stories about him,” I murmur, pulling my hand away and cuddling into the wine bottle. I’m starting to regret drinking as much as I have because I feel nauseous. “I don’t know why they didn’t name me, but somebody still could. I messed up so bad, Brodie.”

He gently pinches my chin, drawing my attention up to meet his eyes. “This wasn’t on you. Do you hear me? He was the married one. You didn’t know that. If you did, would you have slept with him?”

That version of me might have because I was stupid enough to think nothing bad could happen. It isn’t like I’ve intentionally hooked up with unavailable men before. But I’ve also never stopped myself from doing it

again once I found out. Maia's dad is the exception to that because of who he is.

Maybe this is karma catching up with me.

"Once upon a time, I probably would have."

Brodie doesn't react to that in any judgmental way, which makes me like him better. "Sounds like you wouldn't do that anymore. We all have to learn sometime."

All I do is lift my shoulders.

The man in front of me sits down, nudging my leg with his. He tosses the magazines onto the floor, disregarding them. "I want you to remember everything you've been through that you've managed on your own. You did that and still have a kick-ass kid, right?"

I don't answer.

"You barely use what's left of the money he gave you. It's never been about that. Right?"

My lips start to quiver. "But if he t-thinks that I said something to somebody, he could accuse me of going after more. Then I'll be in trouble."

"Hey. None of that." He presses the pad of his thumb against my lip to quiet me. "You've got us on your side. No matter what happens. And since you're innocent in all this, it'll be okay. Nobody can come after you."

That's where he's wrong. People like Dover will do anything it takes to protect their reputation. If it means throwing me under the bus, then he'll do it. I'd get tossed to the wolves with nothing and nobody protecting me.

"I *need* Maia," I all but whimper, more terrified of losing her than everything else.

I feel Brodie pull me into him, wrapping me in his arms. "You'll always have her."

"He's got money."

"So do we."

Shaking my head, I try to stop my jaw from quivering worse than it already is. "N-not as much as h-him."

Brodie doesn't say anything because he can't.

We're no match against Jonathon Dover.

The front door opens and closes, doing little to break the tension in the room.

Footsteps near the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” I hear Finn ask from behind Brodie.

It’s the man who’s sitting in front of me that says, “Before you get your panties in a twist about me getting all touchy-feely with Blake again, we’ve got bigger issues.”

Finn doesn’t say anything.

“Baseball season,” Brodie informs Finn, using the code word we came up with after my drunken admission years ago.

A soft curse sounds from behind us.

Brodie strokes my hair and murmurs, “It’s going to be okay, babe. Your boys will always be here for you and Maia.”

Finn jumps in, his shoes coming into view from the corner of my eye. “Damn straight. What do you need from us?”

Not sure how to answer, I let Brodie do it for me. “Still got the number to the hot redheaded lawyer with big tits? What was her name?”

Finn scoffs. “It’s Sabrina, and don’t be crass if you want her help.”

I vehemently wipe at my face. “You guys don’t have to do this. I don’t have a lot of money for a lawyer, and I don’t even know if there’s anything one could do for me.”

Brodie ignores me, glancing up at Finn. “Do you have Sabrina’s number still?”

There’s only a brief pause from the tech nerd rubbing his neck. “Yeah, I do.”

“I think you should call her for advice.”

Sniffing back tears, I pull back from Brodie and hug the wine bottle to me to busy my arms. “You guys are the best. Do you know that?”

Both men smile.

“We’d do anything for you,” Finn says, pulling out his cell.

Brodie caresses my cheek, saying nothing.

He doesn’t need to.

It’s all in those damn eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Dante

THERE'S A PETITE redhead who looks familiar sitting at the kitchen table with Blake and Finn when I get home from work. I can't place her because her hair is blocking part of her face as she goes over something she's pointing out on the papers resting on the table.

I see Brodie sitting on the couch with the TV on low, I ask, "Who's that in the other room?"

Brodie's right ankle is draped over his left knee, with a beer balanced on it that he picks up and takes a sip of. "You don't recognize her?"

"Should I?"

My cousin grins. "That's the chick you fucked at the bar. The one who spilled her margarita on you after one too many. Her and her friends were celebrating her passing the New York bar exam."

The lawyer.

The same one who went after Finn when I failed to text her after our hookup. Not that I bothered telling him that. Brodie is the only one who knows who she is. When she showed up at the apartment, the wink she shot me when Finn wasn't looking told me to fuck right off.

They were up all night from the sounds she was making from behind closed doors, making sure I knew she was having a good time.

I went to a bar shortly after and found a couple looking for a third, making sure to give extra attention to the man while his girlfriend watched. It got me off, even though I was thinking about the six-foot man at home the entire time.

"You and Finn have very similar tastes these days," Brodie remarks, swirling the liquid in his bottle.

I shoot him a look. "Not now."

He chuckles as he takes another sip of his drink, unfazed by my cool tone.

“What is she doing here?” I ask, dropping into the armchair and glancing into the other room where the three of them sit. “Is there something wrong with the lease?”

My cousin is quiet for a second. “Nah, this doesn’t have to do with the lease.” Voice dropping, he asks, “Did you share anything with your brother while he was here?”

Christ. What kind of question is that? I thought we were past this. “If this is about what we did with Blake—”

“This has nothing to do with that,” he cuts me off, sliding to the end of the cushion. Leaning over and dropping his voice, he murmurs, “Have you seen the articles online?”

Who hasn’t? “People were talking about Dover all day at work. You would have known that if your pussy ass didn’t call out sick to... what, exactly? Sit here and drink?”

His eyes narrow. “Don’t you think the article is a little peculiar?”

I didn’t actually read it, only heard about it through the grapevine. “Athletes cheat on their spouses all the time, man. You know this. It’s not our job to report on that, so I don’t pay attention to it.”

The way Brodie stares at me has my eyebrows raising. “Dude, did you even look at the magazine? We’ve got like forty here at this point. I went to eight different stores today to buy them out.”

Why the fuck would he—*wait.* My eyes snap to Blake, who’s rubbing her arms as she nods along to whatever Sabrina is telling her. “Is the article about Blake?”

Brodie deadpans, “Yes, dumbass. There are pictures. Not very good ones, but anybody who knows her could probably tell who it is.”

Fuck. “Nobody said a thing about who the chick was, just that she probably hoped Dover would leave his wife for her.” That definitely doesn’t sound like Blake, considering what I know.

“For some reason, she wasn’t named,” Brodie tells me, voice still quiet. “But people know it’s her, which means there’s a reason they’re holding back on outing her and Maia. It’s one thing for a guy like Dover to cheat on his wife. People do it all the time. It’s another to have a baby with the woman he’s cheating with.”

I’m not sure what he’s getting at. “So?”

“So...” He sighs, shoulders dropping. “You aren’t going to make me ask, are you?”

Ask what? “I’m not following.”

“Your brother just signed with the same team that Maia’s father is playing for,” he points out slowly, waiting for me to get it. “Then your brother comes here, and magically, Blake gets harassed by a bunch of reporters about her affair with him. Strange, don’t you think?”

I gape in disbelief. “And you think I had something to do with it?”

Brodie shrugs. “I think we all like drinking and get mouthy about shit we probably shouldn’t. It’s happened before. And who knows what was said when you were in the spur of the moment.”

That’s different, and he knows it. “I’ve only talked about my own personal hell, not hers. I wouldn’t bring up business that isn’t mine.”

There’s a reason why Brodie was hesitant to let me into the little secret she had. With Rafael’s connections, my cousin thought it’d be better if I was left in the dark. The less I know, the better. Plausible deniability, I suppose. But when it became obvious that there was something they weren’t letting me in on, I made him tell me because I fucking hate being the odd one out.

I swore I wouldn’t tell a soul.

Not even my brother.

Now, I regret pushing him on it at all.

Because then he wouldn’t be questioning me.

“All I’m saying is that you two had been drinking while he was there,” my cousin states. “Maybe you didn’t mean to say something about who Maia’s dad is, but it’d make sense if you did. It could have been a subconscious thing now that Rafael is with the Phillies.”

Jaw grinding, I ball up my hands. My brother is the only family I’ve got, so I don’t like Brodie accusing him of having anything to do with this either. “I’m telling you, Brodie, I didn’t say anything to him or anybody else. And even if I did, he wouldn’t go sell the fucking story. That isn’t who he is. As far as either of us are concerned, who Blake chooses to fuck is none of our business. It’s not exactly a conversation that I choose to have with people if other topics dry up.”

“Then what about who you choose to fuck? Does that ever come up in conversation, or do you bury that along with all the other trauma you hate

talking about with people?”

He knows more than I want him to about the kind of people I have in the bedroom. More than I want *anybody* to know. “My choices are nobody else’s business.”

Brodie hums, sinking back into his spot. “I bet Blake wishes she could say the same, but I don’t think she’s going to be that lucky. Because her past is being plastered on magazine covers by somebody with an agenda that’s definitely not benefiting her.”

“For the last time, Raf didn’t—”

“How can you be sure?”

The question leaves me glaring.

“Rafael isn’t a bad dude,” Brodie amends. “But people do crazy stuff to get their way. I’m not accusing anybody of anything, but it is possible. Somebody besides us knows about Blake and that douchebag, and I highly doubt it was Dover or his team who leaked the news since they’re the ones who dulled out the hush money to make sure it never saw the light of day. Who else could have then?”

I remain silent, not wanting to believe that Rafael has something to do with this. He’s better than the lows that our father would sink to, to get what he wanted. *Right?*

“There are some people with far more to gain from this getting out,” he concludes grimly. “And it’s people like Blake who are the ones impacted the worst by it.”

I don’t allow myself to read into the situation. I’m sure there are more people who know about Dover’s indiscretions than any of us could guess. If anything, this article is only the beginning. More people will come out with their stories, and Blake will be in the clear.

Hopefully.

Doubt weighing down my shoulders, I turn to the TV and say, “Turn it up. I like this show.”

Brodie hesitates, sighs, and then tosses me the remote before making his way toward the hall to his bedroom. Before he disappears, he looks at me and says, “You don’t have to bury anything for people’s approval. It wouldn’t make a difference to me.”

I know what he’s referring to.

Who.

But I refuse to acknowledge it.

When he realizes that, he swipes a hand through his hair defeatedly and walks away.

That night, I don't slip into Finn's room like I want to because then I'd be proving Brodie's point.

I go to a bar.

Get drunk.

And find the first woman willing to take me back to her place to help me forget who I am.

Just for a little while.

It wouldn't make a difference.

It would to me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Blake

I CAN ALWAYS tell when I did something wrong based on the expression painted on my mother's face. Based on the slackened features carved into the full lips and narrow jawline I inherited from her, I'd say she's seen the three new articles that have surfaced of Dover and me.

Even Sabrina has said it's odd that nobody has published my name, which is why she's digging into who the source is that's sharing the photos. So far, I haven't gotten any answers.

"Hi, Maia baby," I greet, tickling the three-year-old in my mother's arms. She giggles, making me smile despite the heaviness about to be put onto me. "Thanks for watching her."

My mother doesn't pass me Maia, but she does pass me a magazine with another grainy picture on the front. The only person recognizable in it is Jonathon Dover. The girl in the green dress next to him entering a hotel? It could be anybody.

"Deny, deny, deny," Sabrina reminds me. "If they had the technology to make this image clearer, they would have by now. It doesn't necessarily matter who's protecting your identity as long as they keep doing it."

I stare at the new cover like it's the first time I've seen it, but it's not. Finn and Brodie went out and bought every copy they could find in the immediate area before people I knew could find one.

I'm not optimistic that we'll know who the leak is. The pictures were taken the weekend Emily and Hector got married, but that doesn't narrow it down. There were hundreds of people attending the ceremony and hundreds more at Dover's hotel who could have snapped photos if they recognized him.

"I didn't think you believed in supporting tabloid fodder," is my careful response, scanning the other ridiculous story headlines on the side and

rolling my eyes. There are random stories about the president, aliens, and diet fads made famous by celebrities. Yet, *I'm* headline news.

Maia begins squirming, bringing my attention back to her. I set the magazine down on the nearest table and take my daughter from the woman still staring at me inquisitively. She studies the two of us with narrowed eyes before sucking in a breath.

"What?" I ask, brushing Maia's dark hair out of her face. She must have taken out the braids I put her in this morning because the wavy strands are frizzy and knotted.

Mom picks up the magazine in exasperation. "Are we really going to pretend this isn't you? Am I supposed to stand here and play dumb while my daughter ruins her life again?"

Her words are a knife to the chest. When I saw those two pink lines on the pregnancy test, I thought I ruined my life too. But Maia saved me from a bad path that I was going down.

Doesn't she see that by now?

Deny, deny, deny. "You know the people who write that stuff do it for money. They're willing to say anything. See? You can read about a new type of alien species that the government discovered on page ten."

She points toward the second person in the image, tapping the silk dress. "I bought you that. You were worried that you couldn't afford something nice for Emily's wedding, so I took money out of *my* savings to get you something appropriate."

Appropriate. I seem to recall things differently. I'd packed one of my favorite pink dresses that she disapproved of, so she went out and bought me the green one featured in this. It was beautiful and probably the first time I saw her look at me like she used to when I was little. With love and approval.

"It's flattering you think I could grab some rich dude's attention, but it's not true." I play with Maia's hair, trying to tame it.

Unfortunately, my mother doesn't quit. "He's married, Blake."

"Good for him," I grind out.

The sound rising from her throat doesn't sound promising. "I know you. As much as I wish you weren't, you're self-destructive and have been since you were a teenager. Sleeping with a married man sounds right up your alley if you ask me."

It's hard not reacting to that. I doubt it's common for mothers to call their daughters home-wreckers, but here we are.

I take a deep breath and say the only safe thing I can think of. "I'm sorry you feel that way." I tickle my little girl's side, smiling when she laughs. "Ready to go, Maia girl?"

She nods, rubbing one of her eyes. "I tired, Mama. Sleepy."

I peck her cheek and glance casually back at my mother. "Me too. We'll go home and curl up with your favorite book. How does that sound?"

Maia nuzzles into my neck. "Red is apples," is her only reply. Which means the entire drive home, I'll hear her tell me all about what colors other objects are. It could be worse, I guess.

"Thanks again for watching her," I tell my mother, turning to leave.

I pause at her next words. "I'm not trying to attack you. Believe it or not, it's because I care that I want to make sure you don't make more mistakes than you already have."

Standing to full height, I slowly turn back to her with firm eyes. "Maia is *not* a mistake. She's your granddaughter."

For once, my mother is speechless.

The way she watches me is almost as if she's looking right through me yet sees everything I keep locked behind the barrier.

Her eyes go to the little girl in my arms who's fussing to go, and I can't help but see the sadness in them. "I never asked who he was because I knew it didn't matter. You were going to keep her, and love her, and raise her yourself. I respected you for it more than I've let on."

This time, it's me who's silently surprised.

"She has his eyes," my mother whispers.

It's hard to swallow.

Deny, deny, deny. "She's beautiful."

My mother closes the distance between us, caressing hair out of Maia's face before meeting my cautious gaze. "I want what's best for her because she *is* my granddaughter, and I love her."

Evading my eyes, I hold Maia a little tighter against me. I nod and look over my shoulder at the woman whose scolding expression has turned into one of genuine concern. "I know you do. Which is why who her father is doesn't matter. Her family is here. They're who count."

She's about to say something but chooses to stop herself. It's not often she silences her opinion, especially when it comes to me. Which means she really does want what's best for Maia.

Hopefully, she understands that letting this go will ensure we keep the little ball of sunshine in our lives.

Finally, she steps back.

"Tell Dad I said hi," is the last thing I say.

After setting Maia on my lap on the bus, I pull my phone out.

Me: *My mom knows*

Sinking into my seat, I let out a small breath and wait for the bubbles to appear at the bottom of the screen.

Brodie: *Are you on your way home?*

I look down at Maia who's already passed out against me.

Me: *Yes*

Brodie: *I'll get us dinner from Chi's*

I try focusing on the song playing in the background on the short ride home, periodically checking on Maia to make sure she's okay.

When I see Emily's number on my screen, I instantly answer it.

"Maia is sleeping," I tell her quietly. "I'm heading back home now. I was going to call you later."

The quiet on the other end has me worried.

"Emily? Are you okay?"

I hear a sharp breath. "It's my fault."

Confusion pinches my brows. "What is?"

"The pictures," she whispers. "I've been seeing them everywhere, and it made me go back to the wedding albums I posted online."

Anybody could have accessed the wedding album with the right connections. Emily only posted a select few pictures from it to her social media, and none of them were of me doing scandalous things with the right fielder.

“It’s not your fault,” I reassure her, having thought about this. “Unless it was you who gave random people my name and number.”

“I would never!”

My point exactly. “A lot of us were taking pictures that weekend, Em. And let’s be real. There are people who follow that man around for stories all the time. It could have been somebody trying to get a good payday out of the event once they were tipped off about him being in the area. The pictures that were published are from far away. It wouldn’t have been ones taken during the reception when we were all letting loose.”

It takes a moment before she lets out a long breath. “So the person who took them probably wasn’t invited,” she realizes.

Now she’s catching on. “I don’t know who’s responsible, but it isn’t you.”

My friend doesn’t say anything right away.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

Her laugh is abrupt. “I should be asking you that. Things have been so good for you and Maia. I don’t understand why this is happening now.”

I’ve asked myself that too, but Sabrina thinks it has to do with how often Dover is in the media lately. He’s got a lot to lose if the wrong thing is posted about him.

All I want to focus on is making sure Maia is okay. No drama. No legal problems. “I don’t know, but I’m trying not to dwell on the bad stuff or I’ll drink myself stupid again.” I haven’t been able to touch wine since Brodie had to hold my hair back after my drunken escapade a few weeks ago. “Tell me something good. How are you and Hector?”

The next pause has me wondering if the call dropped, so I glance down at my phone to see if it’s still connected.

Then, Emily says, “We’re pregnant.”

An unhuman sound escapes my lips at the news I’ve been waiting to hear. I have to check on Maia to see if she’s still sleeping before asking, “Are you being for real?”

“For real.”

Happiness swells my chest. “I told you it would happen.”

“It’s still so early. I’m scared that something could happen. But my first appointment is next week. Want me to send you pictures?”

“Absolutely. If I wasn’t working, I’d make you FaceTime me so I could be there with you.” I find myself smiling genuinely for her. “Our kids will be best friends.”

My eyes go to the little girl in question, feeling the ice coating my chest melt a little. Thinking about a future full of happiness is all I can focus on.

Emily and I chat for the rest of the ride until I hang up to carry the sleepy girl from the bus stop to our apartment with the rest of our stuff. When I walk in, I smell the food that makes my stomach rumble before I see it waiting for me at the table. There’s a glass of water at one spot, a cupcake beside it from my favorite bakery, and a smiling celebrity lookalike in the seat across from it.

“You didn’t have to do all this,” I tell Brodie.

He lifts one of those broad shoulders. “I know. But you need something good in your life.”

I can feel the tears build behind my eyes, so I have to fight them off as hard as I can. Walking over, I peck Brodie’s cheek before gesturing toward Maia’s heavy body. “I’m going to put her down for the night.”

“Want help?”

Always. “No,” I answer instead. “I’ve got it.”

But because he knows me well, he follows me anyway.

And when the first tear falls, he simply swipes it away with his thumb, goes to Maia’s dresser, and asks, “The pink cat pajamas or the colorful llamas?”

Sniffling, I murmur, “I hate you sometimes.”

He chooses the cat pj’s, passing them to me with a knowing grin. “No, you don’t.”

No. No, I don’t.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dante

THE SPORTS COMPLEX is ritzier than I expect it to be, but I guess that's what happens when the team it's home to is worth billions. It makes knowing somebody who plays for them that much more impressive, even if there's a nagging suspicion that's nestled its way under my skin since my conversation with Brodie last week.

I walk up to the reception desk, where a middle-aged woman sits. "I'm here to see my—"

"Hey," I hear called out from a familiar voice. I turn to see Rafael jogging over to me with a duffel thrown over his shoulder. "He's with me, Meredith."

The woman, Meredith, smiles at him with a beaming face. "Good practice today?"

My brother shoots her a wink, making her blush. "I'm not limping out of here this time, so it's definitely a good day. Can you get my brother a visitor's pass so he can come to games? I saw Trav get one for his uncle yesterday."

"Oh, how nice! I didn't know you had a brother. I can see the resemblance." She turns to me, skimming me from head to toe. "You have the physique of a player. Are you in the industry?"

It's Rafael who laughs like that's the funniest thing he's heard. "Love the guy to death, but he's not the athlete in the family."

My jaw tics at the snide comment. How would he know? Out of all the conversations we've had, he's never asked if I've played sports. It's always been his territory, so he doesn't like broaching it if it means he could be outdone. Which is why he doesn't know that I was the top scorer in basketball most of my high school career or won my school three different trophies for the one-hundred-meter dash on the track team.

Do I correct him? No. I let him have his moment since he obviously holds on to it so tightly. After all, I'm not the one playing for a major league baseball team.

Meredith smiles at me, but it's not the same way she looks at my brother. "I'll need you to fill out some information so we can get you on the family and friend's all-access list."

I look to Rafael. "You don't need to do that. It's hard for me to get out here with my schedule. It'd be better put to use elsewhere."

Rafael scoffs. "Who else would use it?"

He's got family on his mother's side that I know he keeps in contact with. They live closer to Philly than I do. "Your mom, for one."

His lips twitch briefly before perking up when he turns toward Meredith. "I'll get that stuff filled out for him later." He jabs me with his elbow and gestures toward the front doors. "Come on."

The fact he hasn't asked why I chose to come here is alarming, considering I've never brought up coming before. He knows damn well it's not to get free shit. I rarely ask for anything, much less handouts.

When he walks us to a red Corvette in the nearest lot, I stop and stare as he unlocks it with the key fob he pulls out of his pocket. "Where is your Buick? You loved that thing."

This had to have set him back at least six figures, which he's never dropped easily in the past. Unlike me, he's always had decent access to money. His mother wasn't well off, but she had enough to give them a good lifestyle.

"Vanessa helped me get it," he tells me, patting the sleek roof. "Isn't it nice?"

His agent shouldn't be helping him get anything other than sponsorships. "Didn't really picture you in a sports car, honestly."

He shrugs, opening the trunk and tossing his bag inside. "I did a photo shoot with a couple of the other rookies and a blue Corvette for *Men's Health* not too long ago when they were interviewing us about being signed. Van thought it might be good for my image if I bought one after I signed the contract."

It's definitely... flashy. "Vanessa seems very hands-on with your lifestyle," I comment dryly. "Is that normal? You'd think she'd be encouraging you to save money, not spend it."

For a moment, my brother pauses. I can see his teeth grind before he closes the trunk and walks over to the driver's side. "She gets her cut, so she doesn't give a fuck what I do with mine. Vanessa is good at what she does."

My eyes narrow in on him. "Christ. You're not sleeping with her, are you?"

His eyes flash. "It doesn't matter."

The hell it does. "Haven't you ever heard never to shit where you eat? She works for you, not the other way around. I got a raise, but that doesn't mean I went into my boss's office and stuck it in her as a thank you."

Rafael's quick retort has me locked into my spot on the pavement. "That's because she's not your type, and we both know it."

We stare one another down, alarm whistles going off in my head.

"What the fuck does that mean?" I seethe.

He levels with me. "You know what it means. Do you honestly think people haven't talked? Cheri told my mother about your little explorations for years whenever she'd show up to the house with another bruise on her body. Every time my mom would ask yours what happened, she'd say the same thing. 'Anthony caught Dante with the neighbor boy again.'"

The neighbor boy.

Ice coats my skin.

Henry, the boy next door, used to be one of my closest friends. By the time we were in seventh grade, things had changed. Feelings. How I saw him. He made the first move, and it'd opened doors that led to a lot more than innocent touching. But when I was in ninth grade, his father walked in on us making out in his room and went to Anthony about it. That was the first time I had to witness him beat my mother for "encouraging" me. Any time I did something he disapproved of, he'd take it out on her.

My voice is low. "She told you that?"

Rafael dips his chin.

I have to look away when shame cements itself into my stomach. I fucking hate feeling this way. But then I think about how I kept seeing Henry until we graduated high school, sneaking out and going where we thought we couldn't be caught to experience all our firsts together.

It didn't seem to matter how careful we were, Anthony would find out. Then he'd go home, hurt my mother, and remind me it was all my fault.

“I will not allow my son to live that way,” he yells, gripping Mom’s hair. “Until you understand that, I’ll have to remind your mother the proper way to raise a boy into a man.”

Nobody can truly understand the reason I keep telling my mother yes when I should be saying no. How could I turn somebody away who took so many beatings because of me? I can’t.

Rafael sighs heavily. “Look, it’s your life. I have no say in it. What you do is your business, but don’t judge me for my decisions.”

I remember why I’m here, which is the only thing that pulls me away from this conversation. “What about your mom? I know you wanted to get her into a good facility that costs a lot of money. How are you going to afford that if Vanessa is telling you to buy fancy shit you don’t need just so you look good?”

He closes the trunk with a sigh. “I got her a bed at Valley Hope in New York City. Their inpatient program is one of the best on the East Coast and they’ve got certified specialists at her side twenty-four seven. She’s in good hands.”

I’ve heard of that place before. Most people can’t afford it, which is why it’s known for housing quite a few struggling celebrities and their addictions. Only the best for the best.

Clearing my throat, I’m cautious with my next inquiry. “It’s one thing to get your mom into a good rehabilitation center, but the car and the new condo that you’re renting—”

“Dante.” Rafael laughs with a roll of his eyes. “It’s fine. I’ve got the money now. The minors paid me just fine, and Vanessa worked her magic to get me a larger check when I moved to the majors. I know you don’t like her, but she negotiated extra money and some bonuses to help me get settled into the area. She’s taking care of me, so I can take care of my mom.”

What kind of bonuses could he be getting already? It took him years in the minors to get smaller sponsorships for money in the off-season.

“Get in,” he says, climbing in himself.

I wasn’t anticipating going for a joyride when I asked him to talk today, but I get in anyway. “What bonuses did the She Devil get you?”

He snorts at my nickname for his agent. I’ve met her only once, and that was one too many. I don’t think she’s particularly a fan of mine either, so I

don't feel bad for thinking she's a greedy bitch. "Oh, you know. Interviews. Photo shoots. Some publications are willing to pay a lot of money for up-and-coming athletes."

Something doesn't sit well with me as we turn out of the park. "Which ones?"

Most magazines only want athletes featured that will pull money in. Rafael may have been one of the bigger names in the minors because of his stats, but he's a small fish in the majors. They wouldn't go after him first thing if they have better seasoned options.

My brother looks at me in amusement. "I didn't think you'd be that interested. You never have been before."

Well, my roommate's tryst with your teammate wasn't randomly published for the world to see before you came around.

Instead of accusing him of something I'm still not willing to believe he was part of, I say, "I've always been interested, I just don't like prying into business that isn't mine. But you're obviously getting somewhere with all the work that you've been putting in."

If he suspects anything, he doesn't say so. "I appreciate that, dude. It really hasn't been all me, though. As much of a pain in the ass as she is, Vanessa is the mastermind behind some of my success lately. My name wouldn't be where it is without her."

Why does that sound so rehearsed? Even he's told me how annoying his agent is, and now he's giving her credit? "I guess she wouldn't be doing her job if it were any other way, huh?"

All he does is hum this time.

As we drive past lanes of backed-up traffic until we're in the middle of it ourselves, I decide to change tactics. "Have you seen the shit about Dover going around? Bet that's made practice interesting."

Rafael's eyes go to his window. "Yeah, he's been quieter than usual since the claims were made. I think he's realizing he can't charm his way out of it when new articles pop up every day about him."

I wait for him to indulge me on any of the talk he's heard, maybe even names dropped by Dover or the guys who've hung around him before, but he doesn't bite.

He shrugs. "It serves him right. The team obviously likes seeing him knocked down a few pegs. Coach suggested he take some time to deal with

the headlines so people won't spend game time talking about his personal life rather than the games."

So maybe he doesn't know about Blake.

"Does that mean they're benching him?" I ask cluelessly.

He snorts. "Doubtful. Though, he's been on edge. If he keeps acting up, Coach will probably make him sit the next game out. He's already threatened it a couple times."

I can't get a read on what he's thinking, and it's obvious that he isn't going to offer up any information that could lead to who the girl is in the pictures with Dover.

"Brodie was trying to bet us three hundred bucks that he wouldn't be starting," I say, hoping to bait him to ask about everybody else at home.

Rafael takes it. "He's going to lose if he bet it on tomorrow's game. They would have told us if there was a change in the lineup by now."

I sink into my seat as I study the middle-aged man in the lane next to us, looking anxiously at his watch. "That's what Blake said."

Traffic starts moving again. "I didn't take her as a sports girl," he says, voice a notch lower. "Does she watch the games with you guys?"

He briefly looks at me, one eyebrow arched in inquiry, waiting for an answer. There's obviously interest there from the night the three of us shared, but I think it goes beyond that. He'd ask about her, but it was never anything trivial.

"No. She's not a fan of sports." I glance at him. "Or the athletes playing them."

Rafael doesn't say anything.

"I need to ask you something."

"Don't."

I blink. "Don't what?"

"Don't ask me questions that you don't want the answers to," he says quietly, his hand gripping the wheel a little tighter. "Because you won't like what I have to say about it. You're smart. You know what I'm talking about. That's why you're really here, isn't it?"

Fuck.

Fingers tightening in my lap, I try choosing my words carefully. "Was it worth it?"

He takes a moment, the silence too thick for the implication of what's left unsaid. If he feels bad about whatever he and Vanessa have done, he's not letting it cut through the distance coating his face as he weaves through the cars, finally cruising past twenty miles an hour.

"You know better than anybody that we've had to work ten times harder to get where we are," he says, glancing into his side mirror before merging toward the exit lane. "Our circumstances mean we have to do things we might not be proud of. I'm doing what I need to for my family. You would do the same."

"And what about the people you hurt? What about their families?" He knows who I'm referring to without me needing to say so.

This time, Rafael doesn't hesitate. "I've always cared about everybody before myself. My mother. My cousins. My friends. Is it so wrong that I do this for me?"

It's true what they say. Money changes people. Because the person driving this ridiculous car is nothing like the guy I used to know. "It's wrong when we always swore we'd be better than Anthony."

"Fuck you," he growls. "I'm taking care of people. He destroyed them. We're different."

"Tell that to Blake," I whip back.

He white knuckles the steering wheel. "I don't want to hear it, Dante. If you have a problem, go home and complain to your little boyfriend about it."

My body locks up at those harsh words.

The rest of the drive to his condo is thick with silent tension. When he parks in the garage underneath his building, I grab the door handle and say, "I'm going to catch a ride to the train station."

"Dante, stop."

I step out and bend down to look into the car at him. "I've already got one family member who makes my life hell because of who I am. I don't need another homophobic dickbag trying to make me feel bad about it. You say you're nothing like Anthony but look in the goddam mirror."

He doesn't respond, only stares at me.

"Good luck with the game tomorrow."

I slam the door closed and ignore him calling out to me, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders.

That's when I realize what just happened.
Did I just come out to my brother?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Blake

I WALK IN after another long day at work feeling ten times more drained than normal after filtering calls on my cell phone. Unless it's one of my roommates, my mother, my lawyer, or the daycare, I don't bother picking it up or listening to the voicemails. I'm too scared one will be from Dover or his team telling me I breached the agreement. Every new face that comes into the doctor's office is one I'm afraid will hand me papers saying I've been served or tell me they know who I am.

Denial only gets a person so far before anxiety catches up.

I'm grateful today is one of the boys' days to pick up Maia because she's always worn out from all their antics by the time I'm home. When I close the front door behind me and see her laughing and holding on to Brodie's shirt as he crawls around the floor with her on his back, I know she'll be out like a light after dinner.

"Horses?" I guess tiredly.

Brodie grins up at me, hoofing the hardwood floor. "How'd you guess?"

"Giddy up! Giddy up!" Maia kicks at his sides and tugs on his shirt, bouncing until he chuckles and does another circle around the living room.

Maia's obsession with horses started when she was two. The only show she would fall asleep to was *My Little Pony*, so I'd have to record as many episodes as possible and play them when I needed her to take a nap and give me a break. Brodie, Finn, and occasionally Dante would even sit and watch with us until they were practically part of the Bronie club.

"Why don't you give Uncle Brodie a break?" I suggest, pulling her off him and giving her a sloppy kiss on the cheek that she has the nerve to wipe off with her hand. "I missed you. Did you have a good day?"

Maia squirms, reaching back out toward the man I took her from. "No! Brodie! Giddy up. Play horse wid me."

Brodie winks at me as he stands, taking her back and holding her against his side.

“Traitor,” I grumble, crossing my arms over my chest when I see her settle into him with big doe eyes beaming in his direction.

“She can’t deny the charm I exude,” he teases me, turning to my daughter with a playfully cocky smile. “Right, Maia girl?”

Her little giggle says it all. If she’s anything like me when she’s older, I’m in serious trouble. Because I understand well how good it feels to have men like Brodie pay attention to me.

Especially when he asks, “Want to help me eat your favorite for dinner?”

Maia’s face lights up. “Pizza?”

The crestfallen look on my roommate’s face tells me it isn’t pizza he’s got ready in the kitchen. “Uh, your second favorite then.”

Her thinking face scrunches up her nose. “Nuggets.”

The kitchen smells like marinara sauce, so I decide to help Brodie out. “You know what I think Brodie made for us? Spaghetti! He probably even got the cat shaped pasta again since you liked that so much last time.”

Brodie quickly comes to his own defense. “It was on sale.”

I highly doubt the organic specialty pasta shaped like cats that you can only find in one store in a forty-mile radius was on sale. It’s cute he wants me to believe he didn’t spend a stupid amount of money simply to make my three-year-old happy.

And because the little traitor in his arms knows how to get her way, she taps her chin like she has to think about the food he’s offering her before eventually nodding. “Okay.”

I’m sure he would have given her something different if she didn’t want whatever he’s prepared because he’s a softie at heart. I’ve asked him and Finn not to because it gets hard fighting her when she’s being stubborn about the food I want her to eat. Some nights it’s easier to let her win, though.

Something I don’t tell my mother because I don’t want to get a forty-five-minute lecture on how I need to be better at disciplining my child.

I’ll give my mom credit. She’s never brought up the magazine articles since our one-on-one. I think she’s just as terrified of losing her

granddaughter as I am. Even though Sabrina has insisted that won't happen, it's a lingering thought in the back of my mind.

"They've kept it hidden this long," Sabrina reassures me over the phone. "They're going to want to sweep this under the rug as quickly as possible and never speak of it again. I've worked on similar situations with much smaller celebrities, but it's all the same."

All I can hope is that she's right.

When we walk into the kitchen, Maia, still tucked against Brodie, says, "We gots flowers, Mama."

My eyebrows go up. "Who got flowers?"

She points at the counter, where a regular glass full of water and white daisies rests.

Before I can ask, Brodie says, "I saw them on my way home from work and picked a few. Figured Maia girl would like them. It's not a big deal."

Slowly, my focus goes from the flowers delicately placed in the glass to the man placing my daughter in her highchair. "You told me once that the only thing you give girls is a good time."

I think his exact words were, *"I'm a straight shooter. None of that romance crap. The only thing I give women are orgasms."*

At the time, I laughed at his bluntness. It seemed like a fitting statement from him. Something I could picture. Not all guys are the hearts and flowers type, and I respect it.

Brodie scratches the column of his throat before sheepishly looking at me. "Well, Maia is different."

That's all he says before getting the table set for dinner and dropping the conversation. It doesn't stop me from periodically looking at the flowers throughout the meal or gawking at the man who picked them.

Hours later, when Maia is fed, bathed, and fast asleep, I walk into the living room where Brodie is flipping through one of the streaming services to find something. He instantly opens his arm for me, which I happily slide into like he usually does when we watch TV together.

"Where are Finn and Dante?"

Brodie scans one of the movie summaries before continuing to flip for something better. "Last I knew, Dante was in Philly visiting his brother. He didn't mention anything about coming home tonight. Finn was supposedly going out with some people from work."

I'm surprised Finn didn't tell me that when we saw each other this morning. I asked what his plans were for the night because we still haven't finished that Waco documentary. "Is Finn mad at me?"

Brodie's arm tightens around my shoulders in a half hug. "Nah. He's got a lot on his mind. I've been poking the bear a bit which hasn't helped."

"Why can't you just tell me whatever it is you know about him? There was a time when we were all friends here. If I messed it up because of what I did with—"

"It has nothing to do with that. You're a grown woman who can make her own choices. Just like both Finn and Dante are grown men who make their own. We've all got stuff we don't want people to know about. Their shit is something that needs to come out when they're ready, I just wish they'd be comfortable enough to talk about it."

I can respect his loyalty to them. I know better than anybody how horrible it is to have your secrets put on full blast without warning.

Brodie brushes my chin with his knuckles to get me to look up at him. "I know it sucks being in the dark but trust me on this. We're all friends. I want us to keep the peace."

Friends. Why does it not feel that way anymore, then?

The longer we stare, the more aware I am of his fingers lingering on my chin still. I let out a small breath, trying to play it cool as his fingertips move from my chin to my cheek. The pad of his thumb brushes my bottom lip, and the silence thickens, but the growing tension between us doesn't.

We're friends.

But at the moment, I want to be more.

"You picked Maia flowers," I tell him softly, admirably.

I swear his cheeks pinken. "They weren't just for her..."

Friends.

I don't think that's entirely true.

I'm not sure who makes the first move, but Brodie's lips are suddenly on mine. They're soft, gentler than I'd imagine they'd be. His hand curves around the back of my neck, fingertips massaging the skin there until a quiet moan escapes my lips.

He takes advantage, tongue slipping in to coax my own as he tugs me closer to him. Before I know it, I'm straddling his lap with my arms wound

around his neck. I deepen the kiss, settling onto him to feel the length harden beneath me.

My fingers find his shirt, tugging it up until it's off and on the floor. He follows my lead, peeling off the stained blouse that Maia got sauce on in her haste to fight the bathtub.

"These tits are fucking amazing," he says, grabbing them and tugging at the material of my cheap Walmart bra until one of my nipples is exposed. He wastes no time taking it into his mouth, causing my legs to tighten with the sensation his tongue brings out as it drags across my pebbled nipple.

I grind down on his lap, building the friction I need that perks my breasts up as he works them with his mouth and fingers.

When my hands make fast work at undoing the button of his jeans, he pauses to look up at me with glazed eyes. "Are you sure?" he asks, knowing that once the denim layers between us are gone, so is any chance of this stopping.

Instead of answering, I bend down to kiss him and show him how certain I am. Because he picked me and my daughter flowers. Nobody has given me flowers before.

My hands release him from his jeans and wrap around his hard cock to stroke him. It takes less than a minute for the rest of our clothes to find their way to the floor.

A startled noise bubbles past my lips when Brodie flips me onto my back and opens my legs to settle between them. When he kisses me, it's only briefly before that devious mouth starts trailing downward until his lips stop at the apex of my thigh.

I watch him as he peeks up at me through his lashes, his lips curling upward before his tongue swipes along me. My hips arch upward as he works my sensitive nerves in his mouth, using his fingers to tease my entrance and stretch me to prepare for everything else to come.

Fingers threading through his hair, I moan at the wicked things he does to me. It's unfair that other women have gotten this treatment from him, but I push that thought far, far away.

Pulling on his hair to get his attention, I smile when I see the arousal on his lips. "I want you inside me," I tell him.

"Not until you come."

I'm about to reply when he goes back down on me, swirling his tongue where his fingers were and tweaking my clit until an orgasm makes my knees lock on either side of his head.

He rides out the waves as I all but suffocate him with my pussy, pressing him between my thighs to feel his hot tongue against me. If he minds, he definitely doesn't show it. Licking and sucking as I come around him, he holds on to my thighs until my body is sated on the couch.

He rises on his knees, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand with a subtle wink, and flips me onto my stomach, positioning me exactly how he wants me. I've never had any issue with men taking lead in the bedroom. In fact, I've always found assertiveness hot.

Brodie shows me just how talented he is at doing that, arching my back until my ass is in the air, piling two pillows underneath me, and settling between my spread legs. There's no warning before he impales himself, his thick dick stretching me out and making me feel blissfully full.

"Fuck, you feel so good." I moan, eyes rolling back as he does it again.

It's mayhem from there.

Skin slapping.

Low moans and growled groans.

Harbored breathing.

He grabs a fistful of hair and tugs my head back to kiss me, completely dominating my body with each skilled movement.

And I love every single second that I'm not in control. Because it's tiring being the girl who has to know what the next step is. Sex is the one time I've let myself feel anything other than the overwhelming responsibilities that try drowning me.

But right now, I don't feel that way at all.

I feel sexy.

Desired.

Wanted.

I welcome it all as Brodie uses my pussy to get off, fucking us both in fluid, hard movements that have me biting into the arm of the couch.

He presses down onto my lower back as he fucks me harder so I feel every single pump. It hits the perfect spot until a choked noise rises from my throat, mixed with the pleas for him to keep going.

And he does.

One of his hands grabs my hip, yanking me back each time he enters me to enhance how deep he goes, while the other stays pressed against my lower back to keep me arched at the perfect angle.

I know now that he wasn't kidding about all those times he said he could make a girl scream. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little jealous.

Brodie slaps my ass so hard I know there will be a mark left behind. "Are you going to be a good little girl and come on my dick?"

I look back at him with a surprised grin. Long gone is the goofy flirt who joked about how good he is in bed, and now is the man whose life mission it is to prove it.

He presses my head back into the cushion and goes faster than before, hammering into me with a newfound goal until I'm gasping for air.

"That's it," he praises, keeping hold of my head so I can't move. "You're doing such a good job taking me. Come on my cock, baby."

I don't know if it's his words, praise, or how he's fucking me that gets me to detonate again. Before I know what's happening, my pussy clamps down on him. My legs quiver so much that he has to hold me up as he finishes inside me.

One of his hands gently strokes my back as he carefully pulls himself out. I can feel myself leak of him, getting the couch wet.

When I look over my shoulder again, the softness is back on Brodie's face. I offer him a tired smile, hugging one of the pillows to me.

He bends down and kisses my shoulder, repositioning us so he can settle in behind me.

His arm hooks around me, tucking me into his front. "Been wanting to do that for a while."

"Really?"

He chuckles. "As if you didn't know."

I bite my bottom lip to stop myself from smiling. "I knew you wanted to fuck me, but most guys do. That felt..."

Brodie hums, peppering another kiss against my shoulder and collarbone before settling his face into the crook of my neck and letting out a content sigh.

Lying here with him is foreign.

I've never cuddled with anybody after sleeping with them.

I don't hate it, though, and that scares me.

As if he knows what's going through my mind, he grabs my hand and threads our fingers together, resting them on my bare stomach. "Get out of that pretty head of yours. Everything is going to be okay."

I know he's not just referring to the mess I have to deal with outside of this apartment. He means us. The dynamic we've built.

Everything will be okay.

Brodie has never made me feel like I couldn't trust his word, so I allow myself to settle into him and soak up the body heat that hugs me. Closing my eyes, I feel his finger gently brush the back of my hand to coax me into a subtle oblivion.

I wake up sometime later to two strong arms picking me up and carrying me away. Still sleepy, I curl into the bare chest holding me and make a noise of protest when I'm set down. A quiet chuckle is the response I get before the bed dips beside me, and those arms are back.

For the second time in a night, I fall asleep being held.

When I wake up to an alarm that's not mine, it's in a bed that's not the lumpy old mattress I brought with me, in a room that I've never slept in before. Brodie is asleep beside me, one arm still curled around me with the other draped over his face.

I turn on my side and let myself enjoy a little more time in the safe bubble Brodie built around us. Who knows how long it'll be before it pops.

For once, I hope it's not me holding the needle when it does.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Dante

THE MAN IN bed beside me stirs awake, reminding me where I am and how much I drank last night. Groaning, I pinch the bridge of my nose and sit up, fighting the nausea in the pit of my stomach. There are two tablets of Motrin by a glass of water on the hotel nightstand that I definitely didn't put there before passing out.

From the other side of the bed, I hear a muffled, "Take them or you'll regret it later."

Looking from the pills to Finn, I frown. He's tangled in the sheets looking as exhausted as I feel. "I shouldn't have called you."

He hums, turning to face me. I remember enough about last night to know he's not wearing anything under the covers. "But you did, and I'm here."

He rarely takes time off work for anything. But he did for me.

Palming my face, I take the pills to help the headache pounding in my temples. "It was fucked up. I'm sorry."

Eventually, Finn sits up too. The sheet drapes around his torso as he stretches, cracking his neck and watching me down the rest of the water. "No need to apologize."

We sit quietly, listening to the bustle outside our room.

"You told me it was Rafael," he says, bringing up the drunken voicemail I left when I dialed him. "We need to talk about that since you wouldn't last night."

Jaw ticking, I get out of bed and slide on my briefs to hide the boner I have despite the hangover taunting me. "What the hell do you want me to do?" I turn toward him, fisting my shirt in my hand. "If I say something to the wrong person, I could make it worse for Blake. You got her a lawyer for a reason. It's her job to figure out how to fix this."

Finn stares at me. “Isn’t it her friend’s job to make sure she’s okay, though?”

I pick up my phone and see multiple missed calls and messages from Finn, Brodie, and a few other people who’ve been trying to track me down. There are a few voicemails from numbers I don’t know that have me glad my battery is nearly dead.

All I tell Finn is, “She’s always been your friend. Not mine.”

It’s a dick thing to say, but not entirely untrue. The boys have been closer to Blake than me all these years. Sure, I fucked her. But it was never beyond anything physical.

I don’t want her life going to hell because of what my brother did, but my brother is the only family I have. Even though I’m pissed off at him, I don’t know if I can shut him out completely.

Finn gets up and grabs his clothes to redress. “I know you and Blake aren’t friends, but I thought I knew you better than that.”

Out of everybody we live with, he’s the only person who knows me. “It’s complicated, Finn.”

He tucks his wallet into his back pocket and looks at me. “I don’t know Rafael that well, but there’s something about him I don’t trust. He’s working with some intense people who will tear anybody down to make sure he gets to the top. What other motive would he have by letting that story run? Who’s to say he won’t do that to you if he got something worth sharing?”

My reply is instant. “He wouldn’t. I haven’t done anything he could use against me anyway.”

“No?” he doubts. “What if he wanted to take a stance on a hot topic?”

“And which topic would that be?”

The man across from me deadpans, “You know which one. If he wanted to let the world know he’s an ally, who do you think he would out to prove it?”

My nostrils flare, remembering what I said to Rafael in the car. I didn’t tell him I was gay, bisexual, or straight. But it seems pretty evident he’s got his own assumptions about me that he’s made on his own.

Labels can be dangerous.

Why can’t we simply be human?

“He wouldn’t do that,” I repeat.

Finn doesn't seem as sure. "I hope that's the truth for your sake, man. But you've been lying to yourself about a hell of a lot more than that. So be careful."

What the hell is that supposed to mean? Before he can walk out the door, I stop him by slamming my palm against the wood to close it. "You have no right to tell me that."

"Why?" he challenges, turning to me with crossed arms.

I meet his hard eyes, the slim distance between us dangerous. "Because you're no different than I am. Look where you are. You came the second I called. Drove three hours at night in the pouring rain. What does that say?"

When he doesn't answer, I know I've got him.

It's not just me in this position.

He could have said something by now to anybody, but he hasn't. It's not for my benefit, it's for his too.

Instead of answering, he says, "If you want a ride home, meet me outside in ten minutes. I'm leaving without you if you're not there. You can take the train home."

That tells me all I need to hear.

He'll wait for you.

"Fine."

This time, I let him walk out.

When I grab my phone, the same number that left me voicemails is calling again. "What?" is how I greet the unknown caller.

There's a pause, then a sigh. "You're just like your brother, aren't you? You'd think one of you would have manners, but I suppose you didn't exactly have a stellar role model."

I don't recognize the feminine voice on the other end. "And who the hell are you to say that to me?"

"It's Vanessa Ray. Rafael's agent."

Of *fucking* course. "I'm still waiting to hear why you're wasting my time right now. You're not my agent. We have no business."

"Rafael is my business," she counters firmly, in the same tone I've heard her speak to him. "And I need to ensure his place with the Phillies is secure. Which means whatever high ground you're pissed off that he didn't take needs to be forgiven. It was my choice to do what we did, not his."

"He went through with it."

“Yes, well, he wasn’t very pleased about it,” she says simply. “Anyway, I need you to sign some paperwork.”

Is she fucking kidding me? “I’m not signing an NDA or any other bullshit. I’m already blowing up my friendships for him despite my better judgment.”

She’s quiet, so I have no idea if she’ll let it be. I guess I’m not shocked when she doesn’t. “It’s my job to keep people quiet about things to protect my client. Rafael is—”

“My brother,” I cut her off. “He’s my brother, as much as his decisions lately have pissed me off. That trumps him being your fuck buddy.”

She laughs. “I can’t argue with you there. But you have to admit, I’m doing my job. Crossing my t’s, dotting my i’s. Those decisions you hate so much are securing a future for him. And possibly even you if you so desire. He wants to take care of those he cares about.”

He’s made it clear that he only cares about himself and his mother. “Want to get to the point sometime today? I’ve got places to be.”

There’s a pregnant pause. “I know for a fact that your little friend from home has a lawyer who’s digging around. I’m going to make sure that your brother’s name doesn’t get revealed by promising that hers won’t either. Rafael already made me promise I wouldn’t out Blake or her daughter, only the pictures. We could have made a lot more money if we allowed those publications to name Dover’s mystery woman, but your brother took the cut.”

He did what?

He protected Blake.

“Rumors are only the first step to a man’s reputation falling,” Vanessa tells me. “You’re all lucky that it only takes one story leaking for others to follow. People talk after that. Blake isn’t the only woman Dover has cheated on his wife with, but she’s the first who doesn’t want a payout to speak up on it.”

What is she saying? “Does that mean she’s safe from whatever shitshow you started?”

“I don’t know if I’d use the word ‘safe,’” she muses. “She did sleep with a famous athlete, after all. That’s not particularly a smart choice considering the publicity surrounding his career, now, is it? But I’m not

going to use her because I told Rafael I wouldn't. Think what you want of me, but I do like him enough to hear him out once in a while."

In other words, he had to do something for her for this trade-off.

It's no different than wanting something from me, which is why she even bothered reaching out. "What is it you want from me?"

"Your signature. That's it."

On an NDA, no doubt.

"You're a pain in my ass," I tell her.

"It's mutual," she responds. "Does that mean you're going to sign one? I'll have one emailed to you within the hour."

I'm not surprised she has my email. If she's investigated Blake's history, who's to say she hasn't done her research on me, Brodie, and Finn, too? "As long as you never call me again."

"Deal. Goodbye, Dante."

She hangs up before I can answer, which is no hair off my ass.

By the time I get down to where Finn is parked in front of the hotel, it's three minutes past when he said he'd leave.

All I say when I climb in is, "Blake won't suffer from my brother's choices. I've made sure of it. As for the other thing..."

Finn stays silent as he looks at me.

"None of it is easy for me."

Him.

Me.

Us.

"It's not because of you."

He nods. "I know."

"I'll figure it out," I murmur.

Again, he says, "I know."

What he doesn't tell me is that we'll figure it out together. Because he waited for me instead of leaving like he threatened.

It seems we never mean what we say to each other about walking away.

An hour into the long drive home, I find the courage to cover his hand with mine.

We stay like that for the remaining two.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Blake

SABRINA'S NAME POPS up on my phone as I'm walking into the apartment, making nerves bubble in my stomach. The unknown calls have stopped over the past day and a half after Dover's team released a statement denying any allegations made against him.

"Good, you answered," she says chipperly. She called me yesterday to let me know that Dover's team was going to do a press release about the articles, so I'd bitten my nails down to the quick waiting for the news outlets to publish it. I knew he wouldn't out me because that meant harming himself. But that didn't mean I was in the clear.

"Did something happen?" I ask nervously. She knows I've been a nervous wreck waiting to see if I was going to be served, which she told me countless times would never happen. Nonetheless, it didn't ease the worry.

"I sent you a link in your email," she says. "Did you see it?"

I've barely had time to eat my lunch today, much less look at my emails. "Sorry, it's been a busy day. Is it something bad?"

"On the contrary," she answers. Her tone is too happy to believe that it could be anything other than positive. "It's good. For you, anyway."

My brows pinch as I set my bag down on the kitchen counter. "Give me a second." I pull my phone away and scroll through the random emails until I find her name and the link in question.

Mystery Woman Named in Jonathon Dover Cheating Scandal

Panic seeps in as I click the article and scan the first few lines. There's no way she'd be sending me this unless it protected me, so there has to be some sort of catch.

"What the...?"

The woman claiming to be in the photographs with right fielder Jonathon Dover finally speaks out about their long-time affair.

Sabrina breaks the silence. "There are already three other women speaking up about their time with the baseball star, and that's not all. One of them claims she has a son with him."

My eyes widen. "He has another kid?"

"Keep reading!" she encourages.

Bethany Wright claims she met Dover at a sports bar in Cincinnati four years ago, where the two had a one-time affair that resulted in the birth of her son. Since these claims, two more women have spoken out about their time with the baseball player during his stints in their cities during the height of his season.

"But this Bethany woman isn't the one in the pictures they printed," I point out stupidly.

"They don't need to know that," she states. "I have seen this play out time and time again, Blake. Women like that are hungry for attention. They'll do anything to stay in the spotlight and get whatever the media and public will give to her. Same with the others who have come forward since her."

The only problem with that is if they decide to come clean. "What if Bethany eventually says she lied about being the person in the pictures?"

Sabrina laughs. "His team is going to deny everything to make him look like he's being attacked, but there's too much proof against him. They aren't going to name anybody else because that'll look bad on him no matter how they go about it. I think you're missing the point here."

What's that supposed to be? My silence gives her ample time to answer.

"You weren't the first one."

I blink.

Then blink again as those words sink in.

"I have it on good authority that a DNA test was done on the child, and the results aren't favorable enough for Dover to keep saying he's innocent. He's pulled this before on women. Probably more than we'll ever know. It's evident that he's irresponsibly using his status to get women and pay them off for their silence and God knows what else. You and Bethany kept your kids. How many others didn't because he paid them to?"

Anything is possible if you have the money. “What does that mean exactly?”

“There are so many other women involved that he’s not going to narrow in on you. You’ve never once reached out to him or asked for more money. I doubt that’s always the case. As long as you continue keeping to yourself, he’ll do the same. His team isn’t going to want to bring in another woman to the conversation to worsen the mess he’s made for himself.”

I think back to what that first reporter asked me weeks ago. *Do you really want to be a girl going nowhere?* The answer is simple. Yes.

Because at least nowhere is safe.

Dover can’t touch me.

He wouldn’t want to.

Not again.

Sabrina adds, “I looked over the paperwork you signed, and it’s like an amateur wrote it. You have the proper custody documents that you were smart to file after Maia was born, so there’s no way Dover can lay claim to any part of her life. On the very rare chance he chooses to try pulling any bullshit like that, we can easily use that ridiculous NDA they made you sign as evidence that he wanted no involvement in raising her. You’re safe, Blake.”

You’re safe.

You’re safe.

You’re safe.

A weight feels like it’s been lifted off me, allowing me to breathe for the first time in forever. “So it’s over,” I conclude.

“It’s over.”

Clicking my tongue, I walk into my room and close the door behind me. “How much do I owe you? I’ll need a little time to collect the money, but I ___”

“It’s already paid for.”

I stop. “What?”

“It’s been taken care of,” she reassures me. “I’ll keep an eye out on the media, but I highly doubt anything will arise for you to concern yourself with. But if you have any questions, or something pops up, you know where to find me.”

When we hang up, I stare at the phone in confusion, wondering who could have footed the bill for time rendered. She's not the most expensive legal counsel out there, but she's not the cheapest either.

Finn. Even though we haven't been on good terms lately, Finn is still my friend. Clearly, he'll do whatever he can to help me. Even pay a ridiculous amount of money for me to get the legal help that worked itself out without her.

Walking out of my room, I tap on his bedroom door before opening it. "Hey, I just wanted to thank you for—"

I stop mid-step when I see Dante on his knees in front of Finn.

"Oh my God," I whisper, face burning as I quickly back out and shut the door.

Standing there for a second to process the scene I just walked into, I swallow and step away as frantic voices speak from the other side of the door.

I'm about to rush back to my room when the front door opens and Brodie walks in. He smiles as soon as he sees me, but the look quickly vanishes when he sees the shock on my face.

"What's going—"

"Is *that* what you've been keeping from me this whole time?" I demand, pointing toward Finn's door.

Brodie's surprise turns to awareness when he glances over my shoulder at the two people who appear haphazardly dressed from Finn's room. Under his breath, he murmurs, "I knew this would happen. Christ."

Narrowing my eyes, I ask, "Is that the secret you've kept from me?" Instead of pinning this all on him, I turn to Finn and Dante. "All of you have kept this from me?"

The hurt in my tone is obvious. Did they think I'd care? That I'd judge them? I've never been the type to care who sleeps with who. I would be a hypocrite if I did. What I do care about is being kept in the dark.

It's Brodie who puts his hand on my shoulder to bring my attention back to him. "I already told you that it wasn't my place."

From behind me, I hear Finn ask, "You knew this whole time?"

Brodie's eyes move from mine to his. "I'm not a fucking idiot, Finn. I can put two and two together. The walls aren't that thick here. Your little late-night sessions don't go unnoticed."

I hold my hands up and spin around to face the two men. “How long has this been going on? And why didn’t you tell me? You knew I wouldn’t have cared. I love you guys.”

Dante’s skepticism is painted across his face at the statement. “It wasn’t your business, Blake.”

“I live here. Doesn’t that mean I should have some sort of opinion? This whole time there’s been a rule about you guys not sleeping with me, but you’ve been sneaking around with Finn for probably just as long.”

The second his eyes narrow, I know I’ve gone too far. “And how well did the rule really go over? Hmm?”

Brodie curses under his breath again.

It’s Finn who steps in, confusion pinching his brows. “What are you talking about?”

Dante’s arms cross over his chest. “Ask Blake. I’m certain the only person in here she hasn’t slept with is you at this point.”

Heat blossoms over my cheeks, followed by prickled anger. He’s making a point because I pissed him off, I get it. But that doesn’t mean I appreciate him outing my personal business to everybody in the room.

Finn looks at me. “Blake?”

Embarrassed, my eyes lower to the floor.

Brodie says, “Does any of that matter?”

“It does to me,” Finn growls at him.

My attention bolts back to him. “It’s no different than finding out you and Dante have been fucking behind my back. That matters to me.”

Dante steps forward. “It shouldn’t.”

Brodie tries to disperse the situation. “This is all blowing out of proportion. There’s a lot that should have been said, but that’s not how it went down. Can we all agree on that?”

No. “How long, Finn?”

Finn’s jaw clenches.

Dante remains silent.

Brodie sighs.

Was what he said even true about wanting to be with me? Or was that all a lie? Some cover-up to hide what was really going on?

I feel like such a fucking moron.

Looking between Dante and Finn, I shake my head. “I would have been happy for you. *Both* of you. Because that’s what friends do for each other.”

Stepping away from all three of them, I collect myself before letting them see how deep the hurt slices into me.

Looking to Finn, I say, “Thank you for paying for Sabrina’s services. That’s what I was coming in to say. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

The face he makes gives me pause. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I stare at Brodie, expecting him to come clean. He simply shakes his head, giving me the answer before I can ask him.

When I see Dante’s jaw grind, I can’t help but wonder if he knows something. “Dante?”

Both Finn and Brodie look at him.

It’s Finn who says, “Does this have to do with what you told me in Philadelphia?”

Great. More secrets.

Dante ignores him and looks directly at me, eyes still hard with residual anger. “I did it for Maia. To make sure she would be fine.”

He did it for Maia.

When I see the look on Finn’s face, I wonder if that’s the truth.

Because Dante and I aren’t close.

But it’s obvious he and Finn are.

“Whatever the reason,” I say softly, trying to look past the newest revelation I learned. “Thank you. For me. For Maia. For... whoever.”

I’m careful not to let my eyes wander to the man we both know I’m referring to.

I choose to leave the room for my sanity, walking away in the silent aftermath of all the truths that just dropped.

When I close and lock my door behind me, I rest against it and let out a breath.

What the fuck just happened?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Dante

I KNOW THE petite figure standing by the front entrance of the building from a mile away. The closer I get, the harder my teeth grind against each other when I see her slumped over the railing in dirty clothes that swallow her frame.

“What are you doing here?” I ask my mother, who turns the second she hears my voice.

As soon as I get a look at her face, I see red. The entire right side of her face is bruised, her eye is swollen, and her lip is split. It’s not the first time I’ve seen her like this, but I keep hoping there will be a last. When she told me she was going back to him after his release, it was only a matter of time before she became a victim again.

“I have nowhere else to go,” she answers feebly, hugging herself. I’ve never shared this address with her for this exact reason. I don’t want to bring her around the others and make them deal with her bullshit. “You’re my son. You’ve always helped me figure it out before. I need some money. A new place away from him. Anything.”

“What happened to your apartment?”

Her eyes go to the ground. “I couldn’t afford the rent, so your father took it over. Then he got me evicted. Where else am I supposed to go, baby? You know how he is.”

Why am I not surprised? I won’t let her inside because then she’ll never leave. Family may mean everything to me, but I can’t keep enabling her. No matter how much I owe her, I know it’ll never end if I don’t stop it. “I don’t have any money to give you.”

Her eyes darken with the same anger I recognize in myself far too many times. “But you’re my *son*,” she repeats. “What could you have done with the money?”

Paid legal fees to clean up another mess that wasn't mine, I want to tell her. "It doesn't matter what I did with it. All you need to know is that I can't give you any. How many times are we going to go through this? You'll be back together with that asshole by the end of next month and wanting beer money for him."

Her expression melts into one of pity, and I know she's trying to lure me into giving her free charity. "Baby, I promise I'll listen this time. I wanted to believe he had changed. Is it so wrong to give people chances? He wasn't always bad."

Is she fucking kidding me? "Yes, he was. Have you not looked in the mirror lately?"

I used to think everybody deserved a second chance, but eventually, you have to cut them off before they take advantage. "I'm sorry, but I can't help you. There's a woman's shelter two blocks from here. I'm sure they have room for you and resources to get you back on your feet again."

As I walk around her to get inside, I hear, "You're going to kick your own mother to the curb after everything I've done for you?"

I stare at the keypad by the door with a locked jaw. She knows what she's doing by bringing up everything that's happened to her. It's how she gets her way. In hindsight, she's no better than Anthony. Instead of physical blows, she delivers verbal ones.

I turn around. "I'm sorry he hit you, especially when he took out his frustrations because of me. But I can't keep doing this. It's draining me, Mom."

Her laugh is bitter. "It's draining *you*? While you were off with your all your little boyfriends, I dealt with the consequences. I am your *mother*, dammit. You owe me."

Before I can answer, I hear, "Women don't get to pick and choose when they're mothers to their children, and they're definitely not owed anything by them."

My eyes go to Blake, who's holding Maia against her side. The little girl coughs. She must have caught whatever is going around and had to be picked up early from daycare.

Blake is looking at my mother. "We're in it with them no matter what because that's what unconditional love is."

Brows arching, I watch as my mother stands taller at the tone coming from the single mom standing next to us. Gone is the timid woman who wanted my sympathy, and I don't know who's standing in her place as she faces my stubborn roommate. "And who are you to speak to me like that?"

"I'm Dante's friend," Blake answers simply, readjusting her fussy child in her arms. "And I'm a mother. I would never want to guilt my daughter into giving me anything. I'm more prideful than that."

I can't help but stare at the blond-haired girl that I've given nothing but a hard time to recently. It shouldn't surprise me that she's defending me because she's a good person. Something the boys have been telling me since she moved in.

As if to nail that point across, Blake says, "Do you need me to walk you to the shelter or can you handle it yourself?"

My mother turns to me as if I'm going to step in to stop her, but I don't. I remain where I am, deadpan expression while her nostrils flare in irritation. She can think whatever she wants of me. I would hardly let her trick me into thinking I'm a bad son when I've done everything I can to make it up to her over the years.

Eventually, my mother's eyes harden. "I can't believe you'd choose some random whore before me. You should know better, Dante. Just like you should know not to live your life like you always did. Did your father teach you nothing?"

I close my eyes.

Blake says, "That's enough. How Dante lives his life is none of your concern. If you don't approve, don't be part of it. Don't ask him for anything. Don't bother him. Don't come around."

Mom glares at her but says nothing.

"Go," I tell my mother. "I'm done. If you leave him for good and get your shit straight, then we can talk. Not until then."

The woman who birthed me shakes her head, watching me with disgust. "You're no son of mine and never will be. Anthony was right."

With that, she storms off, disappearing around the corner and out of sight.

Blake gives me one look but doesn't say anything as she walks past me and opens the door for herself.

I'm quick to follow her, slowing my steps to match her stride. "Why would you do that?"

She turns to me, looking at tired at Maia. "I believe the words you're looking for are 'thank you.' To which I'd reply, 'you're welcome.'"

"Thank you," I reply, still trying to figure her out.

"I meant what I said. We're friends. That's why I did it. No offense, but your mom sounds like a greedy, ungrateful bitch. She should love you for who you are, not what you offer her. You don't deserve that."

We're quiet as we walk down the hallway to our place. "I've always helped her when she asked. Answered her calls. Gave her money when she held her hand out. I even drove her to the fucking police station when she wanted to file a report against my father. But none of that mattered because she always went back."

I'm not telling her any of this to get her pity. It's the last thing I want. "Like I said, you deserve better than that. I'm sure Finn has told you the same."

My shoulders lock. "I'm not sure what you think—"

She holds up her hand. "I think you and Finn are close. Friends. More than. Whatever you want to label it or not, you both care about each other. I don't give a damn what people say. You *can* pick your family. Finn, Brodie, and I are your family. Whether you want us to be or not. You're stuck with us."

This time, I don't know what to say.

We arrive at our door, and I unlock and open it, letting them in first. "Is Maia okay?"

She nods, brushing her daughter's hair away from her pale face. "She's got a cold, that's all. I called out sick to take care of her because I don't want my parents to catch it. If I do, so be it. I'll try keeping her away from you guys as best as I can."

Watching her and Maia reminds me of what it should have been like growing up. But it wasn't. My parents were never happy when they were together. Everything I did was bad and led to some form of punishment.

There was no love in my life like there is with Blake and Maia.

"I'm going to my room with her if you need me," she says, heading in that direction.

"Hey, Blake," I call out hesitantly.

She stops to look at me.

I wet my lips with my tongue. "I'm sorry. For being a dick. For everything. My brother is the reason why those pictures were published. Well, his agent was. She wanted to give him the upper hand against Dover."

She's silent, processing.

"I don't approve of it," I add, as if that matters. "What's done is done. He wasn't right for allowing it to happen, but he did make sure your name stayed out of it."

Blowing out a breath, she nods. "I guess that makes sense."

Throat bobbing, I admit, "I don't really have anybody outside of you three. My parents are shit, and most of my family distanced themselves when they saw what a mess our life was. Rafael fucked up, but..."

"He's your brother," she finishes for me.

I dip my chin in acknowledgment.

"I don't want him around," she informs me.

I nod in understanding. "He won't be."

She pecks Maia's head. "Thank you for telling me. And for paying my lawyer."

How did she know?

"Sabrina," she answers without me having to ask. "I asked who paid her because I didn't believe it wasn't Finn. So, I appreciate it. It's going to help me and Maia."

My eyes go to the little girl, but it's not her I'm thinking of. "It's not only you two I did it for."

Half of Blake's lips tilt up. "I know. You should tell him that. He's a good guy, Dante. You both are. Don't let your past get in the way of your future. Trust me, you'll never be happy if you do."

Before I can reply, she walks into her room and closes the door behind her.

Pulling my phone out, I send one text.

Me: *I'm not going to forgive you right away for the things you did or said, but I'm willing to look past it if you can prove to me you're not going to use me or my life to your benefit ever again. If that's too much for you, then you can fuck right off along with the rest of my family*

I don't expect a reply right away, so when I see him typing after only a minute, I stand to full height with nervous anticipation.

Raf: *I'm sorry for what I said. If you're willing to give me another shot, I'll take it*

Me: *You only get one. And you're not allowed around Blake or the guys anymore*

Raf: *Not even Finn? If he's important to you, I imagine I'll see him around from time to time*

He's accepting it.

Me.

Me: *We'll see*

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Brodie

FINN IS SIPPING a cup of coffee when I walk into the kitchen, looking over the newspaper like some sixty-five-year-old retiree with nothing better to do. His glasses are even at the tip of his nose, like how my grandpa used to wear them.

“Are you reading the coupon section for senior discounts, old man?” I joke, knocking him on the shoulder as I pass him the coffee pot.

I hear the paper crinkle in his hold, but silence otherwise from him.

After pouring myself a cup of coffee, I turn to him and lean on the countertop. “You’re pissed still,” I theorize, sipping the bitter black liquid.

Finn finally lowers the paper. “You slept with her,” he answers. “I knew you were interested I just didn’t think you’d actually make the move.”

Did he really think that? Or did he not think Blake would let me? “Let me ask you something, man. Why did you tell Blake that you wanted a chance with her?”

He stares at me like I’m dumb. “Why else? Because I like her.”

If this were about anybody else, I’d accept that answer. I’m not going to let him out of the conversation that easy. “But *why*? Your history with her doesn’t compare to the history you have with Dante. We both know you two were involved long before Blake moved in. So, why her? What makes her so special to you?”

He blinks. We’ve never discussed this before. For years, it’s been the elephant in the room. At first, it was because I thought they liked sharing women. But when the women stopped getting between them, it was apparent there was something else going on.

“If this is about labeling us—”

“No,” I cut him off. “This has nothing to do with slapping a label on anything. I don’t give a shit about that. What I care about is making sure everybody is happy. Would you be happy if Blake had been interested? Or

would it have truly been enough for you? Because it feels like you would have been settling. That wouldn't have been fair to either her or you."

Again, he blinks slowly. Good. He's thinking about it instead of spewing the first bullshit answer that comes to his head.

"What's her favorite food?" I ask him.

His brows pinch. "I don't know why you're asking me that. She loves Panera. She gets their breakfast sandwiches all the time before work."

Wrong. "She gets them once a week," I correct. "Do you know why?"

Finn sighs. "What's with the third degree? I don't know what you're trying to prove."

I set my coffee mug down. "Panera runs a special every Thursday on their toasted breakfast sandwiches using old bread they need to get rid of. They're cheaper because the products aren't fresh. So, once a week, she goes in before work and buys herself a bacon, scrambled egg, and cheese sandwich on a half-stale everything bagel or ciabatta roll, and then buys whatever bread loaf is on sale to split between herself and Maia because she doesn't like eating our groceries when she didn't pay for them."

My roommate only stares, his lips parting without saying a word.

"You didn't know that because every Thursday morning you're running late to work after spending the night with Dante and in a rush to get there in time," I conclude, lifting a shoulder in nonchalance. "And no, I don't give a fuck about who you share your bed with. Blake doesn't either. The only two people who seem to be fighting it is you and Dante. I'd be happy for you if you chose to be together, and I'd be happy if you chose other people."

Finn looks down at the newspaper sprawled across the table. "I don't think he even knows what he wants out of this besides a distraction."

I walk over and grip his shoulder. "All you have to do is ask."

His muscles tense under my palm, so I squeeze once in reassurance.

"Now, what are you doing for dinner? Thought maybe we could do that Indian place over on Railroad that we all like. They're the ones who do that chicken curry Dante likes, I think."

Without hesitation, Finn says, "No, his favorite is the spicy lamb curry over on the east end. He says they have the better naan."

He pauses when I chuckle.

All I say is, "Interesting."

Under his breath, he murmurs, “Knowing what he likes to eat doesn’t mean anything.”

Grinning, I sip my coffee. I don’t even know my cousin’s favorite place to eat, much less what he orders, so it means more than he thinks it does. It means he pays attention.

Over the conversation, he looks back at the paper with furrowed brows. “What the hell?”

“What?” My eyes go to the red circle around a few of the rentals listed in the section of the paper he’s opened to. “Are you looking for something else?”

He slowly shakes his head. “No.”

Christ. “I really hope Dante isn’t scoping out new places for his mother again. He swore he wasn’t going to—”

“That’s not his handwriting.” He gestures toward the little stars and notes written on the opposite page in red ink.

It’s Blake’s handwriting.

Fuck.

The person in question appears in the kitchen with dark bags under her eyes and a red nose from the cold she caught from Maia. I went to the pharmacy yesterday to restock some of the medicine and juice she ran out of because she could barely get out of bed.

I pick up the paper. “What’s this?”

Her tired eyes go to the markings. “I’ve been looking at apartments in the area for me and Maia.”

Both Finn and I turn to her.

It’s Finn who says, “We don’t expect you to do that. If it’s because of me and Dante—”

“No,” she quickly tells him, a soft smile tilting her lips. “It has nothing to do with that. I’ve been saving up here and there to get something of my own for a while. It’s something that I’ve wanted to do and haven’t had a chance to until now. The clinic gave me a small raise which has helped. It’s not much, but it’s enough to make ends meet.”

This is the first time any of us has heard of this? “How come you’ve never brought it up before now? We could have helped you.”

She rubs her arm. “It wasn’t like I didn’t want to, but there has been a lot of other things going on. More important things kept burying it. When

those pictures were published, I wasn't sure I'd be able to move after paying Sabrina, so I didn't think it was smart bringing it up until I had something."

I still wish she would have told me. We spend enough time together that it could have come up, but I understand why she didn't. "When are you planning on moving?"

"You're not going to ask me to stay?"

As much as I want to, it's not my place to do that. None of us can ask that of her. "I know you. Once you've made your mind up, that's it. Doesn't mean I don't want you here because you know I do."

Finn adds, "We all do."

She smiles softly. "Thanks, guys." Her eyes go from me to Finn. "And I'm sorry for coming in here and creating chaos."

I walk over and put an arm around her shoulders. "I think your chaos is exactly what this place needed to put things into perspective."

Finn folds the paper. "He's not wrong."

I rub Blake's arm. "Feeling up for breakfast? I'll take you to Panera."

She nibbles her lip. "It's not Thursday."

Pecking a kiss against the top of her head to hide the amused smirk, I say, "It's my treat."

Finn stands up and puts his empty cup in the sink. "Have fun. I'll see you after work."

After he leaves, Blake glances around. "Where is Dante?"

My lips twitch, debating on lying. I choose not to. "He went to meet with Rafael and talk about some shit they need to officially settle. Don't worry, he won't be coming around again."

She blows out a subtle breath. "That's good. Really good. I'm happy he's accepting the best for himself."

I brush fallen hair behind her ear. "As much as I want you to stay, I understand wanting your own place."

Her eyes, still glassy from the cold, meet mine to study me. "I think it'll be good. We can live normally. Have our own space. Date like normal people. If that's what you want, I mean."

My chest swells. "Is that what *you* want?"

Her eyes meet mine, glassy and shy. I already know the answer without her telling me. It's all in the way she looks at me. It's the same way I look at

her. "Let's start with breakfast. I haven't eaten anything besides soup in three days."

I kiss her temple. "You got it, babe. Is Maia still at your parents?"

She nods. "Until tomorrow. My mom says they'll happily keep her until I get my energy back. I was thinking about checking out some of those apartments later today."

"Want company?"

Blake hooks an arm around my waist. "I wouldn't mind that at all."

I nudge her playfully. "That's because you *like* me," he teases.

She pushes my shoulder. "Stop being a loser, loser."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Fin

DANTE WALKS INTO the apartment and stops when he sees the spread of takeout containers laid out on the coffee table. “What’s this?”

Swiping my hands down my jeans, I stand and gesture toward the curry I ordered. “I thought you could use some dinner after your big deadline. You’ve been stressed, so...”

He drops his bag onto the couch and stares down at the different options. “You got it all, didn’t you?”

I lift a shoulder, a little embarrassed that I bought so much. “We know Brodie will eat half of this tonight when he and Blake get back.”

“Where are they?”

“Apartment hunting.”

Dante’s eyes dart up. “Together...?”

I open one of the containers of naan and set it by the curry. “No, for Blake. She wants to move out and get something for her and Maia.”

He doesn’t say anything as I set one of the plastic sets of utensils by his dish.

I look up at him. “Are you all right?”

His tongue swipes along his lips as he picks his gaze up from the food to me. “Let’s go out.”

Blinking, I pause what I’m doing. “Do you not want this? I even got the kabobs that—”

“No, no.” He stands taller, rubbing the back of his neck. “I mean, let’s go out just the two of us. Doesn’t have to be tonight.”

He wants...?

When I don’t say anything, his hand drops to his side. “We don’t have to. I thought it might have been a good idea, but if you’re—”

“I want to,” I cut him off quickly. “You took me by surprise is all. Sorry. Are you thinking the Tavern for drinks and the game?”

He clicks his tongue, glancing down at the food again. Not before I see the nerves in his eyes. "I talked to Rafael," he says.

My brows arch at the information I already knew. Did he forget he told me?

Dante clears his throat. "I don't want to live the way I've had to my whole life, always worried about what people would think. I told him he couldn't be in my life if he was going to be like everybody else."

Not sure what to say, I remain quiet.

"I want him in my life," he concludes. "It doesn't mean I've forgiven him, but I'm open to it if he can prove himself trustworthy. Until then, I don't want to keep pretending."

I don't want to keep pretending.

Lips rubbing together, I ask, "You don't want to keep pretending what?"

When his eyes meet mine, my chest inflates with a fullness I've never quite felt before. "I don't want to keep pretending that this thing with me and you means nothing."

I inhale sharply, staring at him.

He sits beside me on the couch, his leg brushing mine and staying there. "Because it does. Always has."

We stare at each other, the food getting colder with each passing second.

His hand moves closer to where mine rests on my leg, interlocking our pinkies.

The warmth soaks into me, sending shockwaves through my body that cause my heart rate to spike.

"Tomorrow," he says. "I'll make reservations at Mingo at seven thirty to give us time after work."

I blink.

Blink again.

Then, quietly, whisper, "Okay."

EPILOGUE

Blake

IT'S BEEN SIX months since the boys helped me move into my cramped two-bedroom apartment. My parents even gave me some of their old furniture and have visited us a few times for dinner and playdates at the park across the street.

While the space is small, I love being surrounded by new memories. Pictures that have been taken of Maia and me hang on every wall. A few older photos of my family and me rest in picture frames on the shelves that Brodie helped my dad hang up in the living room. The kitchen, while dirty with unwashed dishes piled in the sink and sauce stains on the stove from last night's supper, is well-used from the routine I've gotten into on my own.

I never thought I'd survive as a single mother, but the support system I still have has made the difference.

An arm hooks around my waist, pulling me into a muscular chest. "What's on that pretty mind of yours?" Brodie asks, nuzzling his face into my neck.

I relax into his hold, sinking into his body and letting him hold us up. "I'm thinking about how peaceful life is."

I can feel his smile against my throat. "I told you it would get better."

Snorting, I turn and drape my arms over his shoulders. "As if it was that easy," I muse, rolling my eyes.

After four more cheating allegations came out against Dover, including another child confirmed to be his after more DNA testing, he and his team released a statement about his retirement from the MLB. It was only a matter of time before more women spoke up, and it felt like justice somehow when he finally announced he was finished with baseball. All while his wife stayed by his side despite the evidence of her husband's infidelity.

I feel bad for her.

But that's not my problem.

Brodie kisses my temple. "Do you still want to go out with Finn and Dante tomorrow night?"

Hearing their names together fills my chest with joy, causing me to smile warmly. "Of course. As much as I love having this place to myself, I miss seeing them. I think Maia misses torturing them with her sticker and nail polish collection."

He grins. "I'm sure Dante misses it too."

I laugh. "So... Maia is down."

Brodie hums, walking us into the bedroom. "I noticed. Have anything in mind for the night? A movie? Maybe a midnight snack?"

I gasp when he forces me to sit on the edge of the bed, dropping to his knees and spreading my legs. I'm barely covered in my skimpy sundress, and when he sees I'm lacking panties, his eyes flash.

"Depends. Is the snack me?" I ask, biting my bottom lip when his hands snake up my inner thighs. I get wetter the closer they get to my core.

Brodie's lips start following the path his hands are taking, causing a shallow breath to escape my lips. "Baby girl, your pussy is my favorite meal of the day."

And he shows me exactly how much he loves it by hauling my legs over his shoulders and devouring me until I'm quaking under him. He sucks and licks and fucks me with his mouth in every way possible while I claw at him.

Suddenly, I'm stripped bare and pulled onto the bed. Brodie quickly removes his shirt and jeans and joins me, bending my legs to my chest and positing himself between them so he's hovering over me. My breath is taken away when he surges inside of me in one movement, resting my feet on his shoulders as he moves with hungry desperation.

His fingers tangle in my hair, gripping it to bring my face to his for a kiss that goes on as long as he thrusts inside of me. Every moan, gasp, and groan is swallowed by our mouths. I wrap my arms around his neck and meet his hips with every arch, listening to our skin slapping as he rests his forehead against mine.

I feel his hot breath against my mouth.

His cock thickening in my pussy.

His love absorbing into me the longer we make eye contact.

It's enough to detonate me.

I clench around him, mouth gaping as the orgasm crests with an intensity that fills my entire body from head to toe.

A low groan escapes Brodie as I tighten, squeezing and coaxing him to come with me. He pumps once, twice, three more times before stilling inside of me and letting go.

I kiss him, tongue twisting with his in a sensual dance that lasts long after our bodies are sated. We lie like that for a long time, tangled in each other.

Getting tired, I feel my eyes start to close.

Then I hear Maia fuss in the room across the hall.

Brodie kisses my cheek. "Stay in bed. I'll see if she's all right."

I watch him dress tiredly. "You're going to make a great dad someday," I tell him, voice thick with blissful exhaustion.

His face lightens as he bends over and kisses me again. It's quick but gives the same fast reaction to my heart as all his others. "I hope that's true," he says against my lips. "But we've got plenty of time."

He pecks another kiss against my lips and then walks to check on my daughter.

Letting out a content sigh, I think about how far I've come to get here.

With my daughter.

In our apartment.

With the guy I'll eventually marry, surrounded by good people.

Turns out the girl going nowhere could break free anytime she wanted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Shout out to my friends for reading this spicy book early and giving me feedback. Writing smutty books is not something I really thought I'd do, but plenty of people challenged me to try it out. Since it's not my typical go-to, I appreciate all the feedback I was given to make this steamy quick read worth one-clicking.

Also big thanks to my editor for pointing out some key plot issues that this country girl did not think about when writing a book based in a city. This is why I stick to rural settings or completely fictional ones that I make up. I think I'll stick to that from now on.

To all the readers who wanted me to write a spicy book, I hope I didn't disappoint. Sex scenes are my least favorite things to write, so this was certainly one of the more challenging stories I've put out today.

Until next time

Xx B

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste is a new adult and contemporary romance author that gives voices to raw, realistic characters with emotional storylines that tug on the heartstrings.

She was born and raised in Upstate New York where she still resides with her four-legged feline sidekick Oliver “Ollie” Queen. Her love for reading and writing began at an early age and only grew stronger after getting a BA in English and an MFA in English & Creative Writing. When she’s not writing, she’s working out, binge-watching reality game shows, and spending time with her friends and family.

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