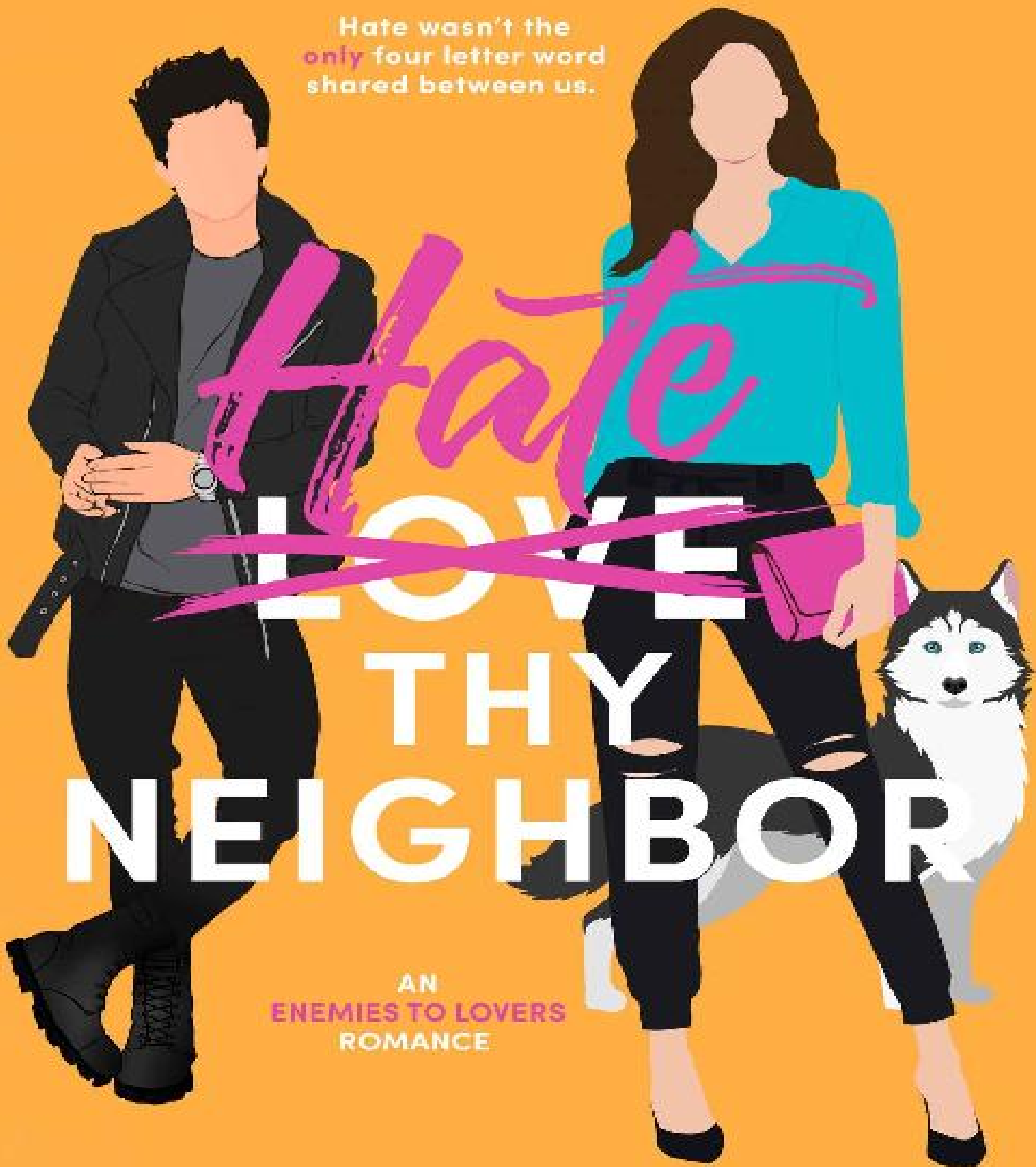


Hate wasn't the  
only four letter word  
shared between us.



AN  
ENEMIES TO LOVERS  
ROMANCE

S.M. SOTO

*Hate*  
~~LOVE~~  
THY  
NEIGHBOR  
S . M . S O T O

*Hate Thy Neighbor*  
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# *Contents*

[TITLE PAGE](#)

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[ABOUT THIS BOOK](#)

[MORE BOOKS BY S.M. SOTO](#)

[PLAYLIST](#)

[EPIGRAPH](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)  
[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)  
[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)  
[EPILOGUE](#)

[KISS ME WITH LIES PREVIEW](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

Fresh out of a failed engagement, Olivia Hales is in dire need of a fresh start. Tired of being the charming and accommodating girl that always gets stomped on, she's determined to change her outlook on life.

When she finds her dream job in a small town in California, she thinks she's finally found her place in life. That is, until she meets her new neighbor.

Roman Banks.

Moody. Foul-mouthed. Jerk.

And the hottest man on the planet.

At a sprawling six foot five, he was coldly distant and physically intimidating. Not only was her new neighbor a God that was good with his hands, he was also a grade-A jerk. Trapped on the same street, sharing the same space together, they've become entrenched in an addictive, ridiculous, never-ending game of insults and pranks that result in the destruction of two perfectly good homes.

The tension between them is as thick as the walls of their houses are thin. Roman's touch burned like fire even when his words were ice, and both of them will stop at nothing to make the others life hell.

In the midst of the pranks and the hate they harbor for each other, Olivia slowly pulls back the layers of the man next door and finds herself consumed with wanting to fix him and his past. When both enemies start to catch feelings for each other, Olivia finds herself hiding her own secrets, not wanting to lose another man in her life.

Lines are drawn. Strict rules put into place. But that doesn't stop Olivia from wanting to save the quiet, broody man next door.

They say you're supposed to love thy neighbor, but that was the furthest emotion she felt when thinking about Roman. Hate was all there was to their relationship. At the very least, that's what she tried to tell herself.

*Hate Thy Neighbor* is a full-length enemies-to-lovers standalone with a HEA. At the end, I've included an excerpt from *Kiss Me with Lies*, book

one in my Twin Lies Duet.

*Hate Thy Neighbor* concludes at around 90% on your device.

Happy Reading!  
XO, S.M. Soto

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**STANDALONE TITLES**

*Ache*

*A Cruel Love*

**COMING SOON**

*CTM*

*Jake Wilder*

*The Consequence of Hating You*



# Playlist

[Spotify.](#)

*Here Comes the Sun*—The Beatles

*Gives You Hell*—All American Rejects

*Poison*—Bell Biv Devoe

*Summer Feelings*—Lennon Stella ft. Charlie Puth

*A Thousand Bad Times*—Post Malone

*Saturday Love*—Cherrelle, Alexander O’Neal

*Fuck You*—Lily Allen

*All For You*—Janet Jackson

*Body Bag*—Trevor Daniel

*Afrodisiac*—Brandy

*Flames*—ZAYN, R3HAB, Jungleboi

*Feeling of Falling*—Cheat Codes, Kim Petras

*Neighbors Know My Name*—Trey Songz

*Faded*—VÉRITÉ

*Don’t You Know*—Jaymes Young

*Alone With You*—Kito ft. AlunaGeorge

*Daydream*—The Aces

*Change Your Life*—Kehlani, Jhené Aiko

*Somethin Tells Me*—Bryson Tiller

*She Wolf*—Shakira

*It’s You*—Ali Gatie

*American Money*—BORNS

*Hold Me While You Wait*—Lewis Capaldi

*Lucky*—Chelsea Cutler, Alexander 23

*Softly*—Clairo

*All Night*—Beyoncé

*Girls Love Beyoncé*—Drake, James Fauntleroy

*Little Lies*—Fleetwood Mac

*Case Of The Ex*—Mýa

*Invisible Things*—Lauv

*The Bones*—Maren Morris

“Hope is not about proving anything. It’s about choosing to believe this one thing, that love is bigger than any grim, bleak shit anyone can throw at us.”  
—Anne Lamott

To the lovers.  
The dreamers.  
And the floaters.

One

## “Here Comes the Sun”—The Beatles



Olivia

“You sure you have everything, sweetie?” My mom’s silvery voice echoes from the speaker. With the phone secured against my ear, I hop out from the back of the moving truck I rented and that I’ll be using for the next few days.

“Yes, Mom.” My eyes roll of their own accord. “I have everything. Stop worrying. I’ve been on my own for how many years now?”

The snark that rises in her tone can’t be missed nor mistaken. “This is your first house, Liv. Sue me for wanting everything to go smoothly.”

I slam my eyes shut, feeling awful for keeping her at arm’s length during this whole process. It’s not all my fault. I’ve always been independent. Well, scratch that, I’ve always *wanted* to be independent. My parents still do many things for me that I often take for granted, even at twenty-five.

“I realize that, and I love you for it.” I sigh. “But don’t worry. I have everything taken care of. Tomorrow, you and Dad are still coming to help unload the heavier stuff before you head back home, right?” I ask, trying to make her feel somewhat better about her role in all of this.

“Your father hasn’t shut up about it, Sweetie. I couldn’t even deter him with sex. That usually always does the trick.”

“Mom,” I groan.

“My God, Liv. I’ve told you, you need to embrace your sensuality, not run from it.”

My mother, Dr. Lisa Hales, is a sex therapist, and the scars from having a parent like her run deep. Nothing is ever off-limits to her. Same goes for my father. He’s a retired psychologist, and I haven’t shared one conversation with the man in all my twenty-five years when he hasn’t tried to psychoanalyze me. The two of them together? It’s about as horrible as you’re thinking. If not worse.

“*Mom*, I’m all for embracing one’s sexuality and whatnot, but I just don’t want to hear about it when it comes to you and Dad. Please.” A shiver travels through my body, and it’s not a pleasant one.

Mom sighs. I can practically see the displeasure written all over her soft, delicate features, even while on the phone. “We’ll be there. You sure you don’t need us to stay?”

I cringe just thinking about spending an entire night with my parents under the same roof. There’s a reason I packed my shit and fled the nest after high school. Listening to their sexual activities each night was beginning to push me toward the edge of insanity. I swear, they almost ruined sex for me altogether. “I’m positive.”

After hanging up with my mom, before she can ask if I’ve had time to masturbate lately,—she’s been on this masturbation kick and telling me I need to “learn my body and enjoy the fruits,” whatever the hell that’s supposed to mean—I slam the back door to the rental truck shut and turn the handle to engage the lock. Everything I was able to carry and lift on my own is packed in there like sardines. It was like playing a real-life game of Tetris. The bulkier items, I had to have my friends and my previous neighbor help me with. I double-check that it’s locked, before I round the side of the vehicle and climb into the driver’s side.

Destination? My first official home.

That *I* paid for.

On my own, without the help of my jackass ex-boyfriend.

Scratch that, my *ex-fiancé*.

You can say I’m excited but even that would most definitely be putting things mildly. I did this all on my own, and I couldn’t be any happier. I mean, I might have to penny pinch and live off ramen for a little while until I get settled at work, but this is where I was always meant to be.

Cranking the radio up, I belt out the song lyrics, feeling more carefree than I have in an awfully long time. My heart fills with a joyous pitter-patter, as I enter the small town of Campbell. It's not one of those towns where everyone knows everyone, but it's nothing like Long Beach. It's a suburb of San Jose and a part of the Silicon Valley area—or at the very least, that's how they choose to advertise it.

It's gorgeous here. With great year-round weather and beautiful mountain views, I don't feel like I'm missing out on much by being away from Long Beach. With cute shopping centers and a vibrant community, it's the perfect place to call home. Gorgeous trees line the streets outside of the various shops and businesses. It all feels so homey and inviting. It reminds me of a town you'd see as the backdrop in a Hallmark movie.

I pass the Downtown District, smiling at the traffic and people as I go by. Yeah, I know, total weirdo, right? I think I'm the first person who has ever been excited to be stuck in traffic. I'm just ecstatic that I'm here. That I've made it this far. After my broken engagement to Reid, I didn't think I'd ever be happy again. Because, for a long time, he was what I defined as my happiness, and without him, I felt like I was drowning. It took a whole month of crying in my old bedroom back at my parents' house to hit my lowest low, and another month for me to get my life together. That third month? It was the tip of the iceberg for me. It was when I realized how shitty my relationship with Reid actually was. I needed the time away to see just how toxic and unhappy we were.

It's my turn now. It's my journey. And all that starts here.

I turn down Clearlake, toward the end of the quiet cul-de-sac where my new house is, sighing happily at the beautiful homes that roll past my windows. Campbell is a fairly residential suburb, and by the infinite stream of well-kept neighborhoods, it shows. This house, in particular, was a bit out of my price range, and I'll have to put even more time and money in to fixing the house and making it presentable, but overall, I'm quite proud of my purchase. It's in a great area, and anyone else would kill for a place like this, especially at the price point here in Campbell.

My smile brightens when I stop the rental truck in front of said house and throw it into park. It's a one-story Craftsman-style bungalow that has the potential to be great. The home is a bit of a fixer upper, but it has a whole lot of character, it just needs a little TLC, that's all.

My eyes trail up the inclined driveway, with my head tilted back the slightest bit to take it all in. The front of each of these houses in the cul-de-sac is designed with big windows to maximize the view outside and allow natural light to filter through. Even with a dilapidated shingle roof and a leaning, broken down fence, the home isn't the worst I'd considered while searching.

I'm sure I'll be getting an earful from my parents when they actually see it with their own eyes, instead of just in pictures. That'll definitely give my dad something else to psychoanalyze.

*Is this a cry for help, Olivia?*

A quick scan around the neighborhood widens my smile. Everything is the same as it was in the photographs. I was half-expecting to get here and be completely bamboozled and catfished by a crappy property. As the realtor stated, most of the families and people living down this street have either been here for five years or longer or have moved in not too long ago. I make a mental note to introduce myself to the families in the houses next door to mine. On the right, the house is a mirror of mine, only that one is well put together: the lawn freshly mowed and no car in the driveway. When I glance to the left, I see a Prius and a Hummer parked in the drive, which prompts me to frown.

A gas saver and a gas-guzzler? I'm sure an interesting individual lives there. This house is a Colonial Revival-style home that towers over mine, and I wince just thinking about the mortgage on a place like that here.

When I've had enough staring, I get to work, unloading all the lighter boxes from the truck, and it takes me the rest of the evening, much longer than I anticipated. The house is in dire need of cleaning, but I'm not too worried about it. My mom promised she'd help me tomorrow when they got in.

My little brother has a game about an hour away from here this weekend, so my parents figured they'd drive my car down for me from Long Beach and help me with the move. Two birds, one stone.

To get a jump-start, I work on sponge cleaning the walls in the master bedroom and then work my way through the rest of the house, scrubbing every surface. I rub my palm along the plain eggshell walls, already plotting color schemes and where frames and knickknacks will go. A smile tugs at the corners of my lips, as I envision what the final product will look like.

It's going to be perfect.



It's going to be *mine*.

When I'm finished cleaning about halfway through the house, I glance up, brushing the hair out of my face, managing to smear the sweat across my forehead in the process. It's well into the night now. I hadn't even realized when the sun went down. With no blinds covering my bedroom window, I have a full view of my neighbor's house. There's little space between the houses. Whoever built them obviously didn't think either of us deserved much room. Our houses must mirror each other because everything aligns, including our master bedroom windows. There is literally no privacy with the way these identical houses have been built. A light from somewhere inside the home next door flicks on, indicating that the family is probably home by now. Another light shines from the pane next to the bedroom window, and when I shift toward my bathroom, flipping on that light, I realize I'm right. These homes really are mirrors of each other.

After taking a beat to catch my breath, I get back to work, only I find myself glancing over my shoulder at the house next door a few times throughout the rest of the night.



My parents show up bright and early the next morning to help. With more cleaning supplies than one would use to sterilize a hospital, my mom is ready to roll with a cupholder filled with Starbucks drinks and a bag of takeout breakfast burritos.

For hours, we work, tirelessly, scrubbing the walls, floors, and the windows. My dad and my younger brother, Brandon, manage to bring the heavy furniture from the rental into the house. Everyone is patient, while we move the furniture around, until I find the perfect place for it. It takes about three tries each. We move the L-shaped couch from one corner to the next and do the same with the coffee table, the dinner table, and the bookshelf. The master bedroom is a whole other story.

The fact that no one has wrung my neck yet is a miracle.

"The floorboards are lifting," my dad grumbles in dismay, toeing said boards. If he had the time, I'm sure he'd redo them all for me, here and

now. That is my father; he's a jack-of-all-trades. The tips of his brown hair hang over his forehead, lightly shielding his eyes. It's the same color as my hair. A deep brown with hints of honey.

Grinning, I lift a shoulder in a half-shrug. "I know. I have some wood flooring in mind that I'd like to try out. Well, after I paint."

Both of my parents raise their brows in surprise. "You're going to paint *and* do the floors?"

Brandon peals over with laughter from his position on the couch, his shoes resting on my coffee table, infuriating me to no end. My little brother is a senior in high school back in Long Beach. He's a football star and completely annoying. My parents baby him far too much. Since he's the youngest and the only one still at home, they wait on the little shit hand and foot. I shoot him a glare, snapping my fingers and narrowing my eyes on his shoes and his sweaty ass that's perched on my couch.

"Feet off," I scold, then turn back toward my parents, my brows taking a nosedive. "Why wouldn't I? It's a fixer-upper. My first official house—I want to make it mine."

"Baby girl, you don't even know how to change a tire."

Brandon cackles some more at my expense, and I shoot him another scowl over my shoulder.

My nose crinkles. "What does that have to do with anything? That's what insurance is for and all that other stuff." I wave my hand dismissively in the air.

They raise their brows, waiting for me to see their point, and I do. I mean, I totally get it. My parents did everything for me during high school and in college, then when I met my ex, I didn't have to worry about doing any of that stuff because he took care of it for me. When I had a flat tire, he called and handled it for me. If my car needed an oil change, he made the appointments and kept track of all that for me.

I guess now that he's not around, I'll have to learn to take care of all that myself, something I should've learned to do ages ago, but honestly, I've always had a man in my life who could help me. First my dad, then my ex. I never had a time when I had to depend on myself and trust myself enough to get something done.

I blow out a sigh. "This is the first time every decision will be mine. I want to make memories in this house, and I want to start by doing all these DIY projects."

My mom forces a smile, truly unconvinced, and Dad just rolls his eyes, mumbling some psychology mumbo-jumbo under his breath. He goes back to his task of carrying in the dining table chairs, something Brandon should be helping with.

“Aren’t you supposed to be doing something useful?” I raise a brow at my brother. With an annoyingly slow pace, he pushes up from the couch and walks down the hall toward the master bedroom.

“Sure do. Think I’ll start with dropping a deuce in your bathroom.”

My face contorts with abhorrence. “Fucking disgusting.”

Focusing back on my task of stacking boxes, I feel my mother’s gaze on me, watching me closely. Much too closely.

“So,” Mom starts, fiddling with the torn edge of the kitchen supplies box on the counter. “You’re taking care of yourself, right?”

I pause halfway down from picking a box up. She’s still fiddling with that damn edge, avoiding my gaze. Likely because she knows what my reaction will be.

“Of course I am.” I damn near scoff.

“We’re just making sure. We know how forgetful you are, and without Reid around to remind you—”

I roll my eyes and cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t need Reid’s help with anything, Mom. I’m perfectly capable of handling things on my own.”

We have a stare off that lasts a few solid beats, before she nods and pats the frumpy box, deciding to leave the subject alone, for now. My mother has always been a beautiful woman, but you know the phrase, “aging like fine wine”? That’s Lisa Hales in a nutshell. With bright hazel eyes, high cheekbones and a slender nose, my mother could’ve been a model if she hadn’t gone the sex therapist route. For the most part, people say my mother and I look alike, but I don’t see it. Where my hair is brown, hers is a beautiful honey blonde. Where her hazel eyes are bright and inviting, mine are flat and boring.

Speaking of those eyes, they trail up and down my body, and she pauses on my breasts.

“Did you take my advice? Remember, nipple stimulation is very important for your body and posture during sex and masturbation, Sweetheart.”

“Argh! Mom!” I groan. Spinning on my heels, I hurry out the open front door. Anything to avoid her “sex talk.” The woman seriously knows no bounds.

I walk back out toward the rental, shaking my head the entire way. I pass my dad, and I’m guessing, by my flustered expression, that he knows exactly what happened back in there because he laughs at me. I pause, at the mouth of the truck, when I hear the sound of thunder. At least I think it is, until the roaring grows so loud, it’s deafening. I shield my eyes from the sun with my hand and glance down the street at where the sound is coming from, only to realize there’s something coming.

Or *someone*, I should say.

My eyes widen when I realize what I’m looking at.

The chromed-out motorcycle that looks like it belongs on an episode of *Sons of Anarchy* pulls into the driveway of the quiet, well-put-together house next door. The one with no cars and the nice lawn. I narrow my gaze, eyeing the person on the bike, as they pull up the drive. A white T-shirt, red and blue flannel wrapped around the waist, and ripped jeans are all I can see on the outside, and my feet, with a mind of their own, start taking slow, unsure steps toward the house next door. I swear I see the bike rider twist their head toward me just a bit, but it’s hard to tell with that helmet on. The visor is blacked out, so I can’t make out anything, not even the person’s eyes.

Before I can figure out who’s under there or get any closer, the garage opens. The bike quickly revs in, and the door shuts, all within a few seconds.

Still with a frown pasted on my face, I glance around at all the houses in the cul-de-sac. Someone who owns a motorcycle was not what I was expecting when I moved in here. Not at all.

This should be interesting. *Right?*

## Two

### “Gives You Hell”—The All-American Rejects



Olivia

My first official day in the neighborhood, without my family, is spent baking. Much to my chagrin, my family stayed and helped me get settled here for a few days, before they had to head back home. Brandon had football practice, and apparently, his coach is a fat dick. My dad called him a chode, something the incomparable Dr. Ethan Hales doesn't do often.

Of course, before they left, my parents had to know I was okay and made me promise to take care of myself. They obviously couldn't tell me that, in their own words, because they discerned it'd somehow lead to the next world war. Oh, no. They used my brother for their dirty work instead. It was one thing for them to ask and question me about my health, but to sic my brother on me? That was a new low.

The first night sleeping alone in my new house felt...surreal. It was the first time I was truly on my own. I wasn't sharing my space with roommates, or a boyfriend, or even a fiancé; I was officially on my own. It was the highest I'd felt in a long time. But with all highs came the lows, and the low in this case was my fear. Though small, my fear was still there, itching to be heard. I feared my ex's words—I feared all his doubts were warranted.

*Maybe I couldn't do this.*

*Maybe I really wouldn't be anything without him.*

All that fear did was make me want to prove him wrong. Once I worked through the doubts, I embraced my new chapter with open arms and not one ounce of trepidation.

If I was truly going to prove everyone wrong, I needed to have faith in myself first.

When I roll out of bed the next morning, a fresh wave of excitement slams into me. I'm feeling refreshed and determined to enjoy the rest of my weekend, before I start my new job Monday. Back in Long Beach, I was a veterinary assistant for three years. It wasn't easy to find an open position here in Campbell, so quickly, but I managed. Of about twenty clinics to choose from, I had my heart set on only a few, and I was fortunate enough that one of those clinics took a chance on me as a new hire.

My plan for today is to knock off as much as I can on my to-do list for the house. Even with all my furniture and most of my boxes unpacked, the house still looks barren and unorganized. I figure I'll find some throw pillows and other odds and ends, before looking into paint colors and other necessities.

Last night, I saw a quick and easy recipe on Pinterest and decided I'd try it out after I went grocery shopping. I thought it would be an admirable introduction to the neighbors. I made two batches of chocolate Bundt cakes. One for the neighbor on the left, and the other for the neighbor on my right. I set the delicious smelling desserts on my good china that I had to dig through my boxes to find and wrap each with foil.

I decide to start with the house to the right of mine. Personally, I like to call them the contradictors. I still can't, for the life of me, understand why they'd have a Hummer and a Prius. It certainly defeats the whole purpose, doesn't it?

Despite that, Mona, the owner of said Prius, turns out to be a really sweet woman. She's a mother of four, and I learn her husband owns the Hummer that isn't in the driveway this morning. We chat for a while, and I can't contain my burst of pride when she fawns over the cake I made.

From her house, I make the trek back to my place and grab the other cake from the counter, before I head to the neighbor's house on the opposite side. Once again, there are no cars outside, but as I noticed yesterday, motorcycle guy keeps his vehicles in the garage.

A smile tips the corners of my lips, as I climb the steps, taking in the immaculate grass and the clean, sleek look of his porch. Whoever he is, he obviously takes excellent care of his house and lawn. Clearing my throat, I ring the doorbell and square my shoulders, wanting to make a worthy first impression.

It's silent, save for the loud barking at the fence.

No sound of footsteps.

My brows dip.

*Okay, let's just knock. If he's not home, I'll leave the cake.*

I rap my knuckles on the door three times and wait again. Still nothing. I'm just about to turn on my heels, when the door swings open with a frustrated sound that can only be described as a low growl.

Time suddenly stops.

The foundation shifts beneath my feet.

Tension crackles in the air. My eyes grow impossibly round, and my mouth drops open in shock.

Standing there—with droplets of water rolling down a toned chest, trickling over abs that are impossible to look away from—is my neighbor. My very *hot* neighbor. There's a script tattoo over his right pec, but I can't be too sure what it says. And suddenly, the thought of asking seems a bit inappropriate. He hovers in the doorway like a giant, and I gape at his height. He has to be at least six feet four, or five. Usually, everyone towers over me, seeing as I'm only five foot two on a good day, but this guy? That's not the case at all. Hell, the top of his head is damn near grazing the top part of the doorframe. With a mind of their own, my eyes trail down his impossibly long body.

Suddenly, the thought of this individual naked, with water rolling down his fine body in a shower, makes me flush hot, and I'm uncomfortable with the fact that I'm this attracted to someone I don't even know.

I swallow thickly.

*Well, now I know who rides the motorcycle.*

For a long beat, I forget how to speak. I even forget how to breathe. I inhale a sharp breath, when a tight pain travels down the center of my chest, reminding me to breathe. Slowly, I drag my gaze up the tan, toned body to a pair of bored ice blue eyes. The guy is handsome. Painfully handsome. I didn't think it was possible for his face to get any better than his body, but,

obviously, I was wrong. His face is so much better than I could've expected.

The color of his eyes are so bright, it's as if he's wearing colored contacts, and I'm finding it hard to look away. His strong and bold brows arch over luminous, furious eyes. He's got cheekbones I'd kill for. And succulent lips pursed into a tight, stern line. His hair is a dark chocolate brown, shaggier on top than it is at the sides. The dark strands look like he's just ran his hand through it; yet, somehow, it looks incredibly good on him.

"H-Hi, I'm Olivia Hales. The new neighbor. Next door," I fumble, snapping out of my ogling. "I just wanted to bring over the cake I made. I know it's usually the other way around, as housewarming gifts for new neighbors, but I thought it would be refreshing to do things differently."

With his hand gripped around the knot of the towel, just above the light smattering of dark hair that dips below, and droplets of water still dripping on his pristine hardwood floors—it doesn't escape my notice they're the exact shade I wanted for my own home—the man continues to stare at me. Scratch that, the man is practically glaring into my soul. I can feel the waves of unrestrained anger percolating in the air around us. No outward expression. No interest. For a second, I didn't think he even heard what I said.

I open my mouth, but freeze, when I see the tic in his jaw. The sharp slope becomes even more lethal, and it's almost distracting to stare at. The man is like a goddamn descendant of a Greek god.

At my gawking silence, his mouth twists with frustration, maybe annoyance, I'm not even sure, but it's enough to make my smile and positive spirit falter. I shift awkwardly on my feet, the weight of the cake suddenly growing heavy in my hands.

"I, um, I would probably set it inside. It's a little warm out today."

And, once again, nothing. Not a damn word. He still hasn't even given me his name, for Christ's sake. He just continues glaring down at me. The sharp features of his handsome face give nothing away.

"I'm sorry. I might have missed something," I say, raising my voice in case he's hard of hearing. That can be the only explanation for his silence. "I'm your new neighbor. O-liv-i-a." I make a show of breaking my name down and speaking loudly. There's no way he can misinterpret that. Unless he's deaf.

*Oh, fuck. What if he really is deaf?*



His grip tightens on the door, and his brows dip, the sharp edges slanting down, casting shadows across his face.

“I heard you the first time.”

His voice...Christ, his voice. It rolls through my body. It feels like warm, melted butter on my skin and stirs something unfamiliar inside me. His speech is flavored with whiskey and tobacco. I’m not even entirely sure if that’s a thing, but I feel like it is. It’s so deep and masculine—and all too hot—it takes me a few seconds to realize what he said. When I do, my face scrunches with confusion.

*Well, if he heard me the first time, why is he making me sound shit out for him and look ridiculous?*

“Oh, sorry,” I mumble, glancing down at my white painted toenails. “Well, it’s nice to meet you...” I trail off, waiting for him to be a gentleman and give me his name. He doesn’t. He gives me a cold leer.

*Okaaay.*

“Here, enjoy this. I have a few more stops to make, then some shopping to do, but I’ll see you around.” I thrust the plate with the foil-covered cake toward him, and he glances down at it like it’s offensive, making no move to take it. My arms start to grow heavy, hanging between us, and a long, awkward beat passes. It’s a test of sorts, as we stare at each other, seeing who will break first. The muscles in my arms are screaming, on the verge of trembling, and I will him with my eyes to take it.

“No.”

“No?” I parrot, feeling oddly discombobulated by this naked stranger and his cold demeanor.

Taking a page out of my book, he makes a show of dragging out the syllables when he repeats himself.

*Does this guy have a limited vocabulary?*

“What do you mean ‘no’?” Growing agitated by his rudeness, I clamp my back teeth together and grind my molars. Anything to keep from telling my neighbor that he’s acting like an asshole.

He shifts, changing his grip on the door. The movement causes the muscles in his arms and his abs to flex without permission. I don’t even have the willpower to force myself to glance away.

*Christ in heaven, he has those veins that strain against such perfectly tanned skin and—*

He suddenly reaches out, and for a second, I think he's going to take the plate, but instead, he pushes it back toward me.

"I mean, *no*. I don't want it." Without another word, he slams the door in my face.

A startled gasp flies past my lips at the resounding echo of the door shutting, and I stand there, staring at the wood, like a complete fool, until I can get my feet to move properly. I cross his lawn back toward my house and glance over my shoulder.

I want to give my neighbor the benefit of the doubt, but as far as first encounters go, I think he's an absolute dick.



I spend way too much time at HomeGoods and another long span at the local hardware store, looking at flooring options. Even when I stumble upon a similar color to what I have in mind, I flash back to my neighbor's floors. The light rustic floorboards are exactly what I'm looking for.

If things had gone differently when I took the cake over there earlier, I might've had the guts to see past his good looks and ask about his floors, but that is most definitely not how it went down. I keep replaying the encounter, going over everything in my mind. I second-guess myself, wondering if I did anything to piss him off, but nothing stands out to me. I could've caught him at a crummy time, and I guess, technically, I did. He was getting out of the shower, after all.

Maybe it was my ogling? I didn't mean to purposely eye-fuck him. I just wasn't expecting my neighbor to resemble a fucking male model from *Men's Health* or *GQ*. But I get the feeling that wasn't the issue either.

For the life of me, I can't get his dickish attitude out of my mind, and most of all, his eyes. I don't think I've ever met anyone—least of all a man—with such beautiful eyes. They were hard and angry looking, but they were also beautiful. Devastatingly beautiful. The vibrant blue was unlike anything I've ever seen before.

When I get home and pull into the driveway, I peek at the house next door. The neighbor's garage is wide open, and he's moving around inside.

It's hard to see clearly, but I glimpse just enough to make out his silhouette and the vehicle inside. I pause, wondering if I should go over there and say hi, but after how awkward this morning was, I decide not to. Instead, I get out of the car, but when I shut the door, the loud sound is enough to grab his attention. With his hands braced on the edge of his muscle car and the raised hood blocking half of him from view, he glances over. Even though it's too far to see the color, I can practically feel the blue of his gaze on my flesh. His stare has a texture to it, one I can feel rolling through my body, traveling down my spine, as if it's a roller in a massage chair. I swallow past the sudden dryness in my throat, and I smile, waving at him. He doesn't return the gesture nor does he smile. He just pushes off from the car, stuffs a red, dingy-looking bandana into the back pocket of his low-slung jeans, then hits something on the wall. The hinges roar, as the garage door kicks into action and shuts, shielding him from view.

Just like that.

My smile drops. My brows dip down even more.

Okay, I know I'm not imagining things now. My neighbor truly is a jerk.

A heaviness settles on my chest, and I shake my head, trying to let the sensation roll off me. I shouldn't care or take his brush-off personally. Maybe he's just a weirdo who likes his privacy? But a part of me, the bit that loves to please others and hates being disliked, *that* part of me won't let it go.

I just don't get it.

Ignoring the need to march next door and demand an answer for my neighbor's brashness, I pop the trunk and start unloading my bags. I mainly bought some stuff for inside the house, but I also bought some yard and gardening tools at the hardware store. I figured I'd take advantage of the cool breeze and get to work on the backyard. I should probably start on the front first, but with the way the sun is beating down on the porch and scraggly lawn, I'll take my chances in the back, where it's shaded.

Dressed in my ratty Long Beach High tank top, a pair of capri yoga pants, and an old, abused Disneyland hat, I get to work in the back, pulling weeds. My next task will be getting the grass to grow back in the lawn because, right now, it mainly consists of dirt and weeds. It looks an awful lot like an abandoned field back here.

About halfway into clearing the back, I hear a scraping sound coming from the fence next door and the sound of something jingling together. Beads of sweat roll down my temples, and the sweat glides down my back uncomfortably. With furrowed brows, I turn toward the source. A white and black paw snakes out beneath the fence from next door. A smile crests on my face, as I drop the tools and pull the gardening gloves off. That grin suddenly drops when a growl sounds, and the dog next door, somehow, manages to push through a loose board in the fence—just another thing I have to fix—into my yard.

The husky's eyes are what slam into me first. The dog's almond-shaped eyes are so gray, they almost look white. His head has black and white markings. The black wraps around his eyes and ears, even trailing between his eyes, while the rest of his face is that snow white coloring. The markings between his eyes, along with their color, make him look astute and, dare I say, intimidating.

The husky prowls toward me, growling under his breath. I try to control my heart rate and take a slow step back. After dealing with so many animals and their different temperaments, I'm trained to handle these situations, but, for some reason, with each step away I take from the husky, I can't seem to get my breathing in check. He's so...intimidating. It's almost like he's scowling at me. The markings on his face make him look more severe than most of the other breeds I've seen.

Pushing upright, I stand to my full height, showing him who the alpha is. If I show my dominance, he's less likely to pounce and attack me.

"All right, buddy," I say, reaching my hand out slowly. His growl grows in volume. He obviously doesn't like the change in positions. "We're all friends here. Why don't you go on back to your yard, and I'll go back inside?" I take a tentative step closer, and he lurches forward, snarling at me.

I yank my hand back, my heart racing now. Perspiration beads on my brow, and I work to control my breathing. The dog bares his teeth, still growling at me, and we both freeze at the brusque whistle. At the same time, we both glance toward the fence at the sound of the deep voice.

"Max."

My neighbor's voice is rough, raspy, and filled with the command of an alpha—an alpha of a dog, of course, that's what I meant.

Max dutifully follows his owner's voice, popping through the loose board back into their yard, as if he didn't just scare me shitless. A tremor rolls down my spine when my gaze clashes with the neighbor's, and I let out an inaudible gasp. His face is a blank mask. He's so cavalier, so cold, yet each time he regards me, I feel a stirring deep in my gut. A prickling sensation on my scalp and along my fingertips that I can't quite place.

With the back of my hand, I wipe the sweat off my forehead and smile awkwardly in thanks. I take unsure steps toward the fence, treating my neighbor just like I did his dog. Like he's a vicious animal going to attack, without a second's warning.

"Thank you. I work with animals, so I usually don't have a problem calming them down, but I guess—"

My neighbor turns on his heels and starts walking away, as I'm in the middle of speaking. He just turns his back on me, not even letting me finish. My mouth hangs open in shock, and I flinch when I hear his sliding glass door slam shut.

Now I'm really starting to get pissed off.

*What the hell is his problem?*

# Three

## “Summer Feelings”—Lennon Stella ft. Charlie Puth



*Olivia*

My first official day at Bennett Veterinary starts off a complete mess. I hit snooze one too many times on my alarm, and then, when it comes time to shower, the pipes decide to have a meltdown because the soft water I paid for is, in fact, not soft, and apparently, the temperature gauge is shit, too, because I feel like I am showering somewhere in the Arctic.

With my nipples as hard as rocks and goosebumps permanently etched on my skin, I don't even bother with makeup. I quickly put my hair into a low bun, before tossing on my work scrubs and flying out the front door, sans breakfast. Of course, that isn't even the worst of my morning. Want to know what tops it off? My dickhole neighbor exiting his house at the same time as me. And, like the idiot I am, I pause in my haste and wave at him again. I'm not even surprised when he looks right through me, hops on his bike, and revs it to life, peeling away.

Frustration simmering just below the surface has me grinding my teeth and curling my hands into fists. I give myself an inner pep talk, as I get into my car and take off, telling myself the next time I see my neighbor, I'm going to ignore him, just like he's ignoring me.

*That'll show him.*

Bennett Veterinary is a step up from the last place I was working at just outside of Long Beach. Though the facility is a bit smaller, overall, the place is a lot cleaner and organized. The staff is sweet. With a total of four vets, six vet techs, and two other assistants, I complete the clinic's employees.

I spend most of the day touring the facility and learning how they handle in-care procedures for the animals. I am given a quick crash course on everything from sick and injured animal care to cleanup, and shown where the animal kennels and procedure rooms are. I meet three of the four vets. Dr. Bennett and his son own the clinic. Samuel Bennett is in his early seventies and will be retiring soon. With coffee-colored eyes and hair that's as white as snow, Dr. Bennett is a sweet, delicate man I can't help but adore during our first meeting. His son, Travis, will be taking over the clinic when he retires. Though Travis wasn't able to make it in today to meet me, I figure I am in good hands here at the clinic. I think I spend most of my day smiling as we go through the procedures. That smile only grows when they finally allow me near the animals.

This has always been my favorite part about working with animals. Healing them. Without realizing it, they heal me, too. The ability to relieve the suffering of a living, breathing creature that has experienced traumatic injuries or chronic illness is nothing short of incredible. Caring for animals always seems to take my mind off whatever troubles I've been having beforehand. Because the way animals express their gratitude is far greater than the way humans do. It's easily the most rewarding job I've ever had.

I can't pinpoint exactly when I decided I wanted to care for animals. I wasn't even animal obsessed when I was younger; there was just a part of me that wanted to heal anything or anyone. Sometimes, humans could be real assholes, so I decided healing animals was as good of a consolation prize as any.

After soothing a cat with worms and hooking up a dog to anesthesia, after he got stuck with pine needles, I realize it's time to go. I clean up my station and move the animals from my care over to Lucy, one of the other assistants, before I leave. The entire ride home is a breath of fresh air. The best thing about working here? It has to be the drive.

Before, when I lived in Long Beach, I had to drive almost two hours each day to get to work, but here? It's only a twenty-minute drive *with* traffic.

My cheerful mood dims when I pull into my driveway and notice the neighbor's garage is open. The light is on inside, illuminating the space, giving me a clear view of the red and black muscle car inside. He left his bike sitting out in his driveway. The car he's working on inside looks old, probably one of those Chevelles or Mustangs. I'm not a car person, so obviously, I can't be too sure what it is.

Much like it was last time, the hood is popped, and my neighbor is ducked under, working on something beneath it. I don't know what because I force myself to glance away.

"Ignore him. He's an asshole who isn't worth your time," I chant to myself, as I grab my house keys and lift my purse from the passenger seat. It's a wonder I can keep my gaze straight ahead the entire time I walk from the car to the house. When I'm inside, the door safely locked, I rest my back against the wood and blow out a sigh. The only bad thing about the move? So far, it's my neighbor.

Figuring it's safe to do so now, I sneak a glance over at his house, but I can't see inside his garage from here, which is probably a good thing. The last thing I need is another reason to keep making myself look stupid in front of my neighbor.



The next few days at work are a breeze. Each day, I find myself coming home with a wide grin on my face. I've even made friends with the other assistants who work at the clinic. What's even better is I've finally found my routine of ignoring my neighbor. I hardly ever see him now, but I do hear his dog, Max, barking up a storm every now and then. The animal lover in me wants to go next door and get playful with him, but I stop short, remembering what a dickhead his owner is and just how cold the animal was toward me that first time.

That'll need to be rectified.

I get back to the task at hand, taping the plastic over the floors. I honestly don't understand why I even bother. The floors are about as ugly as they're going to get, but in all the videos on painting I've watched on



YouTube, I figure it's best to follow a professional's instructions. I may not be Chip or Joanna Gaines, but I sure as hell plan on painting and decorating my house to at least a fraction of their standards.

Yesterday, after work, I stopped at the hardware store and picked up some primer for the walls. I'm still volleying between colors, but I figure getting the ball rolling by throwing on the primer is as good of a start as any.

See? That'll show my parents. Only a true professional would know about primer.

With all my supplies laid out, my back door and windows open, and the music blasting, I get to work. I have my furniture in the living room all bunched together in the center to avoid any paint mishaps. I dip the paint roller into the tray and roll it, allowing the paint to soak into the fiber. My hips sway to the beat of Bell Biv DeVoe's "Poison." I belt out the lyrics, rolling the white primer over the hideous eggshell. With each dip and swipe, more of the wall gets covered, and I can't contain my grin.

A new slate.

One that's mine and mine alone.

Before I realize it, two walls in the living room have been primed, and I'm on to the third. "Saturday Love" by Cherrelle blasts over the Bluetooth speakers, and I bob my head.

Singing along to the lyrics, I'm so lost in the task and the upbeat song that I don't hear the banging on the screen door for a good few minutes. Nor do I hear the sharp bark or the deep baritone of a male's voice.

I whirl around, completely startled. In the process, paint splatters against my coffee table, and I hiss.

"Shit, shit, shit."

The banging on the front screen door starts up again. With a growl, I drop the handle, letting the roller drop into the paint. I wipe my paint-smothered hands on my shorts and tank top. I don't know where all the paint came from. I could've sworn I was doing a superb job, but as I glance down at the droplets of paint covering the floor and my shoes, I realize it's a lot harder than I originally thought.

My heart lurches when I close the distance from the living room to the screen door. Something stirs in my stomach, the effects of the sensation travel through my veins, and I refuse to acknowledge what it is, as I open the screen door, coming face-to-face with my neighbor. His face is pulled

taut with frustration. His eyes are narrowed, practically incinerating me with the glare he's shooting my way. His plump lips are pressed in a grim line. He has a small amount of stubble dusted along his sharp jawline. His black T-shirt hugs his muscles to perfection, and even though I can feel his anger, I find myself struggling not to gape at how handsome he is.

When I finally meet his gaze, I'm startled by the intensity reflected back at me. I thought his eyes were a stark, deep blue, but I was wrong. Today, his eyes, though still blue, have taken on a lighter gray hue. Those pewter eyes glare into me, drilling holes into my skull, and I swallow thickly, forcing an awkward smile.

"Sorry, can I help you?"

He chuckles darkly, without humor, resting one large hand along the doorframe, and shakes his head. "Yeah, you can, by turning down the fucking music. I can't even hear myself think."

The ire in his gaze and the way he regards me with such disgust make me want to curl in on myself and hide. Everything about him is intimidating. His height, his build, just how handsome he is. It's typical really. A good-looking man with a shit attitude. What else is new?

Instead of curling in on myself like I want to, I square my shoulders, not letting him see how much he gets to me. How much his constant blatant rudeness bothers me.

"I'll turn it down, but for future reference, maybe people won't think you're such a dickhead, if you ask nicely."

The corners of his mouth tip into a cold smile. "Listen, I couldn't really give a shit what you think about me."

My mouth drops open in shock. Without sparing me another glance, he fixes his gaze on the mess of paint behind me in the living room and shakes his head again, before he turns, heading back toward his house. The entire way, I watch him, the muscles in his back flexing and straining against the fabric of his shirt. His hands are curled into fists the entire way. I flinch at the finality of his door slamming shut behind him.

"What a prick," I whisper to myself. And, of course, just like the pleasing neighbor I am, I lower the volume of my music to a reasonable level and get back to painting.

Hours later, I take a step back, surveying the entirety of the living room, and I grin. The white primer covers the eggshell beautifully. Now, all I need

to do is pick a color to go over this, once it's dry, but obviously, that's a decision for another day.

After I get everything cleaned up, washing and storing the paint supplies in the closet for later use, I make myself something to eat. I settle on the Adirondack chair in the backyard on the newly cleaned porch and watch the sunset. It's beautiful, the way the orange and purple blend harmoniously.

I used to spend a lot of time outdoors back in the place I shared with Reid. At first, we'd share our dinners out on the deck together, doing exactly this, watching the sunset. I don't exactly know when it happened, but at some point, we stopped doing those things together. We stopped enjoying each other's presence. After a while, I got used to sitting out there alone with my dinner, wrapped in silence.

The only difference now? I don't feel as lonely as I did then. It got to the point where I hated the dynamic of our relationship. The fighting. The avoidance. I think those silent, lonely dinners taught me how to be on my own. How to enjoy my own company. It's exactly why I can sit here now, with a smile on my face, enjoying such a simple day and a simple meal.

This is the life I've always wanted. An independent one.

Nothing and no one can change that.

I tense on the chair when I hear the telltale sound of nails scraping against the wood, and when I glance toward my neighbor's fence, I'm not even surprised when Max slips in through the loose board. I'm on immediate alert, especially since our last encounter didn't go over so well, and he acted like I was a piece of raw meat he wanted to attack.

Max prowls across the lawn, his wolf instincts on high alert. As he gets closer, I start to hear the deep rumble of his growl. Slowly, I push up from the chair, and unlike last time, I drop to my knees and cautiously put my hand out between us for him to sniff. Either that or maul. It could honestly go either way, knowing how aggressive his owner is.

"Not this time, buddy," I mumble to myself.

Max closes the distance between us, and a smile crests on my face, when I feel his wet nose poke at my hand.

"That's it, sweet boy. There you go. I knew deep down you were a teddy bear, Maxie."

He seems to enjoy the soft lilt I use in my animal talking voice, because he rubs his whole head against my hand, trying to get me to pet him. To

which, I oblige, of course. He's just too handsome not to. I scratch behind his ears and pet his coat. My brows jump into my hairline at how well-groomed he is. I guess I didn't expect the asshole to be a decent owner, but I can tell by the lack of shedding, the shine of his coat, and how wet Max's nose is that my neighbor is, in fact, a good owner.

"Too bad I planned on taking you away from your jerk daddy."

A deep throat clears, jerking my attention away from Max and toward the source. "I'd like to see you try."

The asshole in question is leaning against the fence, his forearms propped against the weathered wood, his gaze fixed on me petting his dog. A flush rises to my cheeks, burning the tips of my ears. I'm glad my hair is down to block the evidence of my reaction toward him.

Clearing my throat, I drop my gaze, avoiding those pewter eyes that feel like they brand me each time his gaze bores into me. "I was joking."

"I know that. I'm not an idiot," he snaps. The color drains from my face in mortification at his brash coldness. I truly don't think I've ever met a bigger asshole. "And his name is Max, not *Maxie*." His voice lightens. Hardly, but I can tell he softens his tone, just enough not to sound like an angered caveman.

You know the saying, 'love thy neighbor'? Well, I'm really starting to fucking *hate* thy neighbor.

"I understand that. I'm not an idiot," I shoot back.

I can't tell if it's the dark playing tricks on me, but I swear I see the stirrings of a smirk tug at the corner of his mouth. I can't be too sure, though, because it's gone now, and he's back to his blank, aloof mask.

Fixing my gaze on Max, I pet between his beautiful eyes and scratch more around his ears. "What about yours?" I find myself asking. I keep my gaze trained on his dog, too afraid to look up at him and see the disgust for me written all over his face.

"Roman."

My gaze flits up to him in surprise. I didn't expect him to answer. It takes me a few seconds to process this and gather my wits. It figures that such a hot guy like him would have such a hot name like Roman.

"Got a last name, Roman?"

"Does it matter?" He quirks a brow. We wait each other out, and when I get the sense that he has no intention of telling me his last name, I wash my hands of him for the night.

“Well, Roman,” I breathe out, feigning bravado. “I’m Olivia. I would say it’s nice to meet you, but I’d be lying.”

I give Max one last pat on his head, before I push upright, avoiding Roman’s intense gaze. Pivoting on my heels, I head back up the deck steps and enter the house. I let the screen and the back door slam shut behind me, just like he’s done so many times.

My heart is pounding like steel drums. Electricity is swirling through my veins, and butterflies are roaring in my stomach. I chalk it up to me doing something unexpected for once. Though, I know it may be because of something else entirely. Leaning my back against the wood, I feel a smile pull across my face. It’s a deep grin, one I feel causing my cheeks to ache with the force of it.

It feels good to be bad. Being the one to turn around first and leave that asshole in the dust.

Guess two can play that game, *neighbor*.

# Four

## “A Thousand Bad Times”—Post Malone



*Olivia*

Pain ripples through the soles of my feet, as I climb out of my car. I would say I’m used to standing and working all day, but back at the last veterinary clinic I worked at, it wasn’t nearly as busy as the Bennett clinic is. By the end of each day, my feet are throbbing in my tennis shoes. It feels like I’ve been walking around in six-inch stilettos, instead of shoes with comfortable soles.

Using my aching foot, I kick my car door open and make a feeble attempt to get out. It doesn’t work. I collapse back onto the seat, tossing my head back against the headrest and closing my eyes.

“Olivia! Hi!”

My eyes spring open at the sound of the jubilant voice. I refrain from groaning when I see my neighbor, Mona, waving wildly at me with a smile plastered across her face, as she cuts through our lawns, closing in on me.

Heaving a tired sigh, I grab my keys and purse, pushing out of the car and slamming the door behind me. I muster a semblance of a smile on my face for her benefit. It’s all I’m capable of after the long day I’ve had.

“I just wanted to come by and invite you to our annual block party. Allison, our neighbor up the street, and her husband throw it every year, and usually, everyone who lives on our block congregates at her house and

brings a dish to pass. Allison's been a bit busy, so she hasn't had a chance to come over and invite you herself, but the party starts tomorrow around three. Can't wait to see you there!" With a quick pat on my shoulder and a squeal of excitement, she's gone, leaving me standing there, outside my car, my body and feet aching, mouth agape.

So, apparently, I won't be spending my day off lying around being lazy tomorrow. Looks like I will be attending a block party that I was just invited to—as more of an afterthought.

*Great.*

The next morning, the day of the "block party," I drag myself out of bed and get to work in the kitchen, whipping up something quick to bring with me. I'm in dire need of a trip to the grocery store, but I'm crunched for time, so my options are limited.

I settle on making a charcuterie board filled with finger foods I usually like to snack on, while I read and drink a glass of wine. Not quite sure what to expect from today, I dress casually in a halter sundress and opt out of the heels for sandals instead. The dress might be overkill, so the last thing I need is a pair of heels to really drive the point home that I'm a newbie in the neighborhood.

When I step into Allison's backyard, it's a lot bigger, and the barbecue is a lot more extravagant than I was expecting. There are lights strung up that crisscross, casting a soft glow throughout the space. Groups of people from the neighborhood congregate around tables, and kids run on the wooden playground and swing set, while Allison's husband mans the grill, clinking beers with the fellow men from the neighborhood.

I fidget off to the side of the yard, near Allison's immaculate rosebushes, feeling completely out of place here. The only two people I've shared conversations with so far are Mona and the asshole next door, and calling *that* a conversation is being generous. He's the last person I want to run into here.

Twisting the cap off the water bottle that I grabbed from the cooler earlier, I glance around, my gaze stalling on a group of women huddled together near a table. My back goes ramrod straight, and my stomach twists with unease, when I clearly spot some of them glancing my way, inspecting me up and down, while whispering in hushed tones.

Why are women like this? Why do they congregate in cliques and feel the need to belittle someone they don't even know? I wave my hand at the group, hoping one of them will extend the olive branch my way.

No one does.

"Don't you worry about them, sweetheart," Mona says, drawing my attention to her with a pat on my shoulder. Holding a wine cooler, she has a disgruntled expression on her face, as she watches the group of catty women.

"Are they always like...this?"

She laughs, but it's without humor. "Oh, honey. This isn't even the worst of it. I wouldn't take it too personally, though. I think they're just jealous that you scored the house next to Campbell's most eligible bachelor."

My face scrunches with confusion.

She could only be referring to one person, and I refuse to believe anyone thinks that man is, in any way, shape, or form, an eligible bachelor. She must see the confusion that's written all over my face because she laughs, nudging me in the side.

"Oh, c'mon. You mean to tell me you haven't met your other neighbor yet? Roman, the tanned god. The man is a stunner. Watching him during the summer is our favorite pastime. I mean, those muscles. Have you ever seen anything like it?"

I roll my eyes. "I've met him, all right, and I'm not impressed. He's been nothing but a grade-A asshole—"

"Oh, my God. There he is now," she whispers, her voice taking on a husky note, as she watches Roman stride into the backyard. The collective gasp from all the women around us is resounding. I feel it in the way the atmosphere around us changes. Tension cackles in the air. As much as I hate to admit it, he has a presence that demands your attention. It sucks the air from your lungs, obliterating you entirely.

I'm robbed silent when the group of snobby women spot him and, quite literally, go crazy. My brows rise incredulously, causing my eyes to grow twice their size. My mouth drops open, gaping, when Roman strides over and indulges in a conversation with them. An actual goddamn conversation. With words. And a fucking smirk.

"Is he...is he actually having a conversation with them? What in the actual hell is happening?"



Mona snaps out of her ogling, shooting me a quirked brow. “Not only is the man sweet on the eyes, but he’s also a hell of a gentleman to everyone. He helps out a lot in the neighborhood. Though most of the stuff he gets asked to do is for the bored housewives and divorcees who live in this area.”

Something indignant burns in my gut. “He was rude to me during our first conversation. Hell, he’s been nothing but rude to me since I moved in next door.”

Disbelief passes over her face. “Roman? No. I can’t see him being rude to you, sweetie. Maybe you just caught him on an off day?”

My gaze narrows on the man in question, as I watch him walk around, saying his hellos to everyone. He’s dressed ridiculously in bulky black biker boots, another pair of frayed jeans, and a black T-shirt that does nothing to hide the hard slabs of muscle I know are underneath. He looks like a ridiculous dickhead. A hot, ridiculous dickhead.

*Who wears leather to a goddamn barbeque?*

He’s actually quite handsome, when he isn’t glowering or shooting a glare your way. The smile that’s spreading across his face, showing his straight teeth, brings out a slight dimple in one of his cheeks. Hell, it even seems his eyes are sparkling. A different air surrounds him right now, but when our eyes collide, it all evaporates. His gaze sparks embers of hate between us. It’s like a match has been strategically sparked to life.

When Mona’s husband waves her over, she pats me on my hand, giving me a sympathetic smile, and leaves me to my own devices. I shift awkwardly on my feet, off to the side of the party for a while longer, feeling like the odd one out. I have a few stagnant conversations with people, but they don’t last very long.

I thought being new to the neighborhood would mean more of the community would be a lot more welcoming and inviting at this thing, but I couldn’t be more wrong. The reception has been cold. I guess if you haven’t been living in the neighborhood longer than a year, it’s easy to be skipped over and ignored.

After standing around for another fifteen minutes like a loner, I decide to cut and run. I’m on my way out of Allison’s backyard, when I crash into something warm and solid. By the delicious clean and woody scent, it’s obvious it’s a man, one you’d expect to reach out and catch me. That isn’t what happens.

At all.

Instead, I crash into a solid wall of muscle and stumble back onto the grass. My backside slams against the ground, sending a pang from my tailbone up my spine.

I hiss in pain and slowly drag my gaze up. The first things I spot are biker boots, frayed jeans that hug powerful thighs, and finally, a face I could go without seeing for the rest of my life. I mean, sure, it would suck not to admire the handsomeness, but the glare that's being sent my way? I wouldn't miss that one bit.

It's obvious the guy hates me, but I'll never understand why. The glare he shoots my way is eviscerating, and I feel it slicing into me. Damn near flaying my skin open. Flames lick at my heart, burning me up from the inside out. I can't fathom why it bothers me as much as it does—the fact that he doesn't like me—but somehow, just from a few horrible conversations, he's gotten under my skin. He continues to get under my skin and drive me crazy, every time I see him.

A scowl ripples across my features. "It's you."

I can't tell if it's just from the angle I'm in, but I swear there's stirrings of a smirk on his face. But I know I must be imagining it, when the cold glower he's shooting my way somehow intensifies.

"It's you," he parrots back, his upper lip curling in disdain.

When he doesn't offer his hand to help me up, I stumble up from the ground, much more ungracefully than I'd like, wiping off my backside with a huff.

"You know, an apology would be nice."

His brow quirks. "And what the hell would I be apologizing for?"

Indignation burns in my gut. "You bumped into me, and I fell on the ground," I reply dryly. "Or do you think I enjoy spending my time at your feet?"

"I couldn't care less what you do on your knees, or rather, what you do at my feet."

Heat rises to my cheeks. My gaze narrows into thin slits.

"Are you always such a dick?"

"Never had any complaints before," he counters, infuriating me to no end.

With a frustrated growl, I storm past Roman, leaving Allison's backyard and the barbecue filled with all my asshole neighbors.

This has been fucking peachy.



With my shopping cart semi-stocked with groceries, I turn down the aisle, searching for bleach. There's a faint smell coming from the bathroom in the hallway, and I want to give it another deep clean. I'm not sure who lived there previously, but it's obvious, they didn't clean as often as they should've, if the mold gunk along the windows is any indication.

There's a handful of shoppers down the aisle, making it impossible to get through with my cart, so I park it off to the side and weave through the other shoppers toward the bleach. I push onto my tiptoes, reaching for the last bottle. My hand is just closing around the handle, when a dark shadow falls over me, and like a cartoon when the sun has been cruelly yanked away, the bleach is ripped from my hand. When I whirl around, I see why.

My gaze narrows. Indignation burns at my throat. "Excuse me, that's mine."

Roman, my brutish neighbor, turns his back on me like he didn't hear me. Resentment sparks in my veins, and I hike the strap of my purse over my shoulder and follow him.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" I call after him, turning the heads of a few other customers. Of all the stores in Campbell, did I seriously have to shop at the same one this asshole does? When he doesn't stop, I reach out, gripping his arm. He jerks to a halt, his body going rigid beneath my touch. Slowly, he turns, pinning me with a dark glare. Those bright eyes drill holes into me, pointedly staring down at my hand that's clasped on his arm. I get the memo and release him, but I don't back down.

"I know you heard me. You purposely yanked that bottle of bleach out of my hand. It's mine."

Roman raises the bottle. "I don't see your name anywhere on it."

I scoff. "Don't be such a child. Haven't you ever heard of ladies first? I had it in my hand, and I can assure you, I need it more than you do."

Roman clenches his teeth together, causing the muscle in his jaw to jump, highlighting the sharp lines and angles of his face. "I don't see any

ladies anywhere around here.”

His words are a slap to the face. They’re said so cold and brusquely, it takes me a few seconds longer than normal to gather my wits. “Excuse me?”

Stepping into me, Roman bends down the slightest bit, leveling our gazes. “You heard me.”

“What the hell is your problem, dude?”

“Dude?” He laughs, but the sound is awful and cold, with no humor in it whatsoever.

“I’m not your *dude*. You didn’t have it first, and plenty of other stores around here sell bleach. You’ll survive.”

With that, he turns on his heels, leaving me standing there in the middle of the grocery store, gaping after his retreating form.

That didn’t just happen, did it? There’s no possible way I just argued with my neighbor over a bottle of bleach. I glance around, realizing a few patrons are still staring at me, likely wondering the same thing. Swallowing thickly, I tamp down the embarrassment and do the walk of shame back to my cart. Oh, yeah, I’m sure I look like that crazy lady right now.

Heaving a frustrated sigh, I steer my cart out of the aisle and finish gathering the remainder of my list, so I can get the hell out of here. When I have everything except for my bleach, the one item I needed most, I head to the checkout lines. I blow out a sigh of disappointment, when I see how long they are. There are about nine lanes in total, but only two are open. The lines are unbelievably long, so long, I glance down at my cart filled with groceries and wonder if I should leave everything and just call it a day and head home.

As much as I’d like to do that, I sort of need to eat, and takeout every night isn’t exactly ideal. Steering my cart toward the shorter of the two lines, out of the corner of my eye, I spot an employee opening a new lane. We make eye contact, and she waves me over.

Heading toward her now open lane, I book it there, trying to be the first in line, so I can get in and get out. I can almost taste the victory. That is, until another dark shadow passes over me and a large looming mass cuts in front of me. A sharp pin from the wheel rolls over my foot, and I jerk my cart to an abrupt halt, glaring daggers at the perfectly unkempt dark head of hair that is now in front of me.

When I spot the bleach in his cart, amongst other random things, I snap. My lips curl over my teeth, and I round my cart, pressing my finger into his back, aggressively, to get his attention.

“Hey, you just cut me. Again.”

Roman turns, leering down at me with a look of utter contempt. “How can you possibly think I cut you, when all I did was beat you here?”

“You all but ran over my goddamn foot to get here. I mean, would it have killed you to get behind me?”

“Believe me, that’s the last place anyone wants to be.”

I grit my back teeth together so hard, I swear I hear a tooth crack. “You’re such an asshole,” I hiss under my breath, so only he can hear. I can feel the unwanted stares of everyone around us, but I just don’t care. I’m tired of this guy. I’m tired of him glowering at me like I shit in his Cheerios, when I’ve literally done nothing at all.

“You think so?” he asks the question so quietly, I thought I imagined it, but I didn’t. I about blow a gasket when he stares down at me pointedly and waves the woman who’s waiting behind me in front of him. I choke on a breath, my lungs restricting air, with the torrent of absolute rage flowing through my veins.

This isn’t happening.

No. This asshole did not just run over my foot, cut me in line, and allow someone else to cut him, just to be a spiteful shit.

“What the hell are you doing?” I bark like an insane woman.

“Now I’m being an asshole,” he offers, infantilely.

“You’re a child, you know that?”

“Done talking yet?”

“Asshole.”

“Shrew.”

“Prick.”

“Ignoramus.”

“Dickwad.”

“You seem to be obsessed with my dick.”

My gaze narrows, heat rising to my cheeks, as I glance around. “Excuse me?” I hiss.

“Dickhead. Dickwad.”

“Those are all insults that perfectly describe you. Don’t blame me for the way you come off to others.”

“They all seem to have a very specific focus.”

To my horror, the woman, he let cut him, tries to stifle her laughter but fails miserably. Embarrassment churns my stomach, and I have to work to control my breathing. I’m not a violent person, but I suddenly have the urge to attack this man. Nails bared and everything.

When I don’t say anything in return, he allows me to fume in silence, turning back around and going through the motions of checking out. I glare daggers at his back the entire time. Hell, if I had a voodoo doll, I’d be stabbing the shit out of it with a red pin right about now.

The checkout woman eyes me warily, when it’s my turn, and I do my best to ignore her and everyone else whose gaze I can feel glued to me, just watching and waiting for my next outburst. I’ve had enough of today.

Mumbling curse words under my breath the entire way back to my car, I’m so lost in my own mind, I don’t realize there’s a car backing out right in front of me. By the time I do snap out of it, it’s too late. The car screeches to a halt, still bumping my cart. I let out a gasp, and my eyes widen when I take in the small dent that now rests on the all black muscle car.

No way.

There’s no way.

The driver’s side door is thrown open, and a tall and impossibly intimidating Roman gets out, tossing his hands up in the air.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Me?” I yell back incredulously. “Are you fucking kidding me? You hit me with your car, you dickhead!”

“Don’t you look to see where you’re going? Obviously, if a car is backing out, that means stop fucking walking!”

“Ever heard of a rearview mirror, Roman? Try using it!”

With a growl, he throws himself back into his car, pulls out of the parking space, and drives away. I stand there, rooted to the spot, fuming.

*Who the fuck does he think he is?*

# Five

## “Fuck You (very very much)”—Lily Allen



*Olivia*

The next morning when I leave for work, I pull out of the driveway, just as my neighbor opens his garage and rolls out his motorcycle. Max is nowhere to be found. I watch in the rearview mirror, while I head down the street, as he swings his leg over his bike. A strange burst of warmth and reckless embers explode in my chest when I look in the rearview mirror and see his head crane my way, as he watches me drive away. There’s an odd sense of satisfaction that I get, knowing I obviously get under his skin the same way he gets under mine.

I imagine his bike swerving, and his pride and joy being crushed to smithereens. I smirk.

Would serve the asshole right.

When I walk into work, my steps falter at the broad backed man. I’m even more surprised when he turns around. Dressed in a suit and a white lab coat over it, the handsome man with sandy blond hair shoots me a smile.

“Hey, I’m Travis Bennett. You must be our new assistant. Olivia, right?”

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, and it takes me a few seconds to get ahold of myself. I plaster a smile on my face and jolt my clammy hand out to him.

“Hi, yes, I’m Olivia. It’s so nice to meet you, Mr. Bennett.”

He grins, and it’s dazzling. He has the same charm Reid had. The smiles and charisma are what draw you in.

“Please, call me Travis. Mr. Bennett is my father.”

“Travis. Yes. I got it.”

He chuckles and pointedly looks down at my hand that’s still shaking his. I immediately let go and shoot him an apologetic gaze.

*God, what is my problem lately?*

“Come on, you can assist me for the morning. I could use some help.”

“Of course!” I jump into action, washing my hands and scrubbing down. For the rest of the morning, I split my time between following Travis’s instructions and learning more about him. He grew up here in Campbell. His mother was always a stay-at-home mom, and his dad opened the clinic when he was just a kid. From there on, he knew he always wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps and, one day, take over the family business.

In the few hours I spend with Travis, I learn a lot about him, some good and some bad. The good? On top of being good-looking and funny, he’s an incredible doctor. The bad? Obviously sleeping with co-workers is a nonissue for him because throughout my shift I’ve caught him and Lucy making “sex eyes” at each other. Which honestly wouldn’t bother me at all if he hadn’t already made subtle passes at me.

The “oh, how could a woman as beautiful as you be single?” or the, “I look forward to getting to know you, Olivia. *All of you.*” Yeah, there was no missing that innuendo. And like I said, normally, it wouldn’t bother me. Hot boss who loves animals? Count me in. But in this case, I don’t want to shit where I eat, metaphorically, that is. This is my job. The last thing I want to do is cause any drama or make room for any awkward situations. There’s no telling how many women he’s slept with in the office. The thought alone skeeves me out. Becoming another notch on his bedpost isn’t exactly appealing, no matter how hot he is.

I mean, who am I kidding? What’s going to happen when I sleep with him, and I start to grow attached—because I know I will grow attached. I’ve never been a one-night stand type of girl. I know myself well enough to admit that seeing him flirt with Lucy and Cassandra around the office would bother me. After leaving one toxic relationship, the last thing I want to do is find myself in another one. The whole point of this fresh start, this



move, is to become my own person. Fall into that independence I so desperately craved in my previous relationship.

I'm cleaning and sanitizing room three, when a knock sounds on the door. Travis pokes his head in, an enticing smile on his face.

"How do you like it here so far?" He rests his shoulder against the doorframe, crossing his arms over his broad chest, as he watches me finish up.

I shoot him a genuine smile over my shoulder. "It's great. The drive here is short, and the staff is incredible. I'm loving it here."

"Glad to hear it." He pushes off the doorjamb and uncrosses his arms, drumming his heavy fingers along the wall. "You about done in here?"

"Uh, yeah. I just need to sweep, then this room is all set for the night shift."

"Great." He lingers, and it prompts me to pause. I turn toward him fully and raise a brow. I brace myself for whatever it is he's here for. "You up to doing dinner tonight? I know this great Mexican place about fifteen minutes away."

It's on the tip of my tongue to say yes, but at the very last second, I shake my head. "You know what, I would, but I have some stuff to do at home. New place and all. I still have quite a few boxes to unpack, but, uh, thank you. For offering. That's nice of you."

He nods, grinning to himself, like something is amusing. He pats the wall, signaling his departure. "No worries, Olivia. See you tomorrow, and great work today. You're an excellent addition to the staff."

My grin is probably borderline insane, but I can't contain my happiness at his praise. "Thank you, Travis. That means a lot to me."

I spend the next hour finishing up with the sweeping. This was my last room I had to sanitize before I could leave. The second shift assistant and vet tech start soon, and they stay through the night, until the next shift takes over. They have a great system going, what with this being a twenty-four-hour clinic and all. I haven't had to work a full night yet, but I'm sure it's coming soon. I think they're still giving me time to get used to how things work here.

When I pull into my driveway at a quarter to six, I can't help but glance next door at my neighbor's house. Against my will, my heart lurches at the sight of his open garage door, and the light spilling out. Max's black and white furred body is lying on his doggy bed, and of course, the man in

question, Roman, is there. Once again, he's working on the car. The hood is up, shielding him from view, but I can see his legs. The light inside the garage is bright. Way brighter than mine. I'm sure he's handy enough to change his own lighting, unlike me. I haven't had the guts to venture into the garage yet. The last I checked, it was filled with spiders, and I swear, I even heard something scurry by the garage door.

My car is just fine sitting in the driveway, thank you very much.

Inhaling a deep, stabilizing breath, preparing for whatever Roman I'll be getting today, I hook the strap of my purse over my shoulder and slam the car door shut. Max perks up, glancing my way, and much to my surprise, he hops out of the bed and saunters toward me. Unable to help myself, a grin tips the corners of my lips, and I find myself crossing our lawns toward the garage. Max jumps at me, his heavy paws pushing against my legs and almost knocking me over. I bend, patting his head, giving him a good scratch behind his ears.

Even though it practically kills me to do this, to be the one to extend the olive branch between us, I don't want to start our neighbor relationship like this. Maybe, if I find out what ticked him off in the first place, we can get past all the nastiness that has transpired since then and move on. I don't expect us to become the best of friends, but honestly, I don't know how much more of his scathing glares I can endure.

"Hi, buddy. How're you doin'?"

"Mad Max, sit," Roman commands.

A laugh climbs up my throat at the name. "Mad Max is such a..." I trail off, when I glance up and finally take in my neighbor.

My mouth drops open, and my eyes grow twice their normal size.

He's shirtless, his skin slick with sweat. There are smudges of black on his hands and forearms, and a red dingy rag is tucked in the pocket of his low-slung jeans. My throat goes dry, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. I swear I even forget how to breathe.

Roman's body is insane. There are abs, definite abs there, and way too many for me to count without being too obvious. And his chest, Christ, his chest is just...perfection. His pecs are smooth and tanned, and I can see every droplet of sweat beaded over the script tattoo on his right one. Slowly, I trace my eyes down to the dark trail of hair and the protruding veins that lead into his jeans, hanging low on his hips. For the life of me, I can't tear my eyes away from that deep V of muscle. I can't tear my eyes away from

*him*. I notice it's been too long. I've been too silent. I'm gawking and ogling like I've never seen a man like him before, and shit, I need to pull myself together.

I force myself to fix my gaze on his face, and in doing so, I do another slow perusal of his body. His Adam's apple juts out against his olive skin. His beautiful brown hair curls around his ears and the nape of his neck. He must've shaved recently because the scruff I noticed, the day he came over to yell at me and yesterday at the grocery store, is now gone. He's perfectly clean-shaven, and honestly, I can't tell which looks best on him. His lips are plump, the bottom much larger than the top, but both have me beat in the plump department.

But his eyes? They're what do me in. They're what cause my breath to hitch, my heart to pound, and my stomach to dip with that damn foreign sensation. The pewter blue is vibrant, taking on a gray hue. Like sunlight on chrome, ice in the Atlantic. A fucking stunning pale blue. He really is beautiful. Not in a feminine way, but one you can't help but stare at. He's beautiful in a dark, rebellious way. I feel it in the way the air is charged around him—around us.

I start coughing when I see the makings of a smirk on his face. He's caught me red-handed. It's the last thing I was expecting from him. And it's gone before I can analyze it further. Embarrassment coats my cheeks because he knows I was checking him out. I mean, it's obvious. I wasn't exactly discreet about it. Not in the least.

"Soooo, Mad Max, huh?" I try for nonchalance, but my voice, my whole fucking body, betrays me by sounding breathy. Ignoring me, Roman snaps for Max to come, and he does so begrudgingly. Tentatively, I invite myself inside his garage, observing the space. I take in the license plates on the wall and the hardware and other tools. There's a station with car parts and items resting on a toolbox.

"You fix cars?"

Roman crosses those thick arms over his big chest, glaring daggers at me. The smirk that was inching across his face is completely wiped away now. It's like he suddenly remembers he hates me.

"Is there a reason you're here talking to me?"

I fidget under his intense glare. Shifting toward the car he's been working on, I decide to ignore his obvious dismissal and take in the shiny

black paint job and the red stripes over the hood. It's nice. A muscle car. The same one from the grocery store yesterday.

"What is this, a Mustang? My dad would probably love this car."

Roman scoffs. "A Mustang," he mumbles under his breath, shaking his head with disappointment. "You can clearly see it's not a Mustang."

I roll my eyes. "You know, you don't always have to be so rude about everything."

"If you think I'm so rude, why are you here?" he quips coldly, leaning his black smudged hand against his pride and joy. There's a gruffness in his tone that sets me on edge. The question stumps me, because I honestly don't know what I'm doing here. I knew coming here to play nice was a mistake, but foolish me had hoped that he'd be an adult about this situation. That's obviously not going to happen.

I don't understand why I find myself constantly thinking about him. I refuse to believe it's just because he's hot. There's something about Roman, an air of mystery around him that has me wanting to know who he is.

Why is he such an asshole?

Why did he name his dog, Mad Max?

Why does he hate me so much?

It doesn't matter because it's not like he'll tell me anyway. I'm familiar with Roman's type. I know his type all too well. He's just like Travis and Reid. Men who look like them always treat women a certain way, and honestly, it's a waste of my time constantly trying to figure him out. I refuse to settle, not when I deserve better than either of them is willing to give.

"You're right. I can't fathom why I'm here. I know your type well enough to grasp that you're a jackass. Just like the rest of them." Fuming, I spin on my heels and stomp out of his garage. I'm partly angry with myself. I hate that I'm like this. I gravitate toward men who are bad for me, and I can't for the life of me understand why. I have a loving father, so it's not like I have daddy issues, but a part of me goes out and hopes, it'll be the moment I meet the *one*. I'm constantly searching for love.

I'm also angry with my god-awful neighbor for being such a dick. For invading my headspace and being an unwanted distraction in this new chapter in my life. Why couldn't he just be a nice, regular neighbor who I don't have to worry about walking on eggshells around?

His next words stop me in my tracks. They're spoken low. So low, I almost don't hear them, but I do. They send a tremor down my spine.

“I can assure you, I’m nothing like them.”

I pause, glancing at him over my shoulder. The muscle in his jaw jumps continuously, as if he’s grinding his teeth together.

Too bad for him, I don’t care enough to know how different he really is.

But that’s just another lie.

Because I do care. Way more than I’d like to admit.



The weekend comes with its own set of issues, the first being the plumbing in the house. Or is it the piping? Whatever the hell it is, the water is still cold as shit. The water heater isn’t working either, but I refuse to call my dad back here so soon. For once, I need to figure this out on my own. And sadly, YouTube hasn’t given me the answer. Yesterday on my lunch break at work, I called a local plumbing company, and they agreed to send a guy out to take a look and see what the problem is.

Which brings us to now. He toured the house and checked the water heater, and as he did it all, he did nothing but grunt and scribble something on his clipboard filled with papers. We finally head back out toward his truck, and he slams me with the bad news. In my peripheral, I can hear Max growling. I glance over my shoulder, spotting Roman and Max in the garage. He’s working on the car again.

The same car that is most definitely not a Mustang.

I can feel his heated gaze on me from here. It has my stomach dipping violently. I hurry and whirl around, focusing on Arnold, the plumber with a beer belly that rivals my old neighbor’s. Mr. Greene was the poster child for a man with a beer belly, if there ever was one. It was like his gut had a mind of its own. When he’d laugh or grunt, the thing would bob up and down in a distracting way. And regardless of how big the man’s shirts were, his belly would always manage to make an appearance.

“Well, I found the problem. You have weak piping. It’s an old house, so this was bound to happen. It definitely needs work done. We’ll have to re-pipe. You need a new water heater. The unit you have in there isn’t working

anymore. I can help you out. A crew of guys can be here next week, but you're looking at about eight to nine grand, not including the cost of labor."

I choke.

Literally. I start choking, right there in front of my house.

I think I've even swallowed my tongue.

"I'm sorry, what? Ten grand?" On the verge of hysterics, my voice is deafening. I wouldn't be surprised if the entire neighborhood heard me just now.

"It's an old house, ma'am. If you want warm, clean water, this is what needs to be done."

My jaw is still on the ground, as I stare at Arnold, trying to make sense of the large sum of money. There's just no way. My dad usually did all the house maintenance himself. I don't ever remember him having to call in a plumbing company, but I'm obviously not my father. And I can't just have him drive all the way out here to fix this.

"What's the issue?"

I whirl around at the sound of Roman's voice. He steps up behind me, Max following his every step. The dark pattern on the dog's face makes him look severe and intimidating, so much so, Arnold glances warily at me, then at Roman. After a few beats, he gathers himself, rattling off everything he just told me, including the price. The entire time, my gaze is fixed on Roman. He's dressed in a white T-shirt today that hugs his body to perfection. I can't help the way my eyes trail across his pecs and around the material straining against his biceps. The shirt is plain and dirty, smudged with oil and grease, but he still looks good. Better than good, actually. The man could literally walk around with a smear of shit on his face, and he'd probably still attract women. It's unfair.

I'm so busy checking him out that I miss half of the conversation, barely clueing in when I hear Roman.

"Thanks for your time. I'll take it from here, man."

Arnold shoots me a questioning glance, and I don't even have the ability to respond because I'm in a state of shock. *What the hell?* With an exasperated shake of his head, he tosses his clipboard into the company van and climbs into the driver's side, before taking off.

"What the hell just happened? Why did you do that?" I round on my neighbor, a frown firmly planted on my face.

Roman rolls his eyes. “He was railroading you. New piping doesn’t cost that much.”

I fix him with a glare, propping my hands on my hips. “How the hell would you know?”

“Because I re-piped my entire house, and I can tell you it didn’t cost no ten grand.”

That shuts me right up. A crease forms between my brows. “Oh.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. “Yeah, *oh*.”

I scratch at my head, glancing back at my house, which, from here, is looking more than a little run-down. I really have to start working on the outside, just as much as the inside. If the weeds in the front grow any taller, this place is going to start looking like the home of Michael Myers or something.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

“Fucking Christ.” He sighs, swiping a frustrated hand over half his face. Roman starts walking toward my house, and I just stand there, rooted to the spot like an idiot. He pauses on the porch in front of the closed door.

“Well? Open the damn door, so I can have a look.”

“Oh! Right,” I breathe.

I bound up the steps and open the door, wide enough for his tall frame to slip through. Watching Roman walk through my space is beyond weird. He pauses in the living room, near the front door, and surveys the space. He takes in the clumped together furniture, the unpacked boxes, and the horribly worn floors. Feeling the need to defend myself and my purchase of the home that’s obviously more than just a fixer-upper, I jump into a long spiel.

“I’m working on painting. Just need to decide on the color. Then I’ll move on to the floors. I’m hoping sooner rather than later. I originally wanted to go with a simple dark wood, but after watching HGTV for two months straight, I want to try something different. A light, rustic flooring. Kind of like you have. Where did you get the flooring, by the way? Did you do that yourself? I bet you did i—”

When Roman glances over his shoulder at me and quirks a single brow, it shuts me right up. Rambling in front of hot guys seems to be my forte lately.

The entire time he walks through the house, checking on the piping and random things, I can’t help but wring my hands together, shadowing his

every move. Having him here in my space is odd and painfully awkward. I don't think I like it.

Scratch that, I *know* I don't like it.

I have the strangest urge to keep explaining my design choices to him, as if he cares. This man, who's been nothing but rude to me, since the day I showed up on his doorstep with a cake. It's like he's incapable of being a decent human. Until now, that is.

At least he's offering to help. That has to count for something, right?

"I can do it," he rasps, gaze still surveying my space. "I work every day and have every other Saturday off, but I can make it work."

I've swallowed my tongue. This time I'm sure of it. My throat, mouth, and vocal cords aren't working. I stand here frozen, completely slack-jawed, staring at Roman like he has two heads.

He seems to grow impatient by my silence—or my surprise—because his eyes narrow and his enticing plump lips thin. "Or I can let you figure this out on your own."

I shake my head, trying to shake off the effect he's having on me. "I'm sorry, but what's happening? I'm so confused. I thought you hated me."

If it was possible for smoke to billow out of his ears, it would be happening right this second, as he glares down his nose at me. "Christ. Are you stupid?"

I jerk back at his ire. With an aggravated shake of his head, he turns on his heels and storms out. Max, the loyal companion that he is, follows his alpha dutifully. It takes me a while to get my feet and brain to catch up, and by the time I do, he's already out of my house and halfway across his lawn. I'm left staring after him.

I'm rooted to the spot on my porch with my arms splayed out at my sides.

"You're a fucking asshole!" I find myself yelling. There's no telling if he heard me or not. It's not like he'd care anyway.

Mere hours later, I'm standing in the waiting area for my Chinese takeout. My stomach is growling so incredibly loud, the couple standing next to me keeps pointedly glancing at me. As if I don't realize that my stomach is, indeed, screaming that it's hungry.

This is what happens when I skip meals during the day. I get hangry. And you can bet your sweet ass I'm hangry right now. This is the third



Chinese restaurant I've been to, and each one has been packed solid, with people waiting for food. Did every family in Campbell suddenly realize they wanted chow mein and pork fried rice for dinner? Because that's what it feels like.

Shifting on my feet, I glance down at the time on my phone and try to reel in my aggravation. It's not their fault. I know someone has to cook the food back there, but tell that to my stomach and the pounding headache.

A loud bell from the counter suddenly dings followed by the woman's voice. "Sweet and sour chicken, house chow mein, and the pork fried rice."

My heart leaps, as I realize it's my order. I start making my way through the crowd of people waiting on their order, and hell, I swear I hear church bells ringing, as I reach for the outstretched bag, that is, until I'm suddenly nudged out of the way.

A shocked gasp flies past my lips, and when I swing my gaze to the culprit, I see red. There, standing beside me, is Roman, reaching for *my* food.

No.

*No.*

Hell. No.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demand, smacking his hand away from the bag. I hear someone's sharp intake of breath behind me.

*Oh, cool it, Karen.*

Roman lazily quirks a brow. "Grabbing my food. What does it look like I'm doing?"

My lips thin into a grim line. "That is not your food. It's mine."

"Well, seeing as I'm about to pay for the exact food that I ordered, I'd say, it is, indeed, mine." He smirks, turning back to the woman behind the counter who is eyeing me like I'm insane.

"Ha ha ha." I glare at the side of his head. "Your wit is unparalleled and woefully unnecessary."

Roman shoots me an assessing look. "You seem awfully upset over something as simple as takeout."

*That's not all I'm upset about, dickhead, and you know it.*

With my hip, I shove him out of my way and dig into my purse. I've been here with him before, and I'm not doing this again. This will not be a grocery store situation all over again, with him pulling a fast one on me. No way.

I thrust out two twenty-dollar bills and hand them to the lady who is still eyeing us both, clearly unsure whose meal is whose now. After a few seconds, she takes the money and rings me up. I smile, victoriously, when she hands me my receipt. When I have the takeout bag securely in my grip, I shoot Roman a mirth-filled smirk that says, “take that, asshole.” He just rolls his eyes, clearly not giving a shit.

Then, the bell sounds again, followed by, “Sweet and sour chicken, house chow mein, and the pork fried rice.”

I grit my back teeth together when I realize I, quite literally, almost fought my neighbor over food. Roman tosses his head back and laughs at my expense, as he pays and takes his food. Whirling on my heel, I head home to eat my food in peace.

So much for getting one over on him.



I spend most of Sunday calling different plumbers, hoping to get a quote, and even though some of them have cheaper prices than ten thousand, most of them are still way out of my price range.

Dealing with Roman is another story. After how spectacularly Saturday ended with him storming away, then the mess of our encounter at the Chinese restaurant, I figured I’d give him the rest of the night to cool off, before trying to talk to him. Or, maybe I was the one who needed to do the cooling off? I couldn’t tell anymore.

What I wasn’t banking on? Him being gone the entire day. By the time I woke up in the morning, there was no sign of him. It wasn’t until I’d finished with my laundry and was prepping my lunch for tomorrow at work that I saw him—or heard him, rather—pull into the driveway. The idiot I am, I watched him hop off his bike through the window, and even though I knew I shouldn’t have, I found myself walking out the front door and crossing our lawns.

“Hey!” I holler, just as he’s disappearing into his garage. There’s a beeping sound, and then the sound of a door opening. Just as I step into the

garage, I see Max barrel through the open door, barking excitedly at his owner, then fixing his excitement on me.

My brows tug down, and, for a second, I forget what I came here for when I look down at Max. Did he keep him inside the entire time he was gone? The animal lover in me can't help but scowl at the idea.

"Did you leave him here all day? That's kind of cruel."

I watch as Roman's body grows stiff. He turns away from the door, fully facing me, with a cold expression on his face.

"Some of us have lives and things to do."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I retort, my nostrils flaring. He chuckles darkly, brushing past me, toward the wall of his garage, to hang his helmet. "Why are you always such an asshole, Roman? What the hell have I done that gives you the right to treat me like I'm shit stuck to the bottom of your shoe?"

"Because I don't like you!" he barks, whirling on me. Unexpected pain splinters through my chest. "You're a nuisance. Always in the way, always asking questions. Want to know why I'm such an asshole, Olivia? Because I don't pussyfoot around people I don't like."

Shocked silence descends.

The air is charged with static electricity. It's a tension that percolates.

"Fuck you." The venom in my voice shocks us both.

I whirl around, heading back inside, and promise myself that I'm done playing nice with the asshole next door.

If I wasn't sure before, I am now. I hate my neighbor. With a bone-deep rage that fills my body to the brim with anger.

I am so angry with Roman that I find myself doing something completely out of the ordinary. I go inside, bust out the primer, and start painting the hallway in preparation for the new color that'll eventually go there. Just to really piss off my dick of a neighbor, I turn on my music, open my windows, and keep my Bluetooth speaker aimed toward his house. I purposely play songs I know will piss him the hell off, starting with Janet Jackson's "All for You."

I spend the duration of the song painting, singing, and dancing with a wide, spiteful grin on my face.

*Oh, yeah. It's all for you, asshole.*

The victory only grows when I spot him glaring at me through his living room window that mirrors mine. I don't know where the sass comes from,

but I shoot my neighbor a wink and then give him the finger, letting my playlist choose song after song that I know will drive him nuts. By the time we get through a few Danity Kane hits to “Afrodisiac” by Brandy, Roman has shut all his windows and all the lights are off. With a self-satisfied smirk, I watch his house go still, as he likely lies in bed, listening to my music, while glaring up at his ceiling.

The next morning, I wake to my alarm with a contentment on my face I haven’t had before today. I get ready with an extra pep in my step, just thinking about how much I likely pissed off Roman last night. I walk out of the house, my yogurt and granola bar clasped in my hand, my purse slung over my shoulder, and my car keys in my other hand. After locking up, I bound down the porch steps, crossing through the grass toward the car. I suddenly pause, the chipper grin on my face falling, when I glance down. The smell is what hits me first. My stomach heaves when I lift my shoe that is now covered in dog shit.

“Oh, Max.” I groan, looking down at the mess.

My grip suddenly tightens around my breakfast, and my gaze narrows, when I hear the garage next door roll open. I aim a glare in that direction, and my gaze clashes with Roman who is unsurprisingly wearing a crooked grin.

With his black helmet in hand, he tosses a meaty leg over his bike, and before he slips the helmet on, his devious grin deepens, and just before flipping the visor down, he winks.

He winks!

I try to ignore the tingling in my belly and focus on my anger, as I watch him pull away.

After I change shoes and clean up inside, I make it to work in a less than stellar mood. I’m fuming, as I put my stuff away. My co-workers shoot questioning glances my way but don’t ask. It isn’t until we’re at lunch that Lucy and Travis ask if I’m okay. I finally come clean about my neighbor and what an asshole he is.

“Sounds like he’s into you,” Cassandra says, between bites of her turkey club.

My brows disappear into my hairline, and I practically choke on the chip in my mouth. “I’m sorry, are you listening to the words coming out of my mouth? He purposely let Max shit on my lawn, so I could step in it.

Like, how calculating do you have to be to make sure your dog shits in the exact place he knew I'd step?"

Travis is leaning back, his hand partially covering his smirk, as he stares at me. He hasn't voiced his opinion on the subject. He's just been listening to me prattle on and on about how much I hate Roman.

"I'm just saying. Guys are weird. And to me, it sounds like you irk him because he likes you. He's probably pissing you off on purpose to be a dick. Travis, you're a man. What do you think?" Kassandra asks.

Travis chuckles, swiping a hand down his scruff. He's still biting back his damn laughter at my expense.

"I can't speak for the guy in question, but he'd be an idiot not to be attracted to you." I stop mid-chew and freeze at his answer, and when I glance at Lucy, she's looking down at her sandwich, as if she didn't hear what he said. My heart pangs for her. "I know a good way to get your mind off it. Come out tonight. It's Mark's birthday, and we're heading to the bar to celebrate with a few rounds."

I'm just about to say no, when Lucy butts in with a forced smile on her face. "I think that's a great idea. Travis is right. Drinks always take my mind off my bad moods."

I shoot her a sympathetic smile, but she quickly averts her gaze, uncomfortable with my knowledge. It's not exactly rocket science. It's obvious she's more into Travis than she leads on. I guess that's what happens when you mess around with the people you work with. Except, our boss, is a bit of a manwhore, uncaring who he hurts in the process. And Lucy here, always making herself available to him, even when he's sleeping with other people at the clinic, doesn't exactly send the right signals to him.

He'll likely never get it, until she says something. Or, he could be using it against her, only looking for a quick fuck and nothing monogamous.

I feel bad for her. She's such a beautiful and sweet girl, and even though Travis is quite the catch, she can do better. She *deserves* better.

The rest of the workday, I'm left stewing, already thinking of what I'll do after I get home from work. I let my diabolical mind run rampant with possible scenarios—anything to get back at Roman. It isn't until we're heading to the bar that I remember why I can't chew him out just yet. It's probably for the best anyway.

Maybe a few drinks are all I need to help me forget about my shitty morning and my even shittier neighbor.

The bar we head to isn't one of the nicer, newer bars I've seen around. This one has a homier vibe with people from all walks of life. The lights are dimmed, music is playing, and the TV, in the corner, broadcasts the nightly sports game for the die-hard fans who simply cannot miss a single one. We all settle at a table near the center of the room. Travis heads to the bar to get drinks for everyone, and of course, Lucy follows. Any reason for her to be close to him.

While we wait, I chat with Cassandra about my issues. And by chat, I mean vent. She snorts, giving me a list of acts for retaliation. Her ideas consist of animal feces, wrapping his car or bike in some kind of wrapping paper or saran wrap, ruining his lawn, and, a few others, I'm not sure I'd be brave enough to try out.

Our conspiratorial smiles are refreshing, and dare I say, it feels good to be bad. Even just the thought of getting back at Roman for being an absolute dick brightens my mood. I lean back in the chair, surveying everyone who's sitting around the table from work, and warmth spreads through my chest, like a splash of ink spilling in water. It's as if I've finally found my place here. Back in Long Beach, my friends were always Reid's friends, before they were mine, and since the breakup, I haven't heard from any of them. Because they were never really *my* friends; they were his. I was replaceable to them. I was just the girl they got along with because they had to. No doubt they've already warmed up to the next woman he's seeing.

It's always been that way for me. The previous friendships I've had were always lonely ones. I was never *the* best friend. I was always second choice, the friend who, somehow, always got left out, even when people didn't mean to. A small part of me feels, as though, I never *truly* belonged with any group of friends I've had in the past. I've always felt like an outsider, doing my damndest just to fit in and have people there in my life to fill that void inside me. I've had best friends, people I thought were going to be in my life forever, but, as usual, it never lasted. They always proved, one way or another, that they weren't there for the long haul. Yet, sitting here at this table, in a crowded bar with co-workers, it doesn't feel so lonely anymore.

Not even back home with my asshole neighbor feels lonely. Even fighting with him is more exciting than my entire life back in Long Beach. There was never any spark, any thrill in my life. I can't even remember the last time I had butterflies, before moving here to Campbell. I sure as hell

don't remember the last time I've said so many curse words or felt so angry, all within less than two weeks.

Even though I try not to, my mind drifts to thoughts of Roman. I don't know what it is about him that drives me crazy. I'm not usually a person who acts on her frustrations. I let things stew, then I tend to blow up, but here I am, purposely poking the beehive, just to rile him up. How crazy is it that I want to get him back? There's a very large, wild part of me that wants him to have a reason to be angry with me, to be in my space. I'd like to say it's because he's easy on the eyes, but something else about Roman calls to me. He's a magnetic force, drawing me in, even when he tries to push me away with his brash personality.

As if my thoughts conjured him, I hear a few gasps from our table, as the doors to the bar open and in walks the man who has taken too much space in my mind, as of late. He looks good. Too good. Dressed in a leather jacket, distressed jeans, and a plain tee, he walks in with a few other guys who are handsome in their own right, but they have nothing on him. Every woman's eyes are glued to him, as he walks in, seemingly without a care in the world. My gaze narrows, my nostrils flaring, as I watch him head straight for the open stools on one end of the bar. And, of course, as fate would have it, he settles right next to Travis and Lucy, who, by the way, even look starstruck by his looks. She's no longer fawning over Travis but over him now, too.

I want to roll my eyes at everyone's admiration. It's a bit hypocritical, considering I had much of the same reaction. Scratch that, I *have* the same reaction to him, each time we're mere feet apart.

As if sensing my narrowed gaze, Roman twists on the barstool, and his gaze collides with mine. His expression shudders, and his eyes grow stormy. Gone is the cool, calm, and collected man who walked in, and in his place, is now a scowling, hot piece of work, who looks stiff as a board. We spend a long time glaring at each other, before I finally avert my eyes and turn around, with a growl and a hearty roll of my eyes. Cassandra notices and nudges me.

"What's wrong? You look like someone just shit in your happy little bubble."

I shoot her a glare, and she cringes, realizing her mistake. "Okay, that was my bad. Horrible pun, considering the day you had."

“Well,” I respond dryly, “it kinda feels like someone did shit in my bubble, and it’s my neighbor. He’s here.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re kidding? Where?”

I jerk my head behind me. “At the bar. Idiot wearing the leather jacket.”

Kassandra chokes. Her tan skin brightens with color. “You mean the Adonis?” I roll my eyes so hard this time, I’m surprised they don’t get stuck up there. “You mean to tell me this is the neighbor you’ve been complaining about? Him? Instead of complaining about him, you should be letting him drill you into next week!” She nudges me on the arm.

“No thanks,” I mutter, trying not to glance back at him. I don’t want to make it obvious that I’m speaking about him, but by the way Kass is twisted in her seat, doing a full-on exorcist 360, I’d say he knows we’re talking about him. Thoughts of being inconspicuous suddenly fly out the window.

“God, he’s still glaring at you. I can’t tell if he wants to kill you or bang you.”

“Most likely the former. Definitely not the latter.”

“A guy who looks that good? I wouldn’t mind letting him do both.”

I stifle my laugh and tense up, when I feel Travis place his hand on my shoulder. “What’s going on?”

Kassandra fills him in. “Liv’s neighbor is here. The hottie at the bar who’s glaring.”

As if on cue, Travis glances back at Roman and surprises me when he takes the spot next to me. Much too close for comfort. I force a smile, not wanting to be weird about it. I scour the bar, searching for Lucy. I shoot her an apologetic smile when I find her, knowing she probably won’t like this. And, once again, she brushes me off like it’s no big deal to her, even when everyone knows it is.

A part of me wishes she’d make her feelings for Travis known, just so he’d leave me alone.

I can’t tell if it’s my imagination or not, but I can feel Roman’s angered gaze on me. It’s as if he’s trying to incinerate me on the spot. I can’t help but wonder if he’s glaring this hard because he hates me or because of something else.

The night drags on, much the same, with both of us trying to avoid each other like the plague. That pretty much gets nipped in the bud when I’m on my way out of the bathroom. I crash into a warm, solid body that nearly



knocks me off my feet. Strong hands shoot out, wrapping around my upper arms to steady me. The familiar smell is what hits me first, something masculine and clean, and when I peer up, I see who it is. The scowl that takes over my face is otherworldly. I don't even know where it comes from, to be honest. I'm never this rude to anyone. It seems being near Roman brings out the worst in me.

"Got the whole hallway, and still, you somehow manage to invade my space."

My brows raise, incredulously, and I let out a disbelieving scoff. "You're kidding me, right? *You* bumped into *me*."

Roman glares down at me. My breath hitches, and those pesky butterflies take flight against my will, when he takes a step into me, crowding me.

"Stay out of my way, Olivia." The way he hisses my name with such hatred and disdain sends chills down my spine. The chills in question should make me scared of him, but it's quite the opposite.

He turns to walk away, and I don't know what makes me do it. Once again, I'm poking a bear. I should've left it and let him walk away. But obviously, I'm just a glutton for punishment.

"Sleep well, Roman?" The edge in my tone stops him in his tracks. I watch the tension climb up his spine, settling out into his shoulders and the stiff muscles in his back. Slowly, he turns those intense eyes, drilling holes into my skull.

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know." He pivots, closing the distance between us again. This time, he's closer. Too close. Every goddamn heaven-sent molecule, percolating around us, invades my senses. I can smell his laundry detergent, his musk, his breath—All. Of. It.

"How are your shoes, Olivia? Hopefully, Max didn't cause too much damage."

"You're lucky I like Max and all other animals, or this conversation"—I point between us—"this entire morning would be a different affair."

Roman chuckles, taking another step into me. He's so tall that I have to crane my neck back to stare up at him. I try to disguise the ruckus of emotions barreling through me at his proximity. With each sharp inhale, I feel my breasts graze his warm body. His firm chest, all hard planes and muscle. It makes me hate him.

"That a threat, sweetheart?"

I smile. It's cold and so unlike me. "Oh, no. It's a warning."

My heart lurches in my throat, and I let out a gasp, when he presses up against me, caging me against the wall with a hand over my head, effectively trapping me against him. The blood is roaring in my ears, my heart is racing in my chest, and I can barely manage to pull in steady breaths, without thinking of him. He's everywhere. His scent, the heat of his body, every single part of him is invading that brick wall of anger I've built around myself since first coming into contact with him.

The room spins around us, but the one thing that's at the center of my focus is Roman, as steady and callous as ever. The change of dynamics in our positions can be felt in the sudden shift in the air. It's hard to breathe. Hard to think.

"You sure you want to do this?" he whispers huskily. I feel the effects of it dip low in my gut. Tugging, making me breathless. My lungs squeeze, threatening to give out on me. I have no idea what we're talking about anymore. All I know is, I don't want him to move. I don't want this moment to end. And even though I hate myself for it, I want him to kiss me. I want to taste him. I want to know what it'd feel like to have those plump lips moving in sync with mine.

*Would he taste just as fantastic as he smells?*

*Would his kiss be firm and rough? Or would it be soft and gentle, the exact opposite of everything that makes up Roman?*

"Yes-s," I breathe out, sounding much too husky for someone who claims to hate her neighbor.

My heart stops, and my breath gets lodged somewhere in my throat, when the corners of Roman's mouth twist, curving upright. He smirks down at me, eyes glinting with something that I'm unable to process further, because he's suddenly backing away. I almost whimper at the loss of him.

"You just started a war, Olivia."

I blink. Then blink again. I continue blinking in shock, until Roman disappears with that infuriating smirk and swagger.

*What the hell have I done?*

Six

## “Body Bag”—Trevor Daniel



Roman

The second I slide back onto the stool in front of the bar, I gulp down the rest of my, now, lukewarm beer, and even though I know it’s a bad idea, I order a glass of something stronger. Shots of tequila always seem to do the trick. Ever since Olivia moved in next door, I’ve found myself drinking a shit ton more than I usually do. Anything to help take the edge off and get her out of my mind.

She infuriates me.

Drives me absolutely crazy.

The first day I laid eyes on her, I knew she was going to be an issue. Standing there, in front of the moving truck, in jeans and a tank top, all her soft, tan skin and petite silhouette on display. Even from the distance between our lawns, I could see the lush lines of her curves. The way her soft honey-brown hair grazed her shoulders in that ponytail shouldn’t have been as interesting to look at as it was. *She* shouldn’t have been that interesting to look at.

There was an odd taste in my mouth when I pulled into my driveway. I could feel the weight of someone’s gaze. It was heavy and potent, crackling the air around the quiet street I’ve come to love. When I glanced over my shoulder and saw her standing there, gaze riveted on me, my stomach

muscles clenched, and I was suddenly glad I hadn't taken off my helmet yet. I wanted to cling to anonymity.

It didn't last for as long as I'd hoped. When she stood on my porch, staring up at me with wide eyes and a face sure to have a man make poor decisions, I felt indignation burn in my gut. She was beautiful. Goddammit, my new neighbor was fucking beautiful, and she was checking me out. Her gaze raked across my naked flesh like she'd never quite seen a man without a shirt on before. I didn't know how that made me feel.

Scratch that, I did. I just chose to ignore it. Embracing my anger, something that has been a living, breathing entity in me for years, I pushed her away, needing her gone. Olivia is trouble wrapped in beautiful packaging.

She's annoying, but even with all of that, she still makes my cock rock hard. The fact that our bedrooms are so close means I can practically see everything from my vantage point, and I fucking hate it.

I hate her even more.

No woman has ever gotten under my skin like she has. I wish I could explain why. I wish there was some legitimate reason I can't stand her, but there isn't. The second I spotted her standing next to that fucking rental truck, I knew she was going to be an unwelcome problem. Yet, despite all that, I still want to fuck her. The need to fuck her, listen to her moans, and make her scream is a driving force. One I can't afford to waste my time with. Indulging in Olivia is a disaster waiting to happen, and I refuse to be the casualty.

I keep my gaze fixed on the product of all my annoyance lately. She struts back toward her table of friends, squaring her shoulders and rubbing her palms along her thighs, nervously, as she goes. My lips press together in a thin line when she sits next to the prick who's had his eyes on her the entire night. He casually tosses his arm over the back of her chair. Only, I know the move isn't meant to be casual at all.

I wonder just how close the two are.

"Who's the chick you've been eye-fucking all night?" Vic jerks his head toward Olivia's table.

I grunt, lifting a tequila shot to my lips, and downing it in one fell swoop. "My neighbor."

"You're shitting me." He does a spit-take, as if we're in a movie. "That's your neighbor? Please tell me you've laid pipe at least once."

Eyes still trained on Olivia, I scoff. A part of me finds it comical that he'd use the term "laying pipe" to describe what it would be like to fuck Olivia. Funny because, well, I've offered my services to lay pipe at her house and that didn't go over well. Which was my doing, of course. There's just something about the girl next door that drives me insane. She gets under my skin in the worst ways and makes me react harshly—irrationally. I'm not that guy and never have been, so the fact that being near this woman makes me change all my character traits, that's not the best sign of compatibility.

Instead of answering Vic, I rub the back of my neck, agitatedly, and try to focus on anything else but Olivia. He must sense my need to move on from the subject of my neighbor because he starts talking about an incident that happened earlier at the shop. Vic and I have been friends for the past three years. I met him while working at George's Garage, the mechanic garage I've been at since I moved to Campbell.

He's been my right-hand man, the only person in this city who I even remotely consider a friend. As far as relationships go, us going out for drinks at the end of the week is about as good as it gets on my end. That's the extent of my friendships and all I really have time for.

I watch for the remainder of the evening as the guy next to Olivia flirts with her. His only saving grace—and mine, for that matter—is the fact that Olivia seems uninterested. The amount of satisfaction that courses through me at the realization is, indeed, too much. I know I shouldn't care about whether men find her gorgeous. I shouldn't even care if she reciprocates. But that burning sensation swirling in my gut, making its way up the center of my chest? Yeah, that tells me that I do, in fact, care.

I haven't felt this way since fucking elementary school, and I fucking despise it.

By the end of the night, I'm frustrated, my dick is hard, and all I want to do is head home to Max. As Vic, a few other guys from the shop, and I leave, I can't help but take notice that Olivia's party is leaving, too. She slowly trickles out with her friends, saying goodbye to everyone. I don't know why, but I hang back, waving off the guys and pretending to check my phone. All to keep an eye out for her. And, of course, she's the last one to leave.

I wonder why she hasn't left yet, why she just won't hurry up and go, until I hear the telltale sound of her engine spitting.

*You've got to be fucking kidding. Does she have anything that works?*

I shake my head, telling myself I need to get over it. Go home. Don't worry about her. She's not my problem, and it's not like she'd accept my help anyway. She hates me just as much, if not more, than I hate her.

Not realizing anyone around her is watching, she has a fit in her car. Tossing her arms around, she's yelling profanities, while banging on the steering wheel like a complete and total lunatic.

"Christ."

Snatching my helmet off my head, I toss my leg off the bike and stalk toward her. She doesn't realize I'm standing just outside her window, until I rap my knuckles against the glass. She jolts, eyes growing wide with surprise.

With a calm that is unexpected, she rolls down her window and shoots me a wobbly smile. Her skin is tinged pink with embarrassment, and I try to hold on to my frustration, as I stare down at her. She makes it hard not to fall into her trap of pure beauty and innocence.

With a roll of my eyes, I jerk my chin over my shoulder, toward my bike. "Hurry up and get on. I don't have all night."

Her brows dip comically low. "You're smoking crack if you think I'm getting on that deathtrap with you—"

I crouch down and level our gazes, startling her. Curling my hand around the edge of her window, I say, "You don't have any other choice. Get. On."

A moment passes between us, as we search each other's eyes, both of us trying to bend to the other's will. Finally, the hardness in her eyes softens, and, in its place, is trepidation. She glances toward the bike, as she takes her bottom lip into her mouth, nibbling. A spark of heat shoots straight to my groin. She comes to some sort of agreement in her own mind and nods. I push off the window, giving her space to roll it up and get out of her car.

Without waiting for her, I stalk toward my bike, toss one leg over, and wait impatiently for her climb on the back behind me. I blow out a tired sigh when I hear her approach. She doesn't climb on. In fact, she doesn't do anything but stand there and stare down at the bike like it's going to fucking bite her. I refrain from snapping or yelling. That won't help this situation. Instead, against my better judgment, I latch my grip onto her wrist and tug her toward me and the bike. My hand burns upon impact, and I grit my teeth, trying to ignore the odd reaction my body is having to hers.

Olivia gasps when my hand encircles her wrist, and she climbs on, shakily, behind me. I reach for her hands and try to guide them around my waist, but that's where she draws the line.

"What do you think you're doing?" The accusation in her tone is clear, and I glance heavenward, silently asking for strength.

"Unless you want to fall off and skid the flesh right off your pretty little face, I suggest you hold on."

She pauses, then lets out a defeated sigh, and finally wraps her arms around me. About as gentlemanly as I'll ever get, I hand her back my helmet and wait for her to put it on, before I take off.

The ride is silent and awkward. There's no mistaking the strain in my jeans is one hundred percent from her hands on me. Her nails dig into my abdomen, as she tries to hold on. It's a sensation I'm not used to, but one that I find I quite enjoy. I don't normally ride with women. I find it all too romantic. I'm not a guy who's here for hearts and flowers. When I do have time to fuck, it's usually a no-strings kind of deal. Relationships are an absolute no-go for me, so that's why the dichotomy of enjoying the feel of Olivia's hands on me is so frustrating.

I don't do this. I don't think about anyone *but* myself. It's all I can afford.

Halfway through the ride, I feel her body relax. The same way mine does after a long day. Sometimes, I just need a ride. A long ride to forget why life fucking sucks. I purposely take my bike down the scenic route. The streets here are a bit steeper than the ones downtown, and she must be able to feel the dip in her stomach, because she tightens around me and giggles.

Her lilting laughter in my ear has my chest squeezing with a tight, uncomfortable sensation. It's been so long since I've listened to a laugh as carefree as hers. The guys at work are different. I rarely ever share my time around a woman, unless it's to fuck her, and even then, those encounters begin to feel transactional and just a way to let off steam. I haven't shared any real connections with anyone in over six years.

When we turn onto our street, I pull into my driveway, throw the bike into park, and cut the engine. I take my time helping her off the bike. I don't know why I do it. She doesn't need my help, and I sure as shit shouldn't be giving it to her.

“Hey, Roman, listen, what happened back at the bar, about starting a war—”

I turn on her with a cold smirk. “Oh, no, sweetheart. This means war, baby, and there’s no backtracking now.”

Her mouth drops open in shock, as I turn on my heels, leaving her. If I stay near her a second longer, I’ll end up doing something we both regret. I won’t be in charge of my actions.

Once inside, I head straight for the shower and rub one out. I grip my dick with a resentment that chafes and burns, hating myself for getting off to the thought of her. The thought of touching her, tasting her, fucking her.

When I pad out of the shower, my damp feet slapping along the wooden planks as I go, I pause in the threshold of my bedroom and glance up toward her house. I can make out her petite form in her bedroom. I doubt she’s looking over here. I doubt she’s even thinking of me at all, but that doesn’t stop me from what I do next. I purposely drop the towel, waiting to see if she’ll run. She doesn’t.

Hell, I swear I even see her step closer, as if she’s subconsciously trying to get a better look.

Interesting.

Very interesting indeed.



Despite my better judgment, I wake up the next morning and head to the local hardware store, asking if they have the correct supplies I’ll need in stock. After that, much like I do every Saturday, I dial the house of the one woman on this earth, who I can’t stand more than my own mother, and wait for her to pick up.

The line rings and rings, and I grit my teeth when I get the same message I got last weekend when I called.

*“We’re sorry, this mailbox is full.”*

I redial and wait again, as the line rings incessantly, only this time, I’m not giving up until *someone* picks up. I cringe at the volume on the other end of the line, when someone finally answers. There are kids yelling in the



background, someone is crying, and that's either music blaring or the sound of the TV.

"Hello?" the nasally voice asks, with unnecessary attitude. I know by that tone who it is, without having to ask or needing an introduction.

"Ms. Wallace. It's Roman. I wanted to check in on Ryder." The words practically taste like acid on my tongue. I hate that I have to kiss ass to a woman who doesn't deserve any of my manners.

She makes a disproving grunt before answering me, "Yeah, yeah. I'll get 'im for ya."

I listen intently at the sounds that travel through the phone, as she walks through her wild home. No doubt.

I loathe this part of the weekend. I hate having to call this piece of shit human being to check on my blood. Ryder is my little brother, and since our mother is an absolute good-for-nothing piece of shit, I lost him to the system. Believe that? Now, he's stuck there in that shithole of a place, until I can get my own shit together. Scratch that, until I can prove to the state that my brother belongs with me.

That's why routine has always been so important for me. I've worked steadily at the garage for a while now, and I officially own my own home. I just have about a month of probation left, before I can fight to get my little brother back again.

Even though we have different fathers, Ryder has always felt like more than just my half-brother. He feels like the other half of me, the better half. The one I want to give a better life to.

We grew up in Oakland, where my mother was more interested in drugs than keeping us alive. Before my brother came along, I spent most of my youth taking beatings from her or any of the men she would bring home for the night.

*"What you looking at, boy?" the strange man barks. He's splayed out on the couch, lying down on it like it's his.*

*It's not.*

*He's the second man who's been here this week. As evidenced by the black eye I'm sporting. I don't know where my mother finds these men, but the minute they step over the threshold, their gaze zones in on me, and their jaw clenches. Sometimes, I feel like these strangers hate me more than my mother does.*

*I curl my hand into a fist, not looking away from the disgusting man. I won't let him know he scares me. Not like I have with the others. That was the problem; these men knew they could come in here and treat me like crap, because my momma didn't care. She'd sit on the couch and laugh. She thought it was funny, watching a grown-ass man hit a child. She said I needed the discipline.*

*He lets out a frustrated growl, shooting up from his position on the couch, and stalks toward me. "I asked you a question, you little shit!" His spittle lands on my face, but I remain stoic, trying not to show how frightened I really am. My heart is banging in my chest. I don't want to feel the pain of his fist, but maybe if I stand up for myself, maybe if I—*

*"Think you're funny?" he grits, shoving me in my shoulder. Pain rips through the tender flesh, and I go sailing back into the couch. When I see his fist sailing toward my face, I realize I was wrong.*

*Standing up for myself doesn't help.*

I brush the memory away, gritting my teeth against the phantom pain reverberating from those hits. It was challenging, growing up the way we did. I tried to shield Ryder from a lot of it, but when you grow up having nothing, and your sole responsibility is to keep everyone alive, it's hard to show someone what the right thing is. It was tough for me, just a twelve-year-old kid, to make money and take care of my baby brother and me, all while trying to keep a roof over our heads. With the twelve-year age gap between us, I felt like I was his sole parent most of the time.

I tried to take care of him, as long as I could, but I failed at that, too, just like everything else in my life. In order to make money just to keep us afloat, I had to do things, things no kid my age should ever be forced to do—like stealing. Whether that was from stores, homes, or anywhere I could slip in and out without being seen, I did it. Something a child should never have to deal with is trying to figure out how to ration and make food last to keep two mouths fed. I had to learn where to hide what little money I'd make or cash I'd stolen. Because the second my mother ever found anything of monetary value, she used it for drugs, and I knew we'd be left with nothing.

When I was fourteen, I finally got caught stealing. It was an everyday thing, so I'm not really surprised it happened. Hell, I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner, seeing as the people I stole from weren't dumb. They had to have caught on at some point. I think they knew our circumstances, and for

the most part, they tried to help, but they couldn't do it forever. I wasn't their responsibility, and that was just a sad fact. I was the responsibility of a woman who didn't give a shit about me—about anything really.

I would carry Ryder to Rosie's house, a Latin woman who lived on the same shitty apartment floor as us. She'd watch my little brother for me every day, then from there, I'd walk to school. I ended up getting caught on charges of stealing, and to make matters worse, I was caught with a zip because I was selling weed on the side to help pay for food and the bills, just so we'd survive at home. Without my side hustle, we would've starved, and I wasn't going to let that happen.

I was taken to juvenile hall, and Ryder was taken into foster care at just two years old because my piss-pour excuse of a mother couldn't even find it in herself to take care of him. Without me dropping him off every day, Rosie knew something was wrong. She knew just how hungry and tired we always were, but I think she hoped things would change for us. That our circumstances would be different, but they weren't. We were nothing but another statistic.

If it weren't for her calling child protective services, who knows what would've happened.

I lost track of him while I was in juvie. By the time I finally got out, my mother lost her piece of shit apartment, and I was left, at just eighteen, trying to pick up the pieces of my broken life. I had to cram to finish high school, while simultaneously trying to find my baby brother.

It took three years to do all the above. I was in and out of trouble after that. When you spend most of your life stealing, it becomes second nature to you. When you spend a handful of your teen years amongst other young criminals, you pick up bad habits. I learned, long ago, in juvie that I needed to cut my emotions loose and focus on surviving—on getting out and getting to my little brother. I was on my last strike when I finally found him. One more fuckup from me, and it wasn't just juvie or jail anymore; it would be prison. Somewhere I knew would change me indefinitely.

Ryder wasn't as bad off as he was when I was sent to juvie, but he wasn't doing great either. The family he was sent to was absolute shit. I have scars marring my flesh that'll last a lifetime, and I didn't want to subject my little brother to the same fate.

I've spent the past few years, trying to get my shit together, since my last stint in jail. At twenty-six, you'd think I'd have a lot more

accomplishments under my belt, but instead, I'm just a jailbird and a fucking mechanic. I've tried to win him back from the system and the state before, but I never could because one, I didn't have a great job at the time; two, I didn't have a proper home; and three, I didn't have the proper care for him. In the eyes of the state, I was a criminal who was in and out of jail. I was a risk they weren't willing to bet on.

Now, I am finally trying to be seen as worthy enough to win him back and give him the life he deserves. One of the reasons I work so hard and stay so focused is because my little brother needs me. I don't have time to worry about anything else. Our time was running out. At thirteen, almost fourteen, he's spent most of his life in the system. I wouldn't give up until he was home with me, where he belongs.

My childhood is why I'm afraid to have kids. Because, in a sense, it feels like I already have my own kid. I was the one who cared for Ryder when he was a baby. Trying to juggle life and school, while making ends meet and taking care of a baby, I did it all. Everything has been going according to plan. That is, until Olivia moved in next door. She is a distraction I can't afford. She reminds me of a life I could have, if I didn't have my brother to worry about. If I hadn't screwed up as a kid or been stuck with a shit mother.

She makes me wish for things I'll never have. That's why I have to force her out of my life and my world. I have to snap at her and be rude, because that is my only deterrent; the only way I'll protect us both from inevitable heartbreak.

There are few things I know in this world, but one of them is I'll break Olivia's heart. There is no doubt about it in my mind. It isn't that I want to, but I just won't be able to stop it. I don't know the first thing about relationships, and when you look at Olivia, she screams relationship and commitment.

Two things I'm unfamiliar with.

My little brother's voice finally erupts over the line, and my lips turn up into a real genuine smile, as we catch up.

"How's school going?"

"It's all right, I guess. The kids can be jerks, but it's not too bad. Could be worse."

My stomach muscles tighten. "Why?"

“They know where I live and who I live with. Doesn’t exactly make me popular.”

I grit my teeth. Blowing out a steadying breath, I try to reel in my ire. “I’m trying, bud. Just a few more months, then we’re doing this. You hear me? I promised you I’d have you back before your fourteenth birthday, and I’m keeping that promise.”

He’s silent for a beat. “Okay, Rome. Are you coming to visit soon?”

“I am. I have a few things I need to do today, so I’ll be by tomorrow.”

“Is she going to let you come?”

Fury simmers low in my gut. “She won’t have much say, when I’m at the door, now will she?”

Ryder snickers, and I swear to God, it’s the best sound. “Yeah, you’re right. See you tomorrow, Rome. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Ry. Call me if you need anything.”

He sighs. “You know I can’t call you. She doesn’t let me use the phone that often.”

I grit my teeth. *Fucking bitch.*

“I know.” I heave a deep sigh, rubbing at my forehead and the looming headache. “I’ll figure something out. Bye, bud.”

“Bye.”

Raking a frustrated hand through my hair, I add something else to my list of activities for today. On top of the hardware store, it looks like I’ll be going to add my little brother to my phone plan. I don’t care if he’s not allowed to have one. I’m tired of waiting and doing everything by the rules. This is the one thing my brother deserves. And fuck anyone who thinks otherwise.



I drop all the supplies at my feet and ring the doorbell. I know she’s home. It’s not hard to tell. All I have to do is close my eyes, and I can practically hear her shitty music, bleeding through the walls. It also helps that her car is in the driveway.

Olivia swings the door open, and as usual, she's much too lively and chipper for a mood like mine. Like I said before, not compatible. She frowns when she sees me with all the supplies at my feet. A part of me wants to bark at her for being so dense. Obviously, if you see someone with a shitload of supplies at their feet, at your front door, wouldn't you let them in, so they can get started? Guess not in Olivia's world. I refrain from calling her out, not wanting to take out my impatience on her. I'm trying to do something nice. There's no need to put a damper on it, if I don't have to.

"What's all this?"

"Your piping."

Her eyes grow round, the hazel softening. "What? Roman, you don't have to do this."

I nod, pick up my shit, and turn to leave. "Fine, I won't."

"Wait!" she yells, stopping me in my tracks. "Do you really have to be such an asshole? You weren't supposed to turn and walk away!"

I shake my head at her, fighting the itch to grin. She makes it hard to hold on to my exasperation. I have to work overtime, just to pretend I don't care. It's a façade I created to make her hate me. To make me seem unapproachable to her. Though, for the most part, that plan has backfired. You'd think I'm more than approachable, what with the way she acts around me. Like she doesn't give single shit if I'm an asshole.

I follow Olivia through her house, taking in all the recent changes she's made. She's finally primed most of the walls. It's not the best job, but it's also not the worst I've ever seen either. I recognize the boxes from last time still stacked in the center of the room. I'd imagine, once she's finished painting, she'll declutter and start unpacking more thoroughly.

I pause in her bedroom, taking it all in. I try not to stare too long or focus too intently on anything. I brush past her into the bathroom that's damn near identical to mine and get to work. Olivia goes back to her task at hand, whatever that may be, and I start working my way through her bathroom. I won't be able to finish the job in one day, and I tell her so, yelling over her god-awful music, so she can hear me. About halfway through working, she comes in with an ice-cold glass of water, and for that, I'm thankful.

Her piping is shit. At least the guy wasn't lying about that. It'll take some time and patience, but I should be able to have this fixed for her, so she can avoid a hefty fee.

“So, where did you learn to do this?”

I roll my eyes, using the wrench to tighten a bolt around the pipe.  
“Don’t remember.”

“Where do you work? I just realized I never asked you.”

I blow out a sigh. “I fix cars.”

“How did you—”

“You plan on asking me questions all day, or are you gonna let me get to work?”

She raises her hands in defense and slowly slips out of the bathroom, leaving me to work in peace. Of course, that doesn’t last long. She’s back, not long after, asking more questions. And talking some more.

I’m so caught up in trying to listen to her but also ignore her, at the same time, that I accidentally tighten the bolt too hard. It snaps off, and water starts spraying everywhere. Olivia screams as the blast of ice-cold water drenches us both. We both reach forward, trying to stop the spray and keep it from causing too much damage to the floor and the rest of the bathroom.

I shout over the stream, trying to use my hands to cover my eyes, and block most of it from my face.

“I told you to shut off the fucking water!”

With her hair plastered to her head and face resembling a soaked dog, she yells back through narrowed slits, “I thought I did!”

“Hurry up and stand here and try to cover this with a towel!” I yell, while trying to maneuver her, so she can stop the water flow, until I can get out there and shut off the water manually. She loses her footing on the way, though, because one second, she’s standing upright, and the next, she’s slipping and sliding like a fucking cartoon character. Her arms flail, her face morphing into a comical expression of fear, and she lets out a scream, reaching out to me for support.

I lose my balance, my booted foot slipping in a puddle of water on the floor, and we both topple to the ground. I try to take the brunt of the fall and pull her on top of me, so I don’t crush her. My back slams against the tile, and for one moment, we pause our hysterics and stare at each other. A solid beat passes between us, frissons of electricity coursing through the dense air. Then suddenly, she’s giggling. Both of us are soaked to shit, and she’s laughing. Practically rolling with hysterics.

I try not to focus on the fact that I have her hot, wet, delectable body on top of mine. I want to slide my hands down her body and feel each one of her curves. Instead, I do the opposite. Summoning that façade I've been holding on to like a lifeline, I shoot her a glare, and I watch with rapt attention, as the smile slowly drops from her face and realization sets in.

"Fucking Christ!" I growl, pushing off the wet floor, all while trying to maintain my balance. The entire way out of her house to shut off the water, I have to adjust my swollen cock.

Fucking Christ is right. I'm so fucked.

Who gets a hard-on during a time like this?

*For fuck's sake.*

Once I'm able to shut off the water outside, I step back in and take in the hell that is now her bathroom. It looks horrible. Like someone let the bathtub overflow with water. I blow out a defeated sigh.

"I'll start cleaning this up. Just bring me some towels, so we can soak most of it."

She's quiet, too quiet. I realize, much too late, when I fix my gaze on her that I might've been too harsh when I snapped at her. Her cheeks are coated red, likely with the embarrassment of me being a dick to her, and her eyes look a little sad. Despite the fact that I'm the one who put it there, I find that I hate that look on Olivia. And though I shouldn't, I know I'd do anything I can to make her feel better.

Letting my guard down, just enough to make her feel better, I drop the act. A smile curls the corners of my lips and surprise lights her eyes at the effect of it. I take in her appearance, and suddenly, I'm the one who has to hold back my laughter.

"I wish I could say I've seen worse, but...well, I haven't."

She frowns, and when realization dawns on her face, she swings to look at herself in the mirror and gasps. Her mascara is streaking down her cheeks, and she looks like a raccoon that's been run over and left in the wild for days.

Once most of the water is cleaned up, I head home to search for another elbow cap to help with the water pressure. When I'm finally finished for the day, I glance outside, realizing night has fallen. Olivia walks over sheepishly. The gratitude is written all over her face, and it makes me uncomfortable. It wasn't a huge deal—what I did here today. She doesn't need to get all emotional about it or read into it, any more than necessary.



“You should be fine for now. I’d leave the plug on it, just until I can come finish the rest.”

She nods. “Got it. I’ll keep the plug on. Are you...hungry? I mean, you worked a long time. I can call something in, or we can stop for something. My treat, of course.”

The hopeful flare in her eyes gives me pause. If things were different, if my life was different, I might find that gleam attractive. I might find myself wanting to take her up on that offer, but I can’t. That’s just not my reality.

Chances are, I’ll never be able to have that life. Not until I know Ryder is safe, and he’s permanently back in my care again.

“I’m good.”

Her mouth snaps shut, and she purses her lips thoughtfully, for a second, before she starts nodding slowly, as though she’s trying to process. I can tell by her expression she wants to say more but decides not to. She forces a smile and walks me out.

Before I leave, Olivia stops me at the door, with her hand on my wrist, keeping me from leaving. Slowly, I turn and direct my focus to her hand on my skin. Every cell and neuron in my body begins vibrating. I feel her touch deeply, as if she’s somehow latched onto the bone, bypassing all the outer layers of skin. With one touch alone, she’s managed to get under my skin, ingraining her touch and the soft feel of her skin in my mind. I feel her delicate hands, the soft pads of her fingers, within the darkest depths of my soul; her touch is incinerating. I feel it everywhere. The talons of attraction have pierced my skin and lodged deep enough that they’ll never come lose, not ever.

Something passes between us at that moment, something tangible that we both feel. I can practically fucking taste it. It’s trouble. A tremor travels down my spine, at the premonitions rolling through my body. I try to brush aside the sensations, the way her touch is making me feel. I try to make it seem like it’s nothing at all when, really, this moment, right here, standing over the threshold of her house with her hand on me, feels like everything.

Slowly, I detach myself from her grip, and she clears her throat, realizing we’ve been staring at one another without speaking for far too long. An inviting pink rises to her cheeks again. She clears her throat, working a swallow that I hear travel down her throat. “I just wanted to say thank you. I know you didn’t have to do any of this, and without my parents

here...I just want you to know I appreciate it, and I'd love to pay you back sometime, in any way."

I almost groan at all the ways a man can take that sentence. Does she not realize the power she holds? How many would take her up on that offer and take advantage of her?

The man from the bar the other night comes to mind, and I frown. Fury suddenly shoots down my spine like a straight shot.

"No need." I brush off the idea altogether and start to turn, needing an escape. If I stay here a minute longer, I'll end up doing something I can't take back, like fucking her, right here, against this wall. Hell, her scent is so distracting, I feel like I've been plugging my nose almost all day. It's a combination of something sweet, like honey and a soft floral scent. I don't know if it's her essence or her shampoo, but whatever it is, it's fucking distracting as all hell.

"I also wanted to make sure...the stuff, the war...It's over, right?"

A smirk steals across my face. "Oh no, babe. We're only just getting started."

With that, I head back home, preparing to see my baby brother tomorrow.

For the rest of the night, I try to focus on the important things, like getting my brother back and bringing our family together, but somehow, Olivia still manages to sneak into my thoughts, into my dreams.

It only makes me wish I hated her more.

# Seven

## “Flames”—ZAYN, R3HAB, Jungleboi



Roman

My upper lip curls in disgust, as I walk up the weed-infested driveway. Knowing my little brother is here in this shithole, instead of with me, pisses me the fuck off. How can the state believe this woman, in her one-story shit stone with a shitty lawn, shitty vehicle, and even shittier attitude, can really take care of my brother better than I can?

That was the thing about the state, about the justice system, foster care, whatever the fuck you want to call it. The second you make one bad decision and get caught for it? It's over for you. Your entire future is ruined. You're suddenly lumped in with the worst criminals. When I got arrested for stealing and dealing, my entire world turned upside down. Had I not been forced into that life, had I not had to bear the brunt of that responsibility, then maybe everything in my life wouldn't be as shitty as it currently is. Maybe Ryder and I would've lived normal lives. I could've gone to school every day and enjoyed it, not having to worry about how I would get my homework done, make enough money to feed Ryder and me, and still have enough saved to pay the bills. I wish I could've enjoyed being in high school and even had the opportunity to go to college. Maybe then, I wouldn't have to work my ass off at the garage. Maybe then, my baby

brother wouldn't be stuck here in a shithole he doesn't deserve. None of these kids deserve this.

The truth is, we both deserved better. My mother should've never been allowed to procreate. Some women aren't meant to be mothers, and Allison Banks is one of them.

Don't get me wrong, I love my job at the garage. George gave me the opportunity when I was so close to giving up, because so many other people had brushed me aside. Even though I was finally out of the system and trying to build a better life for myself, one where I'd be able to take care of a kid, I still felt the chains, of that particular system, holding me down. Every place I applied to, they always took one look at me and my history and told me to hit the road. No one ever gave me a chance until George. He didn't make it easy on me, though. He made me work for it. Work for what I wanted in life.

He and Vic are the only ones who truly know about my past and my life now. They understand my drive and how important it is for me to get Ryder back.

I let the sudden anger roll off my shoulders and climb the steps, leading to the front door. The very second my foot lands on the concrete, just a few inches shy of the worn welcome mat, I can hear it. The shouts. The sounds of something crashing. There's a kid crying inside, music is blasting from somewhere, and someone's yelling, probably trying to rein in the chaos.

My lips curl over my teeth, and it's a wonder I don't kick my boot through the door, storm inside, and run away with my brother. In an ideal world, I'd be able to take him from Ms. Wallace with no hassle, but of course not, she's been fighting for him for years. It's not even because she wants him or loves him. It's because him living here, taking up space in her home? That's a paycheck for her. That money she gets, you think any of it goes toward those fucking kids? Not one cent. Want to learn how I know this? The clothes on my brother's back? They're from me. Those brand-new shoes? From me. This goddamn phone in my pocket? All me.

If I'm already the one providing for him, why not just let me keep him for free? I don't need a check to take in my blood. I just need him. I need to be his protector. The one thing I vowed to be, for most of his life, is also the same thing I've been failing at so miserably.

I'd spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to Ryder. I may not have been dealt the same cards as his, but I'll be damned if he doesn't live a

better life than I've had. I refuse to let him go down the same path I went.

I raise my fist, ignoring the ruckus on the other end of the looming door, and rap my knuckles against the wood. I'm honestly surprised anyone hears the knock over the sounds inside. It's like expecting to hear a whisper in an amphitheater, while a rock band is playing. Fucking impossible.

A few seconds tick by, the sound of something else dropping, then the door swings open. Ms. Wallace stands there, wild-eyed, cheeks flushed, probably from yelling at kids all day. Her hair is in one of those messy buns at the top of her head, and she's dressed in a sweat suit. Every time I look at this woman, I can't seem to tamp down the amount of loathing I have for her. The feeling of disgust. She truly reminds me of Miss Trunchbull from *Matilda*. I'd bet my left nut their personalities aren't far off either.

"Oh," she grunts, looking me up and down disapprovingly. "It's you. You're supposed to call and make an appointment with me if you want to visit."

I shrug, trying not to let it show how much I despise her. I've tried doing things by the rules with her, and it got me nowhere. Just calls that were never returned and two whole weeks without seeing my little brother. Like I'd ever give her forewarning before coming, so she can pretend the life he lives here is any better than the one we had previously. "I was in the area and wanted to stop by and see him."

She rolls her eyes, easily seeing through my lie. She beckons me in, with a nod of her head, and walks down the hall. She cups a hand around her mouth and shouts for all of the goddamn neighborhood to hear, "Ryder, your brother is here!"

I dodge random kids running through the house, trying my damndest, not to curl my nose in disgust at the pigsty that is this house. Without fail, I don't understand how this woman passes exams and house tours. Her house is quite possibly the most disgusting place on earth.

Ryder is quick to walk out of the room he shares with two of the other boys here. The second he sees me, his eyes light up, and that feeling I get in my chest? The tightness that makes it hard to breathe? It intensifies. When he's in reaching distance, I pull him into my arms, and I squeeze my little brother.

"Missed you, Bud," I whisper.

He squeezes back. "Me too."

When we pull away, I seek out Ms. Wallace's eyes, and I jerk my chin toward the door. I'm not asking for permission; I'm way past that. I'm telling her I'm taking him for a while.

"Be back before dinner," she yells after us, trying to maintain some semblance of authority.

Without a word or even a nod of acquiescence, I guide Ryder out of the shithole and to the car. I don't take the Camaro out much. I usually keep it back at George's Garage, since I have the Chevelle I'm reconditioning in my own garage at home. As a motorcycle is deemed inappropriate when caring for a child, I bought an old Camaro a while ago, and I've spent all my free time fixing it up. If I'm not visiting Ryder, I'm either working at the garage or working at home on the car.

"Man, it's nice." Ryder whistles, when he gets closer to the car. Unable to help himself, he takes it in from all angles, his bright eyes looking young and carefree. I grin, enjoying the boyish gleam in his eyes, as he stares at the vehicle.

"She's yours. Once you learn to drive, that is, you can have her."

He stops in his tracks, his eyes widening and mouth dropping open. "What? No way?"

I chuckle, nodding my head, as I climb into the driver's seat. Ryder mirrors me, falling into the passenger side.

We chat easily, me just checking on him and seeing how he's doing with school. He'll be in eighth grade next year, and for that reason alone, I've never felt prouder or more like the clock is ticking. I need to get him back.

We stop at his favorite pizza spot—Zachary's. The owner waves us in and pats us both on the back, giving us our regular booth, upon walking in. This is tradition, something we'd be able to do a lot more often, if he lived with me.

"So, what have you been up to?" he asks, between sips of soda.

I shrug, slinging my arm over my end of the booth and bringing my soda to my lips. "Working at the garage. Had to help my neighbor with something yesterday."

He raises his brow, and before he even asks the question, I'm already shaking my head no, knowing exactly what he's going to ask.

"Is this neighbor a...girl?"

I pause. "She is."

"You like her," he observes, leaning back in the booth.

I laugh. Downright laugh. Ryder, the thirteen-year-old, thinks he can call me out on my shit? Not happening.

“I don’t. It’s actually quite the opposite. She drives me fucking crazy.”

He cackles, his eyes crinkling at the corners, when he does so. I haven’t seen him laugh so easily in a while. For a kid his age, his laughter should come a lot more often than it does now. “You wouldn’t have helped her if you didn’t like her. You never do anything that doesn’t benefit you, or go out of your way to help someone, you don’t care about.”

I sit back, flabbergasted, eyeing my little brother. When the hell did he become so observant? So damn smart?

“You have no clue what you’re talking about, kid.”

Ryder snickers knowingly, proving to me just how much he does, in fact, know. Figuring now is the best time, I dig into my pocket and slide the phone across the table toward him.

“Here, this is yours.”

Ryder’s eyes widen. He glances down at the iPhone, then darts his gaze back up to me. Shock is written all over his face, as though he can’t grasp the reality of his big brother buying him a cell phone.

“I wh-hat? You didn’t have to—”

I rest my forearms on the table between us and lean forward. “Yeah, I did, Ry. I need to know you’re safe. If I can’t get ahold of you through Ms. Wallace, at least, this way, we’ll be able to talk every day. Just think of it as an early birthday gift.”

Ryder’s eyes flash down to the phone, his brows creasing, as he frowns. I watch him closely, wondering if maybe he doesn’t want it. Maybe he doesn’t like it. But then I see it. The tremble in his chin. The way he’s trying to keep his emotions at bay by remaining stoic. I give him a minute to compose himself, not wanting to put him on the spot. I am much the same way when it comes to handling emotions. Bottle it up and keep it hidden from everyone—that is how I’ve dealt with emotions my entire life.

“Thank you, Rome. I...just, thank you.”

When he looks up at me, his eyes are red-rimmed, and my chest squeezes with emotion. I brush the sensation aside and lean forward, jumping into an explanation on how to use the phone. I set up his account for him and downloaded some games and apps already. My number is, obviously, the only one programmed for now, but I have no doubt it’ll fill up soon with his friends’ numbers.

We poke fun at each other and snort at random videos we stumble across on YouTube. I let him get the hang of the phone, while we wait for our pizza.

He sobers for a beat, toying with the disfigured wrapper from his straw. His gaze darts to the iPhone he still hasn't unclasped from his hand.

"You ever think about Mom anymore? Wonder if she's okay?"

I freeze, my entire body turning rigid. Straightening on the bench, I rake a hand through my hair, studying my little brother, my response on the tip of my tongue. I want to say the truth—fuck no, I don't think about that woman in that sense. Sure, I'll think about her and curse her for fucking us over, but do I worry if she's okay? Do I care what she's currently doing in her life? The simple answer is no. I couldn't really fucking care less what Allison is doing with her life. She could burn in hell for all I care. Yet, as much as I want to say all that to Ryder, I don't. It's obvious he's asking for a reason, and whatever it may be, I don't want him to feel alone.

"Sometimes. What makes you ask?"

He shrugs. "Guess I just wondered if she ever misses us, you know? If she regrets the choices she made in life. Maybe things would be different for us."

A rage so deep and hot boils in my gut, threatening to spill over, as I think about our piece of shit mother. As much as I want to believe our mother feels some type of remorse for her decisions, I know, deep down, that she doesn't care. She's probably still out living like white trash and getting high on the daily. No, I'd say Ryder and I are the furthest thoughts from her mind.

"I promise you, Ryder, I'm doing everything I can to get you back. We're going to be a family again, you understand me?"

My little brother smiles, and my heart shatters when I realize it doesn't meet his eyes. It's there merely to please me, to make *me* feel better. "I know," he lies.

I suck in a sharp inhale, that much more determined to keep my word.

When I drop him back off at the shithole and remind him to call me every night on his new phone, I head back home, but not before dialing his caseworker.

I'm done waiting around for this shit. My little brother is coming home, and this time, I'm not taking no for an answer.





After my call with the caseworker and the lawyer she recommended to help me, I decide to go for a run to help clear my head. It's rare I have two days off in a row, and it's rare I find myself wanting to run. I usually hit the gym and lift weights, as a means of working out and staying fit, but whenever I need to let off steam, running is the only thing that does it for me. When you're so out of breath, heart pounding, lungs screaming to breathe in air, that's when you have nothing else on your mind and can finally think clearly.

Before that, I tried working on the car in the garage, like I usually do. That one is my passion project, the car I'll keep for myself when the time is right. I always knew I'd give Ryder the Camaro, but this one? It's mine, and usually, it's enough to get my mind off life and other things bothering me, but not today. With my bandana still wrapped around my head, keeping the stray curls out of my face, and my skin sticky with sweat, I pump my arms, pushing past the lactic acid building in my legs. I inhale and exhale sharply, brushing away the heaviness that's settling in my muscles and bones.

I'm so lost in thought about Ryder, my mother, and what the future holds for us, so stuck in my own head, that I don't see it coming until it's too late. My vision suddenly clears, and my tunnel vision and stress-inducing thoughts vanish when I see her in my running path. She waves, but like a movie reel in slow motion, I see the moment she realizes she's screwed. I also see the moment in her mind when she realizes she should move out of my path, so I don't run her over, but that doesn't happen. Within seconds, I crash into Olivia, and we both go tumbling to the ground.

Clasping her against me, I spin her, allowing my body to drop to the ground. The wind gets knocked out of me upon impact, and my skin scrapes against the ground. When I open my eyes, the only thing I'm worried about is Olivia, who's deathly silent and too still.

I roll over, gently rolling her onto her back. Her eyes are closed, and she still isn't speaking, something truly out of character for her. Fear suddenly claws its way up my chest.

“Olivia?” I pant out. I place one hand on her neck, searching for a pulse, making sure I didn’t accidentally hurt her. That’s all I fucking need. Kill the girl next door. It wouldn’t be surprising, knowing my luck. Her eyes suddenly flutter open the second my palm settles along her neck. She glances up at me, eyes dazed, taking a few seconds to focus on her surroundings.

When she still doesn’t utter a word, I call her name again, “Olivia?”

# *Fight*

## “Feeling of Falling”—Cheat Codes, Kim Petras



*Olivia*

“Olivia?”

At his third prompt, I finally force my lids to stay open, and when my vision clears, my stomach does a somersault at the image hovering over me. When Roman’s handsome face materializes, my lips part. My mouth suddenly goes dry, and I feel like I can’t breathe all of a sudden.

He’s straddling me, hovering over me, his perfectly handsome face dotted with perspiration. His tan skin is gleaming in the sunlight, highlighting the bright color of his eyes, the light golden stubble dusted along his jaw, and the sharp features of his face. He has a bandana around his head, keeping the dark brown locks out of his face. His broad chest and muscular arms glisten with sweat, and I try not to stare too hard. But fucking hell, it’s impossible not to.

How is this man real?

Like what was God thinking when he created Roman? *Oh, sure, let me just make this man the finest specimen earth has ever seen and hope for the best?* Christ in heaven, it’s unfair.

No one has any right to look this exceptional, least of all, when they’ve just finished working out. After I work out, I look like a tomato that has been dropped, rolled, used, and abused, and I feel like I smell like an actual

jock strap that hasn't been washed in approximately eight years. But, of course, that's not the case with Roman. He looks like a goddamn Calvin Klein model who has just been spritzed with water to make him look sweaty, and he smells like pure unadulterated male. Dripping with pheromones and testosterone.

I glance down, away from his face, trying to shake off my attraction to him, and my eyes damn near bulge out of my skull, when I see the firm planes of his naked torso.

*Oh, come on!*

His skin is glistening. Literally glistening. His sweat looks like 24-karat gold, and instead of being disgusted and offended by his nudity, I'm absolutely enraptured and turned on by it. I have the strangest urge to reach out and caress his skin, his firm pecs. I've seen the man without his shirt a few times now, but never, and I mean never, have I seen his abs this close. It's insane how deep each contour and rivulet is. He's gotta hit at least a million sit-ups a day to maintain that body. *At least.* I refuse to believe *that* is just genetics.

The man is quite literally dripping sweat on me, and instead of pushing him off, I'm basking in this moment and committing every vital detail about him to memory for safekeeping. I feel like I'm attached to a defibrillator with sharp painful currents, jolting my entire body to life, as we stare at one another.

"Olivia, dammit, say something," he growls, his brows pinching together in distress. It's then I realize I've yet to say a word to him. I've just been staring up at him, ogling his nude chest like a mute. Something, I am most certainly not, which he can attest to.

"Hi," I finally manage to breathe, and for a split second, I see something enter his eyes. It's warm and soft. Hell, it's ooey-gooey, and I feel it all the way down to my bones, liquifying me. I feel like Roman is peering into my soul with that look alone, touching the deepest parts of me, without even trying.

His lip quirks the tiniest bit, but it's enough to cause a swarm of hummingbirds to take shelter in my stomach. They're roaring in my belly, their wings flapping recklessly, as my heart beats like an angry metronome.

"Are you okay?"

"What?" I whisper, my gaze dropping to his full lips. They're so... perfect. Nice and big, plump, yet so firm. His bottom lip juts out, hanging

down, and I have the oddest impulse to reach up and nibble on it. Take it in my mouth and scrape my teeth over it.

He chuckles. The sound is husky, and it hits me right in my loins, causing gooseflesh to spread over my skin. “I asked if you’re okay?”

*What would it feel like if I kissed him? Right here, right now? Would he taste—*

“Yes! God, I’m sorry. I don’t know what my problem is,” I rush out, realizing my mind has drifted to the gutter, once again.

He shoots me a knowing look, as he helps me to my feet. My body screams in protest, but I take the help with a repressed groan of pain.

We stand there awkwardly. Him shirtless, looking like the god-like man he surely is, and me, still dressed in my work scrubs, now drenched in his sweat.

We’re worlds different; yet, whenever I look into his eyes, during moments like these, I don’t feel that way. I feel like we understand each other on a level most people don’t. A level beyond my comprehension.

“I’ll see you,” he says suddenly, slicing through our connection. Before I can utter a single word, he turns, and I watch him walk up to his house. He crosses my lawn into his, and when I glance down, my stomach drops.

*Oh, no.*

I suddenly remember why I was so excited to get home. Why I was dying with laughter, before waving at him, and before he almost trampled me to death.

“Roman! Stop!” I yell after him, but it’s too late. He suddenly stops walking, but it’s not for the reason I think. Slowly, he lifts his foot, and I see the tension build in his shoulders. I feel the atmosphere suddenly change. Hell, I swear I even start to see the storm clouds roll in over our heads.

Roman pivots, glancing at me over his shoulder, with fire in his eyes. When I glance down at his foot that’s still raised, I deflate.

*So much for pranking him.*

Today at lunch, I thought it’d be hysterical to get back at Roman for Max’s dog shit. I went as far as searching for a local dog park I could go to and steal a dog’s shit. It sounds a lot easier than it actually was. Who knew people were so territorial?

I mean, seriously. It’s shit. Not the elixir to eternal youth.

After being chased and run out of there by a mob of dog lovers, I secured the bag of, you guessed it, fresh dog shit, and dropped it on his

lawn. There was a chance he could spot it ahead of time and get rid of it before he ever had the chance to step in it, but I wanted to see what would happen, just in case that didn't happen. Even if there was only a small five percent chance, I'd be able to get him back.

I wanted the chance to retaliate, before I got blindsided with another prank. I tried to call a truce. The day he was leaving my house, after working on the pipes, I tried to put an end to it all, before things could escalate any further, but he didn't want any part of it. If there's anyone to blame here, I mean, it really is him.

"Touché, Olivia." His voice travels from his lawn to mine, his tone is cold as ice. The fire that was just there in his gaze, not even five minutes ago, has now burned out into a smoking dry ice, burning my flesh upon impact.

I feel like I can't breathe, as I watch him turn his back on me. He slips off his shoes and disappears inside, without so much as another word.

Well, shit. I can't catch a break.



For the next few days, I'm wary of Roman, and rightfully so. It feels like I'm constantly peering over my shoulder, waiting for him to pounce. I know it's coming. There's no way he's going to let what I did slide.

There's just no way.

Shaking off the lingering fears, I focus back on the task at hand. I'm at work, helping Travis and Atticus, another one of the vet techs, with a surgery involving someone's pet rabbit that was mauled by a dog in the neighborhood. Knowing there's a family waiting outside this room to hear about their daughter's animal, only makes me want to work harder.

The rabbit, that we learn is named Darcy, has a few deep puncture wounds, but nothing that is irreparable, if we act fast. It's the gash on her left axillary, though, that has us all worried. She's losing a lot of blood, and I'm hoping Travis can live up to his hype and get her stitched up.

We all work in sync with one another throughout the operation. Atticus is in deep with Travis, working to stop the blood flow and stitch up any

remaining wounds. I'm off to Travis's left, handing him tool after tool, twisting the light to his heart's desire. Cassandra is somewhere in the background with Lucy, prepping Darcy's release meds.

It's almost like we're the dream team in there, each of us holding our own and doing our part in aiding Travis in his quest to heal little Miss Darcy. By the time the anesthesia starts to wear off, and Darcy stirs, Lucy gives me a hand, holding her down to keep her still, as Travis finishes.

Once I get home, I'm bone-tired from the extra hours I worked. Though Darcy is perfectly fine and healthy now, the procedure took much longer than we originally thought. I stayed back with Travis to help clean and prep for tomorrow. A part of me wondered why he bothered staying to help. It was so unlike him. He strikes me as the kind of man who thinks he is too good to clean up. That's always been the job for someone like me. It's essentially what I was there for and what my job consisted of. I was pleasantly surprised, though, when he stayed to help. Atticus cleaned up the reception area, while Lucy and Cassandra handled the back rooms for the next shift.

We were all determined to head home and get some sleep.

Unlike the last time we talked, there seemed to be a better camaraderie between Travis and me, this time around. The conversation seemed to flow better, and overall, I felt like I might have misjudged Travis and who he was before now.

Was I interested in dating him? No. Definitely not. But without the prying eyes and ears of the rest of the staff, I felt like he was showing me pieces of his real self, and not the fake façade he shows off to everyone in the office. It was a welcome change and made the cleaning go that much more smoothly.

He walked me out of the office, telling a story about vet training, that included his father and a whole lot of fecal matter. I couldn't help laughing. When we parted ways and I left, I couldn't help but notice how different Travis was from Roman. Roman waited on me that night at the bar, and tonight, Travis didn't.

I guess every guy is different.

When I pull into my driveway, I can't help the way my gaze locks on the house next door. It's past midnight, and all his lights are off. I have no doubt he's already asleep, and if this was any other night, I'm sure I would be, too.

I have to tamp down the urge to go next door and apologize for my prank. A part of me wonders if I can nip his retaliation in the bud with my apology. It's not likely.

I glance in my rearview mirror and frown when I see a flash of headlights. A car pulls up in front of my house, and I stiffen in my seat, going on red alert. Once I make out what kind of car it is, my frown deepens.

I shove open the door and get out. "Travis?"

He throws his car in park and climbs out, running around his rumbling truck. "I think you forgot this," he says, handing my phone off to me.

My eyes widen, and I suck in a sharp breath. "Crap! I didn't even remember losing it! Thank you."

He shrugs. His gaze roams around the neighborhood, then takes in my house behind me. His lips purse, like he wants to say something, but he thinks better of it, shooting me a grin instead.

"It's nice."

Pride soars through me, as I glance back at my house. It may not be much right now, but it's mine. While looking back, I quickly glance at Roman's house, and my stomach drops, when I realize the light is now on in the living room.

*What is he doing awake? He was just asleep.*

Before I can ponder that any longer, I hear the sound of something clicking, then feel water. It sprays from all directions. I realize much too late where the source is coming from. I let out a screech and try to cover myself from the sprinkler spray, as Travis does the same.

When a certain aroma fills the air, Travis and I start to gag. We both fold over, hands on our knees, coughing and gagging. We pause and turn to look at each other. His brows are drawn in, confusion written all over his face.

"Is that...vinegar?"

I grit my teeth, unable to respond. Slowly, I turn, shooting a glare at Roman's house. My gaze narrows, when I see his silhouette in the window, watching it all go down. I glance at the sprinkler system he must've bought at the local hardware store. It's placed between our lawns, aimed directly at my house and grass. How the hell he managed to infuse the spray with vinegar is beyond me and my prankster capabilities.



Knowing he's still watching, I shoot him the finger, and I promise myself, the next prank will be the last. I'll be ending it, once and for all.

# Nine

## “Neighbors Know My Name”—Trey Songz



*Olivia*

After shampooing and conditioning my hair three times, I could still smell the faint traces of vinegar the next day at work. The same went for Travis. He couldn't believe how diabolical my neighbor was. To spray someone with vinegar, while they were getting home from work?

That took a lot of forethought. Certainly premeditation.

It was further proof of what I already knew. My neighbor was the devil.

Everyone in the office spent the day giving me advice on how best to handle him. Half told me to talk it out, to tell him we needed to end this stupid battle, before one of us did something really out of line. The other half? Well, they had some great ideas. Some I couldn't pass up in terms of payback.

After work, I did some shopping around, trying to find most of the supplies I'd need to get him back for what he did. Instead of working in the house or in the yard like I'd planned, I sat on my bed, holed up inside, and got to work looking up the other items I'd need for the prank to end all pranks. Most of them I'd have to buy online, but I went to the website Atticus told me to and read instruction after instruction. If there was anyone I trusted with pranks, it would be Atticus. He was the king of pranking people, an absolute jokester back at the clinic.

Though I haven't been there long, I can already count on both hands, the number of pranks I've witnessed him pull. From dipping onions in caramel and leaving them in the break room, to ridiculous jump-scares that somehow *still* work.

Still feeling burned out from my overnight shift at the clinic the other night, I found myself growing tired, while I did my research. At one point, I decided to push my laptop aside, slide under the blankets, and close my eyes for a while.

I stir awake, groggily, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. A glance at the clock lets me know what was supposed to be a short nap has turned into full-on sleep. It's two a.m., and the chances of me being able to fall back to sleep, before getting up for work, are slim.

The breeze from the open window has a cold chill traveling through my body. I'm just about to get up and shut it, but I freeze on the bed when I hear something. My eyes widen, and I pause, trying to figure out if it's just the drowsiness playing tricks on me.

But nope. There it is again.

A moan.

Along with the sound of flesh clapping and heavy panting.

Slowly, my gaze drifts to my open window, and I let out a gasp, when realization dawns on me. There, with a significant amount of light streaming into his bedroom, is Roman with a gorgeous busty woman folded in half on his bed, as he pounds her from behind.

I realize I should turn away and look at anything but this. My neighbor is quite literally in the middle of having sex. I feel like a creeper. It's not like he knew my window was open. In Campbell, the weather has been nice enough to leave them open all night, so this is nothing new. I just personally, for safety reasons, never do that. I always shut my windows before going to bed. It seems Roman doesn't subscribe to that rule, though.

Who screws someone with their window wide open? Jesus Christ.

With my gaze fixed on his open window, I watch, in complete awe, as his body works. I can't make out much; the glimmer of light in his room is just enough to spot the thin sheen of sweat on his skin. I can't tell if it's my eyes playing tricks on me, or if I really can see that far. I mean, good Lord, the builders didn't think we needed more privacy than this? My eyes fixate on him. The way the muscles in his biceps and arms strain, as he grips onto

the woman's ponytail and yanks her head back. The muscles in his abdomen jump and flex with each pump. And his thighs, sweet Jesus, his thighs are just as thick and as powerful as I imagined they'd be.

I can feel myself growing hot and bothered. I'm tender and flushed between my legs. Perspiration beads on my forehead and desire tugs low in my belly. I feel the ache spread through my lower body, begging to be touched. My core clenches and throbs, as I watch Roman's lips part, as he pumps into the woman. Her head is tossed back in ecstasy, her face morphed in pleasure.

With a mind of its own, my hand slips beneath the band of my underwear, and I start stroking my clit, rubbing it in soft circles, in time to the rhythm of his thrusts. I close my eyes for just a second, and I imagine I'm in her place, and Roman's fucking me. It's him with his hand fisted in my hair, riding me like he's some angry bull.

Moisture builds, the scent of my arousal floods the room, and when I open my eyes, I have to bite my bottom lip to keep the moan from slipping out. Instead of staring down at his date, Roman is staring at my window. I tense on the bed, looking past my reading nook seated just below the window, wondering if he can see me, but even if he can or can't, I don't stop touching myself. His thrusts quicken, and he doesn't look away. Not once.

I don't know if he can tell my window is open, and I hope to God he can't see in here, but as he stares this way, I fall apart all over my fingers. I dip them inside, groaning, as the muscles pulse and clench around me.

When I come back down to Earth, I'm dripping with sweat, and my heart is pounding so violently, I'm afraid both of them will hear it. Realization settles in. Dread and shame take root in my belly. I worry my moan of release might've been too loud.

*What if they heard it? Would he pass it off as her moan?*

I'm mortified.

The magnitude of what I've done suddenly slams into me.

I quickly rip my hand out of my panties and lie there, staring up blankly at the ceiling, searching for answers, for a viable excuse.

*What the fuck have I just done?*

Feeling utterly disgusted and in need of a long shower, I hop off the bed, run to the window, and slam it closed, along with my curtains. I

probably could've tried to be a bit quieter, but I'm not thinking straight right now. That much is obvious.

Rushing into the shower, I let the ice-cold water sluice over and down my body. I yelp at the temperature, but, otherwise, it does the intended job. It helps me get my hormones in check and pull my mind out of the gutter. I thank my lucky stars that, by the time I get out, I don't notice any strange activity next door. Fighting the urge to peek, I leave my curtains closed and force myself back in bed, so I won't be tired for work in the morning.

That doesn't work at all. I spend the rest of the early dawn wide-awake, staring at the ceiling, thinking of my neighbor and the mystery girl.

*Is that his girlfriend? Or is she just a random chick he brought home?*

*Did he notice me?*

The biggest one of all is: *Why do I care?*

It's not that I'm jealous of someone I can't have or someone I hate, but a part of me is jealous of her, because as much as I hate to admit it, I wanted to be in her position tonight. And that's a dangerous thing to wish for. Especially where Roman is concerned.



I've been dutiful from then on about making sure the windows are shut before I fall asleep. The last thing I need is a repeat of what happened.

The other night, when Roman had company, was the lowest I have ever stooped. It is obvious that, even though I am living my life freer than I ever have, enjoying being independent and on my own, I am still feeling lonely. I need a male companion, and I need one stat.

I wish I could say I'm the kind of woman who doesn't need a man to be happy. And for the most part, I am. While single, I've felt more empowered and happier than I ever did, during my relationship with Reid. Despite that, a part of me still craves the intimacy and the affection. Sometimes, the deep-seated loneliness I feel bothers me, and I feel like there will never be a place in the world where I truly belong. I think a part of that stems from my childhood. I've always been bubbly and gotten along well enough with others, but I've never had my own tribe. I'm what you call a floater. A

drifter in life and friendships. I've never found that stable friendship or relationship.

I've always felt like there were certain expectations of me, even when I was a child. My parents, being the way they are, didn't help any in that area. My entire life I've been searching for that place, that group, that person I can fit in with. That I can fall into and be myself with. I think we're all just searching for someone to accept us the way we are, love us the way we are.

Being in a relationship makes me feel less lonely, even if it isn't necessarily a happy one. At first, it's always unicorns and rainbows, all happiness and hot sex, but that always seems to change at some point.

I know for sure I'm not in any kind of head space to date anyone, but it is becoming painfully obvious, I may need to find a man I can let off steam with. Anything to help me stop thinking about my neighbor.

Since the incident, I've been having a hard time looking Roman in the eye. I've avoided him altogether, practically running out the front door and to my car, with my gaze glued to the ground. In my haste, I'm not even worried about another potential prank. I just want to be as far away from him as I can get.

Now, more than ever, I feel like I need to get him back. I need all that stuff to come in the mail, so I can prank him—push him away. I need to make him angry. I need to feel angry with him. Because right now? I'm not feeling that way. I'm feeling something else entirely for my neighbor, and I'm not having it. Whatever it is, it can't happen. I won't let it.

I spend the whole day at work, replaying the way his body moved, the muscles jumping and cording, and the expression on his face. I hate myself and the fact that I'm still feeling the effects of what I saw a day later.

I'm a disgusting, horrible, horrible human.

I need help. Serious psychiatric help. I should probably be talking to a professional about this, but there's no way I'm going to talk to my father.

As if sensing I'm thinking about him, my phone vibrates from the passenger seat, and my dad's face flashes across the screen. I connect the call with Bluetooth, so I can talk and drive.

"Hey, Dad."

"Just getting off work?" he asks, in a gentle probe. Even retired, my dad still has a habit of speaking like a therapist.

“Yeah, I had an early shift this morning. What are you up to? Looking to do some psychoanalyzing?”

He chuckles. “No, not at all. We just wanted to check in on you, see how you’re doing. You know how your mother worries.”

I smirk. “Oh, so it’s just my mother who worries now, is it?”

“Okay, fine. Me too.”

That draws a laugh out of me. “I’m fine, Dad. I promise. The second I feel like something isn’t right, I’ll give you guys a call.”

“That’s all we can ask for, Oliv—” He’s cut off by voices in the background, and the harder I strain to listen, I realize it’s my mother. “I gotta go, babe. Your mother wants to talk to you and your brother can’t seem to keep his hands off my car keys. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Dad. I’ll—”

Before I can even finish, I imagine my mom takes the phone from my dad. Her jubilant voice erupts down the line. “Olivia, sweetie, how are you?”

“Doing fine, Mom. Just like I told Dad.”

“Make any new friends yet? What about potential boyfriends?”

A scowl settles on my face. “No friends and definitely no boyfriends.”

She tsks. “Well, are you at least remaining active? Have you tried Tinder?”

“Mom!” I yell. “Please don’t ask me questions like this, while you’re in the same room as Dad, it’s just weird. And how do you even know what Tinder is?”

I can practically envision her eye roll. “Oh, stop. He’s not even here. And you never answered my question.”

My lips thin. “You never answered mine either.”

“Everyone knows about Tinder, Olivia. I’m a sex therapist, not a born-again virgin. Now, tell me, are you taking care of yourself sexually? Remember, if you’re feeling stressed or overwhelmed, just head to your room, dim the lights, and get intimate with—”

Heat rises to my cheeks. “Yes, I’ve been taking care of myself just fine. Thank you for probing.”

“Ah, so it is masturbation? Honey, you gotta get out and live your life.”

“My vibrator works just fine, thank you very much.”

“It won’t for long, if you keep using it, as often as you do.”

My brows shoot into my hairline. Is my mother...throwing shade at me about my sex life? "I don't even use it that often." My voice doesn't sound convincing to my own ears.

"Right. All I'm saying is, it wouldn't hurt to put yourself out there. Have some fun. Hell, maybe you'll even find someone cute in the neighborhood."

My grip tightens around the steering wheel, as my thoughts immediately drift to Roman and his naked body. Oh, sweet Jesus. It's been days, and *still*, I can't stop thinking about it. I swallow past the thickness that's suddenly blocking my throat. "Nope. No good-looking people here. Just...ugly. Everyone is ugly. You wouldn't even believe it."

"That's rude, Olivia. You don't need to be a jerk about it."

I roll my eyes. "I actually have to go, Mom. I'll give you a call later in the week, okay?"

She sighs. "All right. Remember, don't be afraid to get out there!"

I deflate against the seat, once the call disconnects. Yeah, putting myself out there with a guy like Roman is definitely not going to happen. Over my dead body.

After that conversation, I can't stop thinking about Roman and the way I touched myself. My stomach churns with unease. Part of me is worried he knew exactly what I was doing, and the other part of me is disgusted with myself. How can I claim to loathe this guy; yet, I got myself off watching him fuck someone else?

Once I get home, I give myself a mental pep talk. The plan is to get out of my car, walk inside my house, and barricade myself in there, avoiding Roman at all costs. But that is impossible, since he's standing on my doorstep, which surprises the absolute shit out of me.

"Hey."

I jump at the sound of his voice, a startled yelp flying past my lips. My gaze snaps to his, widening, as I take him in. He's dressed casually in those distressed jeans and shirt that show off just how lean and fit his body is beneath it. I swallow thickly, as flashes of the other night, of his nude, sweaty body thrusting, fill my mind. Shaking my head, I try to clear my thoughts.

He's never gone out of his way to talk to me, so why now?

My stomach drops when a thought suddenly occurs to me. Heat rises to my cheeks, and I suddenly feel like I'm going to be sick.



*He knows.*

*There's no other explanation. Why else would he be standing on my front porch?*

Awkward doesn't even begin to describe our interaction, as I do my best to play it cool.

Forcing one of the most cringe-worthy laughs past my lips, I greet him by saying his name in a high-pitched voice that sounds like nails on a chalkboard. "Roman!"

He jerks back at the volume, his brows creasing together, as he stares at me oddly. "You can call me Rome. Roman's a bit formal, all things considered."

My heart skids to an abrupt halt, and my breath gets lodged in my throat. What does he mean "all things considered"? Is he saying that because he knows I watched him have sex with another woman the other night?

"All things considered? What's that supposed to mean?" I cross my arms over my chest, defensively, waiting for him to spill the beans and tell me exactly what he means. If possible, the crease between his brows deepens, and the frown he's wearing seems to etch permanently into the lines of his face.

"You all right? You look a little flustered," he observes, raking his gaze up and down my body. I tense up, almost immediately.

Can he tell?

Is he looking at my body, knowing what I did the other night?

Instead of being a normal, mature person and asking him upfront what he needs, know what I do? I run past him. Not walk or fast walk. I *run* past him into my house and slam the door behind me.

I sag against the wood, my chest rising and falling violently, as it works to accommodate my heavy breathing.

*Smooth, Olivia. Real fucking smooth. That wasn't incriminating at all.*

Of course, he knocks, and even though the rational part of my brain knew it was coming, I still jump and let out a yelp of surprise. My eyes slam shut, and I inhale deep, stabilizing breaths, trying to pull myself together. If Rome wasn't sure I saw something before today, with the way I'm acting, he's sure of it now.

*Pull it together, damnit! I chide myself.*

Eventually, when I answer, cheeks tinged pink with embarrassment, I try to keep my face as neutral as possible, while looking up at him innocently. He's still staring at me like I'm certifiable. Rightfully so.

"Yes?" I croak, raising a single brow.

If possible, that frown deepens, and his eyes narrow even farther. "Just wanted to tell you I can finish up little by little this week. That way, it won't take me too long this weekend."

"Right, okay. Busy this weekend? Do you have plans?"

He pauses, his head cocking to the side the slightest bit, as he regards me. "And if I did?" he counters.

I open my mouth, then snap it shut, because what's it to me?

"You sure you're just not planning your next stupid prank on me?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Vinegar, really?" I cross my arms with attitude. "That's low even for you."

"Hate to put a damper on your date." The way he says the word *date* with such disgust has me standing straighter. I narrow my gaze, drilling holes into him with my eyes.

"You think you're so clever, don't you?" I ask, stepping into him. His face pinches.

"Who, me? Why on earth would I think that?"

The underlying humor in his tone has me gritting my teeth. "I'm going to get you back. You'll see."

He chuckles darkly. "We'll see about that."

"I don't understand how half this neighborhood has put up with you for as long as they have. You're the most frustrating person on the planet."

"They like me a whole hell of a lot better than they like you."

My gut tightens with unease. I mean, I knew the neighborhood's reception of me hasn't been great, but hell, I thought it was much better than that. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Everyone here likes me. I baked cakes."

Rome tosses his head back and laughs at me. "You think baking random people cakes will make them like you, sweetheart? Try again."

"I'm positive there's a special place for you in hell."

He casts a cold smirk my way. "Next to you, I hope."

My gaze narrows. His words should have the opposite effect on me, but instead, something light and woeful fills my chest. Those stupid

hummingbirds go back to flapping their wings recklessly, making me feel like a bright-eyed idiot.

“Just worry about yourself, Roman, because the next time I see you, you’re going to wish you’d accepted my offer to end this feud between us.”

“Doubtful,” he tosses over his shoulder, offhandedly, heading back to his house. “Better watch out, though. I’m not the only one in our neighborhood who can’t stand you.”

I grit my back teeth together so hard, my jaw aches from the pressure. Does the bastard always have to get in the last word?

Also, the divorcees in the neighborhood, who hate me because I moved in next to him, should not count it against me. If anything, I’m doing them a favor here, taking the weight of having an asshole like him, as a neighbor, on my shoulders.

“I hate you,” I hiss, trailing him. He whirls on me, and there, on my front lawn, we have a standoff of sorts. I step so close to him that my front grazes his.

He smirks down at me. “The feeling is entirely mutual, sweetheart. Now, you gonna quit being a baby and invite me in, so I can finish, or are you that stubborn?”

I ignore his raised brow and the way he’s challenging me. With a disgruntled huff, I whirl around, heading back into my house.

“Hurry up, asshole.”

I glare daggers at him the entire time he works. It’s easier like this, letting my animosity drive me. Don’t get me wrong. The lust is still there, simmering just at the surface, but my hate? My anger? That’s what I feel in spades. *That’s* what I decide to focus on. Because if I don’t, I’m positive I’ll find myself head over heels in love with the dickhead next door. And I refuse to let that happen.

If love is off-limits, I’ll spend my days and nights, hating the asshole next door.

For the rest of the evening, as he finishes working in my bathroom, I try to ignore him and pretend he’s not there. The task isn’t easy. Especially when he takes off his shirt, leaving him in just an undershirt that shows off his toned body, as he focuses on the task at hand.

As I watch him work, his flexing muscles make me think of the night before and the skillful way he rolled his hips. The insanely hot way he’d

bite his lower lip and watch himself disappear inside that woman. The way his sexy, unruly hair was matted to his forehead, the strands tempting me to run my fingers through them. About halfway through, I have to excuse myself and pretend I need to take an important phone call outside, so I can get my shit together. I was falling apart in there. All I had done for a solid thirty minutes was scroll through my phone, searching for help by texting Cassandra. I needed to do something, anything to get my mind off him and the fact that he's here in my house, right next to my bedroom, where I masturbated while I watched him fuck another woman from his bedroom window.

That's how fucking insane I am.

I shake my head at the mess I seem to have found myself in, and I head straight for the kitchen sink. I splash my face with cold water to snap myself out of it.

It doesn't work.

Not that I expected it to.

I hide out until it's time for him to leave, and when he finally does, he takes his heavy looming presence with him, and I finally feel like I can breathe again.

When night rolls around, and it's time for me to start getting ready for bed, I purposely find myself doing mundane tasks to get rid of this extra energy, surging through my veins, making me antsy. I was strung too tightly after being near Rome for a few hours. I was seriously considering downloading Tinder and swiping right at the next man I saw, but I, obviously, decided against it.

After another cold shower, I pad into my darkened bedroom and my feet skid to an abrupt halt when my gaze travels next door of its own volition, and there through the window, I see Rome. He's alone tonight. But that's not what stops me in my tracks. It's the fact that he's completely nude, stroking himself. His head is tossed back, and his cock is long, thick, and proud, and his muscles strain and cord, as he strokes. I let out a whimpered moan as my core clenches, then gapes, practically begging me to go next door and have him do the same to me. Work my body just as skillfully as he worked that woman's body from the other night.

A part of me wants to open the window and see if I can hear him, but the other part is so transfixed by the sight of him, I stick to the shadows of my bedroom and watch. I watch with rapt attention, until his arm and hand

quicken, then he's spraying everywhere. I think I even have a mini orgasm, without even being touched.

I do spontaneously combust when he flicks his gaze my way, and I swear I see the hint of a smirk on his face. I jump out of view of the window. The chances of him seeing me are slim. But...what if he did?

I army roll, my heart pounding, and I lift my head slowly, trying to get a glimpse to see if he's still looking my way. When my line of sight clears the windowsill, I realize he's no longer there, and the lights are now off. I blow out a deep, relieved breath.

How did this guy go from being my obnoxious asshole neighbor to a man I can't get out of my wet dreams?

I'm in trouble. I've never been more sure of anything.

*Ten*

## “Faded”—VÉRITÉ



*Olivia*

It's been a total of four days since I've last seen Rome, and I have to keep repeating to myself that it's a good thing. I haven't bothered reaching out to ask if he's going to finish the piping, because I know he's almost done. He made it seem like there was just one more quick replacement before I was all set. But instead of waiting on him—something that could possibly take forever because he hates my guts—I finally called my dad.

It was due time I reached out and asked for help. I tried to tell myself nothing was wrong with it. Every child needed their parents. That is just facts. And I'm finally well-situated and comfortable enough to reach out to them for help. Sometimes, the phone calls just aren't enough. I miss them. Even if they drive me crazy ninety-nine percent of the time.

Much to my surprise, instead of gloating like I thought they would, my parents were relieved that I reached out. They'd been dying to visit me, but they didn't want to smother me, so they were waiting for me to ask them first. That would definitely explain the pointless phone calls with each of us just breathing down the line, unsure what to say. They booked the first flight they could find and left Brandon with a friend from the football team, since the high school year is still well underway in Long Beach. When I first moved in, they made the drive here to bring my car and help me bring

the rest of my stuff, but I can imagine sitting in a car for almost six hours is a nightmare, if it's not necessary, and in this case, it isn't.

Since I'll be at work when my parents are supposed to fly in, I told them I'd leave the spare key under the mat, in case they needed it. There was a chance they would land and make it back to my place before I was off work, and in that event, I didn't want them to have to wait out on my porch until I got there. It was unlikely, though, flights usually took longer, and I was making relatively good time here at work. For once, the clinic seemed to be slow.

An hour and a half later, I'm pulling into the driveway, and my eyes widen, as I take in the scene before me. It's like something straight out of a horror movie. With quick, deft movements, I yank on the e-brake and scramble out of the car toward my lawn, where my parents are currently deep in conversation with my dickhead neighbor, Roman. Of course, Max sits dutifully at his feet.

I run through scenarios in my head, trying to assess the situation, the closer I get. If he's been an asshole to my parents, they're going to give me more shit for moving here than they already do. Then, once I find out he's been a dick to my parents, I'll castrate him. Chop off his balls and penis and toss them into a meat grinder. By the ticked-off expression on my father's face, I'd say castration is most definitely a possibility. I hurry across the lawn, closing the distance between us.

By the time I get there, I'm completely out of breath. Heart pounding and lungs wheezing. My steps slow, once my mother tosses her head back and crows with laughter. She swats Rome on his muscled arm, her cheeks glowing bright pink, as if she's blushing something fierce.

Her!

My mother!

The fucking sex therapist!

After a glance back at my dad, I can clearly see what has him so angry.

"Oh, honey!" my mom chirps when she spots me. "There you are! Why didn't you tell me your neighbor was such a snack?" she says, voice filled with too much youth for a woman her age. She swats me on the arm, for good measure, while she's at it, too. All I can do is cringe in embarrassment.

*A snack?*

Christ in heaven. Help me.

*Who the hell taught her that?*

“Mom, please, stop,” I hiss under my breath. I glance up at Rome from beneath my lashes and find him smirking at me. I’m sure he finds this whole debacle hilarious.

I could slap him right across his handsome face.

“Stop what?” she asks, tone affronted. When I don’t respond, she waves me off. “I invited Roman over for dinner with us tonight.”

My eyes grow wide. “Oh, no.” I shake my head frantically. “Rome doesn’t like barbecues or anything like that, Mom. I’m sure he has—”

“On the contrary, I love barbecue. I’ve already told your mother I’m happy to come. It’s nice to finally have good neighbors around.”

My jaw somehow manages to come unhinged, and a jolt of shock rolls through my body.

*No, he didn’t.*

No, that fucking asshole didn’t!

“See, honey? And what is this I hear about finally having good neighbors? Have you been a thorn in Rome’s side, Liv?” I mumble obscenities under my breath. *More like he’s been the thorn in my side.* “You should really try to be more tolerable, sweetheart. Rome is a fine specimen. I mean, sweetie, look at the size of his feet and length of his forearm. He’s very well endowed, and I’m sure he’d be happy to help with your issue.”

My heart skids to a halt, and with shock and horror etched on my face, I start shaking my head at my mom, but she just prowls on, ignoring me and ruining my life in the process. When I look at my dad, he’s not even watching this train wreck anymore. He’s peering up at the blue sky, almost like he’s asking the heavens to open and swallow him whole.

If there is one thing I know about my parents’ relationship, it’s that my father doesn’t have control over my mother. She’s an entity of her own.

“Stop it,” I grit, trying, unsuccessfully, to drag her away.

“Sweetie, there is nothing wrong with masturbating. I taught you that while growing up, but remember what I said.” She pauses to point a finger at me. “Too much stimulation on the clit from a vibrator will surely ruin your nerve endings and dull the experience. That’s why I’ve been saying you need to get out and experience the real thing again. It’s obvious it’s well used—”

“Lisa!” my dad barks, finally intervening. With a secure grip, he starts dragging her toward the door.



“Geez! Okay, okay. I’ll see you later, Rome!”

My face is glowing red by the time my front door slams shut. I’m almost too scared to look up.

*Almost.*

When I do, Roman’s watching me with that infuriating smirk on his face. A groan tears from my chest.

“Don’t say anything! Not a word!”

Whirling on my heels, I storm inside. The entire time, I can hear his deep chuckle. It warms me from the inside out.



After fluffing my hair in the vanity mirror in my bathroom, for what feels like the tenth time, I finally take a step back and survey my reflection. I don’t know why I care what I look like. It’s just Rome. I mean, who cares if he thinks I look pretty, right?

As I stare at my reflection, I hate myself a little for going out of my way to look pretty for him. I curled my hair, but then I decided to straighten out the curls to make them look more natural. I don’t want to look like I’m trying too hard. Loose brown waves tumble around my shoulders, the tips grazing the tops of my breasts. I applied a little extra mascara and blush, and at the time, it seemed like a good idea, but now that I’m looking at myself in the mirror, I can’t help but feel like I look overdone. The light smattering of freckles across the bridge of my nose suddenly seem more pronounced. I have the urge to hop in the shower, scrub it all away and stay locked in my room like a pubescent teen.

The last thing I want this to feel like is a date, because this most certainly is not a date. I’m not getting dolled up for him—I’m doing it for myself. He’s my neighbor, not my boyfriend. The only reason he’s here is because my parents invited him. I need to keep my wits about me, if I’m going to survive tonight.

My doorbell chimes, jolting me out of my thoughts. I hear my mother’s voice beyond my bedroom, calling out that she’s got it. Gripping the

porcelain edges of the sink, I clench my eyes shut and inhale a deep breath, summoning the strength I surely don't have.

My body grows tense, once I hear their titters floating down the hall. My stomach twists, just imagining all the things that are likely coming out of my mother's mouth.

*Hasn't she embarrassed me enough for one day?*

Stifling a groan, I flatten my hair, self-consciously, one last time, before leaving the en suite bathroom. I find Roman and my parents in my makeshift kitchen. I feel my cheeks tint with embarrassment at how uncoordinated everything still looks. You'd think by now, after living here for a month and a half, I'd at least have a put-together kitchen and dining area. That is most certainly not the case here. My mother swore that by the time they left to go back to Long Beach, she'd have all my boxes emptied and the house would be organized. I honestly wouldn't put it past her.

"Oh, sweetie, there you are. We were just talking about you."

I purposely ignore Rome and his gaze, which I can sense lingering on me. I feel his eyes roaming over my body, incinerating me from the inside out. I wish he'd look elsewhere, especially with my parents here in the room with us. The last thing I need is for them to get the wrong idea.

*Shit, why am I suddenly so nervous?*

"Were you now?" My voice is high-pitched. Much too high to be normal. Out of the corner of my eye, I swear I see Rome grin at my discomfort. I knew this was going to be a horrible idea.

The oven beeps, and the smell of my mother's famous rolls fills the room, saving me from any more awkward encounters. For now, at least.

"Olivia, help me in the kitchen. I think your dad and Roman are heading next door, real quick, to look at his bike. Your father has been eyeing it, as if I'd ever let him have one."

I nod, thankful for the reprieve. Pulling the glazed buns out of the oven, I set them on top of the stove, waiting for further instructions. We work in a comfortable silence, as we prep dinner, plating everything. Unable to help myself, I crane my head to peer out the front window, seeing if I can spot Rome and my dad next door. I hope to God they're talking about anything else but me. I have a little more faith in my father than I do my mother. At least the doctor has some limits to his methods. I'm sure the only thing I really have to worry about is him psychoanalyzing Roman, too.

*Good luck with that, Daddy Dearest. Roman is one tough cookie to crack.*

“Crane your neck any harder, Olivia Rene, and you’ll break it.”

At my mother’s soft chiding, I snap my head forward, focusing on the task of transferring her potato salad into a nicer bowl. Heat crawls up my neck, and I feel the sudden urge to defend myself.

“I was just seeing where he and Dad went.”

“Mm-hmm,” she grunts, shooting me a look out of the corner of her eye. We take everything to the table, setting each place with the nice china and some cutlery. “How have you been? Taking care of yourself, I hope.”

My steps falter, as I pass her. I know exactly what she’s getting at, and my gaze narrows ever so slightly.

“I am.”

She purses her lips, as though she thinks I’m bluffing, and she plans to call me out on it. “I noticed you’re running low on your medication. Have you found a new doctor yet? We sent over quite a few options.”

Tension eases its way into every fiber of my being. “You went through my stuff?” There’s an edge to my tone that gives my mother pause.

“Not purposely, no,” my mom chirps, feigning innocence.

“You just happened to go looking through my drawers then, did you?”

She shrugs. “Couldn’t find what I was looking for, so I went searching for it. Sue me, Olivia.”

I blow out an exasperated huff, laughing under my breath, without humor. This is just like them, to come in here under the guise of missing me and instead, make demands like I’m incapable of caring for myself.

“I’m fine. Stop trying to force my hand. I’m taking care of myself perfectly, without your help.” She flinches ever so slightly at the dig, and I immediately regret it. She doesn’t deserve me acting like a complete shit to her. I don’t know what it is about this particular subject that always makes me so touchy. I can never seem to put my guard down. And I know she means well. She’s being a momma bear, and I have no right to take that away from her, no matter how many miles are between us.

I blow out a quick breath, expelling the displeasure. “I have looked at the list, and I’m thankful that you’ve taken the time to put it together. I promise, I’ll choose one soon, okay?”

She nods, though her face still looks unconvinced. Which I don’t blame her.

Thankfully, the guys come back inside, soon after, stopping all possible confrontations with my mother for the time being. Dad and Roman seem to be hitting it off well. They're in deep conversation about car parts, as they wash up, before taking a seat at the table. The first initial minutes are awkward as all hell. I can't help but shoot Rome a glance, trying to figure out what he could possibly be thinking about the whole situation.

I'd bet money he regrets agreeing to come.

We start to dig in, and thankfully, my dad is the one who picks up the conversation with Roman, since I'm suddenly incapable of speech. I find myself stuffing food into my mouth, just to avoid having to talk.

Over the course of dinner, I feel his gaze on me, and every once in a while, we lock eyes, but it never lasts for long. One of us looks away, before things can get awkward. I try not to read into it. The dining room is small. It's not like there are many other places for him to look.

"So, Rome, what do you do for a living?" my mother asks, between bites of her salad. She sounds far too chipper, causing me to shoot a frown her way.

*What's she up to?*

Roman shoots her what I now realize is his signature grin. "I work at an automotive shop downtown called George's Garage. I fix up cars and handle a bunch of odds and ends for the owner, George."

My mother *hmm*s, utterly transfixed. She shoots me a look across the table, pointedly wagging her brows between Roman and me. I don't know how it happened, but somehow, we both ended up on the same side of the table, sitting opposite my parents. Like we're a couple. One happy fucking couple. Not a pair of neighbors who have been pranking each other, recklessly, and hate each other's guts.

I'm quite certain this is the most awkward dinner I've ever been to.

And, believe me, I've been to my fair share. Hell, Reid and I broke off our engagement over dinner at a fancy restaurant in Long Beach.

We let the oddness of it all pass through us. Because there's no way he doesn't feel how strange this really is. And in these small moments, I notice something enter his eyes. It's almost...soft. So unlike the man sitting next to me. He wears such a hard exterior, and he wears it well, but now, I can't help but wonder what he's really like inside.

Who is Roman?

Suddenly, I have a deep-seated need to learn everything about this man sitting beside me. To know every moment he carries around. To witness every experience that has molded and shaped him into this unique creature who seems like the strongest, most closed-off person I've ever met in my entire life. With a face meant to be worshipped, a body meant to sin, and a smile birthed straight from the depths of hell, my neighbor is an enigma that has successfully burrowed under my skin.

He seems to enjoy conversing with my dad. They too easily bond over sports, cars, and everything else under the sun. His chuckle isn't husky or deep, much like it has been every time I've heard it so far. No, this time, it's quite boyish. He seems to be enjoying himself, and it makes me wonder when's the last time he enjoyed the company of someone else. Other than that of a woman. When has he gone out to eat with family or friends? Not at a bar or a party, but just sitting down and enjoying simple conversations? By the looks of it, I'd say never. And the realization alone makes me soften toward Roman. It makes me wonder what kind of childhood he had that this, this barbecue with my parents, would make him this upbeat. This calm and content. Something I've never seen from the high-strung guy next door.

"So, I hear you've been helping Liv around the house? What was the issue with the plumbing, or was it the piping?"

The guys proceed to go into specifics, and my mom sits there, wearing a wide Cheshire cat grin on her face. I know what she's thinking, but it's not like that. Not even close. Rome was just being a (somewhat) friendly neighbor by offering. I refuse to look into it any further than that.

Hell, maybe some part of him felt lousy for always acting like a dick toward me? One can only hope.

"Do you live alone, Roman? Any girlfriends?"

"Mom." I sigh tiredly. "You can't ask questions like that."

She tosses her hand in the air, exasperatedly, then lets it drop to her lap in such a dramatic fashion that I have no other choice than to roll my eyes. "My goodness, Liv, I'm making conversation, not asking the man for his social security number. Just calm down and eat your food, sweetie."

Roman covers the lower portion of his face with his napkin, obviously hiding the fact that he's smiling. No, laughing at me behind there. I shoot a glare at my mother. She seems to sense this isn't the direction I want the conversation to go, because she rolls her eyes, changing tactics.

"Fine, do you have any family nearby?"

At the question, Rome's easygoing nature seems to dissipate. I watch through furrowed brows, as the sinews in his strong body tighten. The muscles in his shoulders tense, and if I weren't watching so closely, I would've missed the tic in his jaw.

Maybe I should've let them continue asking about girlfriends and his personal life. He seemed a lot more inclined to answer those questions, instead of this one.

After quite some time, he clears his throat and wipes the edges of his mouth with his napkin, like he's mulling over how to respond.

"It's just me right now. I don't have any family that lives near here. But I do have a little brother over in Oakland."

My mom smiles enthusiastically, all the while my mouth is hanging open in shock. I had no idea Roman had a brother. I don't know why I'd expect to know anything about his life at all. It's not like we've had a single informing conversation since we've met. Though, for some reason, just hearing he has a little brother makes him seem more...real. More human. He has a family just like everyone else. Why is that so hard to believe when it comes to Roman whatever-his-last-name-is?

"That's wonderful! How old is he?"

"He'll be fourteen in a few weeks."

"Oh! Our Brandon just turned sixteen. Is he into sports, too?"

Rome opens his mouth, looks at me, then drops his gaze to his lap. He digs his phone out of his pocket and glances down at the screen until a frown takes over his face. "I'm sorry. I really need to take this. I'll be back."

My brows tug down, as I watch him push back from the table and take his "call." An odd sensation travels from my stomach to my chest, making me shift uncomfortably on the chair.

I heave a deep sigh. "Mom, you can't just ask questions about people's lives like that. Not everyone is into opening up to strangers."

She jerks back, affronted. "What? I hardly asked anything bad. I'm doing you a favor here, sweetie. How is it you've been living next to this man for however long, and you know next to nothing about him?"

I roll my eyes. "We're neighbors, Mom. Not best friends."

"Regardless, I've taught you better than this. He's a nice guy. Would it kill you to show some interest? I'd like to have some grandchildren, while I'm still able to play with them."

I shake my head, not even bothering with a remark for that one.

It's obvious my mom thinks Roman is something special. Hell, anytime she has the chance, she stares at him with hearts in her eyes, more than likely planning out our future wedding, even though that will never happen. I'll admit, he's easy to look at, so I definitely see the appeal, but what she doesn't realize? He's rotten. He's a complete jerk, and I am in no way, shape, or form interested in him.

When Rome comes back, the mood has shifted a bit, but with my mother, being the intrusive, audacious creature, she is, it doesn't take long for things to return to a semi-normal pace. What with her deciding to retell my embarrassing childhood stories.

"You'll never believe it, it was the absolute funniest thing. I walked by her door one night and caught her practicing kissing on her arm." My mom bursts out laughing, and I have the urge to toss my buttered roll at her head.

*Why is this my life?*

"She was so focused, so into it, I didn't have the heart to go in there and tell her she was doing it all wrong. The amount of tongue and saliva I saw swapping with her arm was, most certainly, not the right way to kiss."

Rome shoots me a smirk, as if he's having the time of his life. His brow rises the tiniest bit, and my cheeks redden at the teasing glint in his eyes.

I bet he's really enjoying himself.

I shoot him a scathing glare, but honestly, seeing how much he's enjoying himself, even though it's at my expense, doesn't bother me, as much as I thought it would.

After dinner, we sit around and chat some more. Overall, the dinner is relaxed, and once we get through most of the awkward stories, it really isn't so bad. Rome excuses himself to use the bathroom, and unable to help myself, I follow. I walk through my own house, taking in whatever he may be seeing, as though it's my first time. I'll be the first to admit it doesn't look great, but everything is slowly coming together.

My brows pull down when I bypass the open bathroom door and realize he isn't in there. I hear something in my room, and my heart rate skyrockets. Swallowing down the sudden thickness in my throat, I push into my bedroom, finding Rome's large, formidable body, hovering in the space. Having him in here, looking at all my stuff is strange. My bed is merely a few feet away from us. It does strange things to my heart—to my core. Things that shouldn't be happening.

“What are you doing in here?” I croak out. Embarrassment crawls up my neck and stains my cheeks, so I clear my throat, trying to regain my composure.

He doesn't turn or pay any mind to my question. He just continues snooping around my space. His gaze lingers on my made bed, and for some reason, my stomach flips, somersaulting. It feels like I'm free-falling, and I hate it. Rome shifts from my bed to the window that looks into his bedroom.

He pauses in front of my makeshift reading nook in front of the window. The same place I rubbed one out to him undressing the other night and stroking his cock. Even though I promised myself I'd never do it again, I lied, because I did, in fact, do it again. It was like my body had a mind of its own, when it came to seeing Roman in the nude.

I break into a sweat. It's nonsensical. I was in the dark, and he couldn't see me. There's no way he knew what I was doing. But then, why is he standing here, staring so hard?

Can he smell me?

I sniff the air discreetly, remaining silent.

*Oh, Christ, pull yourself together. He's not a damn dog.*

“Interesting view,” he comments, and the heart rate, that I'd just calmed some, spikes.

So that's what he was looking at.

The view from my reading nook in my room has the perfect line of sight into his bedroom. And since it seems his windows and curtains are always open, I constantly have a front row view of him at all times.

“I like to read there. It's comfy.” My voice is scratchy. Raw even.

*Why the hell do I sound like that?*

I hope like hell he doesn't notice.

“Amongst other things, I presume.” He says it so low, I think I'm imagining things, but when he turns back to face me, I know I didn't. His eyes are filled with heat. It's like staring into pools of molten lava, threatening to turn me into ash and tar with just one touch. For some reason, my heart is racing, and it feels like someone is playing the steel drums in my chest. My breathing is labored, as if I've just run a marathon, and my body...God, I'm trembling. I can smell him everywhere in here. Rome has such a distinct scent; it drives me absolutely nuts.



It's the perfect combination of musk and something tantalizing. I want to bottle it up and steal it for safekeeping. As we stand here, only a few feet apart, I'm surprised by the sexual tension in the air. It's arcing between us, clogging the air, making it hard for me to breathe. I try to look anywhere but at him, but that proves impossible. Roman's face is far too masculine to be beautiful, but somehow, he is anyway. An incredible magnetism surrounds him. The way his gaze bores into me makes me want to delve deep into him and figure out all there is to know about the man next door.

The corner of his mouth suddenly inches up, and the effects of it hit me straight in the core. He takes a step into me, his eyes glittering with abhorrence. "I've heard some interesting stories today. I particularly enjoyed the arm kissing one. Absolutely fascinating stuff, babe."

My stomach dips at the use of the word "babe." Frustration and wonderment spear me in the chest. It's a dichotomy of sensations. I narrow my gaze, my lips pinching together in annoyance.

"I hate you."

Roman laughs. The sound is husky, and it rolls through my body in waves. He leans in, and my body goes still, startled by his proximity. With his lips resting so close to my ear, I can feel the heat of his words race down my spine.

"I hate you, too, babe. So fucking much."

A gasp rips from my chest, and I jerk back, glaring up at him, only to come up short. The look in his eyes tears down my walls and strips me of any barriers. His gaze is filled with heat—not the angry kind but one filled with arousal. One that promises very, very bad things.

Moisture floods my panties.

I startle at the knocking on my bedroom door. The moment suspended between us suddenly vanishes. Whirling around, I find my dad standing there in the doorway to my bedroom, wearing a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"Just wanted to tell you we're going to start cleaning up. Any longer out there and your mother will find a way to bust out your childhood photos. Don't underestimate her."

"I don't even have childhood photos here, Dad."

"I know you don't, but your mother brought them with her," he deadpans.

*Oh, Christ.*

I force a laugh, but it comes out oddly, revealing just how nervous and off-kilter I'm feeling. My dad's gaze darts back and forth between the two of us, before he nods, coming to some kind of conclusion in his head, then raps his knuckles on the door and leaves.

I linger here with Rome for a beat, both of us staring at each other again. There's so much I want to say to him, so many questions I want to ask, but I don't do any of that. Instead, I plaster on a smile and point over my shoulder.

"I'm gonna go out there and help clean up before my mother embarrasses me some more. Feel free to stay and hang out with my dad."

Rome rubs the back of his neck. "I should probably get going anyway. But...thank you."

My eyes widen, and he seems to pick up on my reaction, because he rolls his eyes. "Don't look so shocked."

"I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Thank you?" He scoffs. "I'm sure there's been something else nice in there."

I watch him disappear, and as much as I tell myself I shouldn't, I walk to the window, my gaze following him, as he heads inside his house, hating the way my heart and stomach are reacting. I've felt this way a few times in my life, and each one has ended with a broken heart or in disaster.

I can't afford either.

# *Eleven*

## “Don’t You Know”—Jaymes Young



*Olivia*

They say you should never fall for the enemy. Well, I feel like I am doing exactly that. All that animosity and hate I felt toward Roman is slowly dissipating, slipping through my fingers like fine grains of sand. A sharp, burning tightness spreads across my chest, in a flash of horrible intensity. It’s the realization that I dislike my neighbor as much as I like him. That isn’t even the most unsettling part. It’s how extreme each feeling is. I’ve never felt the level of rage that I feel around Roman. I’ve never felt so incredibly out of touch and out of control with my emotions. And with these new feelings I have for Rome comes a sudden surge of anger. I can’t even explain why. Maybe it’s when he brings women home. I imagine he’s fucking them, and I have no business getting angry that my neighbor may or may not be sleeping with other women. That doesn’t change the tightness that ebbs and flows through my chest, though.

I wish it was me he was touching. Me he was loving. I want to feel the strong sinews of his body beneath my fingertips. I want to trace the black ink of his tattoos scripted along his golden skin. I want him. And that is precisely the problem.

I know it was wrong to watch, and honestly, I’ve already given up on the whole reprimanding myself over it, because I obviously have no self-

control where he is concerned. And my logic is, what's the harm? I mean, a part of me is starting to feel like he is doing it on purpose now. He knows where our windows are. How hard would it really be to shut his curtains before getting down and dirty? Not very hard. I've done it. All it cost me was a few seconds of my life.

It's frustrating.

He's frustrating.

I think a part of me hopes something will flourish between us, but it never does. Rome seems content to keep his distance—or rather, keep me at a distance. After he finishes the job in my house, he seems over my presence, and I'm not sure what hurts more. I can't shake the stabbing sensation in my chest, the green sensation of jealousy that fills me when I think about him and someone else. I am on the verge of being a complete psychopath.

If my father had access to my brain, I'm sure he'd have a field day.

So that is why I do it. I don't know if maybe I want his attention. Maybe I want him to give me more than just a simple wave and a few short glimpses of him during the night. Maybe I want to get back at him, make him angry, too. Whatever the reason, it's the catalyst for us. It is what starts the clusterfuck of poor decisions. I wish I could stop it; I wish I could take a step back and really think about what I'm doing. The truth is, I don't want any of that. I just want Rome.

And that is the root cause of all my problems.

It's been so long since we've last pranked each other that a part of me is nervous to be the one to restart this war. This prank can easily go south, but I think that's the beauty of pranks. There's always a risk, and for once in my life, I want to be that risk-taker.

Since it's my day off, I wait until Rome is long gone, before trying to find a way inside his house. I get a little thrill of vindication, when I climb over the fence, ungracefully, and Max doesn't even bark. Instead, the husky cranes his head to the side, watching me like I'm an idiot.

He wouldn't be wrong.

After trying the sliding glass doors and the back windows, my last resort is his bedroom window, and I snort at the hilarity of it all. It pushes up with no resistance, damn near inviting me to walk on in. His room is the same size and just about the same layout as mine. It consists of dark furniture and clean, sleek lines. There's nothing out of place.

As much as I'd like to snoop through his stuff, just to really fuck with him, I decide not to. This prank is more than enough. I navigate my way into his living room, eyeing the bare wall with a wicked grin.

Opening the package I bought online, along with a bunch of other supplies, I go to work, chuckling at my creativity. I told him I'd find a way to get him back for the vinegar, and I'm finally doing it.

When I'm just about done, I freeze at the sound of someone coming home, and my mind takes much too long to process. I scramble to grab all the supplies, and in my haste, everything slips from my hands like I have butter fingers.

"Shit!" I hiss down at Max, who's just watching me oddly, the way dogs normally do. He's likely wondering what his owner did to deserve such a dick move like this. If he only knew.

I skid to an abrupt halt when I hear two voices. My stomach drops, when I realize he's coming home with someone.

This is the absolute worst time to catch him in the act with another woman. It's one thing to see from my window, but here in his home, where I'm breaking and entering? Yeah, that's where I draw the line for my crazy.

All too soon, the front door opens, and the footsteps get closer, as I try to make a break for it and flee. My gaze darts around his living room, looking for a way out of his house, without being seen. It feels like the walls are closing in on me. The blood is rushing through my veins, making it hard to hear a thing. By the time I think I've found a viable option, it's too late. I hear a female's sharp intake of breath, and slowly, when I glance over my shoulder, an inaudible gasp leaves me, when I see the look of complete fury in Rome's eyes. I've quite literally never seen anything like it. He looks murderous, and the fact that I ever thought this prank was a good idea has me questioning my judgment and my sanity.

I glance at his female companion and can't hide the frown that steals over my face. She's not really what I was expecting, but she's still beautiful, nonetheless. Dressed professionally, she looks much more put together than I do at the moment. A little older, too.

Didn't know Roman was into cougars, but hey, to each his own.

"Mr. Banks, can you explain what's going on here?"

Mr. Banks? That's his last name? I roll it over on my tongue, *Roman—no, Rome—Banks*. Sounds a bit professional.

“Get out.” His cold tone snaps me out of my inner musings, and a sharp stitching pierces my chest. My heart sinks at the coldness reflected back at me and the shard of ice in his tone. I can feel each jagged sliver cutting me open, digging into my flesh.

I pause, my mouth dropping open in shock, as I try to explain. I expected a little frustration, but anger? To this degree? I obviously overestimated myself.

His hands ball into fists at his sides, and I swear, I can see the color slowly seep into his cheeks. He looks like he’s ready to blow.

“Rome, wait. It’s washable, I promise. I would never—”

“Get out!” he barks with such contempt, both his companion and I jump, startled by the force of his rage. The woman eyes me with an odd expression, as I gather my stuff. My body pricks, as I feel their gazes on me. Shame coats my skin, turning my stomach. Embarrassment presses down on my chest, making it hard to breathe. It’s like a boulder has been dropped on top of me, and I can’t breathe.

My hands tremble, as I try to gather everything, as quickly as possible, but just like before, everything keeps slipping, tumbling from my hands and rolling onto the floor. The backs of my eyes prick with tears. I just want to get out of here.

I’m so embarrassed.

So fucking stupid.

“For fuck’s sake, hurry up!” he growls.

My bottom lip trembles, and my nose stings with pressure. I trap my bottom lip between my teeth, holding back the impending sob I feel gathering in my chest like a Category 5 storm. Finally, I manage to gather everything, without any further mishaps, and I slip out with my tail tucked between my legs.

I don’t bother looking back. I’m too embarrassed to face them, to see the look in their eyes. Most of all, I don’t think I can face Roman again, not after the look of pure contempt in his gaze.

Dread takes root in my belly, when I hear pounding footsteps behind me, as I make my way down his porch steps. I don’t have to turn around to know who it is. I can smell him. I can feel him, his brutish aura surrounding us. The very essence of him percolating in the air.

“How fucking stupid are you?” he hisses, and the words hang in the air between us, stopping me in my tracks. When I turn to face him, the urge I

felt to cry is now gone, and in its place is a sudden bout of anger. Unrestrained rage.

He has no right to talk to me this way.

“I’m sorry,” I grit out. “If you would just let me explain, instead of acting like a—”

“Like a what?” he growls, taking a threatening step toward me. His brows take a nosedive, and they slant down, casting eerie shadows across his face. “You fucking trashed my house. Did you really think I’d come home and fucking laugh it off? You can’t really be that dumb, can you?”

I jerk back, as though he’s slapped me in the face. Tears fill my eyes, and I blink rapidly, trying to keep them at bay. Inside me is a riot of mixed emotions. But my ire and frustration with him, that’s what I hold on to.

With rage now surging through my body in short spurts, I take a step toward him, closing the distance between us. I jab an angry finger against his firm, warm chest.

“I did not trash your house. It’s a fucking prank, for goodness’ sake. Because I one-upped you, I’m suddenly the bad guy?”

“One-upped me?” He scoffs. “This isn’t a fucking game, Olivia!”

“Then what is it?” I shout, my voice echoing down our quiet street.

My chest heaves I’m so furious. I can’t even see straight. It’s making it hard to concentrate. My hands and body shake, and my heart is pounding so violently, I fear it’ll burst out of my chest cavity soon.

A moment passes between us, when we just glare at each other, letting our frustrations permeate the air we breathe.

“How is it okay for you to treat me this way, to be such a fucking prick all the time, to do all the things you do, but when I do it, I’m suddenly the one who’s wrong? It’s washable. Nothing about what I did today was permanent. It was a joke, a stupid, foolish joke to get you back for all the times you’ve gotten me.”

“You don’t understand,” he grits. “I needed today to go well.”

“And I needed the first day I met you to go well, too! And look how that turned out! Everything isn’t about you, Roman. Why don’t you get your head out of your fucking ass and realize not everyone is here to serve you. The world doesn’t revolve around you, and news flash, people have feelings. We can’t all be uncaring fucking robots who don’t feel a damn thing. Like you!”

My heart is heavy by the time I'm finished, and I'm on the verge of bursting into a fit of sobs and, quite possibly, cardiac arrest. I'm so angry with him and myself that I can't stand to be near him for another second. I whirl away, storming across the lawn toward my house.

His next words stop me in my tracks. *Does he really believe I'm starved for attention?* They're a poisonous dart to the heart. It spreads slowly, tainting every vital part of me. His harsh words rip into me, and I flinch, internally, at every single one.

He doesn't deserve my tears, and though that won't stop them from coming, I refuse to let him see me cry.

I've shown him too much of my hand already.

I haul ass into the house, and a sudden indescribable pain in my chest makes it hard to breathe. Hard to do anything else other than collapse on the floor in my kitchen and try to suck in lungfuls of air. I clutch my hand to my chest and focus on my breathing. I try to focus on anything but the pain currently swirling through my chest. My eyes slam shut, and I force myself to think about the things that make me happy. The things in my life I can't live without, the stuff that makes sense. Soon enough, the pain in my chest subsides. I unclasp my hand from my sternum, forcing myself to breathe normally. I stay there, sitting on the hard floor, for God knows how long, wondering how all this got so fucked up.

We should've never let the pranks get this far. I still don't understand why he was so angry. It wasn't permanent. It was a joke. And I didn't know he was expecting company. I had no clue that this company he was keeping was someone important. When I close my eyes and play back just how angry he was, just the thought of him and that woman being together makes me feel ill. Physically ill. She's obviously important to him. Important enough that he snapped on me the way he did.

And she just stood there, watching it all happen. I wonder if she'd just gotten off work? How does she feel about Roman living next to a woman whom he constantly pranks and allows her to prank him back? Does she know about the other woman he was fucking, not even a full week prior? I doubt she does.

It only makes my enmity where Rome is concerned grow to new heights.

Unlike my previous bouts of anger where he was concerned, this time, he deserves my wrath.



I am officially done with the pranks. Done with trying to be likeable. I am done with Roman Banks. I am washing my hands clean of him—the enigma I was sure I'd never figure out.

I hate my neighbor.

I just wish I didn't have to keep reminding myself of that.



*Roman*

The second I slide the key out of the lock and step through the doors, the electric charge in the air gives me pause. When I don't hear Max right away, I know something is off, and when I turn the corner and see her, I realize what it is.

It's life, flipping me the finger, once again. I don't know why I ever thought I'd be able to catch a single break. Of course, today wouldn't work out in my favor. Good things like that don't happen for people like me. That is just the sad truth.

I take in the walls of my living room, my hands curling into fists, as I try to restrain my outrage. I hear the social worker's sharp intake of breath behind me, and I can guess what she's thinking. How can she approve me and this house? How can she move in my little brother with me, if I have intruders defiling my property, and worse, doing it as a prank? She's going to think we're childish and stupid, and me...she's going to think I'm not fit to take care of my brother. Not fit to take in the one person in this world who means everything to me. The one who needs me and is counting on me to get him out of there.

On my last thread, like a rubber band being stretched beyond its capacity, I snap. Red spills in my vision, filling my chest and taking over. I bark at her, yelling at her to go, because if I look at her a second longer, I don't know what I might do. I know it's washable, that much seeped into

my consciousness, but even knowing that, I can't seem to wrap my brain around the fact that she chose today to do it. Of all days, it had to be today? I know I'm overreacting, but it still doesn't lessen my temper.

I know I don't have much of a right to be angry with her. It was meant to be a harmless prank, and after all the shit (pun intended) that has happened, I don't blame her for wanting to get back at me. I just wish it had been any other day. Any other time.

She gathers her stuff in a reckless hurry, dropping everything in the process. I should help her, help her out of here, to save at least a shred of her dignity, but I don't. Her shoulders droop in shame, and I swear, I even see the slight tremble in her chin. This is wrong. I'm not this guy. I don't make women cry, and the fact that I've hurt Olivia, enough to make her want to cry? It only serves to fuel my anger.

Before leaving, she pauses over the threshold, looking from me to the social worker.

"I'm sorry. It was stupid prank. I'll come over and clean it, as soon as I can. I just thought...after all the stuff you've pulled on me, I thought I'd finally get you back."

I wish she'd stop talking.

I wish she would've just left it at that.

She walks out of the house, down the porch steps, and I know I should let her go. I should turn around and start apologizing to the social worker.

Of course, I don't do either of those things.

Jumping into action, I storm out of the house after her, needing to get in the last word. I prowl toward her, closing in on her petite form, and it doesn't escape my notice how she flinches when she feels me coming.

When we jerk to a stop in front of her door, I see the tears welling in her eyes, but it doesn't stop the venomous words from spewing from my lips.

"What the fuck is the matter with you? Are you that fucking starved for attention?"

"I'm sorry," she manages through gritted teeth, holding back her own ire and emotions.

"Stay the fuck away from me, you hear me? I don't want to see you. I don't want anything to do with you, Olivia. Get it through your fucking head. This, whatever fucked-up thing is happening, it's over."

With that, I spin on my heels and head back inside. I ignore the pained, ragged sound that escapes her chest and force myself to ignore the pain in

my own. I want to turn around and apologize, but I can't. I have my little brother to save. I can't save everyone, I know that, but if I can save at least one, it's going to be the one I love most.

When I head back inside, the social worker, Regina, I believe her name is, is scribbling some notes down on the clipboard, she seemingly pulled from thin air, and my heart sinks.

"Please, hear me out. I had no idea this was going to happen."

She puts up her hand, stopping me. "I realize that. I also realize that may be a problem. Children need a stable environment. Not one filled with shenanigans of this sort. And the way you lost your temper with her? Makes me wonder how you'd lose your temper with your little brother."

I grit my teeth. "I would never. I love him."

She sighs, a sadness flashing across her face and a bone-weary tiredness settling into her posture. "I know you do. But I also need to follow protocol. I'm not failing you for today, but I'm not giving you a perfect score either. You need to prove you can do this, Mr. Banks. You have everything stacked against you, prove the system wrong."

She walks out after her speech, and the sound of the front door closing seems to echo long after she's gone. I drop my head into my hands and swipe my fingers through my hair, tugging on the ends, relishing in the sting. Max must sense my duress because he whines, parking his butt next to me and rubbing his chin along my thigh. I pat his head, looking down at him. I hate that I have to jump through these hoops, when they know he belongs with me, but I'll prove them wrong. I'll prove to them I can do this. And I'll keep my promise to my brother, even if it's the last thing I do.

Max whines again, and I shift, glancing down at him. He barks, looking toward Olivia's house, and I follow the trajectory of his gaze. My chest squeezes in a vise when I replay the way I talked to her. She didn't deserve it, and I'm ashamed to admit, I took things way too far today. Hell, I might've taken things too far when I first pranked her.

I blow out a tired sigh. "I know, bud. I know. I'll apologize."

Heaving a deep sigh, I head into the kitchen, filling a bucket with water to get to work cleaning the wall. This afternoon might not have gone as catastrophic as it did, if there wasn't a colossal hairy dick on my wall. As if that wasn't bad enough, she had to add semen squirting from the tip and the

words “To the Biggest Dick on the Block.” A dark chuckle escapes at her juvenile humor.

With the first swipe, everything is gone, magically erased. It only makes me feel worse. She wasn’t kidding. It really is washable. I thought I’d have to at least work a little harder to clean up in here.

I close my eyes, replaying the tears glimmering, in the normally vibrant depths of her eyes and the broken expression on her face. I put that there, and I find I don’t like it on Olivia. I normally wouldn’t care, but somehow, some way, she’s managed to get under my skin. I need the perky Olivia, the annoying jubilant one who gets on my damn nerves, yet still makes me smile, despite myself. I need to make things right.

I give it a few hours, waiting to see if she’ll come out again. Tomorrow is garbage day. She’ll have to come out at some point and drop off her garbage cans at the curb. I’ve been in the garage, mostly letting off steam and pretending to work, waiting for any sign of her.

When her front door opens, and she comes out, I hop up from my perch on the bucket and follow her out. She startles on the front steps when she sees me, all the color draining from her face.

Raking a frustrated hand through my hair, I swallow back my pride. The very last thing I want to do right now is apologize, but I was wrong earlier—overtly harsh. “Can we talk?”

Those hazel eyes shoot up to mine, and I’m taken aback by the intensity of her glare. I don’t know why I expected her to be meek and accommodating, while I stand here on her porch, especially after the way I treated her earlier. Olivia Hales is anything but meek.

Anger flares in the depths of her eyes, and I notice a random pulse in her jaw, as if she’s gritting her teeth, trying to restrain her frustration.

“Oh, now you want to talk?” She scoffs, taking a threatening step toward me. Olivia jabs her finger into the center of my chest. If this was any other person, if the circumstances were different, I might be angry enough to snatch her hand away from me. I don’t do that, though. I let her release her anger on me. “You can fuck right off, Roman. The very last thing I want to do is talk, let alone see your face.” With a growl—that I should not even remotely find cute, but I do—she whirls on her heels, slamming the front door behind her.

Heaving a deep sigh, I grip the back of my neck, doing my damndest to ignore the tightness that’s spreading through my chest at her anger.

*This is going to be a lot harder than I thought.*



It's been two days since the prank on the wall incident, and Olivia has yet to give me an opportunity to apologize. When she said she didn't want to see my face again, she clearly meant it.

I should leave it be. What's done is done, and if she can't even stand the sight of me, there's no way in hell she'll accept some half-assed apology. I'm determined to do just that, until I spot her coming home from somewhere late one night.

She isn't dressed in her usual scrub getup. Instead, she's dressed like she had a night out with tight black pants that hug her curves in a delicious, almost obscene way with thin rips along the knee and tall black heels that, somehow, do nothing to improve her height. One side of her hair is pinned back and the rest is left down, framing her face in waves. Her blouse is a turquoise blue, and even from here, I can make out the lace bra beneath. It has me gritting my back teeth together. My attraction to her annoys me.

Throwing all caution to the wind, I cross our lawns, just as she's making her way up the porch steps. As if sensing my presence, she freezes, her entire body locking up with tension.

"Olivia."

She cranes her neck at the sound of her name. For a split second, I see the vulnerability there. The pain and hurt she's worked so well to hide, since that day I spewed those vile words at her on our lawns. She glances down at the hot pink clutch that's gripped tightly in her hand, almost as though she's searching for strength. When she looks back up at me, composed and full of anger, I still see the sadness lingering in her eyes.

I hate myself for putting that look there.

"I'm sorry." She freezes at the sound of my voice but doesn't speak. She gives nothing away, as she drills holes into my skull with her glare. Biting back my insolence that is a constant as it runs through my veins, I cross the distance between us and stand behind her. I reach out to her, my hand

hovering in the air, but I can't bring myself to do it. To touch her. There'd be no going back.

"I'm sorry. For the other day. I shouldn't have said what I said."

I hear a sniff, her back stiffens, and she turns on me, facing me with a ferocity in her eyes that gives me pause. There's a look plastered across her face, like she doesn't care, but I know better. The longer I stare and search her hazel depths, the more of her I really start to see.

"You're right. I was just getting you back. It wasn't even real, for Christ's sake. I didn't know you were bringing a girl home. You were an asshole. No, you were bigger than an asshole, you were a dick. A big fucking dick."

I raise my brows, impressed by her ire. I had no illusions that she'd cower away, but I definitely wasn't expecting her to try to rip me a new one. My level of respect for her grows to new heights. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stifle my smile.

She's got a fire in her. I like that—even when I wish I didn't.

"Okay." I nod. "I deserve that."

She frowns, more than likely expecting me to argue with her. She was probably anticipating more hostility, like the other day. Olivia glances down at the clutch in her hand and turns it, surveying the small thing, like she's trying to decide if she wants to bash me over the head with it.

I raise a brow. A challenge of sorts. "Go for it."

Her gaze shoots up to mine, and her eyes narrow. "It is so very tempting, trust me. But I'm afraid once I start, I may not be able to stop."

"You want to bludgeon me to death with your purse?" I goad, unable to help myself.

The corner of her mouth twitches, like she wants to laugh, but she's fighting it. "It's a clutch. And it's either that or I can cut the brakes on that deathtrap in your garage."

This time, I can't hold back the wry twist of my lips. "Not very creative, but thorough."

An awkward silence descends between us. She shifts uncomfortably on her feet, as an adorable frown creases her brows, wiping away her amusement. I thrust my hands into my pockets and clear my throat.

"I really am sorry, Olivia. You didn't deserve me taking my anger out on you."

“Fine.” She sighs. “I still hate you. But I guess...I guess I’m sorry, too. It wasn’t my intention to ruin your date. I’m also sorry you have such atrocious taste in women.”

I laugh, despite myself. “She wasn’t my date.” Something flashes behind those beautiful doe eyes, though I don’t have time to dissect it. “Can I show you something?”

Her mouth opens, but nothing comes out, as if like she’s incapable of speech. She opts for nodding her head instead and follows me into the garage. I pull out an extra bucket just for her, identical to the one I’m sitting on. She eyes me warily, perching on the edge of it, like she needs to be ready to get to her feet, at any moment, in case I attack.

“So,” she says, clearing her throat, fidgeting with the plastic. “What did you want to show me?”

I shift on the bucket, staring out at our darkened street. The streetlights illuminate the pavement in an orange glow. My brows tug down, as I try to work out how to say what I need to say.

“I guess I didn’t bring you in here to show you anything per se, but rather, explain what happened, and why I reacted the way I did.”

She nods slowly, still not following.

“That woman, she wasn’t there because—”

“Look, Rome, you don’t have to explain anything to me. I get it.”

I sigh, rubbing an anxious hand across the back of my neck. “No, I do. She was a social worker.”

A crease forms between her brows, and she looks up at me with questions in her eyes. “A social worker?”

“My little brother, he’s...” I pause, a grimace tainting my features, as I try to get the words past my lips. It’s always so difficult to admit our situation to people. I normally don’t discuss it for that reason alone. “He’s in foster care. I’ve been trying to get my life together, so I can get him back. The other day was my home visit.”

I hear her sharp gasp and see the moment realization dawns on her, by the way the pain enters her eyes. “Oh my God, Rome. I am so sorry. I didn’t realize. I feel horrible.”

I shake my head, smiling sadly. “Don’t. I think it proves I’m not ready. Maybe I’ll never be. I’ve worked toward one single goal most of my life and that’s to get him back, but it’s almost like, every time I try, it’s never enough. There always seems to be something that gets in the way. I’m

starting to wonder if it's life, fate, telling me to give up. Maybe he is better off elsewhere."

I startle at the soft touch of her hand on top of mine. Her skin is soft where mine is rough. Her body is cold where mine runs hot. We're opposites; yet, I've never been more drawn to another individual like I am to her. My gaze drops down to our point of contact. Her creamy skin against my tan, weathered skin. Slowly, I lift my gaze back up to hers and realize she's been doing the same thing, taking it in, watching me. She has tears swimming in her big doe eyes. I've never noticed it before, but her eyes are a chaotic blend of colors. Like honey in the sunlight. Fine strands of amber. The most beautiful flecks of gold. She's like a siren calling to me, singing a song, enrapturing me.

"No," she says vehemently. "It's going to happen, Roman. I promise it is. You deserve this. You both do." Sadness slackens her expression. "I wish I would've known. I wish I'd known about your brother...God." She sighs, shaking her head.

"It's not your fault. I avoid talking about it."

"With my parents. When you said he lives in Oakland, that's true?"

I nod. "He lives in some shit place. Hell, I'm not sure if this home now is better than the one we had growing up. It's not a far stretch, but I know if I had him, I'd be able to give him a better life than anyone else could. I promised him I would."

Her eyes soften as she gazes up at me. "What about your parents?"

A scoff bursts past my lips, as resentment fills my chest. The pressure is unbearable, making it hard to breathe.

"My parents? Non-existent. My father was a trailer trash piece of shit, and my mother wasn't any different. She loved drugs more than her children. She had Ryder with her drug dealer boyfriend, before he dumped her, and I was the one left to raise him. I was the one working to bring money home to pay for the trailer, to pay the bills, to make us all food."

"How old were you?" she whispers.

"Too young to be taking care of a baby. That's for sure."

"I'm sorry, Roman. I wish...God, I wish you could've had a different life."

"I've always been good about blocking people out and focusing on the important things. While trying to keep us fed and alive, I was caught dealing, did some juvie time, and lost my brother. My druggie mother didn't



fight for him either, so by the time I got out, it took me a while to locate him in the system. Even then, no matter how hard I tried, I kept finding myself back in the system. An eighteen-month stint in jail, here or there, for petty shit. When I eventually saw where he was, I vowed to take care of him. To do the one thing my mother never did.”

“But it wasn’t that easy,” she supplies, a knowing, saddened tone to her voice.

“No, it wasn’t. I had to jump through all these hoops, prove I could take care of him, even though I’d already done it most of our lives. I’ve taken care of him since I was a kid. I’ve been taking care of both of us, for as long as I can remember. When kids my age were making friends and playing sports, I was raising an infant. I’ve spent the last year and half getting my life on track, starting with buying a house and working a full-time job with benefits.”

“Wow. That’s...that’s the most selfless thing I’ve ever heard.”

As if sensing I need some extra compassion, Max gets up from his bed and sits down next to me, resting his head in my lap. Tightness spreads through my chest. Olivia rubs her slender fingers between his eyes and trails them up behind his ears, in a massaging motion.

“That night, a while back, you mentioned something about Max’s name.” I look down at him and only think of Ryder. “He was my little brother’s. He found him a while back. His foster family wouldn’t let him keep a dog, and he seemed sad, so I told him I’d keep him. I’d take care of him till he could come home, then he’s all his. He chose the name Mad Max.”

Slowly, Olivia glances up at me, her hazel eyes filled with unshed tears. “You’re something else entirely. You know that?”

A grin tugs at the corners of my lips. We share a moment when we’re just looking at each other. There’s a sudden shift in the air. Her cheeks redden, and she quickly averts her gaze.

“So, this is what you do in here all day, while you’re ignoring me? You work on this car?”

A laugh catches in my chest. “Pretty much. It helps me clear my head.”

She stands, and I can’t help but watch her, as she takes in everything. She touches the car, and it’s a stark difference from the last time we were in here together, and I snapped at her. I didn’t even mean to do it then. It just happened. Olivia always has a way of making me feel out of place, out of

my comfort zone. It was easier to be mean and force her out of my space than it was to welcome her in. It still feels odd. I haven't let anyone in—in any capacity of my life—in the past five years. But here with her? It feels easy.

“What about you?” I raise a single brow. “What’s your story? You seem to have it all figured out.” I lean back on the bucket, resting my back against the wall, watching her closely, as she walks through my space. My safe haven.

“Me?” She scoffs, shaking her head. “Not even close. Can I be honest?”

“I’d prefer it.”

“I’m a mess.”

“You don’t say.” I snort, and she swats at me, playfully, with amusement on her face.

“I was in a relationship for a really long time. One I thought would last forever. I mean, we weren’t the perfect couple by any means, but things just started to feel so robotic and trivial after a while. There was no spark. No interest on either end. It just felt like he was, somehow, doing me a favor, by staying with me, and that’s not the life I want. I don’t want someone to stay with me out of obligation or because they don’t want to hurt me. I want them to be with me because it’s a necessity. They need it more than they need to breathe.”

“How long were you together?”

“Since college. We shared the same friends. It just...made sense, you know? Reid was a part of my life for the big things, and I think, at some point, we drifted apart and didn’t even realize it.”

“So, what, you decided to leave him and move away? Start a new life?”

She fidgets, uncomfortable with my line of questioning. “I guess in a way, yes. I wanted a fresh start after the breakup. Somewhere I didn’t have any previous ties. I wanted to feel independent.” She seems to shake it off and runs her fingers through her hair nervously. “Anyway, that’s enough about me. How long have you lived here?”

“About two and a half years.”

Her brows jump into her hairline. “Wow. This place looks...incredible. Much better than mine.”

I roll my eyes. “Unlike you, I know what I’m doing.”

She mock gasps. “What makes you think I don’t know what I’m doing?”

I pointedly look over at her house, and that's all the answer she needs. I get wanting to be independent, but at what cost? If I had the parents she did, I'd take advantage of the help, not push it away.

"Want a tour?"

She freezes, and her cheeks pinken. "A tour? Of the...garage?"

I smirk. "My house."

"I feel like I'm in an alternate universe, if you're willingly inviting me into your home. Especially after what happened in there."

"We may very well be," I mumble under my breath, pushing up from the bucket. We walk inside, and I give her the tour. It feels odd having her in my space, yet a small part of me feels almost right having her here. And I don't like it. I feel myself locking up, closing in to focus on what's important.

I did my part. I apologized for being an asshole. I don't need to go any further. We're on positive terms now. I need to leave it at that and be done with this.

"You're very...clean...for a bachelor."

"When you grow up the way I did, it's not hard to keep your space clean. I grew up in a shit trailer, then an even worse apartment that was never clean. Vermin, dust, a dingy shithole I refuse to ever be stuck in again."

"Is it weird that I want to hug you right now?" she whispers, trying to lighten the mood, but I see the sadness glimmering in her eyes. The pity. I've always fucking hated that look in people's eyes.

We finally move on to the bedroom and here she has a clear view into her own room, though she tries to avoid it. Tries to pretend she doesn't already know that, but I do. I've seen just enough to know my neighbor isn't the sweet girl she pretends to be. In fact, she's quite dirty. And if my circumstances were different, I'd absolutely take advantage of that.

Because my neighbor? She's a walking, talking wet dream. She's a complication I don't need, and one I certainly will never be able to have. Nevertheless, I still want her. Having her in my space, it's taking everything in me not to strip her down and fuck her, right here, up against the wall, in the bed—

She clears her throat, her cheeks now fire engine red. Her thoughts must be running in the same lane as mine. My suspicions are confirmed when she glances toward the bed, then hurriedly averts her eyes.

“I should probably get going. I have work in the morning, and I’m sure you do, too.”

I nod slowly, wading through the thick tension between us. “Night, Olivia.”

She pauses, surprise flitting across her features, once again. “Good night,” she says quietly. Just before crossing the threshold, she pauses and glances at me over her shoulder. “And Rome?”

“Yeah?”

“You deserve to have your little brother back. Because all this?” She glances around us at my house. “This is amazing. You are the parent he deserves. Don’t ever second-guess that.”

She turns, before I can reply, and pads her way down the steps and across our lawns back to her house.

The entire way I watch her go, there’s a tightness in my chest. Expanding and spreading, bubbling through my veins.

I loathe it.

And secretly treasure it.

# Twelve

## “Alone with You”—Kito ft. AlunaGeorge



*Olivia*

I start thinking about Roman and his little, brother the second I wake the next morning. All night, I berated myself for how stupid I was. What if I cost him his only chance?

I can't even begin to imagine what his life must've been like as a child. I had two loving parents who doted on my little brother and me. They were successful with great careers and an even better idea of what they wanted for their family.

But Roman and his brother? They didn't have that life.

I can't help but wonder the horrors they had to endure. What did Rome have to do to feed them every night? To care for his baby brother, when he was practically a baby himself?

What was it like for him? To be so young and scared to find your next meal, while trying to make money stretch. When I think of it, my stomach churns, and my heart plummets.

It's becoming glaringly obvious that there is more to Rome than just his rough exterior. Hell, most times, I think he's a dick, but after the life he's had, I think his attitude is warranted. Wouldn't you be angry with the world if you've had everything ripped from you? If you couldn't catch a single break?

On my break at the vet, after helping Travis with a spinal surgery on one of the dogs that was brought in yesterday, I hop on the computer in the break room and look up social workers. Where would that social worker have worked? How crazy would it be if I went there and vouched for him? Tried to explain what happened and explain that he deserves his brother. Not some random woman who wants a check, but him. His blood.

I type *social workers* into Google, keeping my search trained on the Oakland area. Giving that number a try, I dial it, keeping my fingers crossed that this won't be a dead end.

“Hi, yes, I’m calling looking for Ryder Banks’ caseworker. Is there any way I can get in touch with her? It’s urgent.”

“Can you stop by the office around three p.m.? We’re located in Oakland on San Pablo Avenue.”

I glance at the clock, shock rolling through my system. “Yes, I’ll be there.”

The line clicks off, and I fall back into the seat, a small smile playing at the corners of my lips. If I can fix this for Roman, that would be a dream come true.

Suddenly remembering the time she mentioned, I shoot up from the seat, searching for Travis or his father. Thankfully, it’s his father I run into, instead of Travis.

“There’s something important I have to do, a meeting later. Is there any way I can get off a bit early? I have to drive to Oakland, but I can switch shifts with someone, maybe take the night shift?”

“Go for it. You can help Travis close up tonight.”

A smile breaks out across my face. “Thank you so much, Dr. Bennett!”

I gather my belongings, stuffing everything into my purse, as I fly out of the clinic, trying to beat the clock before traffic hits.



I fidget in the dingy waiting room, listening to phones ring off the hook and watching people come and go, as I wait for the caseworker to step out of her office. I got here with just a few minutes to spare, thinking I’d be

allowed to head right back into her office. I couldn't be more wrong. I've been waiting here in their lobby for twenty minutes now. The anticipation is killing me.

The second I see her walk out of her office, I shoot to my feet, startling her. She pauses, eyeing me strangely at first, until recognition registers on her face.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name when we last met. You can call me Mrs. Archibald."

"Olivia Hales. Please, I just want to talk to you for a bit."

She glances down at her watch. "I have a meeting with some—"

"That meeting is with me. I called earlier to set up the appointment."

Her brows rise in surprise, and she nods slowly, as though she's taking her time processing. Finally, she jerks her head over her shoulder, indicating for me to follow.

She leads the way into her small office and shuts the door behind her. Settling in the winged back chair, Mrs. Archibald leans back, dropping her glasses down the bridge of her nose, watching me.

"What brings you down here, Ms. Hales?"

I blow out a nervous breath and keep my hands hidden in my lap, so she doesn't see just how nervous I am. I lean forward and lick my suddenly overly dry lips.

"I need to explain the other day. With Roman." I can already see her opening her mouth, more than likely to tell me to save my breath, so I rush to add, "And please, I need you to hear me out. I had no idea about Rome's little brother. See..." I pause, rubbing at the back of my neck nervously. "We don't know each other very well. I just moved in not too long ago, and I'm a bit...eccentric compared to him. I'm a tough person to handle, I know this."

She leans back, giving me permission to go on.

"I didn't understand why he was so moody, why he worked so hard and did whatever he could to keep his distance from me. And well, me, because I'm as nosy as they come, I couldn't take it, so I inserted myself into his life. One petty thing led to another, and then we were pranking each other. That day...I slipped into his home and spray-painted washable paint on the walls. It was childish, I know, but I want you to know, he had *nothing* to do with it. I think a part of me wanted the attention from him. Wanted him to have a reason to talk to me, you know?"

A knowing gleam enters her eyes, and a small grin twists her lips. She shakes her head and sighs, toying with the paperwork on her desk.

“That isn’t my only issue regarding Roman. He was once incarcerated. He’s young and still prone to make mistakes.”

Rage fills me. “Isn’t everybody? Have you been in his house? Have you seen how hard he works? There is no one his little brother deserves to be with more than him. He’s worked his entire life to get himself together. To get his little brother back. That’s his blood, his only relative in the world. Just because he had a crappy past, parents who didn’t care, and had to make decisions to keep him and his little brother alive doesn’t mean he should be punished. They both shouldn’t be punished.”

“And you think Roman would make a fit parent?”

I nod vigorously. “I do. I’ve never seen anyone so determined. He loves his brother. You know deep down, no one is going to take better care of Ryder than he is.”

She nods slowly, processing, and a small smile curls her lips. “You must really like him. I haven’t heard one bad thing come out of your mouth, and honestly, after the way he yelled at you, this isn’t what I expected.”

Pressure builds in my chest. “We all have our moments. Why don’t you finally give him the one thing he’s been working so hard for?”

She pushes back from the desk, stands, and puts her hand out between us for me to shake. “Thank you for coming in, Ms. Hales. I appreciate you vouching for Roman. If you don’t mind, though, I have another meeting in about ten minutes. Have a nice afternoon.”

Deflated, I walk out of the building, feeling even shittier than when I got here. I thought, for sure, my speech was going to work. I thought she’d call him right then and there and tell him he got his brother back. But I should know better. Life isn’t like books or the movies. Life is unpredictable. It doesn’t care about feelings or ruining people’s lives. All it cares about is the balance. I just hope whatever that balance is, it works in Rome and his little brother’s favor.





After the meeting, I head back to the clinic to work the night shift with Travis and the rest of the second shift staff. I'm expecting it to be slow, but much to my surprise, it's not as slow as it usually is this time of night. We're busy enough that everyone has their hands full. Usually at least one of us has our hands free, but that doesn't seem to be the case tonight.

"Olivia, I need you back here. Bring me a methadone IV and get him hooked up. Then I need you to keep the heat on his axillary, while keeping the light stable here." Travis points down at the animal he's working on. I jump into action, gathering everything I'll need for the procedure. I crack open the disposable heating pad, placing it on the dog's axillary, to keep his body temperature warm and stable.

"Here," Travis says toward the end of the procedure. "Close it here and release the tab like so, exactly. Perfect."

My hands shake as I do it, but I can't keep the smile off my face. The rest of the procedure goes smoothly. We wait for the little guy to wake from the drugs, and when he does, we can already see the change in his demeanor. He already seems more like a happy, healthy pup.

Travis gives the owners a call after cleaning himself up, and I get to work on cleaning the room. I do a thorough scrub down, then I mop. After doing that, I wipe everything down one last time. By the time I'm finished, my lower back is aching, my feet are throbbing, and I'm in dire need of a break.

I practically fall into an empty chair in the break room. Tossing my head back, I close my eyes and let my mind go blank, soaking up the silence. If I do this any longer, I'll risk drifting off to sleep, but I can't seem to bring myself to sit up straight and stay awake.

"You did really well in there."

I jerk in the chair, my eyes flying open at the sound of Travis's voice. It takes me a few seconds to process, and when I do, I blush a little at his praise.

"Thank you for letting me do that."

He waves me off. "You need the experience, if you're ever going to master it, right?"

I grin. "Right."

"So, how are you doing? Heard you had an important issue earlier? Family emergency?"

“Oh, no. It wasn’t like that. I had a meeting with a social worker.” At the furrow of his brows, I wave him off. “It’s a long story. But no, thankfully, everything with my family is okay. They came to visit me not too long ago, so it was good to see them, even if it was for a short amount of time.”

“Where are they from?”

“Long Beach. That’s where I used to live.”

He whistles. “Wow. That’s right. I forgot your file mentioned you worked near Long Beach. What do your parents do out there?”

“My dad’s a psychologist, and my mom is a sex therapist.” As I say it, my face turns beet red, and Travis takes notice. He chuckles at my obvious discomfort.

“We have more in common than I thought. My mom is a psychiatrist.”

My brows jump. “That’s amazing. And I never said we didn’t have anything in common.” I roll my eyes.

“I know, I’m poking fun at you. You make it too easy.”

I head over to the water system to get a cup of water, suddenly feeling awkward, and needing to put distance between us. As I’m filling the plastic cup, I hear his next question, loud and clear, and my stomach flutters just thinking about it.

“What’s going on with your neighbor? He still giving you a hard time?”

I take a hearty swig of the water, as I lower myself back into the seat. “No. We’ve seemed to have found some common ground. I feel like... I don’t know, I think I misjudged him before, you know? He hasn’t had an easy life.”

Travis’s lighthearted demeanor seems to dissipate. His features tense, the lines around his eyes growing tight. His shift in attitude has me pausing, a frown taking over my face.

“That doesn’t mean anything. We’ve all had hard lives. That doesn’t give anyone the right to treat you like shit,” he practically spits. I get where he’s coming from, and for the most part, he’s right. If Rome hadn’t apologized, I’d agree with him, but he did apologize, and more than that, he explained things to me.

It’s not that I pity him. I feel for him. I feel like I understand him a little better than I did before. He makes sense to me. He’s not so much of an enigma anymore. I have the sudden urge to defend him to Travis. He doesn’t get it, so obviously he’s going to jump to conclusions.

“It’s not like that. He’s a good person, and I misjudged him.”

He scoffs, a brief flicker of hatred passing over his features. “I guess he’s gotten to you already, hasn’t he?”

I jerk back in surprise. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re a nice girl. Guys like that are good at lying and manipulating to get people to feel sorry for them, just so they can justify their actions.”

I press my lips together in a grim line because I don’t want to argue. It’s obvious Travis doesn’t get it. And hell, maybe I am being dumb or too forgiving, but that’s *my* choice. If I want to leave the bad blood between us in the past, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.

I finish off my water and push away from the table, needing some space from Travis. He, obviously, feels some type of resentment toward Rome, and that won’t change just because I told him we’re on good terms.

“I’ll see you back out there.”

I hear his protest, as I walk away, but I don’t bother turning around.



By the time I pull into my driveway, I’m bone-tired. I’m also pleasantly surprised to see Rome’s garage open. I shift on the seat, trying to see what he’s doing in there. Trapping my bottom lip between my teeth, I wonder if I should go over there. *It’s late*, I think idly, as I glance at the clock on the dash.

My mind gets made up for me when I spot him stand to his full height, my stomach, once again, doing flips. The force with which the butterflies take flight is reckless and all consuming, like G6 fighter jets. Shaking it off, I grab my purse and climb out of the car, heading toward his garage.

He pauses what he’s doing and stares. I feel his gaze linger on me, traveling up and down my body. The shiver it elicits rolls through my body in waves.

“You’re up kind of late.”

He shrugs. “Couldn’t sleep, decided to knock out some stuff. Just get off?” He looks pointedly at my clothes, and I have a moment of self-

consciousness. I've been working all day in these clothes, so I probably look like a complete mess.

Distractedly, I tug at my scrub shirt. "Yeah. It's been a long day."

Rome jerks his head over his shoulder, and because he's full of surprises tonight, he pulls up the same bucket I sat on last time and places it next to him, leaving a hearty length of space between us. I wish the space wasn't there, but a woman can't be picky.

"You mentioned you work with animals?"

"Yeah, I'm just an assistant at the vet clinic."

"You ever thought about being a vet?"

I purse my lips. "Yes and no. It's a lot of stress, and it's still a lot of schooling. I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

He chuckles, and though I hate to admit it, I'm beginning to love the sound. How is it this man can bring out the most extreme emotions in me?

I hate him.

Now I like him.

I can't even keep up at this point.

I watch him from my perch on his bucket, as he gets to work on the car with Metallica playing softly in the background. When he's deep in thought, those thick brows pull together, forming a deep crease. Even when he's not frowning, you can still see the indents in his face, the frown lines. That just must be how often he does it. Every so often, he licks his lips, and my eyes follow the movement, wondering what they'd feel like. His muscles bunch and bulge, when he lifts something heavy or goes to tighten stuff.

I'm completely enraptured with him, while he works. I don't think I've ever seen a man work so hard, and now that I know what I know about him, it makes me wonder how someone can have so much drive and self-restraint.

I think about my meeting with the social worker earlier, and my stomach clenches uncomfortably. I'm obviously not going to tell him what I did. The last thing I need is for him to yell at me again. But, also, it's not like my meeting helped. What's the point in getting his hopes up?

"I really am sorry. About the other day. With the prank. And the social worker."

He pauses what he's doing, resting his oil-weathered manly hands on the front of the car, near the open hood. He bows his head for just a second,

and I wonder what he's thinking. He turns to face me, and my heart shrivels, just a bit, at the brief flash of indignation in his eyes.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?" I whisper, afraid this will be the moment he snaps and tells me he's still angry.

"Pity me, Olivia. Don't pity me."

A lump forms in my throat. "Rome, I don't pity you. I admire you. You've accomplished so much despite the way you grew up. I have every reason to believe you'll get him back. Believe me, what I feel for you isn't pity."

My eyes widen when I realize what I just said, and the many ways he can take it. Heat rises to my cheeks, and I open my mouth, about to explain what I really meant, but he beats me to it.

He blows out a gruff disbelieving laugh, shaking his head at me. "I don't know why I'm surprised. You would be this annoyingly optimistic."

I blow out a relieved breath, glad he didn't pry into my previous statement further. "Wrong. I'm not optimistic. I just choose to see the good in life and not dwell on the bad, because then...where will that get us?"

"That's easy for someone like you to say. You've had a good life. You have a great family. You want for nothing."

I raise my brows. "You think I've had an easy life, Rome? You think I want for nothing?" When he doesn't respond, I smile sadly, searching his gaze. "What do you want?"

He looks off, with a faraway look in his eyes. I know his answer, and just like I know the man leaning against the car, he won't say it. He won't expose himself any more than he already has. I pat the empty bucket next to me, urging him to sit. His brows tug low, and I can see the internal battle he wages. He takes a seat, his eyes extra guarded, as he observes me.

I shift on the bucket, our knees grazing, sending a thrill down my spine. "You gotta think of it like this. Imagine you're sick with a life-threatening illness and you never know when your final day is coming. Wouldn't you want to live life to the fullest? Wouldn't you want to enjoy every second you had, instead of living in a past you can't change?"

Slowly, Rome turns to look at me, and the look in his eyes has my breath lodging in my throat. There's so much there, so much of the man he keeps hidden from everyone else, and he's giving me a piece of him. Right here, right now.

“Sunshine.”

My brows dip. “What?”

He smirks. “I think I’m going to call you, Sunshine, from now on. Because that’s exactly what you are, Olivia. You’re the sunshine after a hurricane. After years of living in darkness, you’re the warmth everyone wishes they had for themselves.”

My heart is pounding, my stomach somersaulting, and the smile that takes over my face...it’s foreign. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. I feel the dormant muscles in my cheeks, caving with pain from being used, and for once, I feel at home with someone. I feel at peace with myself. I feel happier than I’ve ever felt.

I’m not even afraid to admit that I might be falling for my neighbor.

# Thirteen

## “Daydream”—The Aces



*Olivia*

I hate that I have to ask Travis, knowing how he is with the other women in the clinic, but there are no other guys on shift I can ask, and I don't know if Rome is awake. The last thing I want to do is ring his doorbell in the middle of the night, asking for help with something else, like he hasn't done enough already.

Despite my better judgment, I ask Travis to help me bring in the desk I bought. We haven't talked much, even though we work together. I think there's still a bit of tension between us from our last encounter in the break room. Not to mention, Lucy seems more frustrated with him than usual, and there's no way I'm getting in the middle of it.

Well, until now, that is.

The cute little rustic desk I bought seemed like a neat purchase at the time, when one of the employees helped me get it into my car. The problem is now getting it out and inside the house.

After work, Travis follows me home, and I give him full rein of my car to get it out. The whole process goes smoothly, and it's much quicker than I thought it would be. He does most of the work, while I hang on to the other end of the desk, attempting to help him bring it inside, but if we're being honest, he's doing all the work.

We chat outside for a bit, laughing easily about one of the incidents that happened at the office earlier. Mrs. Williams is a regular at the clinic with her cat. If it's not one thing, he's swallowed or gotten into, it's another, and even though both Travis and Samuel have told Mrs. Williams countless times that she doesn't need to bring in her cat for *everything*, she still does it anyway.

I freeze, pausing mid-conversation, when I hear Rome's motorcycle pull down the street and up his driveway. My stomach dips with something that feels an awful lot like guilt, but I brush it off. I don't need to feel guilty for anything. I asked a friend for help. So what?

I can feel his gaze drilling holes into us. I can practically see the sneer on his face, and if I'm not mistaken, I notice Travis step closer to me. I dart my gaze to his, a frown settling between my brows.

*What the hell is that about?*

When I turn back to look at Rome, he's already rolling his bike into the garage and shutting it. I don't get a wave or anything that makes me feel special tonight. Dread settles in the pit of my belly at the realization. It feels like it used to, before we became somewhat civil with each other. I worry he might go back to hating me all over again because of this. But why? Why would Rome, of all people, care?

"That asshole still giving you problems?" Travis asks, his gaze glued to the house next door.

I shake my head, trying to suppress the sudden bout of anxiety coursing through my veins. "No, I told you, I think we've come to somewhat of an understanding. And he's not an asshole."

Travis raises a disbelieving brow.

"Okay, well, not all the time." I roll my eyes. "Not friends, but definitely not enemies."

Travis nods, his gaze darting from me back toward my house. Under normal circumstances, if he wasn't my boss, and he didn't make a habit out of dating all his employees, I'd invite him inside, but at this time of night and seeing as he's made his attraction toward me clear, I refrain from doing so. His track record with women from the clinic isn't the greatest. I pause on my way up my porch, when I realize Travis is following me. He might be my potential boss, but I am not inviting him into my home. Not happening.



Clearing my throat, I point back at my house. “Well, thanks for all the help, but I should really head in and start getting ready for bed now. See you at work?”

Travis looks like he wants to say more, but as I wave and continue backing up toward the door, he shakes his head slightly, deciding not to. “Yeah. Yeah, sure. See you tomorrow, Olivia.”

Hurrying inside, I lock the door, and the first thing I do is run into my bedroom. I’m surprised and a little deflated that, for once, Rome has his curtains shut. They’re almost always open, about ninety percent of the time.

Dread takes root in my belly. I can’t help but wonder if there’s a specific reason, tonight of all nights, he decided to shut his curtains. I don’t think he had a woman with him—not that that has ever stopped him before. It can’t be because he saw me with Travis, can it?

No.

Most certainly not.

That would mean he cares, potentially even feels something for me, and that is not something my dickish neighbor does. He has made it clear he cares for one person and one person only—his little brother. Where would I fit into that equation?

I wouldn’t. And that’s the problem.



The next morning, when I’m leaving the house, I wave at Rome in passing, and my stomach drops, painfully, when he ignores me and peels out like an absolute child.

I guess that answers my unspoken question about him being upset.

What right does he have to be mad at me? I got help from my boss. I didn’t invite the man inside and spill the beans about Roman’s life. Besides, he’s not my damn keeper.

I’m certain there’s another explanation for the way he’s acting this morning.

There has to be.

The entire day at work I'm in a mood over how asshole-ish Roman is acting. As I'm prepping one of the exam rooms for Dr. Bennett and a sick bird, I feel Cassandra settle next me. She perches her perfectly round butt against the counter, not even helping, just standing there watching me.

"You gonna help?"

"Noooope. Only reason I'm in here is to figure out what's going on with you."

"There's nothing going on with me."

"Oh, really?" She scoffs. "The whole office begs to differ. You're walking around here like there's a perpetual black storm cloud, hovering over your head."

I roll my eyes at her dramatics. That's a bit excessive.

"There's nothing wrong. Well, not really."

"Spill it. Is it the hot neighbor?"

"He has a name, you know."

"Ooh, I see, we're getting touchy-feely over him now, are we?" I don't bother with a response. It's not like she needs one. She'll talk over me anyway. "So, what did he do this time?"

"I-well, I don't actually know if it's him or me, but whatever it is, he's upset with me." I give Cassandra a rundown of last night, me asking Travis for help, then Rome pulling up and seeing us.

"The weirdest part was, he didn't even bother saying hi. He even shut his curtains last night. I mean, c'mon, it's not that serious."

Kassandra guffaws at me. "Oh, God forbid he shuts his curtains before bed and doesn't say hi to you, you greedy bitch."

"That's just the thing, though. He *never* shuts them. So why now, last night of all nights?"

"He's probably jealous. Chances are, he wants to fuck you, but since you guys are neighbors, he doesn't want to make things weird. After seeing you with Travis last night, I'm sure he's jumped to some kind of conclusion regarding the two of you. Also, can I just say how idiotic you are for asking Travis for help, of all people."

A groan tears past my lips. "I didn't have anyone else to ask."

"Um, hello, hot neighbor who wants to fuck you is calling. Oh, what's that? I'm an idiot who asks the manwhore boss instead." I nudge her on the arm. When she says it like that, I realize just how foolish it was of me to ask my boss for help. "Seriously. Travis is going to get the wrong idea. You're

the only woman who has ever told him no. Hell, knowing him, he probably sees you as some kind of challenge, some goddamn mountain to climb and say he conquered. Just be careful. Don't get me wrong, Travis is a great guy when he wants to be, but the last thing I want is you turning into the next Lucy of the office."

I cringe. "Yeah, that was definitely not one of my finer choices, but I made sure I talked with Lucy beforehand. The last thing I need is her hating me because she thinks I'm trying to encroach on her territory."

"Sorry to burst your bubble, babe, but the territory has already been encroached the second Travis laid eyes on you. I'm sure he imagined all the ways he'd screw you, while you guys shook hands."

"Oh, gross. You're seriously the worst. You know that, right?"

She shrugs, pushing off the counter with a self-serving grin. "So I've heard. Oh, and Dr. Bennett is ready whenever you are."

I shake my head at her and force myself to push all thoughts of my neighbor out of my mind. I have a job to do.



"Hey, Max," I coo down at the husky, as he wags his tail wildly, rubbing his head and ears against my hand. I bend down, showing him some love, by giving him a good scratch. I've yet to turn around and face his owner. I was quite surprised that when I got home, Rome was just barely getting home, too. I'm certain if I got there any later, his garage would've been shut. Anything to avoid dealing with me.

Summoning the courage to face him, I do so warily, not sure what version of him I'm going to get.

Annd apparently, it's the bored, cold version. Great.

"Hi." The greeting comes out a lot shyer than I'd like, and I can't believe I'm unable to come up with something more original than my weak *hi*. Without acknowledging me, Roman calls over Max with a sharp whistle and a gruff command. Max goes without question, leaving me standing there feeling foolish. They retreat into the garage, and just as he's about to press the button to shut the garage on me, I open my mouth.

“I thought we were over this, Rome? Over this whole asshole act.” I wave my hand down his body. “I thought we were friends.”

He pauses with his back to me. When he eventually turns around, there’s a cold smirk plastered across his face. With a sinking feeling in pit of my gut, I take a wary step back. He presses the button, and the garage gears kick into action, roaring, as the door comes down. Just when I’m about to lose sight of him, he speaks.

“You thought wrong.”

The garage door shutting is so final, I feel like it echoes around our neighborhood. I glance around, noticing the only person still outside is Josie, the older woman across the street.

“Is he always so...grumpy?” I call out to her.

With her cat on her lap and a cigarette dangling from her lips, Josie is, in fact, the poster woman for the typical cat lady. With at least fifty years on me, she’s an older, frail woman with rollers in her hair who just so happens to be a chain smoker, too.

Her raspy voice calls back to me. “Afraid not. Don’t think he likes you very much, sweetheart.”

Well, that’s nice.

My lips thin into a grim line.

*Thanks a lot, lady.*



The rest of the week goes on much the same way. Roman avoids me at all costs. It doesn’t matter if I go out of my way to say hello, knock on his door, or try to walk over, while he’s working in the garage, he’s seemed to master the art of ignoring me, while simultaneously being a prick. Under other circumstances, I might be impressed.

I’m not.

We’ve seemed to have fallen back into that hate-on-hate relationship we had before. I find myself growing more vindictive where he’s concerned. Thankfully, neither of us have stooped low enough to prank each other again, but everything else just feels like it used to.

The glares.

The snide comments.

I miss sitting with him in his garage and watching him work. I miss listening to him talk and smile. And his laughter. Jesus, I think my greatest accomplishment was the first time I made him laugh.

He laughs so rarely that, when it did happen, you couldn't help but stop and listen. Soak it in because you weren't sure how long it would last or if you'd ever hear it again.

I think the worst part of all this is the women I've noticed he's been bringing home more frequently. He's been diligent not to leave his curtains open, and I've made sure I keep my window shut and locked at all times, but seeing as our houses are literally right next door to each other, it's impossible not to know what he's up to over there. It's a bit of a curse and a blessing, all in one.

Every time I spot a gorgeous woman leaving his house in the middle of the night, I can't ignore the piercing pain in my chest or the way my stomach revolts. I'm jealous. Horribly jealous that those women have gotten his smile. They've gotten his laughter. And I'm sure they've gotten much more than that, too.

Roman being with other women shouldn't bother me as much as it does. I shouldn't feel crushed that he's spending time with other women. It shouldn't feel like there is a vise wrapped around my heart. Hell, I don't even know why I care. It's not like it's any of my business.

Scratch that, I do know why I care, and I wish I didn't. I wish I didn't have a soft spot for Rome. I wish he would've never told me about his past and his little brother, and everything he's done to get him back. I wish he weren't so damn beautiful to look at. I wish I didn't like him so much. I wish I didn't like him at all. I wish I still hated him. That would make my life so much easier.

As I'm taking out the trash, I try to refrain from rolling my eyes, as I watch the girl leave his house, climbing into her little Acura parked at his curb. She's gorgeous. Even I can tell from this distance in the dead of night. She's all legs and beauty. And I loathe myself a little more for hating her, more than I currently hate Roman.

I seriously need help.

I don't know what makes me say it, but as she's climbing into her car, I yell out, "Did he tell you about the gonorrhoea?" I ask, pointing toward

Rome's house. The woman freezes, and her mouth drops open, shock clearly written all over her face. I stifle a laugh, feigning concern I certainly don't feel. "He didn't tell you? My, my, you might want to get that checked out in the morning. Have a great night!"

Still frozen in place, the woman glances at Rome's house and shakes her head, before falling into the driver's seat and taking off. I watch her car go, feeling a little better.

"That's mature."

A scream tears from my lips, and I whirl around, my heart banging wildly in my chest, when I find Roman standing on his porch, arms crossed over his tan, broad chest, as he glares at me. He's perched against the column, so casually, it makes me wonder how long he's been standing there.

I place a hand over my chest, trying to stabilize my heart rate. "What the hell is the matter with you? You just took five years off my life!"

"Good."

I quirk a brow. "So you enjoy taking years off my life? That's wonderful, Roman. Such a stand-up guy."

He pushes off the column, stepping closer to my side of the yard. Even in the dark, I can clearly see every slab of corded muscle. "And you really think you're any better than me?"

"Seeing as I don't dip my dick into anything that has boobs and a vagina, yeah, I'd say I'm a whole lot better than you."

He smiles at me coldly, and I feel the effects of it like a shot to the chest. I hide my wince. "You're awfully worried about my sex life, Olivia. What's the matter?"

My lips thin into a grim line, my frustration with him billowing just below the surface, threatening to boil over. "I'm not worried about anything but my lawn and the state of this neighborhood. It doesn't look favorable when you have a neighbor that lets floozies leave his house at all hours of the night."

"If it bothers you so much, don't look out the window, babe."

My frustration only grows to new heights at the use of the word "babe." My hands ball into fists at my sides, causing my nails to dig into the flesh of my palms. "One, don't call me babe. And two, I haven't been looking out of the window."

“Then how would you know I have ‘floozy’ coming and going?” He smirks, clearly thinking he’s caught me.

I roll my eyes. “Get over yourself. And get yourself checked for gonorrhea, while you’re at it, dickhead.” I turn on my heels, stomping back toward my house. I hear his laughter behind me. He’s enjoying this. He enjoys pissing me off.

“Good night, Olivia.”

“Fuck off,” I holler, before slamming the front door behind me.

My cell rings on the kitchen table, dragging my attention away from the asshole next door and our encounter. For that, I’m all too thankful. I answer, forcing a smile into my tone, for my mother’s sake. She’s been calling every week, demanding I give her doctor updates. I’ve lied and told her I’m looking into it, but the truth is, I haven’t even opened the email she sent. I don’t want to face my reality and deal with more appointments and more doctors. More of the same thing.

I’ve had a nice reprieve from all that since moving here to Campbell. I should’ve figured that wouldn’t last for long.

“Make any appointments yet?” she asks, tone hopeful.

“Called two doctors. We’ll see how it goes.”

My mom’s silence prompts me to pull the phone away from my ear, making sure she’s still on the line.

“Mom?”

“Are you lying, Olivia?” she asks, in that tone of voice I’m all too familiar with. It’s the tone of my childhood. The same one she’d always use when she knew I was lying.

“What?” I feign innocence. “About what?”

I suddenly feel like I have cotton mouth, and I’m a lying teenager all over again, fibbing to my parents, so I can go out and party with my friends, after they’d already told me no.

“About the doctors. Who did you call?”

I can practically see her crossing her delicate arms over her ample chest. “I, uh, I called the first two. Figured it was safest to start at the top of the list.”

“Olivia.” The warning in her voice is clear, and it prompts me to roll my eyes.

“Okay, fine, I’ll call tomorrow. Shouldn’t you be asleep anyway? It’s late.”

“Don’t divert. All we want to do is make sure you’re okay. You know that, right? Your health, whether it’s mental or physical, we just want to know you’re okay, sweetheart.”

I blow out a guilty sigh. “I know, Mom.”



# Fourteen

## “Change Your Life”—Kehlani Ft. Jhené Aiko



*Olivia*

After another long day at work, Atticus, one of my friends at the clinic, recommends we all head to the bar for a night out. Cole’s Bar has become a place we frequent after our shifts. Since it’s close to the clinic, and apparently, Atticus is friends with the owner, Cole, it’s the only bar that makes sense. I’ve never been a barhopping kind of girl, but here, with how laidback and chill this place is, I can definitely see its appeal. It’s a kicked back bar that caters to everyone, from all walks of life. I’ve seen men in fancy suits walk in, college dudes wearing jerseys, groups of women having a girls’ night out, and plenty of other stereotypes, too.

Once we settle in at our usual table in the center, and there are a few fresh pitchers and a round of shots, I feel the tension slowly ease out of my shoulders from the long day we had. The group is all a little quieter than usual today. It’s more than likely due to the fact we lost one of the animals today. Dr. Bennett couldn’t revive him during surgery, and after getting Travis and Atticus to help, there was still no hope.

It’s always tough having to tell an owner that their animal didn’t make it. The animal that was like a family member to them; the one they’ve spent thousands on to keep healthy. After we delivered the awful news, the rest of the workday seemed to drag along, and by the expression on everyone’s

faces here tonight, I can tell they feel the same. We all need this more than we'd like to admit.

I'm so lost in my own thoughts, as Cassandra and Lucy go back and forth with each other over one of their favorite shows, that I don't notice who walks into the bar until it's too late. Once their conversations trail off and I feel a sharp jab on my arm, I shoot a glare at Cassandra. Her gaze isn't fixed on me, though. She's staring wide-eyed at the entrance. Slowly, I turn to follow the trajectory of her gaze, and my eyes widen when I realize what had her pausing midsentence.

Roman, who looks as good as ever, walks in with three other guys, all seemingly deep in conversation. I don't even try to hide the smile that spreads across my face when I see him. Though, it falters the slightest bit, when I remember we're not exactly friends anymore. If last night was any indication, I'd say he's getting a thrill out of pissing me off again. The realization is saddening and sobering.

He still hasn't noticed me yet. Or maybe he has noticed me, and he's decided to ignore me. When he doesn't bother looking my way, that seems like the more viable explanation. Whatever the case may be, he seems to be in deep conversation and enjoying himself. I haven't seen him this relaxed in a while. Not that I've been friends with him long enough to know his relaxed side and unrelaxed side. I don't even bother being discreet as I watch him. I tune out Lucy and Cassandra, my gaze solely focused on him, as I take slow sips of my beer.

He's so irritatingly handsome and laidback. Dressed in a pair of dark wash jeans with a red and black flannel over a black shirt, he looks like a dark rebel who just demands the attention of the female species. His hair is in perfect disarray, with a few rebellious strands, hanging down over his forehead. I haven't been able to just sit and enjoy looking at him in a while. For whatever reason, I don't get that luxury anymore. It doesn't escape my notice the way the other women here flock to him, all dying for a piece of him. That green flare of envy, of jealousy, fills my veins, yet again. I shift on the seat, uncomfortable with my sudden bout of anger.

"You gonna go over and talk to him or sit and stare all night long?" Atticus taunts, raising his brow in challenge. I pause, wondering if I have the guts to go over there and talk to him, after he's made it perfectly clear he wants nothing to do with me. Hell, the more I think about last night and the way I acted, the more embarrassed I feel.

“Don’t you have more poetry to write?” I shoot back, knowing he hates it. Everyone who learns his name for the first time asks the same question. “Atticus, like the poet?” Nothing pisses him off more than having to come up with a civil response.

He rolls his eyes. “Yes, Olivia. Very original. Quit being a pussy and get over there.”

“I can’t. He hates me.”

“Oh, just get the hell up already, would you? You’re ruining my view of him anyway with your big head.” I shoot Cassandra a glare, but I end up getting up from the table, so I guess her ploy worked. Wiping my suddenly sweaty hands down the sides of jeans, I inhale a deep breath.

*You can do this. Just go over and say hi.*

Sweet and simple. That’s it.

I cross the bar, heading to the bar top, where he’s still chatting with his friends. One of them looks over Rome’s shoulder, locking eyes with me. He eyes me oddly, looking me up and down, before nudging Rome, indicating behind him.

I watch it happen. His body stiffens the moment he takes notice of my presence. Slowly, he cranes his neck, not even bothering to turn his body toward me. He wears an impatient look on his face, a bored expression, as if he’s waiting for me to say what I need to say and then leave, so he can get back to whatever it was he was doing.

My stomach clenches uncomfortably. “Hey, Rome. Funny seeing you here, huh?”

Silence.

He blinks slowly.

That bored expression still tainting his handsome face.

I look at his friend, who is purposely looking anywhere but at us, and when I glance back at Roman, he’s glaring at something behind me. Turning to look, I frown, when I realize the only person looking our way is Travis. And he’s wearing the same unhappy expression on his face.

My brows dip, as I make another attempt to address Rome. “Look, Rome, if there’s something I did to make you angry with me—”

“It’s Roman.” His voice is like ice. Like a lash to my skin. I feel the wound split open between us. I take a slow, wary step back. My heart is beating unsteadily. There’s an iciness that settles in my chest at his coldness.

“Right. Okay.” I clear my throat, feeling like an idiot.

“Is that all?”

I look down, trying to hide the dejected expression, that’s surely plastered across my face. “Yeah.” I force a smile that looks more pained than anything. “That’s all.”

I look back at his friend, one last time, and he looks apologetic on Roman’s behalf. The entire way back to our table, I feel their gazes on me. I feel stupid. Idiotic. Like a schoolgirl who has a crush on the hot jock, who is obviously not interested.

I think what bothers me the most is the fact he couldn’t even look at me for long. His words hurt more than I’d like to admit. He was purposely being cruel, knowing how dumb I’d look standing there. He wants me to feel this way. A sharp pain ripples across my chest, and I refrain from clutching a hand to the center to rub it away.

When I take my seat next to Cassandra and Lucy, I bypass my beer and reach for a shot, that’s resting in the center of the table, instead. I down the thing in one gulp, grimacing, as it burns on the way down. I feel a warm, heavy hand clasp onto my shoulder.

“Wow, look at you,” Travis praises. “Luce, would you mind scooting down a chair? I need to talk with Olivia.”

I groan internally. *Jesus, not tonight.*

Lucy pauses, her face slackening. I can tell she wants to say no, she can’t move, but, in the end, she gives in to him, just like she always does. Travis takes the chair next to mine that was once Lucy’s, and I suddenly feel claustrophobic. I’m hot. I’m upset. I should’ve just gone straight home, instead of coming here.

I should’ve ignored Rome. I should’ve never gone up there and made a fool of myself in front of his friends.

“Still think he isn’t an asshole?”

I grit my teeth, at the knowing tone in Travis’s voice, because I don’t want him to be right. Brushing it off, I reach for the last shot on the table and down that one, too. He raises his hands in surrender, shifting his body toward mine subtly. He sets his hand on the back of my chair, so he can lean into me, speaking in hushed tones.

“Look, Olivia, it’s okay to admit when you’re wrong. He’s a jerk. So what? Let’s be over and done with it.”

I mull that over for a second. He's not wrong, and he actually makes a solid point. Maybe I was wrong about my neighbor. Maybe Rome is the asshole I pegged him to be, and I just wanted to believe he was better than he actually was.

"C'mon, let's get some more drinks."

I shake my head, glancing toward Roman and his friends. The last thing I need is to look like I'm trying to strike up another conversation with him.

"Don't worry. It'll be fine."

Heaving a sigh, I follow Travis to the bar. We stand a few empty barstools away from Rome and his friends, and I use his broad back as a shield. I can feel Rome's gaze burning into the side of my head, but I pretend not to notice. Like his proximity isn't affecting me.

"So, what brings you guys in here tonight?" Travis addresses Rome and his friends. I stiffen, glaring at his back.

Fucking asshole tricked me.

Rome's friend answers with a shrug, "Just coming in for a few cold ones after work."

Travis smiles charmingly. "Right, right, we're doing the same. Where do you fellas work?"

"Automotive garage," Rome answers, with a bit of snark. I still haven't found the courage to look their way yet. This is just a bad accident waiting to happen.

Travis makes a noise in the back of his throat, and my heart drops. Oh, good God. This isn't happening. "That's quaint."

"Quaint?" Rome grits. I can hear the warning clear in his tone. Finally, I summon the courage to look his way, and he's staring at Travis, with a murderous gleam in his eyes.

"There's nothing wrong with that. But obviously, compared to a doctor, like me, there's little to no competition."

Rome spears a heated look my way, and I have the decency to look embarrassed on Travis's behalf. "And what would we ever have competition over?" Roman asks, his voice filled with ice. Slowly, he slides off the barstool, turning to face us. Travis smirks, and I realize too late what he's doing. He's taunting Roman.

But why?

I startle, my body going stiff, as he slides his arm around my shoulders. "Competition? There is none. Not where I'm concerned."

My gaze pings back and forth between the two men, both having a conversation of their own without words. Jaws are locked. Eyes narrowed in thin slits. Tension crackling in the air around us.

*What the hell is happening?*

My stomach revolts painfully when Roman looks at me. There's so much to be read in his gaze, but what jumps out at me the most is betrayal. The man, who keeps his feelings boarded up behind a brick wall and thorns wrapped around his heart, is looking at me like I've forsaken him. I swear I even see a hint of jealousy there, but that can't be right, can it?

Roman scoffs. "There is no competition, pretty boy. Not when I don't want what you have."

Their conversation and the hidden messages between them start to dawn on me. I choke on a breath.

Are they...are they talking about me? But why? It's not like I'm dating Travis. And it's not like I'm dating Rome either. So, where the hell is this sudden pissing contest coming from?

Travis smiles like he's just won the lottery. "If that's what you tell yourself, sure. Some people are just...undeserving of some things. Wouldn't you agree, Olivia?"

I jerk my gaze to his, eyes wide. Pressing my lips together, I shake my head slightly. "Please stop," I whisper, so only he can hear.

As if on cue, our drinks are sliding across the bar top. Travis picks them up, taking off with a shit-eating grin. I glance back at Rome and find him standing there, stiff as a board, glaring daggers at us. His hands are balled into fists, and the tic in his jaw jumps wildly, like it's all that's holding him back at this point.

For the rest of the night, I sneak subtle glances at Roman. He's talked to a few women but never for long. Every time one of them smiles and walks away, I can't help but breathe a little sigh of relief that they won't be going home with him.

I truly am sick in the head.

At some point, my bladder screams to be released. Seems all the drinks have finally caught up with me. I excuse myself and head down the wood and velvet hallway toward the bathrooms.

"Olivia, wait!"

I pause, turning around with a questioning expression on my face. Travis jogs up to me, glancing over his shoulder a few times.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Look, I know you said you just moved here but—” He pauses, and I have to shift on my feet, because my bladder is on the verge of bursting. All I need is to piss myself in this hallway. That would really be the cherry on top of tonight. “Listen, I like you, Olivia. You’re smart, funny, and insanely beautiful. You’re committed to the work, and I just can’t help but feel like there’s something between us. This attraction...it’s insane. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. I feel it every time we’re in the room together.”

Ice floods my body, and my breath gets lodged in my throat. My heart stops beating, and my lungs restrict air.

*What?*

*What is happening right now?*

Travis takes a step toward me, and on instinct, I take a small, tentative step back. “I can’t stop thinking about you, Olivia. I just...fuck. I want you to tell me you feel this, too.” He closes in on me some more, and my heart lurches into action, doing its best to pound out of my chest. Something uncomfortable swirls in my belly, and I suddenly can’t stop my body from shaking. The shivers wrack through my limbs, continuously, as I try to process.

My mouth drops open, and a squeak leaves me but still no words. Cool sweat seeps from my pores, when Travis steps closer. In my head, I’m screaming at myself to say something. To say no. Do anything I can to get him to stop this.

*Please don’t kiss me.*

*Please don’t kiss me.*

*Please don’t kiss me.*

I think this is the first time a sane woman has ever wished a handsome man would not kiss her.

“Wait—” I pause, putting my hands up to stop him. He freezes, looking down at me expectantly. “Look, Travis, I think you’re a great guy. You’re insanely talented and handsome, but I just got out of a relationship, and you’re my boss. I don’t feel comfortable exploring anything between us.”

Something flashes behind his eyes. There’s a slight tic in his jaw, and it looks like he wants to say something, but decides not to. Slowly, he steps back, giving me a wide berth, and I finally feel like I can breathe again.

“All right.” He rakes a hand through his hair.

Guilt is swift and all-consuming, as it slams into me. I feel bad that I had to turn him down. My heart tightens painfully at the dejected look on his face. I know it had to have taken a lot of confidence and courage to tell me this, but I just...I can't.

"I'm sorry, Travis."

He grimaces. "Don't be."

With that, he turns, taking his heavy presence with him, and I collapse against the wall, staring up at the ceiling.

*What the fuck was that?*

My bladder twinges, reminding me I still need to pee. Turning on my heels, I fly into one of the open bathroom stalls, and the entire time, I replay what just happened in the hall.

I hope to God it won't be awkward between us at work now. And Lucy. Christ, poor Lucy. If she finds out he made a pass at me, she'll be crushed. I can't do that to her. When I'm finished, I rest my hands on the porcelain edges of the sink, looking at myself in the bathroom mirror.

"Get it the hell together, Olivia," I hiss.

Squaring my shoulders, on the way out of the bathroom, I try summon all the confidence I certainly don't feel. I run my hands through my hair, brushing it out, so I don't resemble someone who's been in the bathroom ripping out their hair in frustration.

"Rendezvous in the bathroom. Real classy."

My steps falter at the deep timbre, and a tingle travels down my spine. When I look up, I'm startled when I spot Roman, leaning against the wall. My hands curl into fists, as frustration bubbles in my gut. My chest grows tight with emotion.

"What did you just say?"

He rolls his eyes, brushing past me, without a word. My frustration reaches new heights, and I snap. I rush after him, gripping his solid arm to stop him from turning away from me.

"Okay, what the hell is your problem? You've been acting like an ass all night long," I hiss, yanking Rome toward me.

He dips down, getting in my face. "My problem? He wants to fuck you. How can you not see it?"

I purse my lips. This conversation would be so much less awkward if Travis hadn't just done what he did in the hallway. "I never said I didn't see it. I just...ignore it."



“So, what? You want to fuck him?”

“God, no!” I blurt, darting my gaze around us, to make sure no one’s around to hear. “And what’s it matter to you? You hate me. You shouldn’t care about anything I do, or who wants to fuck me.”

“It fucking matters, babe.”

My stomach flutters, and my chest squeezes. That stupid, god-awful emotion—hope—invades my rational thoughts. “Why?” I search his ice blue gaze for answers. “Just tell me why.”

We have a standoff, glaring down at each other, our chests heaving, working to accommodate our hatred.

I scoff with a disappointed shake of my head. “That’s what I thought. You’re such a fucking asshole.” Shoving him out of my way, I whirl past him, angry with myself for even thinking, for one second, that Roman might feel something for me other than contempt.

A surprised gasp rips from my chest when his hand closes around my wrist, yanking me back toward him. My heart lurches into my throat, as frissons of electricity fire through my body at his touch. Roman slips his hands into my hair and tugs me toward him. His mouth slams down on mine, his kiss, hard and hungry. It’s needy, unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before.

Time suddenly slows around us. My hearing goes in and out. It sounds like I’m suddenly trapped underwater, and the only thing I’m positive I can hear is the sound of my blood rushing through my veins and my pounding heartbeat.

I freeze, for only a second, before I lose myself in him. In his kiss. His touch. His smell. A moan spills from my mouth into his, when his tongue tangles with mine. His hand presses against my lower back, tugging my body flush with his. I wrap my arms around his waist, my fingers digging into the muscles there. Our mouths clash, both of us breathing each other in like air. Our hands grasp and grapple at each other.

He pulls himself away from me, chest heaving, our bodies still touching. There’s fire in his eyes with the way he’s staring down at me. Every part of my body is aching. I find myself leaning into him, wanting more. I don’t know what’s happening at this moment. All the tension and the hatred we’ve felt toward each other has finally imploded into this. This mess of desire and unrestrained passion.

“Olivia?” I jerk at the sound of Travis’s voice. My heart stalls in my chest, and I slam my eyes shut.

*Shit.*

With a grunt of frustration, Roman storms away, clipping shoulders with Travis, as he goes.

“Hey,” I offer, tone wary. Dread swirls through my gut at what he might have seen. My God, he’s going to hate me. Not even five minutes after I turn him down, I let another man kiss me. How could I let this happen?

I risk a glance at him and find exactly what I knew I would. Anger. Such unrestrained anger. Taking a tentative step forward, I place a shaking hand over my lips that feel swollen by the aggressive kiss between Rome and me.

“Look, Travis, I can explain.”

He smiles, but it’s cold and so unlike him. Dread settles heavily on my shoulders, weighing me down. “No need. I get it. I more than get it.” He turns on his heels, and I fall back, deflating against the wall.

*Crap. This is such a mess.*

When I head back toward the table, everyone seems none the wiser, but when I glance at the bar, I realize Rome and his friends are gone. I grab my purse, nibbling on my bottom lip, as I contemplate what to do, but it seems my mind makes its own choice.

“I’m going to head home, guys. I’ll see you at work.”

During the drive home, my hand has found a constant place to rest in my hair where I tug, trying to wrap my head around what happened back there. Every time I blink or fucking close my eyes, I think about Rome. His lips, the way they felt on mine. The taste of his tongue. My core clenches and throbs, almost painfully, and I feel my nipples pebble against the material of my bra, as I replay the kiss, over and over. The way he manhandled me. The way it felt to have his strong arms banded around me. By the time I pull into my driveway, I’m so lost in thought that I don’t notice the lights on in his living room. His garage is closed, but it’s obvious he’s still awake.

Gripping my purse with sweaty, trembling hands, I cross our lawns and ring his doorbell. He answers without a shirt on, and my core throbs painfully at the sight of his toned chest.

“Hi,” I whisper. It comes out breathy. Much breathier than I intended.

He raises an impatient brow down at me, waiting for me to get on with it. I don't know why I thought he'd make this easy. He's an asshole, through and through.

Rubbing at the back of my neck, I shift on my feet, uncomfortable with the way he's watching me. I'm still thinking about the kiss. My eyes keep darting to his lips, and I feel my cheeks heating, as I catch myself doing it.

"Should we talk about what happened back at—"

"Leave."

I freeze, my heart jerking to an unsteady stop. "What?"

"I said leave," he grits.

A crushing weight settles on my chest. Something burns the backs of my eyes, but I refuse to believe it's tears. I will not let this asshole make me cry, not again.

"Why can't we just talk?"

He clenches his teeth together, causing his jaw to set in a hard line. "Leave, before you make another mistake with me."

I jerk back at his ire. "You're not a mistake, Rome."

He scoffs, smiling coldly. The look is an ice pick to the chest. "Tell that to your doctor boyfriend." The door shuts in my face, before I can get a word in edgewise.

Ugh! I groan, pounding my fist on the wood. "He's not my boyfriend, dammit!"

When he still doesn't open the door, I stomp down his steps and head back home. I collapse against the door, suddenly feeling drained. Today has been a roller coaster of emotions. I don't know if I should be sad or happy that Roman kissed me. It's glaringly obvious Roman has been cold with me because of Travis.

Heaving a deep sigh, I lock up, strip out of my clothes, and head for the shower. The entire time I'm washing, I think about Rome. His lips. His hands and the way they felt on my body. Every time I have the urge to touch myself, I force myself to stop. This isn't healthy. These aren't healthy or sane habits, and I need to get ahold of myself.

When I crawl into bed, I'm plagued with thoughts of Roman and Travis—of what's right and wrong. One of them I feel bad for because I turned him down, and the other, I want more than I want to take my next breath.

How did this become my new life?

# Fifteen

## “Somethin Tells Me”—Bryson Tiller



Roman

I just happen to be looking into her bedroom, thinking about what a jackass I am, when she strolls in with a white fluffy towel wrapped around her body. I shouldn't be able to see so well into her bedroom, but the neighbors before her had put up that shitty little picket fence, and I never changed it. So, instead of a standard fence that gives neighbors a semblance of privacy, there's nothing blocking our view. Nothing keeping me from watching her.

As if sensing my gaze, she pauses near the window, and our gazes collide through the glass. I can't tell what she's thinking. I hope she's going to shut her curtains. Do something other than stare, because I won't be responsible for my actions, if she doesn't cut me off right here and right now.

There's a challenge there in my eyes. I'm telling her to close it. Shut me out.

I stiffen on the bed when I spot her toying with the knot on her towel. With only about ten feet between our houses, I can clearly make out the defiance on her face, in answer to my challenge. The lighting is dim, but it only serves to highlight her body and her perfect creamy skin. When our gazes meet, it sends a tremor down my spine. I grit my teeth, silently begging her not to do it.

She does it anyway.

Olivia undoes the knot and drops her towel. Heat licks at my flesh, swirling in my gut. I force a thick swallow, taking in her perfect body. I imagine she's still damp after the shower, droplets of water clinging to her skin. Her tits are perfect, just as I knew they'd be, and more than a handful. Even from here, the dusky color of her nipples is so appealing, I feel my cock strain to life in my jeans.

Dragging my gaze up her body, I settle on her face, and Olivia licks her lips nervously. I swear I even see her cheeks pink, just like they usually do when she's embarrassed. I clasp my palms on my thighs, forcing myself to keep them there and not anywhere else. When she walks closer to the window, giving me a better view, I just about groan. Her hands, her soft delicate hands, touch the flat planes of her stomach. She feels herself, her soft skin, skimming up to her breasts. My nostrils flare when she sucks her bottom lip between her teeth, while she toys with her tits, pinching her nipples, and fuck me, I almost shoot my load in my pants. That's how hot it is. How hot she is.

I grit my teeth so hard, my jaw aches. Her chest is rising and falling faster now, like she's so turned on, she can hardly breathe. When her hand dips low and disappears between her legs, I fucking groan. She works her fingers between her folds, and I watch with rapt attention, as she fucks herself. Olivia rides her fingers, tossing her head back in ecstasy.

My cock is throbbing painfully, and I fight it. Fight the urge to stroke myself. To stroke my cock to the image of her. There would be no going back. There's a moment when we lock eyes, and I can almost hear all the words she doesn't say.

*Touch yourself. Please.*

*I can't come without you.*

Fucking hell.

Popping the button on my pants, I take out my cock. It springs free, bobbing heavily. The head is swollen and angry, demanding attention. I wrap my fist around my erection and stroke. Gritting my back teeth together, I pump up and down, as I watch Olivia fuck herself harder, her fingers working faster with each passing second. She clutches onto the windowsill for support. My balls tighten, and I imagine it's her hand stroking my cock. Her hand milking me.

She lifts her leg, baring herself to me. I can clearly see her fingers disappearing into her tight channel, and fuck me, if that isn't the hottest sight I've ever seen.

Even with both of our windows closed, I still hear her guttural moan. She tosses her head back, mouth dropped open, as she cries out, her body jerking from the aftershocks of her orgasm. It doesn't take long for me to follow; my cum spurting from my cock, that is still throbbing angrily. I'll be hard for the rest of my goddamn life at this rate. I won't be satisfied until she's stroking me, and her pussy's draining my cock.

We both come down from our high, the endorphins leaving our body. Slowly, she stands upright and picks up her towel, covering herself. She walks to the wall, and the light in her bedroom flips off. My eyes slam shut.

She couldn't do that any sooner?

Jesus Christ.

After some time, I force myself to get up and head into the shower. I have to be up early tomorrow. I have a meeting with Mrs. Archibald, and the last thing I need is to be thinking about Olivia, when I should be thinking about Ryder and getting him back.



I'm shifting anxiously in the chair in the waiting room, frustrated that I'm still waiting here. I don't know what the hell I'm here for. Mrs. Archibald didn't specify. Though, I'm sure if it was good news, I would've been out of here already, but for some reason, I know it's not. Whatever they called me in here for can't be good. My stomach muscles tighten at the thought.

"Mr. Banks? Come on in."

I push up from the chair, tamping down how uneasy I feel about meeting with Ryder's caseworker. When I lower myself into the chair, in her small office that resembles a cardboard box, I square my shoulders, not finding any reason to get comfortable. I'm sure we won't be here long. She'll deliver the dire news, and I'll be well on my way.

"I wanted you to come in, so we can talk."

"About?" I ask in a no-nonsense tone.

*Just get on with it already.*

“I’d like to set up another home visit. Give you another chance.”

I freeze at her words.

My heart stops.

Everything screeches to a halt.

“You’re serious?”

She releases a breath. “I am. It’s obvious getting your brother back means the world to you. The least I can do is give you both a fair fight.”

Something spreads through my chest. It’s so completely foreign, and I refuse to acknowledge it. It takes everything in me to nod my head, while I process, not letting anything show on my face.

“Thank you. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

She smiles. “I think I do. But this time, try not to mess it up. There are only so many chances I can give, understand?”

Before I leave, she gives me the potential date of the next home tour, and the entire drive home, I’m determined to be better. For Ryder. For his future.

He deserves it.

I might not have had someone looking out for me when I was his age, but I want a different life for Ryder. I want him to have options. I want him to grow up around family who cares, not be stuck in a system and getting buried among countless other children.

When I get home, I’m surprised when I find Olivia in her front yard picking weeds. Mona, one of our neighbors, is standing beside her, chatting her ear off, as she watches her work. I’ve lived here long enough to know who to avoid on this street. While Mona and her family are nice people, she’s a talker, and if she hasn’t noticed, talking is the last thing I like to do. Josie, the older woman across the street, is as nosy as they come. When I first moved in with my bike and my beat-up Chevelle, she turned up her nose at me with disgust with that damned cigarette hanging out of the corner of her mouth.

Then there are Allison and her husband. He’s a chiropractor, great guy, average white-collar family with children who are a tad bit spoiled. The other women from the neighboring homes? They’re the ones I have to watch out for. The divorcees and the lonely housewives. For months, when I first moved in, they’d make a habit of stopping by, trying to strike up a conversation with me. Or when I went on my runs, they’d sit out on their

porches and watch me go by, as though they were viewing something on their televisions.

Cutting the engine on my bike, I wheel it in, glancing back over my shoulder, one last time at Olivia and Mona. They're both staring my way. Mona waves wildly, a wide grin on her face, and Olivia, her face is clear of any emotion, save for the brightness tinging her cheeks. I can't tell if it's from working out in the sun or for other reasons—like last night.

My cock jerks to life in my pants just thinking about it.

I have the urge to cross the distance between our lawns—all the mess of the past few days be damned—but just as I'm hanging up my helmet, I hear a voice I dread.

“Roman!”

“Fuck.” I sigh. There's no way I can shut my garage on the woman, without looking like an absolute dick. It's obvious to everyone with ears that I heard her. Hell, you can hear Virginia from a mile away. She has one of those voices that carries, and not in a good way.

As Virginia makes her way into my garage, her cleavage and legs on full display, she makes it a point to rest her manicured hand and nails on my arm. I imagine she'd like nothing more than to dig her talons in and never let go.

She compliments me, even when I keep brushing her off. I can feel someone's gaze on us, and when I glance next door, I no longer see Mona, but I do see Olivia, staring at the two of us, wearing an odd expression on her face. It's tight, pinched together, in what looks like distress. She pushes off the ground, dusts off her legs, and gathers her tools, before she storms off, inside her house.



# *Sixteen*

## “She Wolf”—Shakira



*Olivia*

I drop my head into my hands and groan in embarrassment, again, when I replay what transpired through our windows the other night. At the time, in the heat of the moment, it seemed like a really hot idea. Why not throw caution to the wind with the guy next door that I find incredibly attractive? But now, I can't help but wonder what the hell I was thinking.

Some parts of me are mortified by my actions, and the others are equally aroused by them.

What happened the other night was so unlike me. I'm not that girl. I don't take risks, and I certainly don't do those things.

My heart trips over itself in such a reckless manner, as I recall seeing him there in his bedroom. Through the double-paned glass, there was a moment when we locked eyes. I could practically see the battle he was waging. He surprised me. The heavy way he held my gaze the entire time, instead of only ogling my nude body. My breath hitches when I close my eyes, images flashing sporadically behind my closed lids.

The way he dropped his briefs, releasing his impossibly long erection. My mouth was salivating, and I watched with rapt attention, as he fisted himself, still keeping his eyes on mine. Stroking his long cock, he pumped it smoothly.

I snap myself out of it, growing agitated with my lack of self-control. If I had just been a normal neighbor, this awkward mess wouldn't be happening. Because now that we've masturbated in front of each other, we're back to the awkward phase. He doesn't talk, look, or even acknowledge my presence, and I, well, I can't stop thinking about it. I can't stop trying to get his attention, trying to get him to spare me one word, so we can talk about the kiss and everything else that came after.

Working every day with Travis since the incident at the bar hasn't been a walk in the park either. Some days, things seem completely normal. He smiles and pretends we're friends, but then, there are days when he snaps at me much quicker than he normally would. Those are the days he seems perpetually upset with me, and a part of me wonders if things could possibly get any worse. How do the rest of the women he's slept with in the clinic handle it?

From what I've seen, he's been nothing but a gentleman to them. I can't say the same for myself, though. During every shift we work together, I'm just waiting for him to snap. I'm waiting for him to blow up.

Just as my mother requested, I finally open that list on my break and research all these potential doctors. And, of course, just as she promised they would be, they are the best of the absolute best that are here in the Bay Area. After work today, I have an appointment with one of the doctors on the list. He's the closest, and they were even able to squeeze me in for a consultation, so I figure it's worth a shot.

I only have about ten minutes to kill in the waiting room, before I'm called back to the calmly decorated office. Using this time, I scroll through the other links my mother sent me. They're all from home décor sites. She clearly thinks my house could use some sprucing up. While she and my dad were here visiting, she managed to unpack all my boxes and get the house organized for me; only now, I can't seem to find where anything is, because she put them in places I never would. With new piping, and no more clutter, my house looks much more put together than it did before. But, obviously, my mother still thinks it lacks character. Can't say I don't agree.

Ten minutes come and go, before I'm seated in a stuffy office. There are plaques and awards along the walls that should make me feel better about my choice in coming here today; yet, it doesn't. The doctor, an aging Asian man, regards me, as he reviews the files I requested to have sent over. His

brows furrow, and every so often, he glances at me, more than likely judging me for my life choices.

“Have you had any episodes lately? Anything that should be of concern? Are you being more active than usual, any high-stress jobs?”

I push away the stress of Travis, the stress of fighting with my neighbor, and all thoughts of him stroking his cock out of my mind.

“No,” I lie.

“Well.” He sighs, taking off his glasses and setting them on the desk in front of him. “I’d be happy to take you on as a patient, but things would need to change in your everyday life, and first and foremost, I’d need you to take better care of yourself. While I’m not saying you can’t live a normal life, you do need to proceed by taking precautions. I noticed you mentioned to the nurse that you live alone, which is a bit of a red flag. Do you have someone who comes by regularly to check on you, in case you have any episodes or an emergency occurs?”

I nod, forcing a thin smile on my face, to appease him.

He’s not buying it.

My lips purse, and I tune him out for the rest of his speech, once he starts talking about new medications to try and possible surgeries. By the time I leave and am back in my car, I let out an infuriated scream at how unfair life is. How unfair *my* life is. As if life itself is showing me just how right I am, my mom calls. And like the fool I am, I answer.

“So, have you called?”

“Hello to you, too.” I roll my eyes.

“Knock it off. This is serious, Olivia. This is your goddamn health.”

“Yes! I just left his office now, and you know what? I’m done. I’m so over this bullshit. I’m over it. I’m tired of it, and I want no part of it. He’s talking about surgeries already. More surgeries that will only lead to more complications and more scars.”

I hear a snuffle on the other end of the line, and I slam my eyes shut. “You’re going to die if you don’t take care of yourself, Olivia. Do you understand?”

Pain bleeds from my mother’s voice, prompting tears to roll down my cheeks.

Doesn’t she realize I know that? I’m on borrowed time, but I’m tired of living my life with so much caution. It doesn’t even feel like a life at all.

“I’ll keep going.” I sigh. She makes me promise that I’ll FaceTime her at my next appointment, so she knows I’m not lying.

The woman knows me too well.

Needing to keep myself busy, after the depressing phone call and the visit to the doctor that was like a slap back to reality, I pull into my driveway with a trunk full of ready to plant tulips and soil. I’ve heard gardening is cathartic, and I need that in my life right now. I’m even thinking about taking up yoga or meditation. Lord knows I need it.

Sure, gardening is a lot of dirty work, but I can do it. Plus, I’ve picked most, if not all, the weeds from the front lawn, so it looks better. Now I just need to add some water and bring the grass back to life.

Outside of the fence that leads into my backyard, just below the living room window, I get to work, readying the soil and planting the bulbs. Sweat trickles down my back, and my shoulders are already aching from the work and being hunched over. When I push up to my feet, my knees scream in protest, and I take a step back to survey my handiwork. My gaze roams over the beautiful flowers, and I can’t help but smile. I plan to plant more, maybe even add some flowers around the rest of the house, but this is enough for now.

It’s enough to help me forget that I don’t have the luxury most people do, and I am going to find the beauty in life, even if I don’t have forever to do that.

The next morning, I wake up in a far more chipper mood than I had the previous day. I go about my morning, getting ready and dressed for work, just like I normally would. As I’m on my way out of the house, a thrill enters my chest when I glance at my tulips, but that elation, suddenly, shrivels and dies. The small grin I’ve been wearing all morning slides off my face, and my brows crease together in a frown.

“What the...?”

The flowers that I painstakingly planted yesterday, in the hot, sun are trampled. There’s literally only one that is left standing at an odd angle. The rest of them are stomped to death, the stems broken and the petals crushed to absolute shit.

Dropping my purse and lunch onto the ground, I run to the flowers, the word, “No, no, no,” falling from my lips in quick succession. I skid to my knees in my scrubs and try to help the flowers stand back upright, but

they're dead. All that hard work, all that color I put into my front lawn. It's done. All for nothing.

*What the hell happened?*

Just as I'm taking a closer look at the shoeprints stamped on the flowers, I hear the garage next door open. My heart squeezes, and something dark and cold slithers through my chest. It's at odds with the fury boiling in my gut. Slowly, I crane my neck to the side, watching as Roman rolls out his bike. Those big, bulky biker boots are on his feet. I look back down at my flowers, and my gaze narrows.

That son of a bitch.

Shooting to my feet, I storm across our lawns, smoke damn near billowing from my ears. Red seeps into my vision. A growl rips from my chest, just as Roman glances my way. He pauses, with his helmet hovering over his head, his brows pulling down, as he watches me storm toward him. I can feel my emotions bubbling to the surface alongside my rage. That's always happened, even when I was kid. When I got so angry, I'd cry. And I refuse to cry in front of this shithead and let him get to me.

"How dare you!" I hiss, shoving at his shoulder that feels like steel. His lips press together, and his eyes narrow into thin slits.

"There a problem, babe?" His use of the word "babe" trips me up, for only a second, before I snap.

"How cruel can you be? I spent all evening putting those damn flowers in. That was the one nice thing I had. Why would you do that? Why?"

With slow, methodical movements, Roman swings his leg off his bike and sets his helmet on the seat, towering over me. His hands at his sides curl into fists, and the muscles along his jaw jump wildly, as he grinds his teeth together.

"You accusing me of something, Olivia?"

"I know you stomped on my flowers. I want to understand why. I want to know why you're such a dick, why you hate me so much, and why you feel the need to make my time here in this neighborhood a living hell."

His gaze flicks toward my now trampled flowers, and he frowns, but the look of anger on his face, from being confronted like this, still lingers.

"I didn't do that. I couldn't give a single shit about you and your stupid fucking flowers. Now why don't you walk yourself on back home and get out of my face."

Without thinking about it, I shove him in the chest. The man doesn't even move, which only serves to fuel my frustrations. I'm fuming, my chest is heaving, as I work to control the rage soaring through my veins.

"You're a coward. You're a goddamn childish liar," I seethe, lifting up onto my tiptoes, so I don't feel so small going up against a man like him.

"Hit me again, Olivia," he grits in challenge.

I scoff. The sound is ugly and filled with violence. "Or what, Roman? You going to hit me back? Is that it? Gonna hit me for calling you out on your shit?"

His lips thin into a grim line, just before they curl over his teeth in a snarl. He takes threatening steps toward me, bringing us chest to chest. Bending down, he gets in my face, his gaze filled with ire and ice.

"I'd never lay a hand on a woman. Even one as batshit crazy as you. Now get the fuck off my property."

With those harsh words, he whirls on his heels, throws a leg back over his bike, tosses on his helmet, and peels out of his driveway.

*Yeah, real fucking mature, asshole.*

My entire body deflates, when I glance at my ruined flowers. When I peer over my shoulder, feeling eyes on me from across the street, I frown. Josie, the nosy older woman, is there standing on her porch, wearing a robe, cigarette dangling from her lips.

She shakes her head at me, pulling the smoke from between her crusty lips. "You're mental, you realize that, right?"

I roll my eyes, turning my back on her.

*Yeah, yeah. I know.*



I spend the rest of the day fuming at work. Every little thing seems to piss me off. At the top of that list are Lucy and Travis. I don't usually make a habit out of inserting myself into anyone's business, but after the morning I've had, I can't hold my tongue any longer. The one decent guy in the office, Mark, asked Lucy out for dinner, but because she's so infatuated with Travis, she turned him down. Doesn't she realize what a huge mistake

she's making? I mean, hell, if I was looking to date, I would've said yes to Mark!

During lunch, when I tell Lucy just how foolish I think she is for turning him down, the glare she sends my way is visceral. She's angry with me for pointing out the obvious, and I also get the sense she's holding a grudge over Travis and his sudden interest in me. I hope that isn't the case. That man isn't worth having anyone hate you over. To make things worse, Travis is still treating me like I'm the problem. He's acting as if we were in a relationship, and I cheated on him or something.

He's been short with me during procedures. He is curt and rude when I have questions. The other times, he stands a little too close, and when I try to move away from him, he has the nerve to get snappy with me and have an attitude like a petulant child.

I'm not interested in him. Why can't he take a hint?

He has plenty of women who throw themselves at him daily, and I don't want to be another notch on his bedpost. If his attitude is any indication, I don't want anything to do with him. He's an entitled schoolboy, living in a man's body.

I have to thank my lucky stars when his father, Samuel, saves me from another awkward situation with him. After cleaning up one of the operating tables, I notice Travis hanging back, filling the air with his assholiness. I don't say anything to him, especially after he raised his voice at me, no more than fifteen minutes before. Instead, I just try to do my job in silence, while still stewing over my dickhead neighbor who ruined my flowers.

Why does it feel like I am suddenly surrounded by assholes?

"So, how's the boyfriend?"

At the question and the snark bleeding from his tone, my shoulders tense. My grip tightens around the disinfecting spray, and I work to control my frustration. Blowing out a deep, controlled breath, I try to keep my tone civil.

"I told you, Travis. He's not my boyfriend."

"So you kiss everyone. Just not me, right?"

Dropping the spray and the rag, I pinch the bridge of my nose, not even caring the gloves covering my hands are filled with chemicals.

"Is that what you're so angry about? That kiss? I'm sorry to say this, Travis, but what I do, doesn't concern you. There is nothing going on

between my neighbor and me, and even if there was, as my boss, that's not something I'm obligated to share with you."

Travis scoffs, his eyes darkening a few shades. "You really had me fooled, Olivia. I thought you were different. But you're just another pretty face, falling into the arms of any man who wants you. It's sad, actually."

My chest tightens, painfully so. I whirl around, my eyes round. "Excuse me?"

"You fuck him yet?"

A gasp gets caught in my throat, and I flinch at the ire in his tone. The look on Travis's face isn't the one of a boss or a friend concerned over my well-being. No, this is the expression of a jealous man. Hell, beyond jealous.

"That is none of your concern," I grit.

His chest puffs out, and he closes the distance between us. Fear claws at my throat, making it hard to swallow. I back away from him until my back collides sharply with the table behind me. My heart is beating unsteadily in my chest, and my pulse is pounding in my ears. Something about the glint in his eyes, as he stares down at me, leaves all the hairs at the nape of my neck standing at attention.

"I promise you, Olivia, one night with me will change your whole life. One night." He takes a stray lock of hair that fell from my ponytail and rubs it between his fingers. My stomach churns, disgust causing bile to rise up my throat. A sharp pang shoots down the center of my chest, my lungs squeezing with a restricting hold.

*What the hell is happening?*

I realize too late what's coming next. Travis bends, his hand going around my waist, and I stiffen. My body trembles in fear. I raise my hands, to shove him back, just as the door to the exam room opens, and I hear his father's voice.

"Travis, can I speak with you?"

Travis stiffens, mere inches away from me. My heart is pounding wildly, while his eyes continue to drill holes into me. I see the intent, written in his eyes. If his father hadn't come in, he was going to kiss me, whether I wanted him to or not.

They both leave the exam room, and I gasp for much-needed air, crumpling against the table. My chest is painfully tight, and my heartbeat is



so irregular, I have to press the heel of my palm into my sternum, trying to ease the ache and slow my heart rate.

I don't see Travis or Dr. Bennett for the rest of my shift, and I'm all too thankful for that. I feel guilty. Even though I wasn't the one who initiated anything, I suddenly feel like I'm the problem. I can't imagine what must be going through Samuel's head. Does he think I'm some hussy who's sleeping with his son on the job? A shudder runs through my body at the thought. The last person I'd sleep with on this earth is Travis Bennett. The sooner he gets that through his thick skull, the better off we'll both be.

I'm bone-tired by the time I get home. I'm so over this entire day that I don't even bother making dinner. I just pop a frozen pizza into the oven and call it a night. After showering, I sit in the makeshift window nook and try to open a book to read, but every time I do, I can't seem to focus. I keep replaying the events of the whole day. Seeing my ruined flowers, arguing with Roman, dealing with Travis's sexual advances.

With a huff of frustration, I toss the book onto the cushion and climb into bed, deciding it's best to call it a night. I can only hope tomorrow will turn out much better than today, because today was definitely one for the shit books.

I'm awoken sometime in the middle of the night to the sound of a crash. I stir in bed, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. It takes me a few moments to process, but when I finally do, I stiffen, and my heartrate spikes.

There's the faint sound of glass trickling against the wood floors, and my breath gets caught in my throat, when I hear the heavy thud of boots. My eyes widen, and sweat beads on my forehead.

There's someone in my house.

Someone is breaking into my house!

Fear squeezes my chest. My stomach drops painfully, as I toss the covers back, as silently as possible, trying to remain quiet. Once my bare feet touch the wood floor, I glance at my closed bedroom door, listening closely for any other sounds. I'm just about to reach for my cell phone, when a bright light turns on next door.

My heart pounds erratically, when I spot Roman glance out of his bedroom window, his gaze colliding with mine instantly. Faintly, I can hear Max barking in the background. Whatever he sees on my face has him whirling around and disappearing out of sight. Something crashes in my

living room, and I jump, a shriek of fear tearing past my lips. The thudding of boots gets closer and grows stronger, and I reach for my phone. My hands tremble, as I dial 911.

An alarming tightness grips my chest, squeezing my heart and making it hard to breathe. I've been here before. I know what causes it, but for the life of me, I can't seem to calm down enough to push the sensation away. Tears of fear trickle down my cheeks, and when the line connects, I'm so out of breath, I can hardly get the words past my lips. There's a heavy weight on my sternum, a vise grip on my lungs, keeping them from expanding and bringing much-needed oxygen into my body. I slide down the wall, onto the floor, and I claw the pads of my fingers into the material of my pajama pants, trying to work through the pain. Trying to breathe.

My vision swims from lack of oxygen, that black tunnel coming toward me at lightning speed.

The bedroom door suddenly flies open, and I choke. I can't even scream for help, because I have no oxygen to do so. But I don't need to scream for help, because the man who is frantically glancing around my room, eyes wide with panic, isn't anyone I need to fear. It's Rome.

When he spots me on the floor, tears streaked down my face, barely able to breathe, he runs to my side. Dropping to his haunches before me, he takes my face in his hands, his wild blue eyes searching mine frantically.

"Olivia, are you hurt?"

I open my mouth to respond, to assure him that I'm okay, but no sound comes out. His mouth pinches together in a grim line, and he starts checking me over. Raking his gaze up and down my body, he looks for any signs that I'm hurt. When he can't find anything out of place, his grip on my face tightens.

"Olivia, babe. I need you to say something. Are you okay?"

All I can manage to do is nod, no words still coming from my mouth. I need my pills. Christ, I need my pills.

"Bathroom," I wheeze. His eyes widen at my request, but he helps me to my feet, and I all but stumble into the master bathroom, slamming the door behind me. I throw open the mirror cabinet and fumble through the abundance of pill bottles. My hands tremble violently, as I search for the right one. When I do find it, the pills rattle against the bottle, as I work to get it open. I swallow the pill, forcing it down my throat, hoping it'll help calm the tightness in my chest.

I collapse onto the toilet seat, and I rest my head in my hands. I don't know how long I sit in here, but it's long enough that Roman bangs his fist on the door, startling me.

"Olivia, if you don't come out of there, I'm coming in."

Sucking in a large, much-needed inhale of air, I force the words past my lips. "I'm fine, Roman. Just...just give me a second, please."

I hear his deep sigh, and I can imagine the look of impatience written all over his face. It brings a shaky smile to my own. It's just like him.

When I feel, somewhat, better, like my lungs aren't on the verge of collapsing, I stuff away the pill bottles that fell and splash some water onto my face, before opening the door.

Roman pushes off the wall immediately, his eyes raking up and down my body. He lingers on my splotchy face a little longer than usual. Heat rises to my cheeks in embarrassment, and I glance around, avoiding his gaze.

"The police should be here soon," he mutters, something dark in his tone.

I heave a deep sigh. "Oh, joy."

I let Roman lead the way out of my bedroom, and I jerk to a halt in the hallway, when I see the shattered glass across the floor.

"What the hell...?" I whisper.

"Get some shoes on. I don't want you stepping on any glass," Roman orders, already walking around the living room to survey the mess.

After I get on some shoes, I walk back out and clasp a hand over my mouth, taking in the mess and the shattered front window. My stomach sours.

Someone was in my house. It hasn't really hit me until now.

"Did you...did you see anyone?" I'm afraid of the answer to that question, but I need to know. Did Roman catch this person running off? What would've happened if he wasn't awake and didn't run over here?

A cold chill travels down my spine at the thought.

He shakes his head, still glancing around. His nostrils flare, and he looks angry. I take in his stiff posture and suddenly feel bad. I'm ruining his sleep over this, and after how badly our last conversation went, I'm sure this is the last place he wants to be.

"I'm sorry about all this. I'm sure you have to get up early, and I hate to be the reason you lose sleep."

Roman shoots a glare my way. “I’m not leaving you here by yourself, Olivia,” he snaps.

I raise my brows. *Okaaay*.

“How did you know something was wrong?”

Rome sighs. “Max kept barking. He doesn’t usually bark for any reason. Took him out to use the restroom, and he was still barking. He did the same last night. When I heard the crash next door, I knew something was wrong. I turned on the light in the bedroom, hoping I’d be able to see whatever was going on over there, and when I saw you in your bedroom, the look on your face, I knew something was wrong.”

My stomach cramps. “You can see in my bedroom? Even in the dark?”

Something enters Roman’s eyes, and the muscle in his jaw clenches. “You’d be surprised what I can see from my bedroom, Olivia.”

I cough, heat blazing my cheeks and neck in embarrassment.

Well, holy shit. It’s one thing to strip and touch myself for him with the light on, but all those other times in the dark that I didn’t think he could see—obviously, I was wrong.

He clears his throat. “Anyway, I ran over. I let Max out, and by the time I got inside, there was no one here. Didn’t see anyone outside either.”

I deflate at his words. How can someone get in and out that quickly without being seen?

When flashing lights shine through the window, our conversation gets cut short. We step outside, meeting with the officers, and relay the events of the night. I tell them everything I heard, what I was able to see, and what I wasn’t. Roman tells his side of events, and I make myself comfortable on his front porch. Sadness engulfs me, as I watch my house get walked through by police officers.

I glance down at my dead tulips and back up to the shattered window above, my brows crinkling.

“I didn’t touch your flowers,” Roman says, walking up his porch steps. He leans his strong body against the rocky column of his house. I crane my neck to glance up at him, my brows furrowed. I take in his expression, the sincerity in his eyes, and I suddenly feel like the biggest shithead because I just assumed it was him.

“You didn’t...?”

Roman shakes his head, looking away from me, back toward my house. “I wouldn’t do that.”

A groan tears from my chest, and I drop my head in my hands. “I’m so sorry, Roman. I was just...I was so upset. I shouldn’t have assumed it was you.”

Our gazes collide, and suddenly, a thought enters my mind. “Do you think the person who broke in tonight was here last night?”

Rome’s lips thin, and I can tell, just from the expression on his face, that he was thinking the same thing.

“Let’s wait to hear what the police have to say, yeah?”

I nod, forcing a smile, but it feels hollow.

# Seventeen

## “American Money”—BORNS



Roman

I keep a firm eye on Olivia, as she finishes speaking to the police. They’ve promised to look into any other break-ins around the area, and they’re going to see if their team can find any fingerprints in the database, but chances are, they won’t.

An unsettling sensation builds in my gut. I was so close to going out with the rest of the guys tonight for drinks. Just the thought of not being here, while someone broke into Olivia’s home, doesn’t sit right with me. What if I hadn’t come running up those steps in time? What would’ve happened?

Once the last patrol car pulls away, I stuff my hands into my pockets and close the distance between our lawns. Olivia glances up at me with a weary smile on her face. She’s tired and scared, that much is obvious.

“Thanks again. For everything, Roman. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you weren’t here tonight.”

I was thinking much of the same.

She pushes off the porch step, shifting awkwardly on her feet. “I guess I should probably head inside now. I have to get up early for work and try to explain the situation to my boss.”

A glare steals over my face. “You’re not going back home, Olivia.”

Her brows draw in together, and she crosses her arms over her chest. “And where am I supposed to go, Roman?”

“You’ll stay at my place tonight. It’s safer.”

Her mouth drops open, as shock steals over her features. “You’re serious. You of all people?”

I roll my eyes. “Are you really that surprised?”

“Actually, yes, I am.”

I bite back a smirk and jerk my head over my shoulder, toward my house. “C’mon. You can take my bed. I’ll take the couch.” I don’t bother waiting for a response. Instead, I cross our lawns and unlock my front door. She follows me, looking wary but bone-tired.

“No. No, you should take your bed. I’ll take the couch. This is your house, after all.”

Heaving a deep sigh, I toss my keys onto the table and lock up behind us. Olivia is still standing near the front door, taking in the living room and kitchen. She’s been in here once before, but by the way she’s looking around, it’s obvious she forgot what my place looked like.

“Take my bedroom, Olivia. The spare bedroom doesn’t have any furniture yet. It felt a little premature, considering I don’t know if they’ll allow Ryder to stay with me. I’m already taking the couch. It’s fine.”

Leaving her standing there, I head back into my bedroom, fixing the sheets up for her, as best as I can. I was lying in bed when I heard the crash, so it’s not like I was doing anything she should be grossed out over. I hear her soft footfalls across the hardwood floors, and they pause at the threshold.

“At the risk of sounding like a total and complete ungrateful asshole, are your sheets...well, are they...?”

I turn around, crossing my arms over my chest, unable to hide my smirk. “Are they what, babe?”

Her eyes widen, and that flush, that I’m beginning to love, spreads from her neck up to her cheeks. She licks her lips and glances from me, to the bed, then back.

“I’m asking if the sheets are clean. There. I said it.” She drops her hands down at her sides, letting them slap against her thighs. “And don’t call me that.”

Taking a step toward her, I cock my head to the side, assessing her. “Call you what?”

She frowns, her eyes narrowing, ever so slightly. “You know what.”

Unable to help it, a full-blown smile spreads across my face. “You make it too easy, Olivia. I’ll be out here. Let me know if you need anything.”

I leave the door cracked behind me and grab extra pillows and blankets from the hall closet for the couch. It won’t be comfortable, but fuck it. I’ve slept on much worse in my life. Grabbing the remote for the TV, I turn it on, keeping the volume low, as I settle back on the cushions. It’s quiet back toward the bedroom. With how tired Olivia looked, I’m sure once she crawled into bed, she conked out.

A while later, I’m scrolling through my phone, when I hear the creak of a door and soft footfalls. I’m not surprised when I hear Olivia’s soft voice, as she hovers on the other side of the couch.

“Mind if I sit? Can’t sleep.”

Pushing upright, I make room for her on the couch next to me. She takes the opposite side, keeping a safe distance. Olivia keeps her gaze glued to the television, on the sports highlights that I know she cannot be interested in. She seems uncomfortable sitting here next to me. Her shoulders are stiff, and she keeps fidgeting ever so slightly.

Blowing out a sigh, I shift toward her. “Problem?”

“Hmm?” She turns to me, brows raised. “Nope. No problem. Just couldn’t sleep. I hope I’m not bothering you.”

“It’s fine—”

“You know what? This was dumb. I’m going to leave you to your own devices and head back to bed.”

She starts getting up from the couch, but I halt her with a hand on her arm. She freezes, her eyes growing round, as she glances down at my hand on her bare skin. An awareness of sorts sparks through the air, crackling in the space between us with tension. Slowly, I let go of her, watching, as her slender throat works a swallow. Olivia drops back down onto the couch, and we sit in a semi-awkward silence, until she breaks it.

“How are things going with your little brother?”

“My probation is over in a month. The social worker has offered to give me another chance. I just have to keep doing what I’m doing until then, then I’ll have Ryder back here. Hopefully.”

“How is that going to work exactly?” My brows dip into a frown at her question. She must notice, because she shifts, angling her body toward mine, giving me her full attention. “Well, I just mean, you work a full-time



job. I'm sure your little brother, Ryder, is going to need someone to pick him up and take him to school."

"I've already discussed it with my boss. He's willing to work with me. He'll let me come in after I get Ryder to school and leave when I need to pick him up from school."

Olivia smiles, and I feel the effect of it hit me square in the chest. "That's good. I'm happy for you. And you know, if you ever need anything from me, I'm glad to help."

Uncomfortable with her praise and generosity, I flip through the channels, looking for something both of us can watch, while keeping my mouth shut.

"Oh, this! I love this movie."

I refrain from rolling my eyes, but I still stop on *The Notebook* for her. We watch the movie in silence. Me, completely bored out of my mind, and her, glued to the television. She still keeps fidgeting, though.

"You doing all right? After everything that happened?"

She shrugs. "I think so. I'm a little shaken up, worried about the window and the person who got away. What am I going to do if they try to come back? I live alone, Rome. I don't have anything or anyone to protect me. I mean, I would consider getting a gun, but can you just imagine me with that thing? I'd shoot my own face off."

A spark ignites in my chest. "No one is going to come back and hurt you, Olivia."

"You don't know that," she whispers, fear bleeding through her tone.

"I do. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Olivia gasps, her gaze swinging to mine. I feel the depth of her stare, the bright multitude of colors swirling there, along with emotions I can't pin down to just one. I have to fight the sudden urge to reach for her and slam my mouth over hers. I drop my gaze down to her pink bee-stung lips. Lips I've tasted before and haven't been able to erase from my mind since then.

She tasted like everything I've ever wanted, and everything I'll never be able to have.

Olivia licks her lips, and my abs clench, my body tightening with need. It's a driving force, percolating in the air around us. She clears her throat, glancing down at her lap, severing the connection.

"You make it seem like you're not scared of anything," she replies, trying to keep it light with a forced laugh.

“I’m not.”

“Is it because of your childhood?” she asks quietly. Those doe eyes search mine, and I feel her gaze drilling holes into me, as if she’s trying to peer into my soul.

I shrug, angling my body toward her. With the movement, she shifts toward me a little more, her knee grazing mine. We glance down at the point of contact, heat surging through my body, at the way her body feels against mine.

“Maybe,” I answer her question noncommittally.

“How long were you in juvie again?”

“Too long for a kid my age.”

Sadness clouds her hazel eyes. The color is a strange blend of green and honey right now. “What about jail?”

“Did a couple of stints here and there. Probably something like two years combined.”

“Were you afraid?”

My face shutters, her question bringing back memories I’ve tried to suppress. “In the beginning I was, but it was mostly because of Ryder. Without me there, I worried about what would happen. Who would take care of him? How would he eat? Then I started to worry about when he got older. How would he get to school? I knew my mother wouldn’t do any of those things. I spent that first month worried he’d starve, but at least one positive thing came from me being gone. It made the state look into our home life and our mother. They took Ryder, soon after, and he’s been in the system ever since.”

“God.” She sighs. “I can’t imagine what that was like for you, Rome. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s a part of life. You do what you have to do to survive. To take care of the people you love.”

She smiles at me sadly. Much to my surprise, she reaches over, covering my hand with hers. “That’s not life, Roman. That’s not a life any child deserves. Least of all you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say thank you, but as I stare at her, I can’t seem to get the words past my lips. I can’t seem to say what I really want to say, because I’m enraptured in everything that is Olivia. With no makeup on her face, she looks softer, a lot more innocent than she is. Whereas most women can’t pull off the no makeup look, Olivia certainly can. There’s a

smattering of light freckles across the bridge of her nose. I've never noticed them before, but I find I'm unable to look away from them now. Her hair is a blend of brown and honey highlights that make me want to tug the strands around my fist and bring her lips to mine.

When I drop my gaze down to those lips, heat courses through my system, as her pink tongue juts out, wetting her plump lower lip. A growl gets caught in my chest, and before I can think better of it, I take her hand, tugging her into me. Fire engulfs my body from head to toe, and like the bastard I am, I kiss her. Hard and hungry. Sealing my lips over hers, I take her mouth with mine. She's soft and pliant in my arms.

Olivia moans into my mouth, her slender hand sliding behind my neck and tugging me toward her. I tease my tongue with hers, toying with her, tasting her, getting lost in the way she feels. Electricity crackles between us, the potency so strong, it's as if we've tapped into a livewire. I can't say which one of us torments and teases the other more as our kisses, our scathing caresses catch fire. All I know is this woman is setting me ablaze. She's making me mindless with passion, and fuck me, I've never wanted anyone more than I want her at this moment.

We both jerk away, our eyes heavy-lidded and at half-mast. Desire swirls through the air between us.

"I should probably go to bed," she whispers, huskily, her lips twice their size now. I drop my gaze down to her chest and stifle my groan, when I spot the two hardened points.

Jesus Christ.

"Yes, you should." My voice is like gravel, as I force the words past my lips. Olivia hurries from the couch and runs back to the bedroom. When the door shuts behind her, I drop my head back on the cushions and release a heavy sigh, staring up at the ceiling.

This woman is going to be the death of me. If I go another day with blue balls, I just might die.

Sometime during the night, after I've shut the TV off and fallen asleep, I feel the couch dip and peel my eyes open.

"Olivia?"

"Shhh," she shushes, crawling next to me, tugging on the blanket. "I can't sleep in there after what happened tonight. Just give me this and don't say a goddamn word about it tomorrow."

I chuckle, closing my eyes, and letting sleep pull me back under.

# *Eighteen*

## “Hold Me While You Wait”—Lewis Capaldi



*Olivia*

I stiffen at the warm, solid body of heat, emanating behind me. Peeling my eyes open, I glance around, my heart stalling when I realize where I am. Last night comes back to me. The break-in, staying at Roman’s, crawling onto the couch with him in the middle of the night.

My eyes widen when I realize, exactly where I am and what that heat is.

Peeking over my shoulder, I find Rome behind me, still asleep. His face is soft, more youthful looking now that he’s sleeping. During the day, he looks like a rebellious troublemaker, but, right now, he just looks like a guy who went out of his way to help a girl.

“You gonna make this awkward and keep staring?” Roman suddenly says, voice gruff with sleep. I jolt off the couch, shooting away from him and stumbling onto the floor.

“Roman, Jesus! I thought you were still asleep!” I gasp, clasping a hand over my heart.

“I was.” His lip inches into a smirk, and I have to fight to keep mine from spreading across my face. Staring down at him, his face and hair still sleep mussed, I get bombarded with images from last night. The feel of his hands on my skin. His mouth on mine. His fingers tugging at my hair. A zing of heat zaps me straight between my legs, and heat rises to my cheeks.

My core is throbbing, at just the memory of having his lips on mine. At my silence, he must realize what I'm thinking about because Rome pushes himself upright, gripping the cushions of the couch, his heated gaze raking across my flesh in my pajamas.

"I need to get ready for work. I, um...thank you. For last night." At his quirked brow, I'm quick to rush away, realizing how that might have sounded. "Not for that. I just mean for offering me your bed. Not that *that* wasn't great. Because it was. But *that*...we don't have to talk about that. Ever. Unless you want to."

I realize I'm rambling, and the blank expression that's on his face would normally make me sick to my stomach, but there's a glimmer of amusement in his eyes that doesn't make me feel like a complete idiot.

Before I can make an even bigger fool of myself, I whirl around, running back into his bedroom, to use the restroom and make myself look somewhat presentable, before I head back home. I expect to be disgusted by the state of his bathroom, but I'm surprised that his cleanliness extends even there. Looking as presentable as I'm going to get, I slide my shoes on and brave going out there and facing Roman, again, before I start my day.

I stumble when I realize he's no longer sitting on the couch, but in the kitchen now, coffee pot on and something popping on the stove. My brows dip down, and I frown. When I see his naked back, I let out a ragged gasp, because Jesus Christ, the man is beautiful everywhere.

"You're naked," I blurt.

Roman turns, a comical expression on his face. He glances down at himself, then back up at me. "I clearly am not naked."

"You have a coffee pot."

"Is that a crime?"

"You know how to cook," I squeak, pointing out the obvious, once again.

"Are these observations going somewhere?" He quirks a brow, obviously enjoying himself.

"Yes. No. I mean, I need to go. Thank you for...everything."

Clutching my cell and my house keys in my hand, I run to the front door, needing to make an escape, before I look any more foolish than I already do.

"Bye, Olivia." I hear, before I'm running across our lawns like a madwoman. As I'm unlocking my front door, I glance over my shoulder,

spotting Nosy Josie in her normal spot. With that damned cigarette, she eyes me with contempt, shaking her head at me.

I roll my eyes and let myself inside, so I can get ready for work. My shower is quick, and I'm out of the house and on the road in less than an hour. My mind is whirring with a long checklist of things that need to be done. By the time I step inside the clinic, I'm already stressed. It only gets worse when I realize it won't be Samuel, I'm talking to, but Travis.

What happened yesterday in the office before his dad walked in feels like it is worlds away. In that timespan, I had my house broken into, talked to the police, and slept at my neighbor's house, a neighbor who I'm pretty sure still hates me; yet, I let him kiss me. Things in my life are starting to get crazy. Beyond unpredictable.

I wait until after lunch, before I knock on Travis's office door to talk to him. His gruff response is the only indication I get for me to come in. He glances up briefly, pausing when he sees me. Something that looks akin to a smirk twists the corner of his mouth. I stifle the urge to roll my eyes. I'm sure he thinks I'm in here to discuss yesterday and probably welcome more of his advances, but he couldn't be more wrong.

"Hey, Travis. I was wondering if we could talk."

"Of course. Close the door, please."

I pause, a strange sense of dread filling my stomach. Even though I don't want to, I close the door and take the open chair opposite his. Settling my hands in my lap, I begin twiddling my thumbs nervously. I'm just about to open my mouth to say something when he beats me to it.

"I'm glad you stopped by, Olivia. I've been thinking about you. A lot."

I shift uncomfortably. Good Lord. It's only been a day since he's last seen me. How could he possibly think about me *that* much?

"Oh. Wow," I breathe, unsure of how to respond to this man, without triggering him.

"Look, I realize our situation isn't ideal, but I meant what I said yesterday, Olivia. There's something between us. I know you feel it, too."

I slam my eyes shut. "Travis...that's not why I'm here. I told you before. I'm not interested in pursuing anything with you. You're my boss. I was in a long-term relationship for a while. All I want to focus on, right now, is my career and building my life here."

Travis's face shutters, and I know I've made a mistake by saying that. Even though it sounded sincere and nice in my head, it obviously didn't

come off that way to him because he's damn near scowling at me from across the table.

"What's the problem then, Olivia?"

I clear my throat, trying to summon the courage to keep speaking, even though doing so now, after that, feels anything but welcomed. He's rifling through files on his desk, no longer interested. "Well, my house was broken into last night." I expect his eyes to widen at my words or at least an ounce of sympathy to enter his eyes at the news, but I get nothing, just a cold, bored glare. He doesn't even seem all that surprised. "I was wondering if there was any way I could get the afternoon off to head to the police station and check on the progress. They pulled fingerprints, and I guess...I'm a little bit scared to go back home. My front window was shattered. The person got away. I just want some peace of mind that something will be done. I can make up the time I'll be gone, if I need to."

Travis sighs, toying with the file for his next appointment, trying to make himself look busy. "Look, Olivia, we're trying to run a business here. I can't show anyone special treatment. I'm sorry, but you'll just have to wait for your day off, just like everyone else."

I jerk back, confused by his cold demeanor. Is he serious?

He can't be.

That voice in the back of my head whispers affirmations.

*You knew this would happen. You turned him down. Now look. He's angry. Embarrassed. Ego deflated.*

"Travis, please, this isn't for something as simple as a dentist appointment. This is because my house was broken into. This is important."

Travis rises from his seat, tossing his file down onto his desk with a loud slap. "That's not my problem. Now, you should really get back to work. Your lunch is almost over."

I deflate against the seat, not even flinching, when the door slams shut behind him.



“What a fucking asshole,” Kass grunts under her breath, as she helps me lift the wooden board out of the back seat of my car. After I got off work—a full shift, I might add, because my boss is an asshole—Kassandra offered to go with me to the police station. She suggested we stop at the hardware store to buy a piece of plywood to place over the window, until I can get it fixed. Which is smart, considering I didn’t even think that far ahead. Hell, I haven’t even called my parents and told them what happened. Knowing them, they’ll be on the first flight here.

“Right? He’s being completely unreasonable, all because I turned him down.”

“I knew the guy was a douche, but shit, he’s taking it to a whole new level. Want to know what’s even worse? Lucy is so blinded by her love for him, she was bragging all morning about how he spent the night with her last night. Does she not realize she’s his second choice?”

I heave a deep sigh, as we finish propping up the board, using an obscene amount of duct tape, so it stays shielded over the shattered window.

“God, I feel so bad for Lucy. She has an amazing guy at the clinic who would literally hang the moon for her, and she doesn’t even notice him, because she’s so hung up on Travis.”

For the next hour, Kassandra stays with me and helps me clean up the mess that was left from yesterday. She offers to stay the night with me, but I politely decline. Even though the thought of staying in my home, by myself, scares the absolute shit out of me, I can’t rely on her to make me feel safe.

“You know you don’t have to walk me to my car, right?” she says, amusement tinging her tone, as we pad down the porch steps.

I laugh. “I know, but seeing as my house was just broken into, for no apparent reason, only a day ago, I’d say it’s a necessary precaution.”

“You’re a good person, Olivia. I’m sorry about the house, and I’m sorry about Travis being such an ass.”

“Thanks, Kassandra. It hasn’t always been easy for me to make friends, so I appreciate you more than you know.”

She grins, pulling me in for a hug, before she climbs into her car and drives off. I stand there, watching the taillights of her car, until they disappear down the bend in the road. Turning toward the house next door, I notice all the lights are still off at Roman’s. I planned on stopping by and talking to him about yesterday and telling him about the station visit, but, by the looks of it, I’m not sure he’s even home. Deciding to give knocking a



try, I cross our lawns and ring his doorbell. Surprisingly, I don't even hear Max's barking, only complete silence on the other side of the door.

Blowing out a sigh, I head back home. I'm just walking up the steps to the front porch, when bright lights illuminate the street. I squint, expecting it to be the bright headlight of a motorcycle, but instead it's two.

The truck that stops in front of my house has my gut clenching, and when I see who steps out, the color drains from my face.

"Travis?"

"Hey," he says, slamming his truck door behind him, closing the distance between us. He stuffs his hands into his pockets, his gaze trailing up and down my body.

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to apologize for how I acted earlier. Also, I know you said you were scared to stay here, so I thought I could offer to stay with you. Just to make sure you're okay."

I jerk back, as if he slapped me. This man's mood swings are beginning to give me whiplash.

*What the hell is he thinking?*

I glance around the quiet neighborhood, skittishly, before I force a thick swallow, glancing back at him.

"Look, Travis, I appreciate the apology, and I appreciate you coming down here, but...you can't do this. You can't just show up at my house in the middle of the night. You can't come onto me at work and treat me like crap because I don't reciprocate."

His lips thin into a grim line, but other than that, his face remains impassive, as if what I've expressed doesn't bother him one bit. "Is this about the neighbor? If you would just forget about him—"

"Ugh!" I growl, raking my hands through my hair, finally past my breaking point. After the past two shitty days I've had, I don't want to deal with this. "Would you drop it already? I feel nothing for my neighbor, Travis. *He* means nothing to me. *You* mean nothing to me. Why is that so hard for you to understand? Why is it so hard for you to get that I'm just not interested?"

My voice echoes around the quiet neighborhood, and when I realize just how loud I was yelling, heat rises to my cheeks. We both freeze. My stomach twists, and I clamp my hand over my mouth, my eyes growing wide with surprise.

A sharp bark drags my attention away from Travis toward to the house next door, and my stomach bottoms out, all the color draining from my face, when I see Roman standing there with Max on a leash. His shoulders are stiff. His face is a blank mask, void of any expression, but his eyes, God, his eyes break me. Even from here, I can see the betrayal there. I don't even have to wonder if he heard what I said. It's obvious he did.

And I didn't mean it. Not one bit. It all came out wrong.

"You need to go," I say to Travis, my voice trembling with fear. Not fear of him, but fear that I've made a tremendous mistake with Roman.

Without a word, Travis sneers down at me, stomping off my yard. He gets into his truck and skids off. The moment his taillights are gone, I take off toward Roman and his house, but he's already heading up his porch toward the front door. "Rome, wait! Please!" I yell after him.

He pauses at the door, and I skid to a halt a few feet away, trying to catch my breath. "I didn't mean what I said back there. I've just been dealing with a lot these past few days, and Travis...well, he's been hounding me about you, about my relationship with him." His nostrils flare at that, and my eyes widen. "No! That's not what I meant either. There is no relationship between him and me. He just...God, this is coming out so wrong. I didn't mean any of it, Roman. I swear."

He scoffs, scraping his hand along his angular jawline. "Didn't take you for the type, Olivia."

"What type?" I whisper, fear settling into the marrow of my bones.

"The type to spread her legs for anyone."

Pain lances through my chest.

A stabbing sensation pierces my heart.

My bottom lip trembles, and tears burn the backs of my eyes. "It's not like that, I swear," I choke out. "I didn't even know you were here. I didn't hear you walk up."

His brows jump, and a cold smile spreads across his face along with his humorless laugh. "Oh, and that somehow makes it better?"

"No! Not at all. That's not what I meant. I do care about you, Roman. You're the first guy I've felt anything for since my last relationship."

"Well, don't. I don't care about you, and that won't change anytime soon."

With those harsh words, he pulls Max inside, slamming the door behind him. My heart shatters, the first tears streaking down my cheeks.

*What in the hell have I done?*

# Nineteen

## “It’s You”—Ali Gatie



*Olivia*

When my alarm goes off the next morning, I roll onto my side and groan into my pillow. I spent most of the night tossing and turning, hating myself for last night and how things were left between Roman and me. I don’t even care that I’ll have to deal with the fallout with Travis. All I care about is Roman and how much my words obviously hurt him.

Errr—maybe hurt isn’t the correct word. I never thought a man like Roman could feel anything at all.

Obviously, I was wrong.

As I get ready for work, I decide to give my parents a call. I’ve put it off long enough, but I need to eventually tell them about the break-in. I’ll, of course, need to speak with them separately. My time talking with my mother will be about what’s happening—or more accurately, not happening—with Roman. Now, the conversation with my father won’t necessarily involve information about my neighbor, but he is my moral compass, and he’ll help me dig myself out of this mess, using his psychoanalyzing ways.

There are some benefits to having a sex therapist and psychologist as parents. Not many, but definitely some.

“Olivia, sweetheart! I was just thinking about you,” my mom singsongs. I wince when I realize her happy-go-lucky attitude is going to be

diminished, when she finds out why I'm calling.

"Hey, Mom." I sigh. "I was actually calling because..." I pause, tasting the words on my tongue, and I find that I don't like the way they taste. I still can't believe that my house has been broken into.

Dammit. Maybe I should've called my dad first. He's a little less dramatic and a lot more levelheaded than my mother.

"How are the doctors' visits going? Is everything okay?" my mother asks suddenly, as if realizing this isn't meant to be a pleasant phone call.

I roll my eyes. "Yes, everything is fine. Well, not really. My house was broken into the other night. But I'm fine. I'm totally fine," I'm quick to add.

There's silence. Hell, I don't even hear her breathing, which prompts me to pull the phone away from my ear to make sure the call didn't drop. When I see that she's still on the line, I frown. "Mom, you still there?"

"Are you fucking kidding me, Olivia Rene?"

I flinch at the atomic level of her voice. Lisa Hales doesn't yell often. I mean, sure, she has a loud voice, but yelling in anger? That's not something she does. Yet, she's doing it right now. In my poor eardrum.

My eyes slam shut. "Don't do that. I'm fine, I swear."

"You're fine? Fine? Your house was broken into. You are a young, beautiful woman who lives alone, and you could've been murdered, and you decide to call and break the news like you're telling me what you had for lunch." I cringe at her tone. It keeps getting higher and higher with each word. "When did this happen? Are the police involved? Oh my God! Your health!"

"I told you that I am fine," I tell her, trying to remain calm, hoping she'll follow along. "And it happened the other night. Things have been hectic, and I haven't had a chance to call."

She screams.

My mother screams, absolute bloody murder, on the other end of the line.

I cringe, wishing I had worded that differently.

"The other night? *THE OTHER NIGHT?*"

I tap the speaker button on my screen and begin brushing my teeth, unable to handle her piercing cries directly into my eardrum.

"You cannot do things like this, Olivia. This is irresponsible of you and your health. How dare you keep this from your father and me!"

That gets my back up. I spit a wad of toothpaste into the sink, snatching my toothbrush out of my mouth. “Irresponsible? Are you kidding? I’m having a crisis, and you’re more worried about me not telling you?”

“You’re not normal, Olivia. As much as you’d like to believe you are, you’re not! You can’t live a normal life!”

“I can!” I snap, tossing my toothbrush onto the vanity. “This is why I moved here. This is why I moved away—to get away from this. Your constant bickering in my goddamn ear every five seconds. You don’t think I can do anything myself.”

“Because you can’t!”

My chest caves in with pain, an iciness piercing down the center, making my bottom lip tremble. A searing ache slams into me, taking my breath away. Sniffing back the sudden pressure I feel in my nose, I grab my phone off the counter and let the anger and pain from the past few days out.

“You want to know why you’re never in the loop? This is why! Because you’ll never come to terms with the fact that I don’t need you, and I can take care of myself just fine.”

With those harsh words, I end the call, chucking my phone into my bedroom. I finish in the bathroom, pausing when I get a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. There are dark bags under my eyes, and the pallor of my skin looks dull and lifeless today. Of all days I’d need to look presentable, today is the day I had to wake up, looking like this.

Today, we’re taking the annual photograph that goes on the website. It has all the staff members who work at the clinic, to make our customers feel more connected with the staff who will be handling their animals. Dressing quickly, I opt for a white sundress and wedges, stuffing my work clothes into a bag, before I’m out of the house.

It sort of feels like the universe has decided to bestow the shittiest of days upon me; each day just seems to keep getting worse and worse. At work, Travis is an absolute nightmare. The minute I step foot inside the clinic, our gazes clash, and I feel his animosity toward me. It radiates in waves throughout the photo op and during our shifts. During our first procedure, he is snappy and rude and makes me feel like I can’t do anything right.

He is also a disgusting, chauvinistic pig. During my fifteen, I take a quick bathroom break when I spot him cornering Lucy in the supply room. His hands are running up and down her body, and I’m sure he is whispering

sweet nothings in her ear. If the goofy smile on her face was any indication, I'd say she's falling for every second of it. Disgust churns through my gut, as I walk past them. The fact that this man, who seems to have no boundaries at all, was at my home, only hours prior, professing how much he thought we belonged together is scary. As much as I like Samuel Bennett, his son is a fucking idiot.

Samuel has a busy schedule today, but he does stop me, while I am on my way to lunch and says he wants to have a conversation with me sometime this week, when we're both free. That can't be good.

Once our shift is over and the night duty staff comes in, I change out of my filthy scrubs and back into my dress, while everyone gathers their stuff and talks about stopping at Cole's to get drinks. My original plan was to go home and wallow, but after the days I've had, lately, getting drunk with Cassandra and a few of the other vet techs doesn't sound like a bad idea.

I'm grabbing my purse out of my locker, talking to Cassandra, when a voice stops me in my tracks.

"What are you doing?"

I turn toward Travis, whose narrowed gaze is aimed at me. Everyone in the clinic pauses to watch our exchange. "I'm grabbing my bag, so I can go home." I point down at my purse, my brows creasing.

Travis scoffs, an ugly, cold expression washing over his face. "Olivia, I asked you earlier to stay after and clean all the exam rooms before leaving. Something tells me you haven't done so that quickly."

Like a bucket of ice-cold water has been thrown on me, I freeze. My stomach turns, and I shake my head, my brows tugging low. "No, Travis, you didn't ask me to stay. I would've remembered."

"I think your mind has been elsewhere, Olivia. If you plan on staying here, you need to do the work. I need you to stay and clean those exam rooms. I don't care how long it takes."

Embarrassment crawls deep into my chest, heating my face. I can feel everyone's eyes on us, everyone watching to see what my reaction will be. I will not let this ass-wipe make me feel like an idiot in front of everyone. Luckily, I'm not the only one who thinks it's unfair because Atticus steps in for me.

"Hey, Trav, c'mon. It's been a long week. Why don't we all just head out to Cole's for some drinks? The night staff can handle it—"

“I didn’t ask the night staff to handle it, Atticus. I asked Olivia. And that’s final. Everyone else is free to go.” Travis’s gaze pauses on me. “And once those exam rooms are finished, you can go, too.”

Slowly, everyone trickles out of the break room, and I’m left standing there, my chest heaving violently, my nose tingling with pressure, as I work to hold back my tears. Cassandra hangs back, placing a soft hand on my shoulder.

“You want me to stay and help?”

I turn away from her, dislodging her hand. “No, it’s fine. The last thing I need is him saying I let you do all the work. Just go. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Olivia.” She tries to get my attention, but I already have my back to her, walking to the supply room for cleaning products.

I spend the next two, almost three hours cleaning the exam rooms. My feet are killing me, and the dress isn’t exactly the most comfortable thing to clean in, but seeing as my scrubs are filthy, I didn’t like the idea of putting those clothes back on.

The night shift watches me clean with sympathy, but they offer no help. Not that I’d take it anyway.

I’m so angry with myself for letting those words slip out in a moment of anger. It felt like Rome and I were finally finding a common ground, and I ruined it. He hates me. If I wasn’t sure of it before, I am now.

With a heavy sigh, an aching body, and a growling stomach, I walk out of the clinic to a downpour. The first I’ve witnessed here in Campbell. I stand under the awning of the roof, staring at my car in the dark parking lot, that’s illuminated by the glow of a yellow streetlamp. I didn’t know rain was in the forecast today, but I should’ve figured. When it rains, it pours, and it’s definitely pouring right now.

Using my purse as a shield, I brave the rain, running across the parking lot to my car. My body is shivering, my teeth are chattering, and my dress and hair are already soaked to shit by the time I’m inside. The fabric of my dress squelches against the now damp leather seats, and the water sticks to my thighs in the most uncomfortable way.

I feel a weight lift off my chest, as I pull out of the clinic parking lot. I don’t know how much more of this I can handle. What if today with Travis wasn’t the worst of it? What am I going to do then? And now that his father wants to have a conversation with me in private, I can only expect the worst. He’s probably going to fire me for being unprofessional.



Sadness clogs my throat. I've made friends here. Atticus is the sarcastic prankster who is never *not* in a good mood. Lucy, though she has her own faults, is as sweet as pie. Cassandra has the best sense of humor and the biggest backbone on the planet. She claims it's all in her "black girl magic," but really, it's her heart. She's the one I'll miss the most, if I have to leave.

Do I really want to go job hunting all over again? And Samuel, what will he think if I complain to him about his son? Will he think of me as some hussy, just trying to get a leg up? I cringe thinking about the compromising position he found me in the other day. A position I didn't even want to be in.

I'm a little less than halfway home when, through the windshield wipers, I see smoke billowing from under the hood of my car. My eyes widen, and I pause, as dread takes root in my belly.

"No, no, no, no."

The car sputters, and with no other choice, I pull onto the side of the road, letting it coast down one of the side streets downtown. Turning off the ignition, I hop out, getting soaked all over again. The smoke is still billowing from under the hood, and when I try to lift it, I burn the tips of my fingers in the process. Letting out a curse, I hop back into the car and slam the door. I deflate against the seat, staring up at the ceiling of the car. There's no way this is happening to me. Not today. Not after everything.

With a frustrated growl, I dig into my purse for my phone, so I can call the insurance or a tow company. Anything to help get me home. I swipe my finger across the screen. I press the power button and nothing.

*Nothing.*

An overwhelming wave of emotion slams into me. Tears spring to my eyes, and my bottom lip trembles. My car won't start, my phone is dead, and it's pouring down rain outside. I quite literally have no way to get home.

I bang my head against the steering wheel, hating that this is my predicament. I shouldn't have yelled at my mother this morning. Because now? My pride won't allow me to run to them for help—not that I'd be able to anyway. It's nearly eight p.m., and unless I want to risk walking alone at night, I'll need a tow truck to, hopefully, give me a ride to the nearest garage. Only, I can't call for any of those things because my phone is dead.

I war with the decisions in my mind. I can either stay in the car until the rain clears, or I can get out now and try to find a phone, or my last, and

final, option is just to walk home. I still have about a twenty-minute car ride to my house. I can't imagine how long that will take me on foot. In wedges, no less. Grabbing my purse and useless phone, I hop out of the car, locking it behind me, as I trek up the street, the way I normally would if I was driving home.

Settling my bag over my head, I try to shield most of the rain, but it isn't very much help. It adds an extra five pounds to my already long and endless trek. I spot a sign up ahead for an automotive garage, and a small ounce of hope filters through my chest. I quicken my stride, trying to get there before they close. I don't imagine a lot of mechanic shops are open around eight p.m., but one can hope.

My lungs are wheezing, and I'm out of breath, when I finally reach the garage. The lights are on inside, beyond the glass windows, and that hope blooms to life in the confines of my chest. I hurry toward the entrance, but pause, when I spot the older fellow in uniform on his way out.

"Excuse me! Hey!" I wave him down, running toward him in my wedges and soaked dress.

Truly, I don't think things can get any worse.

I'm wrong. Obviously.

The man starts shaking his head. "Just closed, babe. You'll have to come back in the morning."

My heart shrivels in my chest. "No, please! You have to help me out."

He blows out a sigh and peers over his shoulder toward the shop. "Fine. I have a guy in there who can help. *If* he wants to help you out, it'll be up to him." He turns, walking back toward the entrance, and I follow.

"Rome! I got a job for ya!" he hollers, as soon as we walk in. I practically stumble over the threshold, when I spot Roman wiping his hands free of grime. Dressed in the same getup as the older man, I can't help but stare, mouth agape. The black mechanic jumpsuit covers his long legs, but he has the top half-zipped down, hanging around his waist. He's wearing a white shirt beneath it that does nothing to hide his muscular physique. It still has grease stains, despite the fact that he has on the coveralls to prevent just that from happening.

I just about swallow my tongue when he glances up, his ice-cold eyes drilling holes into me.

*You've got to be shitting me.*

Turning back toward the older man, I resort to begging. “Please, I’ll pay extra if you stay and help. Please—”

“Look, lady, it’s my daughter’s birthday. I gotta get home sometime tonight. If Rome wants to help, ask him.” With that, he disappears, the bell attached to the door jangling behind him, leaving Rome and me.

Alone.

The air around us grows heavy with tension.

Silence passes between us. The soft trickle of water hits the tile floors from my soaked outfit, but I can’t find it in me to feel bad for that. Instead, all I can seem to focus on is him—the strong, corded muscles of his arms, the golden hue of his skin, and the smudges of dirt on his clothes that should turn me off, but they do anything but. My heart races against my chest, and I swallow thickly. I’m sure I look like a foolish girl, standing here in a dress, resembling a wet dog, in the middle of a rainstorm. I almost want to cry at the shittiness of it all.

When Roman continues standing there, glaring at me, that hope in my chest deflates like a knife to a balloon. “I’ll just let myself out.”

I turn on my heels, taking my puddles of water with me, and freeze at the gruff sound of his voice.

“What do you need?”

Slowly, I turn back around to face him, a sheepish look on my face. “My car is a few blocks away. There was smoke coming from the hood, then it just stopped.”

Roman’s jaw ticks. “Why not call your insurance company?”

I glance down at my heeled feet, unable to look at him. “Because my phone died.”

He blows out a sharp breath, and then he’s gone, the sound of a door slamming shut behind him. My shoulders slump, and I just about fall into a heap on the scuffed tiled floor and cry.

That is, until he comes back.

With a windbreaker in hand, he tosses it at me, jerking his head out toward the tow truck parked in the front.

“Put it on.”

His command is cold and filled with no-nonsense. So I slide the jacket over my body, and immediately, just from the smell, I know it belongs to him. It smells like the very essence of Roman and cars, all wrapped in one. I’m realizing now this is slowly becoming a favorite scent of mine.

Following him out to the truck, I wait as he locks up the shop and proceed to give him directions to where I left my car. While out there in the rain, he hooks my car up to the tow truck and brings it back to the shop. He does all of it without so much as one word to me. Not even a glance my way. To say I feel like a burden would be putting it lightly.

I watch in silence, as he works on the car in the spacious garage. There are other vehicles vaulted on jacks and some looking worse for wear. There are a handful that look amazing, just like the car in his garage. My gaze slides over his exposed muscles and the finesse of his hands, as he works with tools under the hood of the car. I want to strike up a conversation and ask him what the problem is, but a part of me is much too afraid to say anything. We've had too many strange moments lately, and I'm not sure how to feel around him.

One day, we're just neighbors, and other days, we're neighbors who kiss each other and touch ourselves to thoughts of the other. He's insinuated that he knows about me touching myself to the mere sight of him in his bedroom, in what I thought was the safety of my home. He's picked up on my attraction to him, and all I get back are his mood swings and his very rare smirks. I can't keep up with this man.

"You're mad at me. I get it."

He scoffs, still working on the car. He's lying back on one of those roller things now, inspecting under my car, while it's on the jack.

"I don't get you, Rome. I thought we were...connecting. I thought we were finally becoming friends."

"I'm not your friend, Olivia. And I don't want to be your friend."

My heart splinters at the caustic remark. "Then neighbors. We can be friendly neighbors."

"Don't want that either."

I grit my teeth. "So, what do you want, Rome? You want me to have no friends? I don't understand you! I told you I didn't mean what I said the other night. It came out wrong. Travis has been hounding me about you, and it just...God, it slipped."

He shoves out from beneath the car, shooting to his feet. "That's why you think I'm mad?"

"Yes!"

His chest puffs out, rising on an inhale. He clenches his jaw, the muscles there jumping against his tan skin. "I'm mad because I can't get

you out of my fucking head, Olivia. I can't stop thinking about you. Even when I know I shouldn't be. I'm mad because I fucking care at all."

His response takes my breath away. He tosses his oil rag, clearly frustrated. I rise to my feet on shaky legs, and the next thing I know, we're merely inches apart. He stares down at me, those bright eyes drilling holes into me. Up this close, it's easy to admire how handsome he is. There's a slight scruff on his lower jaw, but it does nothing to hide his masculine good looks. Those plump lips are practically calling to me, and when I look into his eyes, I see the intensity there. I feel it. The way it travels through my body in waves. The way it caresses my soul with a finesse I haven't had the pleasure of feeling in my entire life.

Waves of static electricity zap between us, the tension growing thick, so heady and powerful, I can't breathe without inhaling *him*. His very essence infiltrates my senses.

My tongue darts out, swiping across my lower lip, and his eyes follow the movement, heating like they're molten lava. Like a rubber band snapping beyond its capacity, we slam together in a mess of heat and passion. Our mouths collide, tongues clash, and I feel his hands on my skin, caressing my body. It feels like he's branding me with fire—marking me as his. I moan into him, as he tangles his hand in the soaked strands of my hair.

My dress clings to my skin, but he doesn't seem to mind. With an urgent growl that reverberates in his chest, he grips the top of my dress and yanks down the cups. When he takes my nipple into his mouth, my head falls back, and I groan, thrusting my chest toward him. I don't care that this man has been nothing but a jerk since I've moved in. I don't care that it's obvious he has a gaggle of women who want him. I don't even care that he might hate me. All I care about is this. Feeling his hands and mouth on me. All I want to feel is him. His tongue flicks and laves, toying with my nipples, until I'm a wet, panting mess.

With quick, deft movements, he hauls me into his arms, dropping me on top of the car and spreading my legs. I throw my head back, and my eyes roll into the back of my head, when he jerks my panties to the side and his tongue swipes down my middle. He fucks me with his mouth that is far too skillful to be normal. His tongue dips inside me, toying with my entrance, fucking me until I'm a gasping, trembling mess. When Roman slides a finger inside me, I cry out at the sensation. With his tongue fluttering over my clit and his long, thick finger pumping in and out of me, it's driving me

up the wall. I can feel the orgasm building. The throbbing in my core becomes incessant and the blaze of heat that crawls over my skin is all-consuming.

“Christ. You’re so fucking wet.” He strokes me, playing with my pussy, until I’m coming on his fingers. “That’s it, Olivia,” he praises. “Come all over my fingers. Just like that, babe.”

Blinding swirls of color burst behind my eyelids and my body spasms. Aftershocks from my orgasm roll through me, as his tongue still flutters over the bundle of nerves. He drags his tongue down, licking at me. He’s slurping and kissing, like he’s been dying to taste me on his tongue for ages.

When Roman stands upright, hovering before me, my core throbs painfully, as I take in the scorching expression on his face. His eyes are liquid pools of heat, as he stares down at me.

His mouth descends on mine, and I let out an embarrassing moan, when I taste myself on his tongue. My juices cling to his lips. A satisfying ache blossoms between my legs at the thought of the remnants of my sex clinging to him.

There’s a second when we pull away, where we’re just panting for much-needed breath. We use this second to breathe each other in, searching each other’s eyes. My heart stutters at the look in his eyes, as he looks down at me. Underneath all the heat and desire, there’s a softness that tugs at some place deep inside that’s never been touched.

With the tips of his fingers, he grazes my thighs, never once taking his eyes off me. Gooseflesh erupts over my skin at his soft touch. He trails his hands up, grasping the hem of my dress, and with slow, methodical movements, he peels the damp dress off my body. His gaze blazes a trail of fire across my flesh, as he stares at my body.

I help him shed his clothes, and when I get a glimpse of his tan, toned chest, I drag my nails over his skin, enjoying the sound of his sharp hiss. Unable to help myself, I drop to my knees in the garage, and I stare up at him through my lashes. His jaw is set in a hard line, his body stiff, as he waits to see what I’m going to do next. Not wanting to disappoint, I take him into my mouth. His head slides over my tongue, and I suck him in, until he’s poking the back of my throat. He lets out a sharp grunt, as one of his hands goes to my hair and tugs ever so gently. He guides my movements. With one hand, I stroke his base, while taking in as much of his length as I can.

He's musky and salty, the perfect combination.

Unable to take much more, he drags me up by my hair, lifts me in his arms, and urges me to wrap my legs around his waist. Then, without warning, he thrusts inside me. Hard. I gasp his name in pleased pain, waiting for my body to acclimate to his size. Our eyes hold, as my breath scatters, and he slowly begins to move inside me. Sliding in, then all the way out, he takes me like no man ever has. The feel of him is so perfect, it electrifies my lower spine. He's breathing new life into me, entwining our souls as one.

I catch a glimpse of our reflection in the mirror along the wall and let out an embarrassing moan. Watching our reflection, the way our bodies are tangled together, it's driving me insane. It's making me incredibly hot. Roman dips his head, catching my heated gaze in the mirror. He poises his lips near my ear, tickling me with his plump lips and his dirty words.

"You like to watch, don't you, Olivia?"

I nod, unable to help myself. He strokes harder, faster, deeper, and I dig my nails into his back, trying to stay afloat, when every part of me wants to sink.

I do it anyway.

I fall at that moment. I fall for the man with a hard exterior. I fall for the man who has the potential to destroy me.

Mainly because he's worth falling for.

He's worth risking my heart for.

# Twenty

## “Lucky”—Chelsea Cutler, Alexander 23



Roman

We collapse against each other, resting back on the car. My hands tighten around her perfect petite body. My fingertips dig into her flesh, as I get a whiff of her. She’s everywhere around me, wrapped up in me. I’ll never have enough of her. Now that I’ve had a taste, I’m like a fiend. I’ll keep coming back for more. No matter how badly things might turn out. A part of me knows I should turn away now, but I can’t bring myself to do it.

Slowly, I dislodge myself from her body and gently set her back down on her feet. She lets out a shaky breath, her body trembling. I can’t tell if it’s because she was wearing those soaked clothes for so long or because of what just happened. I glance down at her, the same time she peers down between her legs, and that’s when I see it. My cum slides down her creamy thighs, and, fucking hell, I know I should be berating myself for not using a condom, but it takes all my willpower not to whirl her around and fuck her over the hood of this car again.

I turn away from her, trying to pull myself together, and grab some paper towels to help her clean between her legs. When I turn back toward her, paper towel in hand, I see her face is a bright red shade.

Did she think I’d leave her like that? Standing there helplessly, with my cum still dripping between her legs?



Dropping down to my haunches, I pat her outer thigh, indicating for her to spread her legs. She does so slowly. I settle the towel between her legs and cup her sex, wiping her clean. She lets out a sharp gasp. Her hand settles on my shoulder for support, those fingernails digging into my skin. I glance up at her, and the way she's looking down at me right now, she's lucky I have her car to fix, or I'd be fucking her all over again.

"You're gorgeous. Every single inch of you." With my hand still cupped over her drenched core, I grasp the back of her thigh, in my other hand, and trace soft circles over her flesh.

Heat rises to her cheeks. Something flits over her features, as we stare at each other. She glances away, gathering her thoughts, before looking at me again.

"We didn't use a condom. Are you...are you clean?"

Still caressing her skin, I nod. "I am."

Her slender throat works a swallow. "That's good. That's really good," she repeats, as if she's unsure of what to say. It has me fighting back a smile. "I'm clean too. You know, in case you're worried. I'm on the pill, too, so, I guess you don't really need to worry about all this." She gestures around the mess between her legs, and the smile I was fighting breaks free. She's damn cute when she's nervous.

"That's good," I murmur, as I finish wiping between her legs. I didn't think it was possible for her cheeks to get any redder than they are, but I was wrong. With her bottom lip trapped between her teeth, she stares down at me, questions floating in her eyes.

"What are we doing, Rome? I...I don't do this."

I push upright, tossing the soiled towel. "Neither do I."

She rolls her eyes. "That's a lie. I've seen you do it. But I'm saying I don't. One-night stands aren't my thing. I can't—"

I whirl on her, a glare plastered across my face. "Who said this was a one-time thing?"

Her eyes widen. "You mean...you want to keep doing this?"

Releasing a pent-up sigh, I step into her, crowding her against the car, and I slip my hand around her neck. "I wanted to fuck you the moment I saw you standing by that goddamn rental truck, watching me ride in. I wanted to fuck you when you brought that fucking cake to my house. I've wanted you every single day since, Olivia."

Something flickers in those beautiful doe eyes, and her hands circle my neck, and she kisses me deeply, throwing everything she has into it. I don't know how I know that, but I do. I feel it. Just like I feel every part of her.

Gently, she pulls back, her chest rising and falling, rapidly, to accommodate her heavy breathing. The way she's staring up at me, through those thick lashes, has me wanting to slide back inside her and forget real life exists, but as I glance at the car beside us, I don't have that option. I need to keep it in my pants, at least a little while longer.

My arms tighten around her slender shoulders, when she trembles in my arms. I can feel the gooseflesh on her skin. She was out in the rain for God knows how long, and her hair is still damp as shit. Dislodging from her, I run into the shop, coming back with an extra set of clothes I keep in a duffel bag in my locker.

"Here, put these on. They'll help keep you warm until your clothes dry." I hand off the clean T-shirt and shorts to her. They won't fit, not on her small frame, but they're enough to keep her covered, until we get home.

While she dresses, I get back to work on the car. I feel her gaze on me as I work. There was a crack in her engine block, and she has a leaking gasket. For a car this model and year, most of the parts will need to be ordered, but other than that, it's nothing I can't fix.

I glance up at her, about to break the news, but pause when I spot her. She's already watching me, cheeks flushed, hair mussed in that freshly fucked look. She looks beautiful, sitting there, drowning in material, her beautiful body hidden behind my clothes. Seeing her like this does something; it awakens something primal in me. Her legs are pulled to her chest, her chin resting on her knees, as she stares.

"So, what's the verdict?" she asks, jerking her chin toward the car. "She going to survive?"

"Eventually. You have a leaking gasket, and your engine block is cracked. That's what was causing the shortage and the smoke from under the hood. We'll have to order the replacement piece, which can take anywhere from one to two weeks."

Her face falls, all humor evaporating from her face. "Wow. Just when I thought these past few days couldn't get any worse."

After wiping any remnants of grease off my hands, I toss the rag on the car and close the distance between us. I perch on the chair next to her, staring down at her.

“I guess it has been a shitty few days for you.”

She scoffs. “That’s putting it lightly. I’m not sure if the universe has decided to punish me for something. As if I haven’t paid enough in my life.”

The corners of my mouth quirk into a grin. “You always this dramatic?”

Her own mouth curves up into a mildly suppressed grin. “You always such an asshole?”

I lean in, pressing my lips to her temple. “I think you know the answer to that already, babe.” Pushing upright, I lay my hand out, palm up between us, and wait for her to take it. “C’mon. It’s getting late. Let’s go home.”

“My house or yours?”

“Yours. I’ve been dying to fuck you in your bed for weeks.”

“Roman!” she mock gasps, slapping me on the arm.



I follow Olivia into her house. Since her window is still broken, only boarded with a piece of wood I noticed the other night, there’s a cool breeze in here. She heaves a deep sigh, her gaze settled on the window, likely following my train of thought.

“It’s cold in here, isn’t it?”

I nod, dropping my duffel onto the floor. “Give me a sec. I’ll be right back.”

It takes me two trips, but when I finally shut her front door behind me, and Olivia sees what’s in my hand and the rest of the tools on the floor, her eyes widen.

“Roman, what did you do?”

I shrug, heading toward the broken window, to remove the wood. “I planned on fixing it the other night, when your boss was here.”

“Oh,” she breathes out.

I keep my back to her, as I work on popping the frame of the window out. I have a buddy who sells windows for a discounted price. Since our homes are mirrors of each other, I didn’t exactly need measurements, since

I already had my own, when I added new windows in the house six months ago.

“You bought me a new window?” she whispers, still trying to wrap her head around all of it. I heave a deep sigh. I know Olivia well enough to know she’ll never truly be okay with me buying her a window. Hell, she probably won’t even be happy that I’m the one putting it in. She’ll try to pay me back, maybe even throw in labor costs, but that’s not why I’m doing this. Not at all.

So, I lie.

“I changed out the windows in my house about six months ago. Didn’t realize I ordered an extra, and it’s the exact size of your front window. Figured you needed it more than I do.”

I hear her soft footfalls, and I tense when she rests her hand on my back. Slowly, I turn to face her. There’s a softness in her eyes, apologies written all over her face.

“The other night, when you were outside with Max...”

“I was going to bring everything over and work on fixing the window, but you weren’t home. I took him for a walk. Wanted to make sure no one was in the neighborhood, while you were still out.”

Her eyes glitter with some emotion, and catching me completely off guard, she leans in and kisses me. Her soft lips work mine, her tantalizing little tongue toying with my own.

“I really am sorry about what I said. If you can’t tell, by now, you don’t mean nothing to me, Rome. You mean a whole lot more. I think that’s why you get under my skin the way you do.”

The corner of my lip inches up. There’s so much I want to say, so much I probably should say, but I keep it close to my chest and get back to work on the window.

After she gets out of the shower, she chatters mindlessly in the background, cooking up something for us in the kitchen. Something she says gives me pause, and I turn, facing her, a frown passing over my features. “What did you just say?”

She pauses whatever she’s stirring on the stove at my tone. “I said if it wasn’t for my boss, Travis, being a jerk and making me stay late, just because I turned him down, today might not have been so bad.”

Rage sparks in my chest. “He made you stay late because you turned him down?”

Olivia heaves a tired sigh. “You know, not to sound dramatic, but he’s obsessed with you. Ever since he caught us kissing at Cole’s, his attraction to me has intensified, and every time I turn him down? He gets...crazy.” She shakes her head, clearly thinking about those instances. “He’s shown up at the house a few times. The night you were outside with Max? He just showed up out of the blue to apologize for being a dick to me at work. I asked for time off, so I could get the window fixed and everything sorted at the police station, and he treated me like I was asking for time off to go on a shopping spree.”

I drop the pane glue on the floor, turning to face her, something ugly brewing in my gut. “Olivia. He comes to your house without being invited? He takes advantage of you while you’re at work?”

“Well, sort of. I mean, maybe taking advantage of me is being a little dramatic, but I guess so.”

“That *is* taking advantage of you, Olivia. No employer in their right mind is going to show up at your home, when they haven’t been invited. It’s unprofessional.”

“I know,” she groans. “But what am I supposed to do? Besides being near Travis, I love working at the clinic. I’ve made friends there. And his father is the one who owns it, but I’m afraid complaining will only cause more problems. Travis is a manwhore. I’m certain he’s slept with half the women at the clinic, and the last thing I want everyone thinking is that I’ve slept with him, too.”

“You need to talk to this Samuel guy. Or I’ll be having words with Travis.”

Olivia rolls her eyes. “Stop it.”

Picking up the pane glue again, I rest the new pane for the glass inside, holding it still, while I wait for the glue to dry. Something about Travis doesn’t sit right with me. A part of me wonders where he was the night her house was broken into. I don’t want to freak her out and allude to anything, but the guy, obviously, isn’t right in the head.

“Just about done?” she asks, setting her small table with steaming plates of food.

I prop the stick against the glass, making sure it’s tight, so everything stays in place, while the pane glue dries. “Yeah, just about. The glue needs to dry, but as long as you don’t touch the window for a day or two, you should be good.”

“Thank you. For doing all this, Roman. You’re a good guy, even when you’re trying to convince me that you’re not.”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. I’m uncomfortable with her praise. It’s something I didn’t get much of as a child or as an adult. Setting everything down, I dust my hands off on my pants and head toward the door.

“Where are you going? I made food.”

“Gonna check on Max really quick. I’ll be back.”

“You can bring him here, you know. I don’t mind.”

There’s a vulnerable expression on her face. One I find difficult to turn away from.

Once Max sees where we’re headed, his tail wags a little harder than usual, and I shake my head. The dog is a fucking traitor, I tell you. Even when I’d purposely try to keep my distance, purposely try to find any reason at all to dislike my neighbor, Max was always whining when he saw her.

As soon as we walk into the house, he heads straight to Olivia’s side, pausing next to her at the table. With his head cocked to the side, he watches her, and she giggles. The sound is pure fucking bliss. Any other day, when I heard it, I’d try to pass it off as annoying, but that was just a lie. Everything Olivia does gets under my skin in the best fucking way. When Max settles his paw on her thigh, she gives his head a good scratch, before she gets up to wash her hands and get us both something to drink.

We finish dinner with easy conversation, and I truly can’t remember the last time I enjoyed just sitting and talking with a woman. Usually, I bring women over for a quick fuck, because that’s all I have time for. All I really have to offer. Relationships have never held an ounce of interest to me until now. Hell, I haven’t slept with anyone since the night Olivia decided she’d tell my last one-night stand I have gonorrhea. Worst part? Ever since she moved in next door, she’s been the only woman on my mind. I tried sealing the deal with countless other women, but I couldn’t. I was thinking about her the entire time. Not the women beneath me, *her*. I didn’t know what that said about me, her, or us, but all I knew was she was all I could think about. The only woman who apparently gets my cock hard these days.

While she cleans up in the kitchen, I pick up the mess in the living room, gathering the tools to take back home and get rid of the board and any leftover shards of glass from the broken window. Once I get everything

cleaned up, and Max is back home and asleep, I double-check the newly installed window, satisfied with how it's sitting.

I hear a soft pop behind me, and when I turn, I find Olivia sitting cross-legged on her couch, watching me closely, with a lollipop hanging out of her mouth. A smirk tips the corners of her lips.

"A girl can get used to this."

"To what exactly?"

"A hot guy in the middle of her living room, putting back the pieces of her miserable life together."

Closing the distance between us, I stare down at her fixated on the way the stick of the lollipop juts out between those pink bee-stung lips. Gripping the end that's hanging out of her mouth, I tug, and she lets go with a pop that goes straight to my groin. Taking the lollipop, I put it into my mouth, and her mouth drops open, her eyes heating with desire.

"About that bed."

She licks her lips, pushing to her feet. "Oh, that's right. What was it you mentioned earlier? You've been waiting to fuck me there?"

Christ in heaven.

My cock goes from half-mast to hard as a fucking rock at her words.

That mouth will be the death of me.

Knowing the effect she's having on me, Olivia smiles. It's downright sexy and full of seduction. Tugging my hand in hers, she pulls me along after her, leading the way to her bedroom.

With slow, methodical movements, she strips her shirt off over her head, leaving her in a sports bra. I drop down onto my haunches beside her on the bed, resting my hands on her hips. I hear her sharp intake of breath, as I begin tugging her bottoms down her legs. She bares her center for me, and I groan when I get a closer look at her pussy. Back at the garage, everything was fast and hot, but here, I want to take my time with her.

"You stole my lollipop," she whispers, tucking her bottom lip between her teeth, nibbling on it.

"I wanted to taste you."

Her brows dip. "And you thought that was best done with a lollipop?" I hear the amusement in her voice. That's what makes what I'm about to do next so damn perfect.

"I can show you much better than I can tell you, Sunshine." Taking the lollipop, I drag the sticky ball of sugar down her stomach and pause just

over her pubic bone. She gasps, and when I glance up at her, I see the knowing gleam in her eyes.

Taking the candy, I swirl it around her clit, enjoying the way she squirms on the bed. The way her hips ride off the sheets and she moans, begging for more. I apply more pressure, swirling through her folds, and then I pause at her entrance.

“You like that, Olivia?”

“Y-yes,” she pants.

As I slide the sucker inside her pussy, she groans, drawing a deep chuckle from my chest. “I thought so.”

I fuck her slowly, sliding the lollipop in and out, watching the way her walls grip the candy, the way her pussy glistens and drips with cum. With one last stroke, I pull it out and slide the lollipop over my tongue, tasting her.

Her eyes slam shut, and she tosses her head back onto the sheets.

“Oh, my God.”

I smirk. “You taste good, baby.” I drive my point home with a swipe of my tongue over her perfect little cunt. Her entire body spasms, and the noises spilling from her throat, bouncing off the walls in her bedroom, are driving me fucking crazy.

“Want to taste yourself?”

When she doesn't say no, I drag the lollipop across her lips, until she opens and then slides it over her tongue. There's never been a more perfect sight than this one. My balls draw up, and unable to help myself any longer, I strip out of my clothes and slide between her legs, pressing my cock against her entrance. When I slide inside her, my eyes slam closed, and her walls grip me like a vise.

Sex with this woman is addictive. Everything about her is addictive, so addictive that I can't get enough of her body, even well into the night.



# Twenty-One

## “Softly”—Clairo



*Olivia*

I wake the next morning, disappointed that the spot next to me on the bed is empty. Raising my arms over my head, I stretch, relishing in the slight sting between my legs. Last night was...like nothing I've ever experienced before. Roman is like no one I've experienced before. Because that's exactly what he is, a whole damn experience.

Back when I was with Reid, I once thought our sex life was what dreams were made of. It turns out, he doesn't hold a candle to my neighbor. Not that I expected him to anyway. I've never felt so connected and downright consumed by a person the way I do with Roman.

As I pad from the bedroom to the bathroom, I silently thank my lucky stars that today is my day off. I can't even imagine trying to focus on work, while images of last night keep flashing through my mind. The stiffness radiating from my lower body is also another delicious reminder of last night.

I try not to let it bother me that I woke up alone after everything that happened last night. It's not like I would expect a cute note from a man like Roman. He doesn't really seem like the type. I shower and dress quickly, trying not to let my worries get the best of me. As I'm padding down the

hall, I freeze, when I hear a thud outside. My heart jumps into my throat, and fear settles in my gut.

Slowly, I make my way down the hall, toward the living room. My gaze immediately flies to my newly installed window, and I can't help the slight upturn of my lips. It gets wiped off my face when I spot a large form outside the window.

Without really thinking it through, I run to the front door and throw it open. I stand on the porch in my bare feet, staring at the scene before me, my jaw unhinged in shock.

“Rome?”

He pauses when he hears me and casts a glance at me over his shoulder. He's in another one of those black T-shirts that hugs his biceps to perfection. That's not what has me rooted to the spot in shock, though. It's the fact that there's a crate of brand-new tulips beside him, and right next to that are the old ones that had been stomped to death.

“Is this a dream?”

He chuckles. The sound is warm and raspy, as it travels through my body in waves. “This the shit you dream of, babe?”

I swallow thickly, my heart kicking up a few notches at the name. After sleeping together, the term suddenly takes on a whole new meaning in my head. “You're calling me, babe?” I squeak.

Roman stands to his full height, wiping his filthy hands on his pants, as he closes the distance between us. He doesn't make any move to touch me, but as I stare in his eyes, I can practically feel the heat brewing there. I can feel his need. It rivals my own. There's a sharp bark, and it's then I notice Max, standing dutifully beside his owner, watching me with his head cocked to the side.

“Pretty sure this isn't the first time I've called you that. Would you rather I call you something else?”

I shake my head. “Nope. I like babe. Babe is fine. Babe is perfect.”

He smirks, obviously knowing the effect he's having on me. I glance, around his large form, at the brand-new flowers that Max is now sniffing. He turns away from them, clearly uninterested.

“Dumb question, I know, but...what exactly are you doing?”

“Bought you new flowers.”

I scratch at the back of my neck. “You do this a lot? Buy flowers and plant them for people in their front lawn?”

His smile is crooked, revealing that slight dimple in his cheek, and it causes my stomach to flip, as if I've just gone through a dip on a roller coaster. "Not usually, no. Though, I have planted half of Josie's garden for her."

I raise my brows, fighting back a smile. "Oh, really?" I glance across the street at the woman in question. The stamp of disapproval on her face is, ever present, as she stares at us. "So, I have quite the competition then?"

"I'd say so."

I lose the battle and burst into laughter. "You know, when you aren't being a jerk, you're kind of funny."

He shrugs, fighting back his own laughter. "It's a gift."

I roll my eyes. "How long have you been up doing this? I can, uh, I can make you breakfast, if that's maybe something you'd want."

"Nah, don't worry about it. I actually gotta get going in a bit anyway."

I don't mean for it to, but the goofy smile I was wearing, suddenly drops off my face, and I shift awkwardly on my feet. I feel like an idiot for assuming he'd want to have breakfast together after last night. I mean, so what if he replaced my window, stayed the night, and is planting new flowers for me? This is normal male behavior. This is casual. I can handle this.

"Oh. Right. Yeah. Totally." I'm babbling one-word answers in quick succession. I realize I probably sound like an idiot, but I can't seem to stop talking. "You can leave the flowers if you have some place to be. I can get to them later." I force a smile and spin on my heels, heading back inside, before I make myself look like an even bigger shithead in front of him.

Roman calls out after me, but I'm already shutting the front door behind me. I busy myself in the kitchen, making breakfast, and then I move on to the bedroom. I change my sheets and do a load of laundry, all in the hopes it'll help take my mind off Roman. I shouldn't let it bother me that he didn't want to have breakfast with me. This is my problem. This is why doing anything casual isn't meant for women like me. We think too much. Worry too much. The attraction I feel toward Rome is dangerous—not because I don't trust him, but because I don't trust myself. I'm not at a place in my life where I can drag someone else into my mess. I've done it, once before, in my last relationship, and it didn't turn out great.

I have nothing to offer but the here and now. I can't promise a future, because my future *isn't* promised. That is why I moved here and started

over. Not to find love, but to live the best life I can, while I am still able to.

Feeling weighed down by my thoughts, I pause, in front of my makeshift reading nook, and glance at Roman's house. A shocked gasp flies past my lips, and I jump in surprise. He's been standing there for who knows how long watching me. His hands are curled around the window ledge. He's shirtless and looks freshly showered. His dark hair is hanging over his face.

Swallowing thickly, I push open the window and perch my hip on the nook, mirroring him.

"I want to show you something." His voice travels across the small space between our fence and windows. I swallow, opting for humor.

"You plan to show me from this window?"

His mouth quirks. "You dressed?"

I nod, trapping my bottom lip between my teeth in anticipation.

"Meet me out front."

Slamming the window shut, I slip my shoes on and lock up behind me. When I pad down the porch steps, Max is already there, jumping up on my legs.

"Hey, buddy." I scratch behind his ears, enjoying the way he leans into my touch, as if he can't get enough of me. At the sharp whistle from his owner, Max runs back to Roman who lets him inside the house.

"So, what is it you're showing me?" I ask, following him into the garage, toward his car. He opens the passenger side door for me, helping me in.

"You'll see."

We ride in silence, and my confusion over what's going on between us only grows, when he leaves Campbell and keeps going south. When I see the signs for Oakland, my eyes widen. As I shoot a wary glance at him, the question is on the tip of my tongue.

He must know I'm on the verge of asking, because he answers for me. "On my days off, I always come down here to visit my brother. I didn't turn down breakfast with you to be a dick."

My eyes slam shut. "Rome. You didn't have to bring me here for this. I'm such a child. I thought you were just blowing me off, but I get it now."

His grip tightens on the steering wheel. "I'm bringing you along because I want to."

Warmth spreads through my chest, wrapping around my heart. “This is where you grew up?” I ask, glancing out the windows, taking in the dingy neighborhood. The sky is gloomier here than it was back in Campbell.

“Pretty much.”

There’s a tightness to his voice, as though he’s having a hard time admitting this is where he came from. Or maybe it’s just him suppressing all the awful memories.

“Are you guys still in contact with your mother?”

“No.” His answer is short and clipped. I lean back in the seat, deciding to stop my questions, until he’s ready to talk.

We drive for another fifteen minutes, before Rome pulls to a stop in front of a building, that has me working overtime to hide my cringe. The weeds are overgrown out front. The place looks like it’s a halfway house, and the fact that someone is living here with children? That’s a scary prospect.

“I’ll be back in a few.”

I watch him go. There’s a stiffness in his shoulders that wasn’t there earlier. His gait is less fluid than it usually is. For the most part, the neighborhood seems quieter than I was expecting. There’s a group of men loitering on the corner, glancing our way, but they don’t seem too interested in us.

There’s suddenly a loud uproar of voices, and when I glance back at the building, I see why. The front door opens and closes behind Roman. Just from the door being opened, the inside of that place sounds like someone is having a concert inside. Hell, if it’s loud from out here, I can’t imagine what it’s like inside.

I straighten in my seat, a smile breaking out across my face, when Roman walks out of the building with his arm slung around a young kid’s shoulders. I know Roman said Ryder is his half-brother, but just looking at them together like this, side by side, they look like near carbon copies of each other. The other difference is the obvious age difference and their builds. His little brother’s hair is a few shades lighter than Roman’s, and his skin is a shade lighter. I can’t tell if that’s just genetics from his father or if he just isn’t getting enough sun in that place.

Once they’re a few feet away from the car, I throw open the door and get out. Surprise alights the young boy’s face. He glances up at his brother, both of them pausing before me.

“Hi, Ryder. I’m Olivia, your brother’s neighbor. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

To my surprise, a smile steals over his face. He glances up at his older brother, who is rolling his eyes.

“And you said you didn’t like her.” Ryder snickers under his breath.

Roman hides his grin. “Shut up.”

“Believe me, I didn’t like him much at first either. Your brother is a bit of an acquired taste. Definitely not for everyone.”

Ryder bursts out laughing, as he climbs into the back seat. I’m just about to get in the car, when my gaze snags on Roman’s. He’s watching me, a softness in his eyes that I’ve yet to witness. It has glitter bursting in my chest. The sensation is light and airy, and for once, I welcome it instead of tamping it down.

Roman and his little brother catch up on the way to go eat. Ryder said it’s a tradition for them to go out for pizza, then ice cream. I listen in on their conversation, enjoying their slight bickering. Even though they’re siblings, it’s easy to tell, just seeing how he interacts with Ryder, how he takes on the parental role with such ease. Sure, he acts like an older brother, but he also holds the weight on his shoulders, as though he’s a parent. And he practically is. He raised his little brother when his mother couldn’t. I can’t help but respect him. Both of them.

We settle into a booth at the restaurant. While Roman heads to the front to order for us, I hang back with Ryder.

“How long have you guys been hanging out?” he asks.

“Not long. Being the new neighbor and all, there were a few long weeks, where I’m sure your brother hated me.”

“He talked about you a lot. He doesn’t hate you.”

“Hate is such a strong word. Maybe severely dislike is better?”

Ryder laughs and shakes his head at me. “He likes you. He wouldn’t bring you here if he didn’t.”

My heart does a somersault. “What makes you say that?”

“You’re the first girl he’s ever brought around me.”

I scoff, brushing that off, trying not to let his words get to me. “I’m sure that’s not true. He’s probably just busy. He wants to spend his time with you.”

“I’m sure that’s true. But he purposely doesn’t date. I know my brother. Just like I know you mean something to him if you’re here.”

I'm stunned into silence over Ryder's words. I shake it off when Roman comes back, not wanting to alert him that we were talking about him. For the rest of the meal, we laugh and talk, but I can't get Ryder's words out of my head. I shouldn't get my hopes up over this. I shouldn't find joy in this. But I do. God, I do.

Knowing what I know about Roman, it does something to my heart—the realization that maybe he feels something for me after all. Even if it's just a minuscule thing.

But with all those good feelings comes the guilt. Guilt because I'm lying about myself. I'm keeping secrets from him, and after the life he's had, he doesn't need any more surprises. Not like the ones my news could potentially give him. Throughout the rest of the day, my cheeks hurt from laughing and smiling so much. I didn't think I'd enjoy spending the day with a kid and a grown man, but I have. Sometimes, when he doesn't think I am watching, I catch Roman staring or watching me with an odd look on his face. It is a mixture of confusion and something else I can't quite name.

On the way home, a yawn rips from my chest. "Thank you for bringing me today. I had fun."

"You're good with him."

"Ryder?" I smile and shrug. "He's easy to be around. Well-mannered. I like him. Maybe even more than I like you."

The corner of his mouth inches into a crooked grin. "Oh, I'm sure."

"Any news from the social worker?"

"She said to expect a call this next week, so I guess we'll find out then."

Reaching over, I place my hand over his that's resting on the gearshift. "This is going to happen for you, Rome. For both of you."

He casts a quick glance my way. It's short-lived but filled with everything he's unable to put into words.

When we get back to his place, I linger, unsure if I should head home, stick around with him, or wait for him to ask me to stay. He's leaning against the car, those thick arms crossed over his broad chest, as he watches me, making me uncomfortable with the weight and intensity of his gaze.

"I should probably head home now," I offer weakly.

When Roman doesn't say anything, just continues staring at me, I turn on my heels and force myself to walk away. Warmth suddenly encloses around my arm, and I'm pulled back into the hard planes of his body.

"Stay."

My heart thumps wildly in my chest. “You’re probably tired.”

“I could be running on no sleep for days at a time, and I’d still find a way inside you, Oliva.”

I whimper.

Turning in his arms, I feel Roman’s hands slide around my waist, tugging me flush against him. His heat envelops me. His intoxicating scent is a drug. My nipples pebble against my top in anticipation, and he growls, almost as though he can feel it.

With an animalistic need I’ve never felt before, Rome digs his fingers into my hair and drags my mouth up to his. He takes my lips savagely, leaving me boneless. I fall into him. My lips and body surrender to him.

He works my lips with finesse, his tongue stroking mine so seductively that I feel the effects of it shoot straight down to my core. I can’t get enough of his mouth. The way he tastes, the deep lashes of his tongue. He is unrestrained, but oh, so skilled. There is knowledge in the way he handles me, experience that promises pleasure too heady to resist.

We break apart from each other, both of us heaving for much-needed breath. “I don’t know if I hate how good you are at this, or if I love it.”

His hands trail down my ass, and he lifts. My ankles wrap around him, and before I can inhale another breath, his lips are on mine again. We stumble inside his house, crashing into the walls of the hallway, tumbling onto his bed, all limbs and lips. With frantic hands, I grapple at his shirt, trying to get him to take it off. With the lights on, I get a full glimpse of his body, and a moan reverberates in my chest. I run my hands down the ridges of his abs. He’s perfect, absolutely perfect.

For every article of clothing he sheds, he helps me do the same. I’m so caught up in him and what his touch is doing to my body, I don’t notice him freeze when he rips my shirt and bra off.

“What’s this from?” The pad of his finger lightly traces the ugly scar along my sternum. My hands fly to my chest, trying to cover it, before he can get a better look, but he grips my hand in his, stopping me.

I don’t know how I forgot about this. Hell, I don’t know how he’s just noticing it now. Maybe because the lights are on, maybe because this is the first time we’re taking our time with each other, exploring our bodies while fully naked. Heat rises to my cheeks, and I glance away, avoiding his probing gaze.



There's no way I can talk myself out of this or ignore him. It's on the tip of my tongue to say it, to come clean about everything, but a startled gasp flies out, instead, when he touches me. With a caress that's so gentle and soft, so unlike him, he traces it. He runs his finger over the scar, and the effects of his touch, of his hands on me, even if it's just one finger, have my heart pounding. My blood is rushing through my body, roaring through my ears.

For some unknown reason, tears spring to my eyes.

"Why are you hiding, Olivia?"

*Because I like you.*

*Because if you knew the truth, you'd run. Just like everyone else.*

*Because I want you to want me.*

I don't say any of those things, though.

"Because the scar is ugly."

"Embrace your scars. They're what make you beautiful. They're what tell your story. And this one?" He leans into me, dipping his head down to rub his lips across the scar. "Is no different."

I'm speechless, as this man stares up at me through his lashes. Rogue strands of chocolate hair hang down in his face, making him look boyish and painfully handsome. I don't know what's happening, but the force between us is tangible. I can taste it. All I want to do is lean up and taste him.

"Heart surgery." It feels like I swallow my tongue after I say those words. His brows tug down, and for the first time ever, I see worry flit across his features. It's written there in the bright color of his eyes.

"You're all good now, right? There's not—"

I nod, tracing my fingers over his lips, stopping him, before he can finish that thought. I figure it's not really a lie if I don't use words. Rome doesn't need to know that my heart defect won't ever be one hundred percent healed. I'll never not have to worry about it. It's something I'll have to live with for the rest of my life.

I could tell him, but I don't want to risk him running, just like Reid did. I think it's why he tried so hard not to get our relationship to work. Because he knew what my odds were. He knew what he was getting into with me, and I was afraid losing him would mean starting over with someone else, who might not be capable of handling it.

And as I stare up at Roman, even though I want him to want me, truth and all, with everything else he already has on his plate, holding the truth from him is as much for his benefit as it is mine.

“Kiss me,” I beg.

And he does. He kisses me until I’m panting. He slides down my body, his tongue showing extra attention to my breasts, drawing moans out of me. His hand dips between my legs, fingers swirling between my wet folds. It’s all so much, the different sensations he’s eliciting, and I can’t keep up with them all.

His tongue flutters over my folds, and a long digit slides inside me. He pumps slowly at first, taking his time with me. Toying with me, he uses his fingers and mouth. My hands fist into his bedsheets, and I writhe on the bed. My stomach dips with the euphoric sensations he evokes in my body. I feel my orgasm looming. I’m on the cusp of coming, just from his tongue alone.

When he slides a second finger inside me and begins scissoring them, going faster, then slower, my hands fly to his head for support.

“That’s it, baby,” he breathes into my sex, as he fucks me with his mouth and fingers. “Ride my fingers. Just like that, Olivia.”

Colors flash sporadically behind my closed lids, and I groan, my body spasming violently on the bed, as my orgasm rips through me. His movements are so quick that I barely have a moment to catch my breath, before he has me positioned on all fours, and he’s hovering behind me, angling his cock at my entrance.

“Jesus Christ, you look good like this,” he groans, as he slips inside me. Our moans are a chorus around us. The sound of wet flesh slapping and cries of pleasure percolate in the room. With a skill that I’m beginning to both love and loathe, he pounds me into the mattress from behind. I find it so hot when I glance up, looking at the window, and I find our reflection staring back at us. If I look hard enough, I can see into my bedroom, but right now, all I can focus on are the strong sinews of muscles jumping and flexing in Rome’s body, as he fucks me.

“You watching, baby?” he whispers seductively in my ear, pointing at his window. I moan, because yes, I am looking, and I find I can’t look away. Our height difference should be a problem, but like this, the way he towers over me, taking me is so hot. When he lifts my legs, changing the angle of his thrusts, my eyes roll into the back of my head. The tip of his cock is

hitting something inside me, and with each thrust, it rubs, building and building, until I feel like I'm going to explode.

"Oh God," I choke.

"I can see everything from here, Olivia. Even in the dark." My core clenches violently at his words, because I know what he's getting at. Jesus. This is messed up. Looking beyond our reflection, I look into my bedroom, and he's right. I can see everything. Even in the dark. My heart is starting to pound at the realization.

"Every time I was with them, I thought of you. The woman next door I couldn't have. The one I didn't deserve to have."

His words wrap around my heart and squeeze. The effects of it zap me straight in the core.

"So, every time...you saw...?" I pant, trying to force the words past my lips, but with each thrust of his hips, I'm falling apart a little more. I'm falling for him a little more.

He kisses a path down my neck. "Oh, I saw, baby. I watched. I craved you."

"Roman," I groan out, his words my undoing.

"That's it, baby. Come all over my cock."

I do just that. With each swirl of his fingers over my clit, each pump of his hips, I ride out my orgasm, words and noises falling from my lips that never have before. I collapse onto the bed, and his grip on my hips tightens, as he finishes. He follows, soon after, scooping me into his arms.

We both lie there, staring up at the ceiling, as we work to control our breathing. There's a sudden howl that's coming from his hallway, and I glance up at him, laughing under my breath.

"Someone feels left out."

Rome's lips quirk. "Horny bastard."

His fingers trail up and down my spine in featherlight motions, practically lulling me to sleep. I rest my cheek on his chest, relishing in the feel of his warm skin beneath mine. The sound of his heart beating, the synchronicity, is a song I didn't realize I've been dying to hear.

"You know, I always wondered what this tattoo said." I run the pad of my fingers over the script tattoo on his pec.

"Got it a while back. During one of my stints in jail."

I smile sadly, thinking about the words inked across his flesh.

*Learn from yesterday. Live for today. Hope for tomorrow.*

“I think one day, when I stop being a chicken, I’ll get one. It’s sort of been at the top of my bucket list, but I’m sure you know how that goes.”

He laughs huskily. “Not really. Didn’t realize people still did bucket lists.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re telling me you don’t have one?”

“Nope.”

“Fine, I’ll share mine with you. I mean, it only seems fair.”

His chest rumbles beneath me as he stifles his laughter and it makes me smile. *God, I could get used to this.*

A thought suddenly strikes me, and even though it might ruin the mood, I need to know.

“Can I ask you something?”

His answer is a gruff, “Yeah,” that I feel vibrate beneath my head.

“How many women...?” I pause, trying to figure out a way to phrase the question. “Since I’ve moved in, how many women have you slept with?” I feel the muscles in his chest tighten, and I jump to add, “I only ask, because of all the women I saw coming and going.”

He’s silent. Far too silent. I start to wonder if maybe I pissed him off somehow or took it too far, by asking a question like this. But when I hear him chuckle, I nudge him in the ribs, my own lips twisting ruefully.

“Two. Both of them were to purge you from my mind, and everyone else I tried with, it just...”

My heart is beating rapidly at his admission. “Just what?”

“Just didn’t happen. I couldn’t do it. Especially not when I was thinking about all the ways I wanted to be fucking you instead.”

Glitter bursts in my chest, and my breath catches. Hearing this news shouldn’t make me as happy as it does, but Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I can’t help the relieved breath that escapes. It’s empowering to know I held so much space in his head that he couldn’t sleep with anyone else, because he was thinking of me. I’d like to say I’m not the jealous type, but that would be a lie. The idea of Rome sleeping with hordes of women makes me sick to my stomach. His admission has tamped down that swell of jealousy. I find myself burrowing deeper into his embrace, relishing in the feel of his skin against mine.

Since I asked him something deeply personal, seems he is doing the same. “Now it’s my turn.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“How long ago did you have heart surgery?”

I tense at the question. I should’ve known he wouldn’t let me leave it at that.

“I was just a kid, Rome. It was so long ago.”

He’s silent. Processing. “What caused it?”

I swallow thickly, wishing he would change the subject. Wishing I didn’t have that goddamn scar on my chest. I’d be able to avoid all of this. I’m not ready to tell him. I’m not ready for him to look at me any differently than he does now.

“I was born with a heart defect. By the time I was five, I had already undergone three open-heart surgeries. This scar, in particular, is from a valve replacement.”

“Does it affect everyday life for you? Do you see the doctor regularly?”

I heave a deep sigh. He sounds *too* worried. This was the last thing I wanted. “I told you I’m fine now.” Lie. “I take my medication. I have a doctor. I have it all under control.” Lie. Lie. Lie.

“You’d tell me if something was wrong, right?”

Guilt slams into my chest as he searches my gaze. There’s so much worry there. I can’t stand it.

I press a chaste kiss to his lips. “I will.”

Another lie.

“Your dad’s questions make a whole lot more sense now.”

My brows tug low. “I didn’t know he asked you about me. What did he say?”

Roman lifts his shoulder in a shrug. “He just asked if you were taking care of yourself. I didn’t know there was anything that needed to be taken care of, so I didn’t exactly have an answer for him. He also said they worry about you, being here all on your own.”

I roll my eyes. Yeah, that definitely sounds like my parents. “They coddle me. It was one of the main reasons I left.” I sigh. “I’ve always wanted to be independent, but with their constant hovering, I never really could.”

“Do you miss it there?”

I think about Long Beach, my old apartment, my ex. A wave of contentment rolls through me.

“I don’t actually. There isn’t a single thing in Long Beach I miss.”

His grip tightens around me. Using this opportunity to steer the topic away from me, I put the spotlight on him, instead.

“So, I know this is new, and I may be overstepping my bounds, but those women who would come here...” I make a face, even thinking about Roman with anyone else. “Were they your girlfriends?”

A laugh bubbles in his chest, vibrating beneath my ear. “No. Relationships weren’t my thing. Those were just women I fucked.”

“That’s kind of shitty, Rome.”

He shrugs. I lift my head, popping my chin on my hands, and stare up at him. “It’s the truth.”

“What about me? What am I to you? Just someone you’re fucking?”

He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, letting the tips of his fingers graze my cheek in the process. “You’re much more than that.”

My heart skitters in my chest. “Why?”

“I wish I knew. All I know is, when I’m with you, Sunshine, heaven feels a whole hell of a lot closer.”

My heart does something strange at that moment. His words wrap around the organ and squeeze. I feel emotion tug at my tear ducts, but I refuse to cry over such sweet words. I search his warm gaze, falling into the swirl of blues and grays there. “Are we...?” He quirks a brow, waiting for me to finish that sentence. I chicken out, deciding to take the easier way out. “Are we exclusive? I mean, how will this work?”

His brows draw together, and heat enters his molten gaze. “You’re crazy if you think you’re going to be fucking anyone else but me.”

A laugh bursts from my chest. “Well, gee. Way to turn up the romance.”

He’s still frowning. “I’m serious. We’re exclusive. Monogamous. Whatever damn label you want to put on it. You’re mine. And I don’t share what’s mine, Olivia.”

Despite his alpha-asshole spiel, a smile breaks across my face. “I prefer the term ‘girlfriend.’”

He rolls his eyes, but I see the amusement there, along with the smirk he’s failing to hide. “Fine. If that’s what you want to call it.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re kind of an asshole?”

A softness enters his eyes, and the effect of it has warmth spiraling through my chest and a hoard of angry bees swarming through my stomach. The buzzing radiating from there is almost too distracting. *Almost*. He traces my lower lip with the pad of his thumb. Taking my chin between his fingers, he tugs me toward him, ever so gently, pressing his lips against mine.

“Too often to count, babe.”

# *Twenty-Two*

## “All Night”—Beyoncé



*Olivia*

After spending the weekend alternating between my bed and Rome’s bed, I wake up Monday morning to the rude awakening of work. I’ve had a blissful weekend, where I didn’t have to deal with Travis, but that small reprieve ends today.

When I hear the honking from outside, I grab my purse and a breakfast bar, before I lock up. I asked Kassandra to give me a ride to and from work this week, since I’m still carless. Roman promised he would give me updates on what’s happening, once they get the new part in. It was kind of comical. After spending an entire weekend having sex and exploring each other’s bodies, we’d only exchanged phone numbers this morning, before he left for work at the garage.

He didn’t seem all that enthused that I’d be heading back to work today with Travis, but I assured him I’d come up with a solution for his advances. I didn’t tell him, yet, that that solution still wasn’t having a discussion with Samuel. The last thing I want to do is piss Samuel off, or his son, and be out of a job.

Jobless.

Carless.

Neither of those things sound appealing.



“Olivia, can I speak to you before your shift begins?” Samuel says, popping his head out of his office. My stomach cramps. Swallowing the sudden lump in my throat, I nod, forcing a smile, as I follow him into his office.

He blows out a weary sigh, dropping his glasses on his desk. “About the other day, with Travis. I wanted to make sure...did he corner you?”

My eyes widen with surprise.

I wasn't expecting this.

I was expecting him to take his son's side and fire me.

Pressing my lips together, I war with myself and mull my options over. Even if I do tell him about what happened with Travis, that's his son, so what is he really going to do? There's no doubt in my mind I'll have to be let go and the people in the office will gossip, and I'll be the problem.

Even though it physically pains me to do so, I shake my head. “No. It was just a misunderstanding. That's all. I'm fine.” The words are acid on my tongue.

Samuel searches my gaze. It's as if he's waiting for me to change my story, but I square my shoulders, determined to leave it in the past. Scrubbing a hand over his face, he nods.

“You're free to go. I just wanted to check in on you, Olivia.”

“Thank you, Samuel. I appreciate it.”

I'm able to avoid Travis throughout most of my shift. After my conversation with his father, I'm all the more determined to keep my distance. That is, until after lunch. We have a dog in for a clean break, an open wound near the ribs and what looks to be a shattered jaw. Travis needs all hands-on deck and that includes me, much to his chagrin.

It's obvious he's been purposely choosing everyone else for help over me. It's spiteful and petty, because he knows how much I love healing animals. Hell, he used to compliment me on how good I was at all of this. Now, he has me second-guessing myself and my abilities. Was he only saying those things because he wanted in my pants, or did he really mean them? Chances are, he didn't. That would explain why, instead, he'd have me clean up and not join in on any of the action.

Till now.

Putting my grievances aside, I follow Travis's orders, and with everyone in the room, we work together like a well-oiled machine. The procedure for Daisy, the dog in question, goes a little over our time estimation, and by the

time we clean up and have her in recovery, everyone is bone-tired. I'm gathering my stuff from my locker when I hear Travis's voice. I release a pent-up sigh, feeling deflated. I was so sure I'd get out of here today, without having to deal with him.

Across the break room, I meet Cassandra's gaze. She looks just as unhappy about this as I do. Sucking it up, I head into his office, keeping my expression blank. I refuse to let him know how much he's bothering me. I'm sure he'd get nothing but satisfaction out of that fact.

"You wanted to speak to me?"

"I did. Shut my door, will you?"

Biting the inside of my cheek to keep from snapping back a smart remark, I move to close the door, but pause, when Cassandra pops her head inside, stopping me in my tracks.

"Someone's here to see you, Liv."

There's a glint in her eye that makes me wary. My brows pull down in confusion. I glance back at Travis, who looks just as confused and put off by this information, if not more so. He rises from his desk, following Cassandra, obviously wanting to see what the issue is and what's keeping me from having a discussion with him.

I jerk to a halt in the waiting room, my eyes growing wide, when I see who is standing there. At his sprawling six feet four inches of muscle and leather is Roman. He has on those faded jeans that I love and a white T-shirt. His biker boots are so out of place in a clinic like this, it's almost comical.

When my gaze collides with Rome's, awareness slithers down my spine and desire pools in my belly, at the look he's casting my way. Jesus, this man is going to be the death of me. His eyes roll over me, toward the man behind me, and I see the tension slowly climb into Rome's shoulders.

Well, this isn't good.

I share a look with Cassandra and Atticus, who are both staring at Roman with raised brows. Yeah, I know. He's an exceptional specimen to look at.

Proving that the surprises are going to keep coming, Roman closes the distance between us and pulls me into his arms, his hand spanning my back, lifting me off my feet, as he leans down. His mouth takes mine in a kiss that I feel all the way down to my toes. For a second, I forget where we are and

who's around us. When we pull away, I'm out of breath, trying to blink away the stars that are still blurring my vision.

"You ready to go, babe?" he asks, tugging me into his side. Heat rises to my cheeks, at the way he's staking his claim over me. I can feel Travis's gaze on me, but I choose to ignore it.

"You didn't have to come here to get me, Rome. I told you Cassandra would've driven me home."

He glances in the general direction of Travis. "Yeah, I did."

*Okaaaay.*

"Let the man pick you up, Olivia. It's not every day we get eye candy like him around here," Cassandra offers, making me laugh. I hear someone's disgruntled huff, and I can just imagine who it is.

"Let me grab my stuff and I'll be right out." I hurry back to grab my purse, not wanting to leave them alone out there for too long.

"The fact that you're banging that hot piece of ass makes me want to jump straight off a cliff," Cassandra whisper-hisses under her breath, her gaze still glued to Roman's ass in those jeans. I trap my bottom lip between my teeth to stifle my grin. I still can't believe it myself.

"Stop eye-fucking my boyfriend."

Her brows rise. "Boyfriend? My, my, you guys don't waste any time, do you?"

"Shut up." I laugh, nudging her with my arm.

My feet falter as we make our way back into the waiting area. Travis's and Roman's voices are rising in tenor. My pace quickens, my heart lurching in my chest. I knew I couldn't leave those two alone together. Pausing just over the threshold, I swallow at the violence that's painted across Travis's face. Meanwhile, Rome looks bored. As calm as a cucumber. Sensing my presence, he looks over Travis's head at me.

"You ready to go?"

I nod, my gaze darting to Travis quickly. His lips are thin, eyes burning with an unrestrained rage. Roman clasps my hand in his, and just as we're leaving, he directs his next words over his shoulder at my boss.

"Remember what I said, Travis. I'd hate to come back here and pay you another visit."

Roman takes his time helping me onto the bike, and the entire time, I can't keep my gaze off him.

"What happened in there with Travis?"

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

I sigh. “Rome. This is my job. If I’m going to find myself fired because of something you said, I’d like to know.”

“You won’t be fired.”

“So, what did you tell him?” I ask, securing my arms around his waist.

“I told him that you’re mine. And I don’t share what’s mine. If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll back down.”

I dig my fingers into his abs. “Roman!” I admonish.

He shrugs, revving his bike to life.

“Told you you’re mine, Olivia. And I don’t fucking share.”

An odd thrill shoots through my core at his words. I tighten my grip around him, relishing in the feel of the wind whipping through my hair. With my cheek resting against his broad back, I fall for Roman Banks, my asshole neighbor, a little more than I had the day before.

Back home, Roman helps me off the bike, and something in his expression gives me pause. I hand the helmet back to him, a questioning gleam in my eyes.

“What is it?”

“Got a call today.”

I’m just about to ask what kind of call, when it suddenly dawns on me. My eyes widen, and a massive smile breaks out across my face. “You’re joking.”

For the first time, a genuine smile, dimples and all, spreads across his face. It makes him look handsome. If that’s even possible. Broody Roman is a vision, but the playful one, that’s a whole other man. One that my heart skips beats over.

“I got the news today. My probation is over. He’s finally coming home.”

I squeal, jumping into Roman’s arms. He catches me effortlessly. With my arms wrapped around his neck, I squeeze him to me, barely giving him room to breathe.

“I’m so happy for you, Rome. You guys deserve this.”

He sets me on the car in the garage, swiping his thumb across my cheek. “I actually have you to thank.”

“Me?”

He nods. “His social worker gave me the name of a woman who begged her to give me a second chance.”

Heat rises to my cheeks. It slipped my mind that I did that for him. The way he's staring down at me has my stomach flipping and my heart pounding so hard, I'm having trouble pulling in a single breath.

"Thank you," he breathes across my lips, sending tingles shooting straight to my core. The blue in his eyes is molten, like the heat from a blue flame.

"You don't need to thank me."

Reaching down, he circles my wrist with his fingers and lifts my hand to press my palm against his chest. My breath leaves me in a rush, at the feel of his pounding heart and the sincerity in his eyes.

"I do, Sunshine. It's all because of you I get to keep my promise to him."

My bottom lip trembles. "No, it's because of you. I've never met a man like you, Roman. One with so many sides, so much love to give. This was all you."

Keeping my hand pasted to his chest, he levels our gazes. "See what you do to me, Liv? You make me forget about the past and how far I've come. You make me want things I never thought I'd want," he murmurs, almost to himself, his gaze heavy-lidded. Just that quickly he went from playful to downright seductive.

I swallow thickly. My mouth opens to say something, but I snap it shut. I don't know what to say. All I know is how I feel about this man. He drives me crazy in the best of ways. I hate him and what he does to me, almost as much as I love it.

Taking his free hand, I press it to my heart. With my hand on his chest, and his on mine, we stand there like this in his garage, staring deeply into each other's eyes, saying all the things we're too afraid to say out loud.

"This is what you do to me, Roman. You make it so I can only see and feel *you*."

His nostrils flare, and my gaze, with a mind of its own, dips to his mouth. Need courses through my veins, making me hot and bothered. My breasts feel heavy. My sex swells and slicks. I press my legs together to alleviate the pressure.

"Kiss me. Please."

And he does just that. Kissing me until I'm breathless and Mad Max is howling at us. When we pull away from each other, both of us panting for

much-needed air, I spot Josie across the street, watching us with that same disgruntled expression that's always there on her face.

"I'm pretty sure she hates me."

"Sunshine, I think half the neighborhood hates you."

I mock gasp, knocking him in the chest with my fist. "People love me."

He's smirking, as he rolls his eyes, trying to get under my skin. "Oh, I bet they do."

Taking a seat on the open bucket he usually sits on while working, I watch him dote on Max. He brushes his fur, giving his head a good scratch, before he goes through the motions of wiping down his bike. He then moves on to the car and starts wiping that one down, too, even though it's in the garage. Unused.

An idea suddenly clicks in my head. "Can you teach me?"

"Teach you what exactly?"

I jerk my chin toward one of his pride and joys. "I've never driven a stick before, might be a good time to learn."

Rome pauses, blowing out a breath. "What the hell do you need to learn for?"

I feign hurt. "You're telling me you don't want your girlfriend to know how to drive a stick? The audacity."

He shakes his head, but I still see the remnants of a smile on his face, and I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that I've won him over.

Taking me by the hand, he drags me toward the car and pauses, turning to me with a stern look on his face that makes me grin even harder.

"Listen to everything I say, and for God's sake, don't mess up my clutch."

I jump up and down and clap excitedly. "Can we try the bike next?"

He stops in his tracks. "The bike is off-limits."

"Oh, c'mon, Rome, please."

"Shut up before I bend you over this car and fuck you instead of teaching you."

"Is that a viable option?" I waggle my brows, enjoying the way my core clenches with desire at his words. "What's my reward for driving well?"

He smirks, and I feel the effects of it shoot between my legs. He leans into me and whispers in my ear, "I'll kiss your sweet pussy, until you come on my tongue. That work for you, Sunshine?"

I swallow thickly, my panties now damp and ruined. "Y-yes."

Not even five minutes in, the car is all but forgotten, as Rome and I stumble into his house, shedding our clothes. It turns out, I didn't even need to be rewarded to get this.



The smile that's on my face probably looks goofy, but I can't seem to help it. The grin comes naturally, when I see the two of them together. It's been two weeks since Ryder has been home, and I've seen a subtle change in Roman. He seems happier and a little more carefree about life. Those first few days after he got the news were tough. He was anxious and stressed, and because he was still an asshole by natural design, he took it out on everyone around him. Except me, surprisingly.

He needed to figure out a ton of things. Did his little brother want to change schools? How did he feel about uprooting his whole life to live with Roman? It turns out, he didn't mind too much because he all but jumped at the idea of being out of that place and back with his brother. I gave Roman as long as he needed to adjust to taking on this parental role in his life. I couldn't just come over whenever I wanted anymore because he had a kid living in the house.

A teenager.

It was cute, watching Roman painstakingly set up Ryder's room in the spare bedroom. He wanted everything to be perfect for his little brother.

He's adjusted a whole lot better than I thought he would. Because of the hours he's working at the shop to accommodate Ryder's school hours, he's been taking on an extra day of work during the week, but the days he's working and Ryder is stuck at home, I usually hang out with him in the yard, and he helps me. So far, we've made the front of the house look somewhat presentable. The only splash of color is from the flowers Rome planted for me.

The weather is starting to cool, with it being September and all. Today, the two of them are bonding, putting up a new fence between our houses. The other one was old and leaning, so Roman took it upon himself to fix it and rebuild a whole new one with Ryder. How the guy knows how to do all

this, without being a contractor, I'll never know. They have been at it for a while already, so I can just imagine how hungry they are.

"I'll be back in a bit with some food, boys!"

Ryder waves goodbye, focusing on whatever Roman is telling him. Rome spares a glance at me over his shoulder, and even from here, I can feel the heat of it. Life with a preteen isn't easy, so sneaking in time for sex is a lot harder than you'd think. Sure, we could lock ourselves in his bedroom while Ryder is busy in his room, but I doubt his little brother wants to hear anything sexual coming from his older brother's room.

It's an adjustment, especially for a relationship as new as ours, but we're making it work.

After I pick up some food for us, I'm just about to get inside my car, when a steel grip encloses around my wrists. I let out a ragged gasp, pain tearing through my arm. My back is suddenly slammed up against my car, and when I see who it is, the words die on my lips.

"What the—"

"We need to talk," Travis grits out, his hand still gripping my wrist like a vise.

"Travis, what are you doing? You're hurting me," I hiss through the pain.

"I'm trying to talk to you, Olivia, dammit. You've been avoiding me, and I want to know why."

"Because of this!" I snap, wrangling my wrist free. The skin is red and chafed, burning from his bruising grip. I can even see the imprints from his fingers. "We have nothing to discuss outside of work, Travis. This is beyond unprofessional."

"Unprofessional?" He scoffs, color rising to his cheeks, in his bout of anger. "Want to know what's unprofessional? You being a cock tease."

My eyes widen, and I choke, as if the air has been knocked out of me. "A cock tease? Are you insane?"

"You led me on. Then you left me, for him, leaving me high and dry."

"He's my boyfriend! You and I have never even shared a kiss, Travis. You're out of your mind!"

His hand slams against the car behind me, stunning me silent. A ball of dread knots in my gut. I swallow thickly and press my back into the metal, wishing it would swallow me whole.

"You wanted me!" he growls. "What changed?"



The look in his eye turns my stomach. Gone is the sweet guy I met when I first started working at the clinic. He's no longer put-together. His hair is in disarray, and he looks like he's been drinking.

"Nothing changed. You're my boss." My voice trembles, revealing just how frightened I am.

"We both know I'm much more than that, Olivia. I want you. You're so blinded by him that you can't even see what's right in front of you." Travis leans into me, and I cringe, jerking my head to the side, trying to get away from him. Glancing around the parking lot, I search frantically, praying someone will walk by and put a stop to this.

"I don't want you, Travis. Please stop this. I don't want to speak with your father, but I will."

I feel his body tense. My words have set something off inside him. "Who do you think he's going to believe, Olivia? You or me? You realize I could've had you already if I really wanted to."

Slowly, I glance up at him, letting his words sink in. That ball of dread in my stomach only gets bigger. My gaze narrows, and my lungs clench, restricting air.

"Did you break into my house, Travis?"

He leans into me, causing bile to rise in my throat. He invades my space, and when his hand grips my chin, jerking my face toward his, I react. With my heart in my throat, I swing my knee up, and though I don't connect with his privates, I do hit his inner thigh. Travis lets out a grunt of pain, and I shove against his shoulder, causing him to stumble back.

With my heart pounding in my chest, I throw myself into the car and shove the keys into the ignition, peeling out of the parking lot. My vision swims with tears, and the road blurs before my eyes. I have to coach myself on how to inhale deep breaths. I suddenly feel like the road is shaking. My head is pounding, and my heart is beating so irregularly, I know I need to take my medication.

A sob rips from my chest, and I pull over, trying to get ahold of myself. I wish I could call Roman and tell him what happened, but I can't. He'd lose it. He has more than himself and me to worry about now. He has Ryder. And not to mention, bringing up anything about my heart condition, is absolutely out of the question.

By the time I get home, it's already getting dark, and I'm sure the food is cold. Grabbing the bags, I hurry inside the house and head straight for the

master bathroom. I throw open the cabinet, rifling through bottles, until I find the one I need. I swallow the pill down dry and slam my eyes shut, willing the pain that's ebbing and flowing through my chest to ease.

The sound of the front door opening and closing, then the hard thud of footsteps, catches me off guard. My heart jumps into my throat, and the calm that was just settling over me evaporates. The pill bottle slips from my hands and drops into the sink.

"No!" I choke.

"Olivia?"

My chest tightens painfully, keeping me from opening my mouth and responding. I run to the bathroom door and shut it, turning the lock, before he can see me. I get a glance at myself in the mirror, and I cringe. Tear tracks stain my cheeks, and my skin looks ghastly white.

"Olivia, are you all right?" Roman asks, his knuckles rapping on the door. I clamp a hand over my mouth, trying to stifle my heavy breathing. I force myself to inhale deep, stabilizing breaths, until my lungs expand just enough that I can respond.

"I'm s-sorry, I'm fine. I was feeling sick. Why don't you and Ryder eat without me tonight?"

I expect to hear a response or his boots retreating, but they don't. "Open the door," he demands.

The sigh that expels from my lips is a choppy wheeze of air. "I'm fine, Roman. I swear. I think it was something I ate earlier. I'll be okay."

"You don't sound fine."

I can hear the skepticism in his tone. "You would sound like this, too, if you were on the toilet, Rome!" I snap, just wanting him to take the hint and go.

He lets out a deep sigh, and I hear a thud against the door, which I can only imagine is his head resting there. "You'll call me once you're feeling better?"

"I promise."

I wait a while longer, until I hear the sound of his boots retreating. Collapsing against the wall in the bathroom, I slide down to the floor. With my arms resting on my knees, my heart drops, when I see the splotchy colors wrapped around my wrist. Tears spring to my eyes, and I press my lips together, trying to remain calm. Where Travis grabbed me, there is now

a bruise marring my skin. My arms begin to shake, and a warning pain shoots through my heart.

He was the one who broke into my house that night.

I know it.

How far would he have gone if Roman hadn't come over? "*I could've had you already,*" he had said. It didn't make sense until now.

Showing up at my house at all hours uninvited. I should've known. I should've guessed it was him. Why hadn't I thought of that before? His mood swings at work, the way he was acting whenever I turned him down—those were all signs. My hands tremble, as they weave into my hair, and I drop my head between my knees and sob.

Because, as much as I'd like to run next door and fall into Roman's arms, I can't. The first thing he'd do is go after Travis. He won't care that I have no proof or anything to base my opinion on. And if he sees the marks on my skin, he'll lose it. He won't be thinking about Ryder and everything they went through to get him back. He'll just be thinking about hurting Travis, and knowing my boss, he's the kind of man who doesn't care who he hurts in the process. He'll press charges, Roman will lose Ryder, and I'll never forgive myself.

On the bathroom floor, I make a deal with myself. A deal that will not affect Roman and Ryder.

# *Twenty-Three*

## “Girls Love Beyoncé”—Drake



*Roman*

With a glare painted on my face, I stand there, arms perched on the windowsill, as I stare into Olivia’s darkened bedroom. It’s night three that I still haven’t seen her. She comes home from work, later than usual, and she leaves before I’m out of the house with Ryder.

Usually, she packs us both breakfast on the way out, but ever since the other night, she’s damn near disappeared.

“Hey, Ro. Just wanted to say good night,” Ryder says, softly thumping his hand on the door. Turning, I find him leaning against the doorjamb, watching me with questions in his eyes. His gaze darts to the house next door.

“Are you guys fighting or something?”

I glance at Olivia’s house, my brows pulling low. I didn’t think we were fighting, but I’m not great at relationships. I could’ve done something that pissed her off, but I have no way of knowing.

“Honestly, I don’t know.”

My little brother scratches at the back of his neck, obviously uncomfortable with the idea of me fighting with Olivia.

“All right, well, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Ry. Let me know if you need anything.”

His lips twist into a crooked grin. I ask the same thing every night, and his response is always the same. "I will." But he never does.

When I hear his footsteps retreat and the door close behind him, I face back toward Olivia's house. She's avoiding me. I just wish I knew why. Every time I go over and knock on her door, she doesn't answer it, but when it comes to calling and texts? She answers right away.

I'm not usually one to sit back and let shit like this play out, but I'm so out of my element here, and I don't exactly know how to go about handling this. Do I go over and demand she open the door and let me in? What if this distance is because she just can't adjust to being around Ryder? Or worse, could it be that asshole Travis? Is something going on between them? She's been coming home later than usual. Olivia doesn't strike me as the type to do that, but you can never be too sure. Especially with the way she's acting.

There's a long list of shit that's bothering me, but at the top of that list is the curtains in her bedroom. They're shut. And those fucking curtains are never closed. I don't know what changed, what happened that made her suddenly close them. It feels like her way of closing me out. And I fucking hate it.

With a frustrated growl, I reach for my phone, shooting off a text to her.

***Roman: Come over?***

Her response is immediate.

***Olivia: I'm already in bed. I had a really long day. Talk tomorrow?***

My grip tightens around my phone, and I chuck it at my bed. It slams against the leather headboard, flopping back lifelessly onto the pillows.

Saying to hell with it, I grab my house keys and march next door. I leave Max back at home with Ryder, and once I'm on her doorstep, I ring the doorbell.

Silence.

Nothing but silence.

Growing agitated, I start pounding on the door. "Olivia, open the door. I'm not leaving until we talk."

This time, I hear footfalls on the other side of the wood. I can practically envision her peeking through the peephole, on her tiptoes watching me. When she still doesn't open the door, I resort to knocking again.

"Olivia, I'm not kidding. I'll wait here all night if I have to. You gotta come out sometime."

I hear her deep sigh, then the click of the lock mechanism. She opens the door, but only slightly, since the chain lock is still attached at the top. My lips thin into a grim line. For someone who swore she was tired, she doesn't look all that exhausted.

"Rome, I told you I was tired. Can't we talk tomorrow?"

Gripping the doorframe, I brace my weight there, trying like hell not to lose my shit with her. I'm becoming increasingly impatient, the longer she leaves me standing out here.

"That doesn't work for me, Liv. Let me in."

Heaving a sigh, Olivia closes the door softly, and I hear the chain slide across. When she opens it again, her eyes are looking at everything and anything but me. Taking the door from her, I close it behind me, invading her space.

"Mind telling me what the fuck is going on?"

She crosses her arms over her chest as though she's shielding herself from me, and I don't like it one bit. "There's nothing going on, Rome. Is it a crime to be tired?"

"Tired? You're tired?" I scoff. "That's not what this is, Olivia. If this thing, whatever this is between us is done, then just fucking say it. Don't drag this out and make it more than it needs to be."

Her eyes swing up to mine, wide with surprise and filled with tears. "Roman, no! That's not it at all. How could you possibly think I want out? I care about you. So much."

Her bottom lip trembles, and it only serves to fuel my frustration and my confusion where she's concerned. "How can I think that? You've been avoiding me for days. What the hell else am I supposed to think, Olivia?"

Her shoulders sag. "I've just...I've been busy, and I'm tired."

"You don't think I'm tired, Olivia? Jesus Christ, I still find time to talk to you, though, don't I? Why don't you just be honest? Is it Travis? You've been spending an awful lot of time at the clinic."

All the color drains from her face, and she stumbles back, like I've struck her. "Travis? How could you possibly think that?"

"What else am I supposed to think?" I yell. It's the first time I've ever yelled at her since we've been together. A tear slides down her cheek, and she uncrosses her arms, swiping at it angrily.

"There is nothing going on with Travis, you asshole! Isn't it obvious how I feel about you? Jesus, Roman. I've never felt this way about anyone."

I've just needed—”

I'm not processing any of her words. My gaze is honed in on her arm. Something intense seizes in my gut, churning violently. I feel it crawl into my chest, and I feel it squeeze my heart and lungs in a vise.

“What the fuck is that?”

She freezes, and when she follows the trajectory of my gaze, her mouth snaps shut, and I swear I see all the color drain from her face. Ignoring the pain that's suddenly a living, breathing thing in my chest, I cross the room and reach out for her arm. When she flinches, I grit my back teeth together so hard, I swear I hear a crack.

She must realize she flinches, because she shakes her head, more tears falling. Her eyes glimmer with apologies, and her bottom lip trembles.

“I'm sorry. So sorry. I don't know why I did that. I didn't mean to do that.” My brows dip into a frown that feels like it embeds itself permanently on my face. “What happened to your arm?”

She glances down at her arm and holds it out between us. My jaw clenches with anger, and my nostrils flare. The bruise is clearly in the shape of a hand, which means someone grabbed her. Someone touched *my* girl.

Olivia continues staring down, and I can tell she's trying to work through possible answers to the question, anything but the truth.

“Olivia.” The warning note in my tone is clear.

“It was Travis.” She whispers so low, I'm not sure I heard her correctly, but when she looks up at me, and I see the pain in her eyes, I know I heard her just fine.

“When did this happen?” I'm teetering on the edge of violence. So close to losing my shit. She must sense it because she stays silent. The way she's been acting, her avoidance, it suddenly makes sense.

“The other night, when you said you were sick. That's when it happened, didn't it?” Her chin quivers, and I know I'm right. “That son of a bitch. I'm going to fucking kill him,” I growl, spinning on my heels.

“Roman, no!” Her hands clamp around my arm, and she tugs, trying to keep me still. “This is why I didn't tell you. You can't—”

“How the fuck could you keep this from me? What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking of you and Ryder! Or did you forget about him in your sudden bout of anger?” she challenges.

I grit my teeth. “Don't do that. I always think about him. He's the only fucking thing I care about.”

I regret the words, as soon as I say them.

She flinches but recovers quickly. "I'm handling it. That was why I didn't tell you. I didn't want you to do something stupid."

"How are you handling it? Please, enlighten me, because the fact that this fucker is even still breathing is unacceptable."

"You can't resort to violence for everything, Roman. This is my problem."

"Like hell it is!" I snap. "He touched what is mine, and he's going to fucking pay for it."

Her eyes narrow, some color climbing back into her cheeks from how loud we're yelling. "Yours? I'm not your property, Roman. I am my own person."

"You're mine, Olivia. Whether you fucking like it or not. And I don't take kindly to people touching what's mine."

Her lips thin into a grim line. "Get out."

I laugh. "You got another thing coming if you think I'm leaving, sweetheart."

"You're being an asshole right now."

I step into her, sliding my hand around her slender neck, and I tug her into me roughly. She lets out a squeak of surprise but doesn't fight me. "What else is new, babe? This is me. Fucking deal with it. Now, you're going to tell me the story, the whole goddamn story of how that happened," I say, jerking my chin toward her wrist. "No more of this bullshit distance."

Her gaze narrows. "You can't just order me around, dickhead. I want to be alone."

My lips twist into a smirk. "Too bad. You either talk now, or you talk at my place. The choice is yours."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm going to bed. We'll talk tomorrow when you've cooled off."

"So, my place then?" I ask, ignoring her.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Before she can utter any more excuses, I bend, grasping her legs, and lift, tossing her over my shoulder. Olivia lets out a scream.

"Roman! Put me down!"

"Nope." I pop the p just to be a real son of a bitch. Grasping her keys off her table, I lock the door behind us and cross our lawns.

"I can't believe you're doing this. We have neighbors, and it's cold!"



“Should’ve done things my way then, sweetheart.”

“Ugh! Half of my ass is hanging out,” she hisses.

I glance up, and, sure enough, half of her ass cheek is exposed in those little sleep shorts she has on. I swat said cheek and grin when she yelps. Once we get inside the house, I set her down, and she shoots me a glare.

“You’re a Neanderthal, you know that?”

“And you’re stubborn.” I shrug, jutting my hands on my hips.

“You’re such an ass. I hate you.”

“I’ve heard it all before, baby. Now get your ass in the bedroom and start talking, or I really will start losing my shit.”

Olivia deflates. Turning on her heels, she heads into my bedroom, glancing at Ryder’s closed door, as she passes. I follow her, closing the bedroom door softly behind us, and then cross my arms over my chest, waiting for her to talk.

With a tired sigh, Olivia climbs onto my bed and leans against the headboard, avoiding my gaze. “I went to pick up the food for us when I was grabbed from behind. Travis cornered me. The mark is from him grabbing me. I told him he was hurting me, but he was so hung up on me. He was saying all this stuff about me being a tease, and I just...I don’t know. I freaked out.”

My hands curl into fists at my sides. I inhale deep breaths, trying to remain calm, but I can feel the red haze of rage, seeping into my vision. All I want to do is rip the motherfucker apart with my bare hands, for even thinking about touching my girl.

“Did he...?” I grit my teeth, forcing the words out. “Did he do anything else?”

She finally looks at me, a softness entering her eyes, and shakes her head. “No. He didn’t. He, uh, he did try to kiss me, but I kneed him in the groin, and I drove off.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me, Olivia? Jesus Christ.”

“I’m sorry. I freaked out. I didn’t want you to do something stupid. You have Ryder to think about now, and I didn’t want to be the reason anything happened.”

I scrub a rough hand down my face and close the distance between us. I drop down next to her on the bed. She shifts toward me, those hazel eyes searching mine.

“I know I have Ryder to think about now. There’s not a moment when he doesn’t cross my mind, but you mean something to me, Sunshine. You mean more to me than you’ll ever know. I need to know when something like this happens. You have to trust that I’ll be able to put my anger aside and do what’s best for everyone.”

“And what’s that?”

“Kick his fucking ass.”

She rolls her eyes. “Be serious, Roman. Please. There’s nothing we can do.”

Cupping her face in my hand, I graze my thumb along her jaw. “I’m not going to let him get away with putting his hands on you, Olivia. That’s just not going to happen. Be angry. Hate me. I don’t care. But that’s not flying, you understand me? And for future reference, don’t lock yourself away and avoid me, just to keep the truth from me. I can handle it. Whatever it may be.”

Her bottom lip trembles, and tears start slipping down her cheeks in quick succession. “Okay,” she whispers. Something in her eyes gives me pause. Like she wants to say more. I wait her out, but she just rubs her lips together, keeping whatever it is vaulted inside.

“Come here.” I pull her into my arms, and she falls into me.

“I told Samuel about what happened. I was expecting him to be angry with me and think I was lying, but when I showed him my arm, he understood. I haven’t seen Travis since then.”

“Think he’ll try anything else?” At her silence, I tense. “He hasn’t tried anything, has he?”

She sighs. “No, but...I don’t have any proof of it, and I may be far off, but something he said that day when he cornered me. I think he’s the one who broke into my house.”

I tense. Anger fires through my veins, settling in my lips. “What did he say?” I ask slowly, trying to keep my voice even, though I feel anything but calm. She grasps my hand with hers, prying my fingers from gripping the sheets. She opens my hand, tracing my palm with her finger, while she speaks.

“He said, ‘I could’ve had you already, if I really wanted to.’ I didn’t understand it at first. Nothing about our relationship was sexual. I never once led him on. I mean, sure, at first, I thought he was cute, but I could see through him. The way he treated the other women who worked at the clinic

was gross, and I didn't want any part of it. I just wanted to work in peace. Then when I was home, after it happened, I couldn't stop thinking about how cold he'd get when I turned him down. He'd get angry, and then he'd take it out on me at work. Then I thought back to all the times he'd shown up at the house uninvited. Every time you saw him here, *I* never invited him. There was always a reason he came. The only reason he knew where I lived is because he followed me home when I left my phone at work. If he really wanted to find out where I lived, he could've looked at my employee record, and I would like to say he wouldn't do that, but I don't know anymore." She blows out a heavy sigh that practically reverberates between us. "I could be wrong. Like I said, I don't have any proof, but I just...I have this feeling."

I'm trying to stay calm as I process.

I'm trying to be logical.

"You didn't think to tell me that sooner? You've been at your house alone. Anything could've happened to you."

"If he even has an inkling that I know, he's not going to show up at my house, Roman. He's not going to risk it."

"You don't know that!" I snap.

"You're mad."

"Of course, I'm mad. You put yourself in danger."

"What do you want me to do? Do you want me to be afraid of my own house?"

"No, but I'm not leaving you home alone."

She groans. "You can't baby me. The whole reason I moved here is to survive on my own."

"Who are you trying to prove that to?"

She glances away, avoiding my gaze. "I don't know."

Rolling over, I settle my arms on each side of her head and hover above her, staring down at her expressive eyes. I didn't see it earlier, but she does look tired. There are slight shadows under her eyes.

Her hands settle on my hips and slide around, rubbing up and down my back. I didn't realize how much I missed her until now. Until this. Just being this close to her. Having her beneath me, those mercurial eyes staring up at me so openly, with so much trust.

"I missed you."

"Could've fooled me."

She frowns, pinching my back. “Don’t be a dick.”

Dipping my head, I take her lips with mine, soaking in her taste. The soft feel of her lips, the velvet perfection of her tongue stroking mine.

“I missed you, too.”

She smiles up at me, and the effects of it hit me square in the chest. Her smiles always have an odd effect on me, but this one? It’s different. This whole night is different. What I feel for Olivia is new. I can admit it’s something I’ve never felt before. It’s something I’ve been good at brushing under the rug, not wanting to face head-on, but, after today, there’s no running from it. What I feel for this woman isn’t something simple. This isn’t just a fling. This is more. So much more. Seeing the bruise on her arm brought me to a place I haven’t been in a very long time. It made me realize how dangerous she really is, because I’d do anything for her.

I am in love with Olivia Hales. I don’t know when it happened. Maybe it was the moment she was standing on my doorstep, looking all sweet, holding out that fucking cake for me. Maybe it was the moment she helped me get my brother back, but, whenever it was, I can’t remember a time when this woman wasn’t invading my thoughts.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she whispers, searching my gaze.

“Like what?”

Her breathing accelerates, and she licks her lips. “Like...like you’re...”

“Like I’m what?”

It’s on the tip of her tongue—I can see it—but she chickens out in the end. “Never mind.” Smiling, she slides her hands around the back of my neck, tugging my lips down to hers.

I know exactly what she saw on my face.

The fact that it doesn’t scare me, not one bit, tells me everything I already know about the girl next door.

She’s the one.

I park the car at the curb, outside of my house, my gaze immediately fixing on my buddy Victor from the garage. He shoots me a look, clearly thinking I’m insane for what I’ve just done.

“If it was your girl, you’d do the same,” I tell him, as I climb out of his car.

He raises his hands in defense, crossing my lawn. “I didn’t say a damn thing. Maybe next time you go out to beat the shit out of someone, rethink your choice in vehicles, if you want to be sneaky.”

I roll my eyes. He’s not wrong. I knew if I took the bike or the Chevelle, Olivia would spring awake and immediately know what I was up to. Instead, I asked Vic if I could borrow his car. It’s a sensible vehicle that doesn’t make a lot of noise. It’s something I need right now.

After Olivia fell asleep last night, I texted Victor and asked him if he’d lend his car to me for a few hours, while I took care of something—that something being Travis. Victor came over early this morning and has been waiting out on the porch, holding down the fort for me, while I take care of Travis.

I didn’t expect to find Travis at the clinic, but with no other leads on where he lives or where he could be, I figured starting there was my best option. It turns out, it was. As I was pulling into the lot, I spotted the bastard yelling outside of the clinic doors. For whatever reason, he wasn’t allowed inside, and I got a thrill of satisfaction from that.

Travis got into his car, and I did what any sane person would do. I followed the bastard who put his hands on my woman. It didn’t take long to get to his place. It also didn’t take long for me to get out of the car and ram my fist in his face. The first hit was for being a dick to Olivia. The second hit was for breaking into her house. And the rest of those hits? That was for pushing himself on her and marking her.

Victor glances down at my swollen hands and whistles. “Good luck in there, man.”

A grimace pulls across my face, and I respond in a dry tone, “thanks.”

When I slip inside the house, I pause in the living room, half-expecting Olivia to be there with her arms crossed over her perfect chest, glaring daggers at me. I expel a relieved breath when I realize she’s still asleep, just like Ryder.

Heading into the kitchen, I glance at the time above the stove and begin pulling out ingredients to make pancakes. I wash my hands in the sink, only wincing slightly at the sting of soap on the scrape along my knuckles. Travis put up a good fight, I’ll give him that—too bad it wasn’t good enough.

I’m sliding the first pancake onto the plate, when I hear Olivia’s sleepy voice.

“Hey, what are you doing up so early?” She yawns, as she walks into the kitchen. Her light brown hair is in disarray, as it frames her face. Rays from the sun catch in the strands, bringing out the honey hue. My gaze rakes up and down her delectable little body. She’s wearing one of my T-shirts and her sleep shorts, and though it may not be much, she’s never looked better. She’s fucking beautiful.

“Making you breakfast,” I finally answer, once I’m done eye-fucking her. A soft smile lights her features, and she pads into the kitchen. Her hands slide around my waist from behind, and she peeks at the stove.

“Smells good,” she comments, her grip tightening around me. “You didn’t have to do this, Rome.”

I shrug, pouring some more mix into the pan, for the next pancake. As I do so, I feel Olivia stiffen behind me. Once I set the bowl down, she grabs me by the arm, urging me to face her. When I do, her eyes fly to my hands. I don’t even try to hide them. She would’ve found out eventually, and hell, even though she won’t like it, it won’t change what I’ve done. I told her I wasn’t going to let him get away with it, and I meant it.

“Roman,” she grits out, a warning clear in her tone. “What happened to your hands?”

I look down at them, my brows furrowing, as I feign innocence. “No idea.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and juts her hip out sassily. “Start talking, right now.”

I pop a handful of blueberries into my mouth in response. Fuming, she opens her mouth, and I’m sure she’s going to rip me a new one, until Ryder walks into the kitchen. He pauses when he sees us, his gaze narrowing on Olivia.

“Are you in the middle of a fight?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Olivia and I respond in unison. Ryder’s gaze darts, back and forth, between the two of us. He glances at the stack of pancakes, takes the whole plate, and slips out of the kitchen.

“I’ll be in my room if you need me.”

As soon as she hears the click of his bedroom door, Olivia whirls on me, with fire in her eyes. I shouldn’t find it as sexy as I do, but fuck me, her anger makes me hard as a fucking rock.

“Last time, Roman. What happened to your hands?”

I swallow my mouthful of berries and shrug noncommittally. “While you were sleeping soundly this morning, I made a call to a friend, and he was able to pull some strings, so I could handle some things.”

Her chest turns a bright shade of red, and I watch as it slowly climbs up her neck in her rage. “What kind of *things*, and what the hell does it have to do with your hands?”

“Paid a visit to Travis early this morning. He won’t be a problem anytime soon.”

Olivia’s mouth drops open. The color leaves her face, and I see the moment she loses her composure. Hell, I swear I see steam billow from her ears. “You did *what?*” she shouts, her angered voice, bouncing off the walls.

Pushing away from the counter, I close the distance between us, which is risky. She’s liable to punch me right in the nuts for going against her wishes. “He touched what was mine, Olivia. I wasn’t going to let him get away with it.”

“So, you kicked his ass for it? How could you be so...so...ugh, so stupid, Rome! You have Ryder to think about.”

I grit my teeth together. “What’s done is done. You can sit here all day and be angry, or you can get over it. Either way, Travis has been dealt with.”

“What’s done is *not* done, Rome! You can’t just come in here and fight all my battles for me. I’m not some damsel in distress. I told you I was handling things the way I wanted to.”

Within seconds, I have a hand wrapped around the back of her neck, and I tug her into me. Her eyes widen, and she lets out a puff of surprise. “This is one battle I refuse to let you fight on your own, Olivia. So, be angry. Fucking hit me, kick, or scream. It’s not going to change the fact that I’ll do whatever it takes to protect you—whether you want me to or not.”

Slowly, the tension eases from her body. A softness enters her eyes, in the midst of the anger she’s still holding. “I’m still mad at you. I hope you know that.”

I drag my lips across hers, reveling in her sweet taste. “Wouldn’t have it any other way, babe.”

Loving and protecting this woman is my purpose, and I’ll be damned if I fail at that.

# Twenty-Four

## “Little Lies”—Fleetwood Mac



*Olivia*

At my request, my parents and brother head up to my place for Thanksgiving, instead of me having to fly out. This will be the first time I'm able to host a holiday dinner. Back at my old apartment with Reid, we always did what he wanted to do. Dinner at his parents', then dinner with my family. I hated driving to two separate places. It just always felt like a lot of work, but I never complained.

A thrill courses through my body, as I take a step back, surveying the guest room we just finished. My house will be a little crowded with three extra bodies, but I'm not complaining. A part of the reason I did this was so Rome and Ryder would be able to have Thanksgiving with us. Sure, Roman could've given his little brother something amazing on his own, but I wanted them a part of this, a part of my family.

I also wanted my parents to know we're dating. The last thing we need is another awkward sex conversation spearheaded by my mother. Maybe now that she knows I'm with him, she'll back off.

“It looks really good, Ry. Thanks.” I pat Ryder on his back, and he grins at me, enjoying the praise. Over the past two months, we've grown closer. I can see why Roman spent years trying to get this kid back. He deserves it. You'd think after the life Ryder has had, he'd end up being a bad kid, but



he's the opposite. Always open to learning new things. He's a little quiet, but when he comes out of his shell, it's the most beautiful thing. Because when he laughs, he's the spitting image of his brother. And when he doesn't think anyone is looking, the way he looks at Rome brings tears to my eyes. I'm certain Ryder loves Roman like he's his father.

Those two aren't just half-brothers; they're so much more.

I've grown attached to these two, more so than I ever thought I would. I can't imagine being away from them now. Hell, the thought makes me sick. I know I'm in way too deep when the mere idea of losing, not just one, but both of them becomes impossible to stomach. I've grown close with Ryder; so close, in fact, he's even given me a nickname. That has to be a good sign, right?

"No problem, Olive. I'm gonna head home and shower, before your parents get in."

"All right, bud," I call after his retreating back. Ryder has taken to calling me Olive instead of Olivia, as a nickname of sorts, and I find that I love it.

He helped me put together the guest room for my parents. It's not great, but it'll do. And my parents won't complain. They'll just be glad I'm alive. Now my brother? That's a different story. My brother will find something to complain about, no matter how perfect everything is. Tales of being the baby of the family, I'm sure. With only four years between them, I hope my brother will get along with Ryder. I don't want Ry feeling weird around him.

Flicking off the light in the guest room, I shut the door and am just walking down the hall, when I hear a car rolling into the driveway. I cross my living room to look out the window and smile. Sure enough, it's my parents pulling into the space next to my car.

I pad down the front porch steps, tugging the sweater around my shoulders, to ward off the November chill. Also hearing my parents pull in, Roman comes out of his own house, crossing our lawns, heading straight toward my parents. My mom's squeal of pleasure can be heard down the street. I roll my eyes, slightly annoyed, but I'm unable to keep the smile off my face. My dad and Roman shake hands, while Brandon unfolds his abnormally long body from the car. It's been about six months since I've seen my little brother, and I swear, the asshole has grown a wondrous eight inches.

“Looking a little hub there, Brandon. Might want to think about cooling it on the supplements.”

My brother shakes his head dismissively, but I can see the smile tugging across his face. He pulls me into a hug. “You look like shit, Liv.”

My hands fly to my chest. “Aww. You have such a way with words.”

“Son, come check this out!” my dad calls after Brandon, as he crosses our lawns, heading into Roman’s garage. I’m sure they’ll be in there for a while, fawning over guy stuff.

“There’s my favorite daughter.” My mom holds her arms out for me.

I snort. “I’m your only daughter.”

She quirks a single brow. “That you know of.”

I roll my eyes but oblige, no less. My mom squeezes me. When she pulls back, she rests her hands on my arms, looking me up and down, then her gaze stills on my face.

“You look happy.”

I grin. “That’s because I am happy.”

“And flushed. How many orgasms have you had today?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Mother.” Turning on my heels, I walk into the house, away from her and her shenanigans.

“It’s a valid question!”

While we wait on the guys, I give my mom another tour of the house, letting her absorb in all the new additions. I’ve finally finished painting the interior of the house, and Roman and Ry helped me do some moving around to change the overall layout inside. She takes it all in, oohing and aahing obnoxiously, like proud mothers do. Every now and then, she’ll bring the topic back to sex or something that makes me uncomfortable, and I have to bend over backward just to change the subject.

She finally finds a safe topic of discussion. “How are things with Rome?” It’s comical how she gets all giddy whenever she says his name. “I’m so happy you took my advice with him, sweetie. I knew he would be perfect of you. You have to tell me, though. Was I right about a certain appendage?” She waggles her brows.

*Yes, yes, you were, Mother.*

I make a show of gagging. “I’m not discussing the size of my boyfriend’s penis with you, Mom.”

She sighs, as if I’ve just told her she has to sleep out in the rain during a storm. “Fine. How are things going with you guys? How is the little brother

adjusting?”

“Things are great. Ryder seems to be adjusting well. Roman is so good with him. I never had any doubt, but seeing them together, these past few months? He’s amazing.”

My mom pauses in her quest for a glass of water, quirking a brow at me. “You sound smitten.”

I glance away, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. I busy myself at the counter, pulling out food supplies for tomorrow morning. We both glance toward the front door, at the sound of laughter and trailing voices. The guys pass through, not even a few seconds later, and my gaze immediately seeks out Rome’s. As if he’s doing the same, our eyes clash, and warmth surges through my body. He’s wearing a huge grin, the one that showcases the dimple in his cheek. He’s laughing at something my dad and brother are saying. Ryder is standing next to my brother, deep in conversation with him. The sight alone, taking in both my family and Roman’s, warms my heart.

“Are you doing okay since the incident with your boss?”

I tense at the mention of Travis. Even though I didn’t want to, I finally broke down and told my parents everything that happened with my former boss. I worried that he’d do something to retaliate against Rome for the ass beating, but surprisingly, it didn’t happen. Not only was he fired from the clinic, by his own father no less, but Lucy and Cassandra also talked me into pressing charges.

I’ll admit I can sleep easier, knowing Travis isn’t somewhere lurking in the shadows, waiting to attack me.

“I am. I feel like things are finally falling back into place. It helps that he’s not allowed to come within fifty feet of me, so that’s a relief.”

My mom pulls me into a brief hug that’s filled with motherly warmth. “I’m glad you’re okay, sweet girl.”

We spend the rest of the evening in my living room, catching up like any normal family would. When my parents head into the guest room for bed, Roman pats Ryder on the shoulder, jerking his head back toward the house.

With my parents being here for the next few days, sleepovers with Roman will have to be put on hold, until they’re back home, and by the look he shoots me when he kisses me good night, I can tell we’ll both be keeping our windows wide open tonight.



Everyone has been up since what feels like the ass crack of dawn, prepping the turkey and the ham. My mom and I handle most of the sides, leaving the guys to do their own thing until dinner is ready.

Roman spends time with my dad, talking shop and watching the game. At some point, all the guys head over to Roman's, where he shows off his cars and shares a beer. I know my dad and Brandon are probably in heaven over it.

Brandon and Ryder seem to be getting along well, too. They've been out in the front tossing a football, laughing at whatever kids laugh about. I'm a little surprised that my brother is being civil. He's usually an asshole, and I was sort of expecting that I'd have to smack him upside the head, but, surprisingly, he seems to be getting along with Ryder.

Though I haven't had much alone time with Roman today, with how crazy busy we've been in the kitchen, we've snuck our moments between, with soft touches and deep, lingering kisses, when no one's looking.

I'm helping my mom with the candied sweet potatoes, when I hear her clear her throat. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't pay much attention, but the way she does it, the way it demands attention and tells just how serious she's about to get, makes my stomach drop.

It was only a matter of time.

Things between us were civil for far too long. I should've known she'd ruin it by inserting herself into my life and asking questions about my health.

"You two seem happy. He's good for you."

Still waiting for the other shoe to drop, I reply cautiously, shooting her a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes. "Yeah, he makes me happy. I think...I think I might be—"

"In love with him?" she finishes for me. She stops moving, and a smile spreads across her face. My heart is a hummingbird racing in my chest. The wings flap wildly as I think about Rome. Pink coats my cheeks, as I think about last night, the way he made me come through my window, without

even touching me. I look back down to hide the blush and the grin, threatening to steal over my entire face.

“Yeah. I think I do.”

“Good. I’m thrilled for you, Liv. I just want to make sure you’re both being careful.”

I quirk a brow. “Meaning?”

“I mean, using protection.”

I roll my eyes. “Mom, please. You’re always preaching about sex, and now you want to make sure I’m using protection?”

“I just want to make sure you’re taking care of yourself. Are you ready to start a family, Liv?”

I groan. “It’s only been a few months. Please stop talking about babies. It’s a little premature.”

“Well, you never know. I would like to have some grandbabies, before I’m on my deathbed. Have you been to the doctor, talked about your options, when it comes to starting a family? Is it safe?”

All of her questions slam into me at once, and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to remain calm. That’s my mother. She is a storm.

“Mother, this is not *Steel Magnolias*, okay? I’m sure when I’m ready to have children, I’ll be fine. *When I’m ready*,” I reiterate, making my point clear.

She jerks back. “How long do you plan on waiting, Liv? Till you’re thirty? I’ll be half-dead by then.”

I nudge her. “Stop it. It’ll happen when it’s meant to. Right now, I’m just... I love being with him. I want to see where this goes. If this is even something serious.”

“The way that man looks at you, Liv? He’s serious. But now I’m worried because I wonder if *you’re* serious about him.”

I stop what I’m doing and turn to her with a scowl on my face. “What the hell are you talking about? Of course, I am. I just told you I’m in love with him.”

My mom sighs, and when she looks at me, with that ever-present fear in her eyes, I know exactly where she’s headed, before the words are even out of her mouth.

“Have you told him yet?”

I grit my teeth. “I haven’t found the time. It’s not a big deal.”

Now it's her turn to look angry. She yanks off her apron and places her hands on her hips. "Not a big deal, Olivia? Of course, this is a big deal. How can you be so careless? This is your goddamn health—"

"Stop!" I shout, cutting her off. "It's one thing, Mother. One thing that I refuse to let define me and my life. It's not like I have fucking HIV, and I'm sleeping with him, without saying a word."

"Somehow, this feels worse than doing that! And at least those victims tell their partners there's something wrong with them."

"I'm just not ready yet. I'm not ready to ruin this...whatever it is that's between us."

"Why are you so sure it'll be ruined?"

"Why?" I scoff, fighting back tears. "Because whenever they learn the truth, it changes *everything*. Nothing lasts. They can never handle it. I turn into a charity case. I turn into...a goddamn child. The 'did you take your medication today?' and 'Are you listening to the doctor?' I don't want to hear that from him. He has so much on his plate already; the last thing I want to do is unload my problems on him. He has Ryder to raise. I need to remember that."

"That man has quite literally gone through hell and back to get his brother, and you're telling me you don't think he's strong enough to handle this? Him, of all people?"

I look down at the tray of sweet potatoes and get back to the task of topping it off with marshmallows. "I can't lose him, Mom."

A tear slips free, and I don't bother wiping it. The thought alone causes my chest to cave with pain. I've gotten so accustomed to having Roman in my life that just the idea of not being with him makes me sick. It breaks my heart. If I wasn't sure before, I am now. I am irrevocably in love with Roman Banks. Even when he's being a stubborn asshole. I can picture us growing old together—or as old as my heart condition will allow me to live.

"I know, sweetheart. But what happens if he loses you?" she asks quietly, and just like that, the dam breaks. I fall apart in the kitchen, my mother catching me, before I crumple to the floor.

Despite my breakdown earlier, Thanksgiving dinner turns out a lot better than any of us imagined it would. We eat together, as one big family, and the looks on Roman's and Ryder's faces are ones I'll remember for a long time.

Contentment.

Happiness.

I startle when I feel Roman's hand wrap around the back of my neck, tugging me into him. I breathe in his scent, something clean and woodsy mixed with the faintest hint of leather. He stares down at me, those bright eyes vibrating with an intensity I feel all the way down to my soul.

"Thank you for today." His voice is low and raspy, caressing my skin like a deep wave. With his free hand, he swipes his thumb across my brow, caressing me with a reverence that makes me want to tell him just how much he means to me.

"Don't thank me. This was the best Thanksgiving I've had in a long time because of all of you. Did Ryder have fun?"

A soft smile pulls across his face. "He did. He likes your family. Thinks your mom is hilarious."

I roll my eyes. "Oh, God. Don't tell her that. That's the last thing we need."

"She means well."

I raise my brows. "Does she, though?"

Rome sobers, the intensity in his gaze amping up a few notches. Those three words are on the tip of my tongue. For so long, the only four-letter word I allowed myself to say to this man was hate, but now, the other one is all I can seem to think about.

Sweeping his lips over mine, Roman kisses me softly, at first. It's sweet and perfect, until he deepens the kiss, drawing a moan from me that vibrates from deep within my chest. When we break for air, both of us panting for a much-needed breath, the air between us is clogged with desire and thick with tension.

"Get your stuff."

I frown. "What?"

"I'm not sleeping without you again. Deal with it."

My heart flutters. "But my parents..."

"Are asleep."

Trapping my bottom lip between my teeth, to stifle the grin that's itching to spread across my face, I lock up the house and follow Rome home. He's right. Two nights without him is long enough.

We have a lot of lost time to make up for.

# *Twenty-Five*

## “Case of the Ex (Whatcha Gonna Do)”—Mýa



*Olivia*

I’m on my way out of the house, running a little behind for work, more so than usual. This morning, Roman conveniently fucked me into oblivion, before he showered and took Ryder to school. That’s generally what our schedules are like these days. We get up and get ready for work, he leaves to take Ryder to school, while I finish getting dressed, and then he heads to the automotive garage from there.

Only this morning, I seem to be moving in slow motion. It feels like every time I make it farther out the door, I forget something, whether that being my purse, keys, or cell phone. Whatever the hell it is, it’s slowing me down.

A quick glance at my phone screen has a groan tearing from my chest. “Fucking great,” I hiss, as I hurry toward my car. I’m throwing my purse and lunch onto the passenger seat, when I hear a voice from behind me that has me freezing in my tracks.

My shoulders tense, and my back goes ramrod straight. With my heart pounding wildly in my chest, I slowly turn around, facing the source of that voice. I take in the man standing before me, an odd, déjà vu-like sensation passing through me, as I stare at him.

“Reid?”



I'm surprised that, as I stand here, staring at my ex-fiancé, I don't feel an ounce of regret. There isn't a speck of longing inside me that makes me miss him. I feel nothing at all.

Reid stuffs his hands into his suit pockets, his gaze raking up and down my body, taking me in. Everything about him is the same as it was, nearly a year and a half ago, back when we were on the road to marriage.

A shiver travels down my spine at the mere thought of walking down the aisle.

What if I'd settled and married him? I would've never met Roman. Or Ryder. Or Cassandra, and all the friends I've made at the clinic.

His sandy blond hair is still cut short, slight waves at the top that can be attributed to his expensive hair mousse. He's dressed in his typical black slacks and white button-up shirt combo. He works at a marketing firm, and for the longest time, I loved the professional businessman look on him. Now, I find my tastes have shifted, particularly to a man who prefers ripped jeans, biker boots, and leather.

"How are you, Liv? It's been a while."

My brows tug low on my face into a frown. "What are you doing here?"

He sighs, scrubbing at the back of his neck, like he always does when he's uncomfortable. "I called your mom." My stomach sours. "She told me where I could find you."

I glance around us, taking in the quiet neighborhood. The only person who is out and about right now is Josie; she's sitting in her sunchair, watching the show. No cigarette today.

"That still doesn't explain what you're doing here, Reid. What did you call my mom for?"

He sighs. "I wanted to check on you. Just because we aren't getting married, Olivia, doesn't mean I don't still love you. It doesn't mean I don't care about you and want the best for you."

Here we go. My hands curl into fists at my sides, a defense mechanism of sorts. "That isn't your job anymore."

His face shutters. "Caring for you was never a job. You just always thought it was. I came here to check on you and catch up. Your mother is worried about you, Olivia. Do you even care?"

I splay my hands out at my sides, clearly agitated. "I'm fine. I'm alive, here in one piece. She has nothing to worry about."

"Are you taking your medication?"

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, stop it, Reid. I’m not doing this with you.”

“Doing what? I care about you, goddammit!”

“I’m seeing someone. You can’t just show up at my house out of the blue, without calling or texting me!”

When I hear the roaring sound of a motorcycle, my stomach drops. I stand frozen on my front lawn, beside Reid, with my heart in my throat. When I spot Roman’s motorcycle coming down the street, my stomach twists with unsettled emotions, when he pulls into his driveway, swinging his long body off the powerful bike.

“What’s wrong?” Reid asks, clearly not realizing what a mess this all just turned into.

The second Rome takes his helmet off, I feel the ire in his gaze, and when he crosses the distance between our lawns, all brawn and ice blue eyes filled with heat, I force a swallow.

“There a problem?” He directs the question to Reid, his gaze narrowed threateningly. Reid jerks back at the tone, his mouth thinning.

“There’s no problem here, man. Just trying to have a conversation.”

“I wasn’t asking you,” Roman snaps.

I step between the two men, one a distant figure from my past, and the other is someone of the future, I hope. “Rome, it’s okay. Everything is fine.”

“You know this guy, Liv?” Reid asks, clearly shocked. He takes in Roman, assessing everything about him.

“She knows me quite well. You’d do well to remember that.”

There’s no missing the innuendo, and I groan. “Roman, stop being a jerk. And Reid, stop making those faces. This is my boyfriend.”

Reid’s brows jump into his hairline. “*This* is your boyfriend?”

“That a problem for you, pretty boy?” Roman steps into my side, like a shield of sorts.

“What the hell is your problem, man?” Reid grits, taking a step toward Roman, which is probably a mistake, seeing as Roman has a good six inches on him. Realizing that things are only going to escalate if I don’t put a lid on them now, I stand in front of Rome. Placing my hand in the center of his chest, I try to calm him.

“Now isn’t the best time, Reid.”

“Jesus.” He scoffs. “We spent six years together, Liv. We were going to get married. The least you can give me is peace of mind that you’re okay.”

I feel Roman tense beneath my hand. My eyes widen, and I shake my head, silently relaying a message to Reid to shut up, but he doesn't get the memo.

"I'm okay. You can stop this now." My voice is trembling.

"You're not fine, Olivia. You're living on borrowed time!" he suddenly shouts, the vein in his forehead pulsing.

Ice suddenly fills my body, and all the color drains from my face. I'm too scared to turn around and face Roman. Even though my hand is resting on his chest, I can't physically feel him anymore. It's like he's somehow managed to sever our connection and detach himself. My chest squeezes, like it's in a vise, as pressure builds behind my eyelids.

And just like that, my neighbor steps back, away from me. Slowly, I turn, taking in the tight expression on his face.

"What the fuck is he talking about, Liv?" Rome demands. His tone is calm, but his eyes, they're a riot of emotions. He's seething, his face turning a scary shade of red, as he tries to contain his anger. My eyes slam shut, and my stomach drops.

This is what I wanted to avoid. Everything I've tried to keep hidden from Rome is coming out, and the look of betrayal on his face guts me. Tears burn the backs of my eyes, swimming before me, distorting his figure. My bottom lip quivers, as I try to suppress my emotions.

"You didn't tell him?" Reid scoffs, realizing he just dropped a bomb. "Of course, you didn't. This is just like you. You're so irresponsible with your health."

"Because I want to live!" I shout, emotion clogging my throat. "I refuse to let this...this diagnosis keep me from living a normal life. I can't walk on eggshells forever. I just want to be normal." My voice cracks, the wall I was building around my emotions crumbles, and the tears carve hot trails down my cheeks.

"I'm outta here," Reid grumbles, leaving Rome and me.

I can't bring myself to look at him, at first. I shouldn't have to feel this way, but a part of me still feels guilty for not telling him the truth. After everything he's shared with me about his life and his little brother, I kept my biggest secret from him.

Two of my biggest secrets.

Clasping my trembling hands together for strength, I swallow back the tears that are clogging my throat. "You have to believe me, Rome. I was

going to tell you, I swear. I just needed a little more time, that's all."

Roman's nostrils flare. Hurt flashes behind those blue eyes. "You're lying. You were never going to tell me, were you?"

A sob bursts past my lips, and I shake my head. "No, I promise you, I was. I just didn't want to ruin this." I close the distance between us and reach out for him, ignoring the torrent of tears streaking down my face. "I love you, Rome."

For the first time, Rome looks like he's in actual pain. He winces at my words, and the muscle in his jaw clenches. I rush on, needing him to hear me. Needing him to understand just what this relationship has turned into for me.

"For the longest time, I thought hate was the only four-letter word I'd ever feel when it came to you. I hated the way you talked to me when we first met. And the way you smirked, God, did I hate that. I hate the way you drive that god-forsaken motorcycle like it's not a death trap. I hate it when you stare for too long. I hate your big dumb cars that you love. And the way you read my mind. I hate the way you stay in my head. The way you always know what to say. I hate it when you make me laugh when I'm trying to stay angry with you. But you and I both know none of that is true. I don't hate you at all, Rome. I never have. I just hate the way you make me love you. I hate the way you make me feel anything at all."

"You love me?" He laughs without humor. "You kept something as monumental as your health away from me. Do you really expect me to believe you love me? You didn't trust me with that information, is that it? Didn't think I'd be able to handle it?"

I choke on a sob. "No! That is not it. I've seen you with Ryder, and you are incredible. I just...I didn't want my issues getting in the way. You've worked so hard to get him back, and I didn't want to be another weight for you to bear on your shoulders. I just wanted to be normal for once."

He swipes a frustrated hand down his face. "Yeah, well, look how that turned out."

With that, he turns on his heels, hopping onto his bike and pulling out of his driveway, as quickly as he stormed in.

I collapse there on my front lawn, sobbing openly for the whole neighborhood to see. Pain sears down my chest, seizing my lungs. I clasp my hand there, trying to ease the pain-filled ache that's blossoming at his

absence. I've royally fucked everything up this time. I've lost him for good, and I only have myself to blame.



*Roman*

Raking an agitated hand through my hair, I crack open a beer. Sitting on the stool in the garage, I glance at the one right next to it and sigh. It's become a routine, both of us sitting in here, while I work on the bike or tweak something on the car. She's imprinted herself in every facet of my life. Hell, even sitting here on my own, I feel like I can still hear her laughter. I can still smell her, the scent of roses and something inherently sweet.

It's only been three days since the explosive fight on her lawn. Three days that I've avoided her texts and calls. She's only attempted to come over once to talk to me, and Ryder intervened, telling her I was in the shower, even though I was sitting right there in the living room, stewing.

"You okay?"

I straighten on the bucket, glancing back toward the door. My brother makes his way into the quiet garage, and I push out the empty stool for him to sit on. He takes it, waiting for me to respond.

"Yeah. I'm good." I take a sip of the beer. It tastes like acid as it goes down my throat. Nothing tastes right since I've learned the truth.

"What happened?"

I heave a deep sigh. He's asked the same question every day, but I'm still not sure how to put it into words. How to explain that Olivia is sick. She may not look it or act like it, but she is. It's a slap to the face.

"She lied to me."

He's silent for a beat, processing. "About what?"

"She's sick."

Ryder glances at me, his brows tugging low. “You mean, the bad kind of sick?”

I force a swallow. *Is there any other kind?*

“Yeah. And she lied to me about it. She was also engaged, so that’s just another thing I need to process.”

Ryder’s shoulders deflate. “Well, why are you here and not with her then? If she’s sick, then she needs you.”

My mouth twists into a grimace. “If she needed me, she would’ve told me.”

“She loves you.”

My chest squeezes. I take another pull from my beer, washing down the bitter taste in my mouth.

“And I know you love her. No one looks at anyone, the way you do Olivia, if they’re not in love.”

I cast him a dry look. “Oh, and you’re suddenly an expert in all this?”

He laughs, shrugging his shoulders. “I’d like to think I know what love is, and when you and Olivia look at each other, that’s love.”

His response stuns me into silence. I sit there, staring at my little brother, processing his words of wisdom. Never thought I’d see the day I’d be getting said wisdom from someone half my age. As if knowing he’s bestowed wisdom and his work is done, Ryder smirks, patting me on the back, then disappears into the house, leaving me to my own devices.

Blowing out a deep sigh, I stare up at the ceiling, looking for strength.

This woman is going to be the death of me. That is all I’m sure of.

Dropping the beer on my toolbox, I stare at the car, the same one I fucked her over, only a few nights ago. Seems fucking her on vehicles has become a new favorite pastime. Just three uncomplicated nights ago.

That’s a lie. Things have never been uncomplicated between us. From the second I laid eyes on her, she’s been a thorn in my fucking side. And that thorn has only seemed to dig deeper, growing on me over time.

Putting my pride and my frustrations aside, I shoot her text, waiting for a response. Minutes tick by with no reply, so I say to hell with it. I check in on Ryder before I lock up behind me and cross our lawns. I’m done with this distance. We’re talking things out here and now. I may have acted like an asshole the last few days by ignoring her, but I plan to rectify that, here and now. My brows pull down into a frown and I come up short when I realize her car isn’t in the driveway.

*Where the hell is she?*

I rap my knuckles on the front door, waiting her out. Unlike last time, I don't hear her footfalls on the other side of the wood. Just silence. Uncomfortable silence.

When five minutes of unanswered calls and knocks go on, I decide to call it a night, too frustrated to come up with theories as to where she could be. She's obviously not home. She could be at work, but something tells me that's not it either.

Hours later, my cell vibrates on the bedside table, jolting me awake. Through bleary eyes, I frown at the number on the brightly lit screen. It's from an unknown number, but I can't imagine anyone would be calling at this time, if it wasn't important. Sliding my finger across the screen, I answer groggily, and the person's voice on the other end of the line has me jolting upright, blinking away the sleep. The words that echo over the line wrap around my heart in a constricting noose, and it's like losing my brother all over again.

One sentence composed of just a few words has the capacity to ruin me.

I fly out of bed, throwing on clothes, before I pound on Ryder's door to wake him. He jerks upright, eyes wild. Whatever he sees on my face is enough to get him moving. He hops out of bed and throws on his shoes, not wasting any time with questions.

I speed the entire way to the hospital, and when I step into the waiting room and see her parents in tears, my heart shatters. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. Each time I try to open my mouth and ask the simple question, the words don't come.

*Is she alive?*

*Please, God, tell me she's alive.*

"C'mon, son." Liv's dad claps me on the back, pulling Ryder and me into the open seat next to her little brother.

"She's gonna be fine," Brandon insists, his eyes red-rimmed. "She has to be."

We can only hope.

After hours of waiting with Olivia's family, they've given me the breakdown of her condition. What happened and what led her here. Something I would've already known if I'd just put my pride aside and let her talk, but I was being stubborn. I was so focused on my rage that I let her

down. She really can't trust me. She obviously has every reason to hate me. Maybe if I had let her explain, I could've helped prevent this somehow.

At birth, Olivia was diagnosed with atrioventricular septal defect, which resulted in heart surgeries to repair a hole in the wall of her heart that works as a separator for the upper chambers. Only, her condition was a lot more severe than she led on. Because of the surgeries she'd undergone, the muscles in her heart became permanently inflamed, causing her to have cardiomyopathy.

There was never any promise that she'd always be okay. In fact, her parents told me it was quite the opposite. Because she was such a risk factor during surgeries, the other valve in her heart didn't heal properly, which means, at any given moment, her heart can give out on her. That is why taking her medications, on time, every day, and seeing a doctor regularly is imperative.

It doesn't matter how much medication she takes; it is just a matter of when her heart is ready to give out on her. That is her reality—a severe case of congestive heart failure.

Her parents tell me she was at work when she collapsed. They got the call yesterday afternoon and flew out, as soon as they could. They've been here ever since, waiting on word that she's okay. That she's going to make it out of this alive.

That would certainly explain why her car wasn't there last night.

I can't stop beating myself up over this. If we were talking, I could've been here sooner, but I'd been purposely avoiding her, and somehow, I can't help but feel like the cause of this.

"Roman, walk with me to get some coffee?" Lisa, Olivia's mom, asks, jolting me out of my thoughts. I nod, not really here. My mind elsewhere. I walk beside Lisa, stuck in my head, as we make our way toward the cafeteria for coffee.

"Stop blaming yourself. This isn't your fault."

I heave a deep sigh. It sure in the hell feels like it's my fault. "I didn't even give her a chance to explain."

"It's actually my fault. I was pushing too hard, and it was wrong of me to give Reid her address. I thought you knew about him, and I just hoped there would be one person who could talk some sense into her and make her take her health seriously."

"How long were they together?"



“They met in college, stayed together until about a year ago. But want to hear a secret? I always knew they wouldn’t last. A mother knows these things, Rome, and Reid and my daughter, they would’ve never worked. She knew that all along. It just took her a few years to get the courage to leave. Want to hear something else? She’s never looked at anyone the way she looks at you.”

Her words pierce my heart.

We grab our coffees in silence. I get the sense she’s giving me a moment to process this information. Lisa Hales is a lot of things—she’s vibrant, full of life, and so much like her daughter; yet, she’s entirely different. You never really know what you’re going to get from the woman.

“I never told her I loved her.”

Lisa hooks her arm through mine. “You’ll still get to tell her, Rome. I have every faith that my daughter is going to pull through this.”

I look down at the small woman, a frown wrecking my features. “How can you be so sure?”

She grins up at me, though the smile is wobbly and her eyes are red-rimmed. “Because I know my daughter, and she’s a fighter. She always has been. She’ll pull through this just to show us that she could, just to prove us all wrong, and when that happens? You both are giving me a busload of grandchildren, for taking ten years off my life.”

A surprise laugh bursts from my chest. The scariest part of everything she just said is that I’m not even fazed by the idea of having a busload of children with Olivia.

When a doctor comes out to give us news, regarding Olivia’s condition, everyone is on edge. The man is about the same age as Olivia’s parents, maybe even a little older. With a weathered face and a head of silver hair, the doctor clears his throat, his gaze sweeping across each of us, settling on Lisa and Ethan.

“Mr. and Mrs. Hales?” They reach for each other’s hands, nodding, waiting to hear more. “Your daughter is stable.” At this news, everyone blows out a deep sigh of relief. “The atrioventricular valve needed repairing from the swelling. It was causing loss of blood flow to the heart. She went a little while with stalled heartbeats, but after a successful defibrillation, we were able to mimic and restart the pumping and ease the swelling. She’s going to be out of it for the next few days. I’ll need to keep her here until I can be sure the swelling stays under control. I’ll be adding a dose of

captopril to her medication to reduce the resistance to blood flow. Just for preventative measures. This isn't a fix by any means, but hopefully, this will be the last episode. The heart is a very complex organ, but your daughter is a fighter. Her heart may not be the strongest, but it's hanging in there, just like she is. She should be awake soon. I'll have a nurse swing by, once they have her set up in a room."

I sit there, thanking every lucky star in the goddamn sky that she's okay. She's going to be okay.

*She's going to be okay.*

After her parents and her brother visit with her, I walk into her room, absolutely hating the sight of her in that hospital bed. A handful of machines surround her with tubes connected to her hands and chest.

I pause just over the threshold, surprised to see she's awake. Her skin is pale, not as filled with life, as it usually is. There are dark circles under her eyes that aren't usually there either, but goddammit, she still looks beautiful. A softness enters her eyes when our gazes clash. Even from here, I can see the slight tremble in her chin, her way of trying to keep her emotions in check.

"You came," she chokes out.

I step farther into the room, unable to take my eyes off her. "Did you really think, for one second, that I wouldn't come?"

A tear slides down her cheek, and I reach out, catching it, relishing in the feel of her skin beneath mine. I've missed her. Every single part of her. Reaching up, she captures my hand and presses a kiss to my knuckles, tears teetering on the edge of her lashes.

Ryder clears his throat behind me, dragging her attention toward him. She smiles. "Hey, Ry."

My little brother smiles. "How do you feel, Olive?"

"Much better. How are you? Bored without me?"

Ryder chuckles, glancing at me, before he steps closer to the bed. "You're asking how I am, when you're *there*?"

Olivia grins. "I guess I am."

"He's been miserable without you, just so you know."

She shoots a glance at me. We don't use words, but everything that needs to be said is said right then and there. I feel everything she doesn't say, and I try to convey everything I should've expressed days ago—everything I feel.

“I’m gonna give you guys a minute. I’ll be waiting for you outside, Ro.”

When the door closes behind him, I shift my attention back to Olivia, raking my gaze across every inch of her. I work through the barrage of emotions slamming into me, trying to find the right words to make up for the other day.

“I’m really glad you’re here, Roman.”

Blowing out a breath, I summon the strength to open up about my feelings for a woman, for once in my life. “I’m sorry. About how I acted the other day.”

Olivia shakes her head. “Don’t apologize, Roman. This isn’t your fault. This is on me. I should’ve told you sooner. Every man I’ve ever been with always says it’s fine, that they can handle it, but what about years later? When I’m sick and I don’t have very long to live? They never last. They realize this isn’t what they want. I didn’t want that for us. I wanted to hold on to you, for as long as you’d let me.”

“I’m not them, Liv. Do I want forever with you? Of course, I do. But I love you so much, I don’t need forever. As long as I have the now, that’s all that really matters. I’ll take the seconds, the minutes, and the days, because it’s you, Sunshine. It’s always you.”

“I’m so sorry I kept this from you,” she whispers, tears clogging her throat.

“I should’ve handled the news a lot better than I did. But I don’t care about that, Olivia. I don’t care that you were engaged before. I don’t care that you lied to me about your health. All I care about is *you*. We’re going to make this work, no matter what. I don’t care if you have a heart condition. I don’t care if you don’t even have a week left. I love you, and I’m not going anywhere.”

What I hope is a happy sob bursts past her lips, and she reaches out, gripping the back of my neck, to yank me toward her.

“So, you want to grow old with me?” she asks, through her tears, trying to lighten the mood.

“I’ve never wanted anything more than growing old with my annoying neighbor who makes a habit of playing shitty music.”

She giggles, and the sound is absolute music to my ears. “Janet Jackson’s music is classic!”

A grin spreads across my face. “I love you, Olivia. I love the way you hate how I acted when we first met. I love the way you hate when I smirk

when I get my way. I love the way you hate my motorcycle and call it a death trap. I love the way you hate it when I stare for too long—and the whole time I’m staring, I’m listing all the reasons I love you in my head. I love the way you hate my ability to read your mind. I love the way you hate that I get stuck in your head and stay there. I love the way you hate that I always know what to say. I love the way you hate it when I make you laugh, when you’re failing to stay angry with me. The only thing I really hate, Liv, is the fact that I’ve ever made you cry at all. But want to know what I love the most?” She nods, tears streaming down her face, as she waits for me to continue. “I love the way you love me, Olivia. I love you so much, I’ll take whatever amount of time the universe thinks I deserve with you. You’re worth all the heartbreak in the world, Sunshine. You’re worth everything.”

She grins, more tears coursing down her cheeks. “I love you, too, Roman.”

# Twenty-Six

## “Invisible Things”—Lauve



*Olivia*

“Can I open my eyes now?” I ask, from beneath the bandana he has covering my eyes. I don’t know how it’s possible, maybe it’s from years of use, but the bandana smells like Roman. It’s somehow captured the essence of the man through countless machine washes, and I’m suddenly trying to find ways to capture this smell and bottle it for later use.

Roman chuckles, the sound warm and smooth. It glides over my skin, prompting goose bumps to rise along my arms. “Not yet.”

“Oh, c’mon, Rome. The suspense is killing me.”

He sighs, just like he always does, when I’m getting on his nerves. “Fine. Take it off. We’re just about there anyway.”

I pull the bandana off my head, blinking past the brightness, until my vision clears. Roman is pulling into a parking spot somewhere in town, prompting me to frown.

“You brought me to...” Pausing, I glance around us, looking for anything that looks familiar. “A shopping center?”

Chuckling, he slides out of the car, coming to my side. “Not exactly.”

Taking my hand in his, he leads the way, and when we round the corner of the parking lot, onto the main street, I see now.

“This is where you brought me?” I ask, referring to the tattoo shop.

“Figured I’d surprise you, before you could chicken out.”

I swat at his arm, laughing. “I would not have chickened out. What made you want to do this?”

“I thought we’d accomplish this. Something you said you always wanted.”

Tears spring to my eyes. I do remember telling him this is something I always wanted, but I was never sure what I would get. It may just be a tattoo to some, but it’s a whole hell of a lot more than that to me. It’s my freedom, a token of my time here. A chance to take advantage while I can. It’s the fact that he listened, when I didn’t think he would, that has me tearing up. This gesture is so much more.

He’s so much more.

“Roman Banks, I am so irrevocably in love with you.”

He grins down at me, his grip on my hand tightening in reassurance. “Come on.”

A bell dings, as we step into the tattoo shop. Two other people are sitting in the chairs, either waiting on someone getting tattooed or waiting to get their own. They’re a stunning couple. The woman is Latin, with dark brown hair and perfectly tan skin. She’s holding the hand of who I presume is her husband, since they’re both wearing wedding bands. He’s handsome and something about him gives me pause. I get the feeling that I know this person from somewhere, I just can’t put my finger on it.

“It’s not polite to stare,” Rome whispers in my ear, amusement tinging his tone.

“I know, but something about that guy is so familiar. Do we know him?”

Roman chuckles. “That’s Luke Caldwell. He was the all-star QB and wide receiver for SDSU, and now the San Francisco 49er’s wide receiver.”

My brows shoot up. “How are you not freaking out right now?”

Rome shrugs noncommittally. “I’m from Oakland, babe. I’m a Raider fan.”

I roll my eyes.

*Men.*

The woman behind the desk takes notice of us and shoots a smile our way. Her body is covered in colorful art, and her ears filled with piercings. She’s intimidating and wickedly gorgeous.

“Roman for the twelve o’clock appointment?”

Rome nods his answer, and the woman heads to the back, probably to grab the tattoo artist.

I glance up at him, brows furrowed. “Wow, you even made an appointment for us? Talk about serious business.”

He rolls his eyes. “Getting nervous yet?”

“Well, now that you’ve brought it up, yes.”

“You sure you want to do this?” he asks, concern creasing his brows. Warmth wraps around my heart, and I step into him, pressing a kiss to his lips.

“I’m sure. And I know just what I’m going to get.”

His lips quirk. “Mind sharing?”

“Oh, no. You’re going to wait until the final result, baby. It’s going to be a surprise.”

“Not really a surprise if I’m sitting there with you, is it?”

“You’ll be looking into my eyes, not staring at my back.”

He chuckles. The sound is filled with warmth, as it reverberates in his chest, rolling through my body in soothing waves. “You’re insane.”

“Says a lot about you, don’t you think?” I smirk, quite enjoying this back and forth. It’s helping take my mind off the fact I will be permanently marking my body soon.

Following my instructions to a T, Roman waits outside the room, while I explain to the tattoo artist what I want. When I lie down on the table, stomach down, my hand in Roman’s, gripping for dear life, I expect him to glance at my back, but keeping his word, he doesn’t look. He stares at me the entire time in that soft way he does. It’s the look he reserves just for me, and I love it. I bask in it.

No more than an hour later, my back is raw, and the muscles in my hand are sore from squeezing Roman’s hand so hard, but I’m finished. Roman helps me up from the padded table, toward the mirror that’s hanging on the wall opposite us. I gasp when I get a look at the tattoo. Somehow, the artist captured exactly what I had in mind.

Two sunflowers entwined together start just at my shoulder blades, in the center of my spine, in a soft watercolor. The stems trail down my spine into the words “Sunshine, heaven is always near” written in a light, delicate cursive.

Roman rubs the pad of his fingers around the tattoo, careful not to touch it.

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah.” His voice is raspy and low, and when I glance back at him, I smile. He’s remembering the words he said to me.

When it’s his turn, I sit on the chair beside the table, smiling when I see what he’s getting. The thrill in my core is ever present at the sight of it.

“Very original.”

He shoots me that signature crooked grin. “You already have my heart. Might as well put your name on it.”

I press a kiss to his lips. “You’re a little bit of a romantic, you know that?”

Roman grunts, obviously in disagreement.

We walk down the shopping center, hand in hand. After he finished with his tattoo, we grabbed a late lunch at the restaurant a block over, and now we’re walking around, killing time until Ryder gets out of school.

“What made you get that specific tattoo?” he asks.

“I’ve always felt that, with my heart condition, heaven was always nearer to me than it was for others. And then one day, out of the blue, you tell me, ‘Sunshine, heaven is always near when I’m with you,’ and it’s stayed with me since then. It felt like a sign. A sign that we were always destined. You get me like no one else ever has. This tattoo isn’t just a reminder of my condition; it’s a reminder that when I’m with you, I feel the same way. Heaven feels a lot nearer when I’m with you, Rome. I have my heaven here with you.”

There, on the sidewalk, with countless people walking by, Roman kisses me with a passion I’ve yet to experience before. It’s one people will go the rest of their lives searching for. Some, sadly, will never find it. It’s one for the books. One that touches my soul and dances with it. It entwines our hearts, bonding us together for life.

Roman Banks isn’t just my neighbor. He is the man who’s stolen my heart. The man who made me hate him and love him in equal measure. He is a different species—one of a kind—and he is mine.

I plan on holding on to this man, to this feeling, for as long as my heart will allow. Because this? This feeling right here, thrumming in the air between us, pounding through my heart, soaring through my veins, it’s perfection.

I feel like I belong.

I feel like I’ve finally found my place in the world.



I've finally found my person.

# Epilogue

## “The Bones”—Maren Morris

*Three Years Later*

I sit across from Ryder, waiting impatiently on the couch, for him to open the gift. My smile must be on the verge of lunacy because he keeps side-eyeing me, then glancing at his older brother for help. Roman is standing off to the side, watching both of us, those thick arms crossed over his chest. He lifts a shoulder in a helpless shrug, but he’s wearing a conspicuous smile of his own.

“C’mon, open it already,” I urge.

“Jesus. What is it, a million dollars?”

I shoot him a glare. “Just open it, would you? You’re ruining the moment.”

Ryder smirks, and it’s like a blow to the chest. There’s so much of his older brother in that one smirk, it’s kind of scary. The girls are in for a real treat.

I clasp my sweaty hands together, watching Ryder peel open the box I gave him. Trapping my bottom lip between my teeth, to stifle the smile that’s itching to spread across my face, I watch anxiously as he pops the lid off, frowning at the contents inside the box. He picks up the handwritten note, his eyes widening.

“This is my birthday gift?” he asks the question warily, like he honestly can’t believe we’d give this to him as a gift.

I laugh. “At least try to look a little more excited.”

“I mean, I’m happy for you guys, but I think you could’ve just asked me this over dinner last night and that would’ve sufficed.”

“Fine.” I blow out a dramatic sigh, taking the box from him. “I’ll just find someone else to be our daughter’s godfather.”

“Ah, ah, ah!” He reaches back out for the box, taking it from me. “I never said I wouldn’t accept.”

I smirk. “You’re going to be an uncle and a godfather. Pretty exciting, right?”

Ryder rolls his eyes, indulging me. “Oh, yeah. Can’t imagine anything more exciting for a seventeen-year-old.”

“Well, hang on now. We’re not done. There’s one more thing your brother has for you.” I grin. Glancing back over my shoulder, I search Roman’s gaze. He’s hiding a smile of his own and jerks his chin toward the front door.

“C’mon.”

I follow the guys out of our new house, and I hear Ryder’s choked breath, the second he steps out onto the porch. There, in the driveway, next to Roman’s pride and joy, is the ’69 SS Camaro he’s been refurbishing back at the automotive garage for Ryder for the last few years. It’s almost identical to his in color, but the car itself is a different brand and model.

About two years ago, Roman and I made the decision to sell our houses and find something big enough for all of us. We didn’t really see the point in having sleepovers anymore. I spent most of my time at his place with Ryder, anyway, so it made the most sense to get our own place together. Our new place is a four bedroom and only two and half blocks away from our old neighborhood. It’s the perfect little place for all of us. I fell in love with it the second I saw it and knew it had to be ours.

“No fucking way,” Ryder whispers, running toward the car, his hand flying to his head. His eyes are wide, surprise written all over his face. I curl into Roman’s side, glancing up at him. Happiness radiates from him these days, just like it is right now. The way he’s looking at Ryder brings tears to my eyes.

“How do you like her?”

“I think I might cry,” Ryder admits.

“It’s the baby news that did you in, isn’t it?” I joke, making them both laugh. Ryder turns back toward the car, admiring her, practically fangirling. At the mention of the baby, Roman’s hand slides around my waist and rests on my stomach. His hand is so big it spans most of my stomach. I’m not showing yet, seeing as I’m only fourteen weeks, but the way Roman’s been coveting this child already, nothing else could ever bring me this level of happiness.

Settling my hand over his warm one, I squeeze. “I think you just won the award for best brother.”

“Think so?”

“I know so. Ryder is a lucky kid.” I turn in his arms, cupping his strong jaw in my hand. “He could’ve had a brother who didn’t love him half as much as you love him. But he doesn’t. He has you.”

Roman’s eyes soften, as he stares down at me. The blue looks lighter than usual, almost white, just like Max’s.

“Can I take it out for a drive?” Ryder asks, dragging our attention back to him.

I blow out a sigh. “Yes. But you have to be home by dinner. And no girls in the car!”

Roman tosses Ryder the keys, and he catches them effortlessly, jumping in. He runs his hand over the dash, before he starts her up. The smile that spreads across his face, as the muscle car roars to life, has me choking up.

Jesus. These hormones are not a joke.

Ry waves at us, as he pulls out of the driveway, and Max barks at the car, as it roars down our quiet street. I get a pang in my chest, just thinking about the moment he graduates. Having Ryder gone while he’s off at college is going to be tough. As if sensing where my thoughts are headed, Roman presses a kiss to the side of my head.

“C’mon, let’s head inside. You look tired.”

As if his words were a trigger for the sleepiness to take over, I let out a long yawn. “I am. Your baby is draining me already, Mr. Banks. Can you imagine what she’ll be like when she’s here, terrorizing everyone, just like you?”

Roman tosses his head back and laughs, taking my hand in his, as we walk back inside. “How can you be so sure it’s a girl? Could be a little boy in there destined to terrorize.”

“A mother knows these things.”

He swats my butt, jerking his head toward the bedroom. “Go lie down. I’ll bring you some water.”

I sigh. “You’re too good to me.”

Crawling onto the bed, I let out a tired huff of air. These spurts of sleepiness hit me randomly. I can feel completely fine, until I climb onto this bed, then, unbeknownst to me, I’ll fall asleep. It’s not even like I’ve been working crazy hours; my schedule at the clinic has been relatively

light compared to when I first started. If anything, Roman should be the one who's tired. He puts in so many hours at the garage for George. I know he does it because he loves it, but I still worry about him overexerting himself. Though, I guess all the years he put in at George's have come in handy. George mentioned he was looking for someone to take over the garage when he was ready to retire, and he was looking at Roman. I don't think I've ever seen him look so damn proud of himself.

Max trots into the bedroom, stopping at my side of the bed. Resting his head on the edge, he stares up at me. I reach over, scratching behind his ears and petting his smooth coat.

"Hey, buddy. Are you feeling tired, too?"

Max lifts his front paw onto the bed, and it's then I notice the little box attached to his collar. I frown. The box is small, dangling from a string that Roman must have tied onto it. Sensing someone's gaze on me, I glance up near the bedroom door and find Rome, leaning against the doorjamb, arms crossed over his chest, watching me.

"What's this?"

"Just a little gift for you."

"For me? What for?"

His mouth inches up, like he wants to grin. "Open it and find out."

My stomach dips, and I reach for the box, sliding it out of the string. It's light in my hands, and my heart is suddenly pounding in my chest, as I slide off the lid. My breath gets lodged in my throat, and my hands tremble, when I see the velvet lid of the smaller box inside.

Sucking in a lungful of air, I drop the velvet box in my hands, and when I open it, a hand flies to my mouth to stifle the gasp.

"Roman," I whisper in awe, staring down at the ring. It's gorgeous. The large diamond in the center reflects the light, sparkling beautifully.

During the last year and a half, we've talked a lot about marriage, and whether it was something we wanted or not. But because I didn't want to get my hopes up, I mentioned numerous times that I wasn't sure if I wanted to get married. How could I, when our future wouldn't be promised? So every time the discussion was on the table, I vetoed it. Pretending it wasn't what I wanted. But of course, Roman saw right through my lies. He always does.

I do want to get married to this man. More than I've ever wanted anything. I just didn't want to be selfish. I didn't want to force the issue, but

the fact that he's here with a ring, proposing to me, anyway? It's everything. *He is everything.*

When I glance up and find him beside the bed on his knee, the first round of tears slides down my cheeks. I slap a hand over my mouth, trying to quell the urge to scream in joy. There are so many emotions rioting inside me, I'm having a tough time pinning it down to just one. All I'm really sure of is that I'm happy. So goddamn happy I can't even breathe.

"I had this extravagant dinner planned out, where I was going to ask you to marry me, and it was perfect, but I couldn't wait any longer. I love you, Olivia Rene Hales. I love you like I've never loved anyone before. You have my entire heart. Your grasp on my soul is eternal, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?"

"Yes!" I sob, throwing my arms around his neck and dragging him into me. The pads of my fingers dig into his flesh and I hold him there, soaking everything about this moment in, never wanting to let go. He pulls back, pressing his lips against mine, in a kiss that I feel travel through me in waves. It's a kiss that I feel settle deep in my bones.

Roman takes the box from me and slides the ring onto my finger. I'm not surprised that it's a perfect fit. Everything about this proposal is so beyond perfect, I don't even care that he couldn't wait to do this over a fancy dinner. I'd take him proposing with a goddamn Ring Pop and still be overjoyed. Because it's from Roman, my dream man.

"You couldn't do this sooner? My dad's going to kill you for getting me pregnant before marriage," I tease. Our next baby announcement was going to be for my brother and parents, but I guess that won't be the only thing we're announcing, when we head down to Long Beach to visit them next weekend.

Roman snorts. "We've done everything ass backward, so why would this be any different? Plus, your parents want to see photos of the engagement, so maybe we'll still do that fancy dinner after all, just to keep the illusion that I do deserve you."

My bottom lip trembles. "I love you, Roman Banks. That means I'll tell this proposal story to all our children and grandchildren because it's ours. The real version. Not some cookie-cutter bullshit that isn't us." I press a kiss to his lips, and when we pull away, gasping for breath, I keep looking from the ring back to this man. This moment still feels so surreal. When I moved into that house, never in a million years, did I think my neighbor

would be a man like Roman. Never could I have imagined that I'd fall into such a deep hate with that neighbor and slowly fall irrevocably in love with him.

I glance down at Max, who's standing beside Rome, staring up at us, his head cocked to the side.

"Maxie, you were in on this?" I choke, emotion clogging my throat. He barks in response, making both of us laugh.

Sitting up, I wrap my arms around Rome and tug him onto the bed with me. His mouth works mine, trailing from my lips down to my neck, lingering there, until I'm squirming on the sheets from the magic that is his tongue.

When he reaches for the hem of my shirt, and I reach for his, I proceed to make love to the man who owns my entire heart.

There are some loves, some dreams that feel like they're beyond reach. You never quite feel like you're going to find both.

But I did.

I found my dream in Roman and our little family that's now expanding.

And our love may not be the kind people write home about, but it's ours. It's one of a kind. It's the kind of love that brings out the stars on the darkest nights. The kind of love that finds all your missing pieces and puts them perfectly together.

It's the kind of love that builds a home in your heart. Home isn't where you're from. It's where you belong. Some of us travel the world to find it. Others find it in a person.

I've found my home in Roman.

Our love is the kind that makes even the biggest cynics fall head over heels for the annoying girl next door.

It's eternal.

It's us.

The End.

IF YOU LOVED THE EPILOGUE/HEA FOR OLIVIA AND ROME, OR  
IF DEATH MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE, PLEASE DO NOT

CLICK THE LINK. BUT IF YOU'D LIKE TO SEE INTO THE DISTANT FUTURE OF THE COUPLE WHO DEFIED ALL THE ODDS, [FOLLOW THE LINK](#) AND KEEP READING FOR AN EXCLUSIVE POV FROM THEIR DAUGHTER IN: *THE CONSEQUENCE OF HATING YOU*.



## *Kiss Me with Lies* Preview

### Book One in the Twin Lies Duet

Two sisters. One unsolved murder. A sickening plot for revenge.

When Mackenzie Wright attends her first real high school party, held somewhere deep in the woods of her small California town, no one expects to wake up the next morning to news of a gruesome murder. Especially not her own sister's.

No suspects.

No motive.

No convictions.

Just one unsolved murder and whatever's left of the now deserted town.

Mackenzie has spent years with her sister's death weighing heavily on her shoulders, but it isn't until she stumbles across a photograph that changes everything for her. The memories, everything from that night, come flashing back in high-speed technicolor and Mackenzie soon finds herself obsessed with the truth.

Determined to find out what really happened to her sister, Mackenzie relies on that one photograph to give her the answers she needs by embedding herself into the lives of five of the wealthiest men in Los Angeles. Consumed by her need for revenge, Mackenzie infiltrates the world of the rich and elite, only to come face-to-face with an alluring complication in the form of an elusive playboy.

When enemy lines are drawn, Mackenzie has to choose between her loyalty to her sister and the man who has stolen her heart.

# Prologue

“God, your sister is such a bitch,” Winnie hisses.

Even though I wholeheartedly agree with the statement, I don’t voice it. Instead, I keep following Winnie as she winds her way through the trees in the forest, heading toward the growing sound of teenagers partying.

End-of-the-year fest.

It’s exactly what it sounds like. This party kicks off the summer at the end of every school year. I’ve lived in Ferndale my whole life. The small town is known for its pies and beautiful redwoods. For the most part, it’s quiet, but every now and again, we’ll get tourists here to visit. Located smack dab in the middle of Redwoods National Park and Humboldt Redwoods State Park, Ferndale is the perfect location for a hiker or nature lover to vacation.

Normally, I wouldn’t be caught dead sneaking around in the middle of the night with my best friend, Winnie, especially since gossip travels faster than light in this town. How I ended up here with Winnie is beyond me. I don’t party. I don’t drink. And surely, I’m not on any guy’s radar. So again, I have no idea what the hell I’m doing here.

Winnie has always been an in-between—not exactly popular, but definitely not a nobody geek like I am. Athletic and beautiful, she’s everything I’m not. We’ve been friends forever, despite the fact we’re opposites. I’m pretty sure if she had stopped hanging out with me, she’d already have a front row seat in the popular club. Sadly, I know I’m the one holding her back. It’s my status. The way I look. How I dress. How smart I am. It all counts against me in the high school popularity scene.

She’s my only friend at Ferndale High, and quite honestly, I don’t see that changing anytime soon. I’m just glad I’ll have her to help guide me

through my senior year. Living in my sister's shadow is hard enough, so being around Winnie makes everything easier—she's my backbone, through and through. Where my sister is crass and sassy, Winnie is a mellow wallflower. Where Madison is snobby and rude, Winnie is sweet and feisty when no one is around. She is quite literally a walking, talking contradiction, and I love her for it.

I once thought that having a twin sister would mean I'd be just as popular as she was, but I couldn't have been more wrong. When Madison was in the womb with me, I'm pretty sure all the good genes that guarantee beauty, popularity, and homecoming queen status went to her. Just another one of the many things in a very, *very* long list of why my sister makes me feel inferior.

Beautiful? Check.

Insanely smart? Check.

Luscious, gold-spun blond hair? Check.

Incredibly athletic? Check.

Body that rivals the models of Victoria's Secret? Double check.

I remember when we were little, my mom would dress my sister and me up in these identical outfits, and even then, Mads would always be the star child. Strangers would approach my parents and tell them how gorgeous she was. And where would I be? Clinging to the back of my mother's legs, hiding. Much as I still do.

My only reprieve from Madison has been the past six months that she's been gone. It was the first time in a long time that I remember feeling happy. And the main reason being, Madison participated in a foreign exchange program in Italy for half a year. Part of me was jealous that my parents agreed to let her go instead of me—we were twins, after all, so it only seemed fair we both go. But after she left, I started to notice little things, like how much easier it was to breathe when she wasn't around. I still heard her voice in the back of my mind, telling me I wasn't enough, but I no longer had to worry about her berating my every move.

She flew back home just a few days ago, and I noticed the change immediately. She was somehow meaner, prettier, and scarier than ever. Madison Wright was the most frightening creature in all of Humboldt County. I was sure everyone knew it, too.

"I still can't believe your sister told you not to show your face here. *Everyone* got an invite tonight. I don't understand how someone can be

so...”

“Vile?” I finish for her, darting my gaze down to my ankles that keep getting scratched by the underbrush in the forest. That was Madison in a nutshell. Vile.

Who knew evil girls had the prettiest faces? I did.

Madison never lets me forget how beneath her I am. And it’s not as if her harsh words aren’t true because they are. She *is* the prettier sister. It wouldn’t *kill* me to drop a few pounds. And sometimes, my curly, dirty blond hair *does* look like a bird’s nest.

I never used to care about any of that stuff, but the more Madison tears me down with her comments, the more I realize she’s right. My perception of myself has changed drastically. I never truly thought I was ugly, but now when I look in the mirror, there’s no unseeing it. I understand that the way we perceive ourselves is relative. Facial appearance can be translated to judgments of character, making us all vain and in need of “looking” pretty, instead of focusing on being pretty on the inside, too. I can’t pinpoint the exact moment the idea of my ugliness began. One day, I was blissfully unaware of my looks. I didn’t realize just how much they’d mean to others and how they dominate society. And the next, I couldn’t stomach looking at myself for longer than a few minutes at a time. Why? Because all that stared back at me was disappointment.

Up ahead, the thick brush of trees starts to clear, and I can finally make out the crowd of bodies and the glow of the bonfire. The closer we get, the more my nerves start to screw me over. I’m not your regular nervous person; no, when I get nervous, I turn into a sweaty, jittery, crackhead junkie, or at the very least, someone who resembles one. The beads of sweat have already made their trek along my spine, and the hair at my neck is matted to my skin in the most disgusting and uncomfortable way.

When Winnie pushes through the last of the greenery, I cringe, trying not to worry too much about the fact that we’ve been brushing against a multitude of plants as we navigate our way through the forest. What are the odds we’ve encountered poison oak? If I’m being honest, probably fifty-fifty. As long as there is no itching, swelling, or symptoms of a fever, we should be okay. For now, at least.

Pushing away my worrisome thoughts, I shift my gaze around, and my eyes widen as I take in the party around me. This is my first time at the end-of-the-year bash. It’s always been a legend here in Ferndale, which means

it's usually a very hush-hush, invite-only ordeal. To my knowledge, this is the first year everyone got an invitation. The seniors at our high school run this party like they're bookies running an illegal operation. They handle the "guest list," the booze, the drugs, and the debauchery that takes place.

The fire in the pit is roaring, and a bunch of people I don't recognize from my high school are sitting around on logs. Scratch that, I do recognize them. They're all the popular kids. What I meant was, they wouldn't recognize me; I'm a nobody swimming in a sea of stars.

Some people are making out—quite crudely, I might add—and I quickly avert my gaze, taking everything else in: the different cliques mingling with the help of liquid courage. You have the jocks socializing with the stoners, and by stoners, I mean the drug dealers. The cheerleaders chat freely with girls I recognize from the soccer and softball team. "Whine Up" by Kat DeLuna plays on someone's speakers, livening up the party. Everyone is in their element tonight. Except me, of course. As I glance around, I'm still trying to make sense of what the hell I'm doing here.

I don't belong. That much is obvious. I stick out like a sore thumb.

It's still utterly baffling to me that this yearly bonfire happens without a hitch. It never gets shut down, no cops ever arrive, and nothing bad seems to ever happen. Sometimes, I wonder about the intelligence of the police force or that of the sheriff. This is a small town, so how the hell does the sheriff not know there's underage drinking going on in the same place every single year? I refuse to believe the rich kids and their families have this much power over law enforcement.

"You ready for this, Mackenzie?" Winnie asks from beside me, gripping my sweaty palm in hers. She had to practically threaten bodily harm to drag me here. After Madison made it clear I was not to show my face here, even though I never had any intention of coming in the first place, I threw on my loungewear and started a movie at home. Winnie, being Winnie, wasn't having any of it. She said we needed this one last hoorah before our senior year. We argued for a while, but she won in the end, like always.

Because, even though I hate to admit it, Winnie is right. Next year is my final year of high school, and I haven't lived. I haven't done anything but attend classes, turn my work in on time, and go home. I don't know what the rallies are like. I don't know how crazy the football games or homecoming can be. I've never experienced any of it because I'm different. I'm the girl in the corner who no one looks at twice. I'm the loser who lives

at home with the prom queen. And for once in my high school career, I don't want to be no one. I want to be *someone*. I want to be popular and for people to know my name.

I'm not sure what Winnie expects me to get out of tonight. Hell, I'm not even sure what I expect. I don't plan on drinking anything from those kegs horribly disguised as garbage cans. I sure as hell don't plan on talking to anyone, not like anyone would start a conversation with me anyway. It's all a big waste of time.

"This is a mistake." An icy chill of trepidation shoots up my spine.

She squeezes my hand. "No, it's not."

I blow out a wary sigh. "Madison is going to kill me."

"Oh, screw her. And stop doing that to your teeth."

I roll my eyes but do as she says. When I'm nervous or anxious, I have a habit of running my tongue over the brackets of my braces. Something about the way the metal snags on my tongue serves as a distraction. It may help me feel better, but I know on the outside, to everyone else, I probably look like a geeky loser with a mouth full of metal.

Winnie leads the way, weaving through groups of people drinking and laughing absurdly loud. We finally step up to a table where the cups are, and the keg is hidden beneath.

"I know you're going to say no, but I figure I'll ask anyway. Want a cup?"

Instead of saying no, as I know I should, I dart my gaze around the party and a pair of angry, ice-filled eyes drill into me. Madison stops talking midsentence and is now glaring daggers at me.

*God, why didn't I just stay home?*

I flit my eyes from my sister's death stare to the escape being offered to me in the form of a red cup, and, for once, I do something out of character. I take the escape. With a trembling hand, I take the offered cup from Winnie and bring the plastic rim to my oversized lips. Another thing Madison used to tease me about—my lips. She always used to say I looked like I had fish lips, which never really made any sense to me. But, it honestly didn't have to. Her vile words still hit their intended mark.

The alcohol is frothy and bitter as I swallow gulp after gulp, surprising myself when I finish the entire cup. Winnie raises her brows and looks at me as though I have two heads. Because seriously, who the hell do I think I am, downing an entire cup like that? The effects of the beer hit me almost

immediately. I guess consuming alcohol for the first time can screw with anyone.

“C’mon, I see an open log. Let’s go sit.”

I follow Winnie and perch on the wood. The material of my sweater dress snags on the bark, prompting me to raise my butt over the wood to fix the hellish situation. When Winnie wouldn’t take no for an answer, she dug through my closet, trying to find something suitable for me to wear tonight. All we found was this sweater dress that was casual enough to look like I wasn’t trying too hard, but it wasn’t as homely as my holey jeans and graphic tees. Once I’m positive I don’t have a hole in my dress, I right myself on the log. My gaze dips toward my Converse, and I take in the redness around my ankles.

Good god, I think the chance of my exposure to poison oak just went from fifty-fifty to one hundred percent. I’m pretty sure I’m going to need medical attention soon.

Ignoring my inflamed ankles, I sit in front of the fire and drink in silence, people-watching. When Winnie’s popular teammates call her over, she tugs on my arm to follow, but I shake my head, slipping free.

“No, no, you go.” I force a smile, not wanting to hold her back any longer. With alcohol swimming heavily in my system, I feel like I’m seeing things way more clearly now that I’ve got a buzz. Winnie needs a night like tonight. I can’t hold her back anymore. Especially not with senior year looming.

She’ll never admit it, but she purposely avoids these parties and hanging out with other people from school—all to keep me comfortable. She knows I hate these things, and she knows she’s my only friend. I don’t want to be the one who keeps her from enjoying her last year here in Ferndale.

“You sure, Kenz? I don’t want to leave you alone.”

I smile through my alcoholic haze, my eyes crinkling at the corners. “I’m fine, Winnie. I’ll be right here. You go. Seriously.”

For a second, she looks as though she’s going to argue. I know she doesn’t want to leave, but in the end, she decides to go. I take another sip of my beer and wait for her to come back, my gaze riveted to the roaring flames of the fire.



I don't know how much time passes, but it's long enough that it dawns on me Winnie is still gone. She's no longer in the spot she was when she left to go mingle. She's nowhere to be found actually. My stomach sloshes as I sway when I climb to my feet. I realize I may have consumed way too much beer. I've obviously overestimated myself and my drinking abilities.

My legs feel weird, and I'm pretty sure if I bit my tongue off right now, I wouldn't even feel it. Everything feels blissfully numb. In my drunken state, it takes me a while to process the loud voices being directed at me.

"Hey, you! Get over here!"

When I pick my gaze up, hazy vision and all, my eyes settle on the group of hulking guys standing not too far away from me, and it's then I realize the rowdy group is talking to me. My brows pull down, or at least I think they do, and I look over my shoulder, trying to see if these jocks can be talking to anyone else, but, sure enough, I'm the only one here.

One of them barks out a laugh at my actions.

"Yes, I'm talking to you. Get over here!" The voice is deep. A guy's voice. When I find the source, my stomach clenches because I recognize who the voice belongs to. Trent Ainsworth. All-around asshole, hot jock, and one of the five Savages of Humboldt County.

Yeah, that's right. I said Savages.

Honestly, I think they're more in line with devils.

Because that's exactly what these assholes are in our small town. Each of their ancestors is a founding family. They're like great white sharks, swimming amongst a sea of us trout. Or are we sardines? *Jesus. I can't even think straight anymore.*

Trent's bastard, jock rich friends call themselves the Savages. Town royalty. Amongst other ridiculous nicknames.

Why? No one really knows.

They're like a rabid pack of wolves—the strongest of their pack. They stick together, though it remains unknown who, out of the five of them, is the alpha.

Over the years, I've watched them from afar. I've heard the rumors, and even though they can be just that, *rumors*; part of me never truly believed it. They were constantly up to no good. If there was a brawl at school or at a party, everyone already knew who was behind it. If there was a commotion in town late at night, the rest of the people in Ferndale knew to stay indoors. If they destructed town property, the sheriff and the rest of the police were



never anywhere to be found. If there was a girl in town who swore one of the five had hurt her, nothing would happen. Every single one of them walked around like they didn't have a single care in the world—and I guess in a way, they didn't. They were rich as sin, and had mommy and daddy's money to get them out of any kind of serious trouble.

It was obvious I didn't know much about them. We didn't hang in the same circles and certainly, they didn't even know of my existence. But what I do know is, they're trouble, wrapped in beautiful packaging.

Want to know how I know they're trouble? Madison has been trying to get on their radar for *years*. One night. She just wants one night with any of the relentless Savages who run this town, but I guess none of them have shown any interest in her yet. They're selective assholes who think they're more powerful than God.

I'm not sure what that says about them—the devils—for turning her down the way they have.

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat and force my legs to walk over to them without any drunken mishaps. Of course, that's too much to ask for. The tip of my beat-up, white Converse snags on air, I guess, and my body hurtles forward. Dizzying colors blur before my eyes—a blend of angry orange, vivid green, and hazy brown. I see the ground coming toward me, but I can't seem to stop it from happening. Suddenly, strong, warm arms wrap around me, and I'm no longer falling.

“Whoa.” The voice chuckles. “Take it easy. You all right, sweetheart?”

I look up, my vision splitting on the figure holding me. There's two of him standing before me and I can't seem to focus my gaze, no matter how hard I try. Trent Ainsworth is gorgeous in his own right, but up close and personal, he's a living god. His face breaks out into a grin as he stares down at me and brushes a stray hair off my round face. His finger grazes my freckled cheek, and my heart lurches in my throat.

*Holy crap.*

“What's a beautiful girl like you doing out here alone?” His pretty eyes search my face for answers.

Beautiful? Did he really call *me* beautiful?

Blushing under the weight of his gaze, I fumble with my words.

“I-I'm not ... b-beautiful ... you're not ... this isn't ... a-alone ...”

When Trent chuckles, I'm distracted by the bobbing of his Adam's apple, but he helps me stand straight, and I notice his hand lingers on my

wrist. He's something larger than life, with the way his whole hand engulfs my arm. I hear his friends, the rest of the hellish crew, laughing behind him, probably at me, but I don't care.

*He thinks I'm beautiful?*

*He noticed me?*

How did this gorgeous guy notice me before my sister? It's almost too good to be true.

Trent glances over his shoulder, and his buddies laugh some more before he turns back toward me. "Want to get away from these assholes and talk?" he offers. I dart my gaze over his shoulder and realize I'm nodding as I stare at his formidable friends.

"C'mon," he says. Wrapping his hand firmly around my wrist, he leads me away from the fire and deeper into the woods. A voice in my head screams not to follow him, but I do. This is the one thing I can have that Madison hasn't had. Trent Ainsworth.

He noticed me. He wants to talk to me. Alone.

*Me.*

Trent surprises me by stopping just before the entrance into the woods, so we still have a clear view of his friends and the rest of the party.

"Finally," he breathes, resting his back up against the trunk of one of the many redwoods here. "It feels good to get a little peace and quiet. I was getting tired of pretending to have fun."

His words make me smile. My lips itch to spread across my face, showcasing my braces, but I fight it, opting for a closed-lip smile instead.

*He was pretending, too?*

"So who did you come here with?" he asks. I realize he's trying to have a conversation with me.

I clear my throat, moving my foot through the dirt anxiously. "My friend Winnie dragged me here. This is the first party I've ever been to, and honestly, I'm not all that impressed."

Trent laughs. It's deep and husky and so freaking hot.

"Ouch. You realize the guys and I put this together?"

My cheeks heat in embarrassment. *Crap*. "I'm sorry," I say, cringing.

He chuckles again. "Don't apologize. You're being honest, and I like that. Not many girls are honest nowadays." His eyes roam my face, and my heart continues its quest to burst out of my chest. His gaze drops down to the cup I realize I still have clutched in my hand. "First time drinking?"

“How can you tell?” I tease, my lips twisting with amusement.

He shrugs. “You have this pretty flush on your skin. It looks cute.”

I dart my gaze down to my feet, trying like hell to hide how happy his comment makes me.

“Hey,” he says. His hand lightly touches my chin, forcing my gaze back to his. Before my eyes settle on his, I take in the tattoo on his inner forearm—the one he and all his friends have. It’s a skeleton key with an actual skull outlined and an eye with a triangle around it that rests on the skull’s forehead. It’s kind of creepy. “Don’t hide from me, Mackenzie. You’re absolutely gorgeous.”

My breath catches as I stare into his eyes and watch as they fill with heat. So much heat, I feel something stirring in my stomach. The sensation is one I’m not familiar with.

Wait—*he knows my name?* I don’t have the guts to ask how he knows my name. He’s one of the elite. I’m sure they know everything about everyone here in Ferndale.

“Thank you,” I breathe out in a rush of air. Trent glances toward the bonfire, and I try to follow his gaze, but his next words have my heart seizing in my chest.

“Can I kiss you, Mackenzie?” His hands are already on my face, pulling my mouth toward his, and his body is already leaning closer. My nipples pebble against the material of my bra. It’s such a foreign sensation, one I’ve never experienced before, yet I find it titillating all the same. I say yes before I can think better of it.

His lips graze mine lightly at first. I’m so flustered and buzzed, I let out an embarrassing moan into his mouth when he deepens the kiss. I taste him—a mixture of beer and gum. I feel his hands gliding along my overheated skin, and I can smell the burning logs from the bonfire. I can vaguely make out the sound of hollering laughter, but I can’t tell where it’s coming from, and the truth is, I don’t even care. His hands find their place along my hips and slide down my thick thighs, toying with the material of my sweater dress. When his fingers make contact with the skin of my inner thigh, I slip my arms around his neck, and I kiss him. Hard.

This is my first kiss, and if this is how all first kisses go, I will never complain another day in my life. This doesn’t even seem real. It’s too perfect, too intimate, too much like a dream. I don’t ever want—

“What the fuck is going on?”

I jolt away from Trent at the sound of her voice. I'd know it anywhere. Hell, it haunts me in my dreams. And when I get up every morning. Slowly, I turn on my heel and face my sister, who looks completely unhinged. I've never ever seen her look this angry. And sadly, all that anger is directed at me.

"What in the actual fuck do you think you're doing, Mackenzie?"

I open my mouth to say something, but before I can get words out, Trent steps closer behind me, resting his hand on my hip.

"Leave us alone. We're in the middle of something."

Madison doesn't acknowledge Trent. Instead, she continues to glare daggers at me. Her anger is written all over her, and I can read every thought that crosses her mind.

*How dare you.*

*He should be mine.*

*He's supposed to be mine—they all are.*

"God, what did you do, promise him a fucking blow job to get him over here with you? You're disgusting, Kenz," Madison spits. "And you ..." She focuses her wrath on Trent now. "If you go any further with her, you're going to regret it come tomorrow morning when you realize just how low you stooped while drunk. I think those shots have you mistaking one sister for the other. Come near her again, and I'll hurt you, Ainsworth."

My throat constricts at her words, and tears burn my eyes. How can she be so mean? So vile? We're sisters, not enemies. Is it really so bad that Trent would want to kiss me instead of her? There are four other friends she can have. Why can't she let me just have this one thing?

Madison is the queen at everything she does. She has everything, while I'm always shoved in the corner, forgotten about in the shadows.

"Screw you, Mads," I choke out, fighting back embarrassing tears.

She laughs at me and crosses her arms over her ample chest. "If you don't go home with me right now, I'll tell Dad what a little slut you've been tonight. How do you think he'll react when he finds out I caught you having sex?"

I blanch. "What? But I—"

"Who do you think he'll believe?" She's right. He'll believe her. It's always her.

Blowing out a sad sigh, I turn toward Trent just as he bends down, his lips grazing my ear. "My friends and I will be here all night. Sneak out and

meet me at the kissing rock once you can get out, okay?"

I back away and look up at him. I've never snuck out before. The thought has never even crossed my mind, but I know tonight will be my first.

"Okay." I smile secretively before I turn on my heel and follow my sister.

The whole way back to her car, she's mumbling angrily under her breath. In my drunken state, I should be worried about her driving, but we don't live far. Our house is only a few blocks away.

"Ugh!" She brusquely growls. "I can't believe you would stoop this low and do this to me."

"Me?" I damn near screech. "Why is it so hard for you to get along with me, Madison?" I yell. "Why is everything always about you? You have everything already. Why can't I have this one thing? He noticed me. Maybe he actually even likes me. Why can't you just let me have this? Why do you have to ruin this for me, too?"

"Newsflash, Mackenzie, he doesn't like you. He isn't interested in you. He wants me. He's just using you to get to me."

I laugh darkly. It's such an odd, foreign sound as it bursts past my lips. "Bullshit. You wouldn't be so angry if that was true. You hate that he chose me over you. You can't believe he wants to meet me at the kissing rock tonight and not you!"

She stops walking and turns to me with fire in her eyes. "He told you to meet him at the kissing rock tonight?"

I nod smugly. "He did."

Her lips curl into a sneer. "Get in the car. We're going home."

The drive home is silent and awkward. When Madison parks in the driveway, the look she shoots my way makes me want to cry like a frightened little girl. That's the power of Madison's glare. She has the capacity to eviscerate and kill with a single glance.

"You're going to go inside and be the good girl everyone knows you are. This isn't you, Mackenzie. Stop trying to be like me."

"I'm not trying to be you," I mumble.

"Oh, yeah? Trying to take Trent from me says otherwise. Just get inside before I make the next year of your life a living hell."

"Where are you going?" I ask as I push the door open.

"To meet Trent at the kissing rock, of course."

My stomach bottoms out, and my heart shatters. “But ...”

She smirks in satisfaction. “We all know I’m the hotter sister everyone wants—might as well give Trent a night he’ll never forget.”

“But he said me. He wanted me. He won’t sleep with you after tonight. I just know he won’t.”

Madison laughs. “He’s drunk, Mackenzie. He doesn’t care about you, or who shows up at the rock. He just wants to fuck, and we all know you can’t do that. Now shut my door.”

With tears swimming in my eyes, I do as she says and shut the door.

When I walk into the house, I know my parents are sleeping because all the lights are off. I climb up the stairs and head straight to the shower. The tears fall in hot streams, and I cry freely without fear my sister will hear and use it against me somehow.

It’s unfair.

Why is it always her?

She gets everything while I get nothing. I’m always the afterthought. The loser. The nobody. I don’t know why I thought tonight would be any different.

I climb into bed, enflamed ankles and all, and sob into my pillow until I drift off to sleep.



When I wake up the next morning, it’s to a shrill scream coming from the kitchen. I run downstairs, and my feet slow on the final steps when I see two police officers, and in the kitchen near the front door, my mom is on her knees with tears streaming down her face.

Sheriff Keller stands in front of her with an expression that makes my stomach sour.

“We’re sorry, Monica.”

His next words have my stomach hollowing out and the blood draining from my face.

*Body’s been identified.*

*Found at kissing rock.*

*Homicide investigation.*

I shake my head, trying to make sense of what he's saying. It can't be. There's no way.

"We're looking into all possible leads on what could've happened to your daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Wright. Her body showed signs of trauma as well as ..." he clears his throat, "as well as signs of assault."

"What does that mean?" my father asks, voice hoarse.

Keller sighs. "Michael ... it means she was raped."

"My baby!" my mom screams, and the sound of it rains nails down my back. I sway violently on my feet and clutch the banister rail for support as realization sets in.

My sister was murdered.

Her body was found at the kissing rock.

The very last place I was supposed to meet Trent and his friends last night.

Madison wasn't supposed to be found dead at that rock this morning. It was supposed to be me.

# CHAPTER

## One



*Nine Years Later*

“Have you talked to them yet?” Katherine asks from her position across from me.

I lift my shoulder noncommittally because no, I haven’t talked to my parents, even though I know I should. It’s nearing the ninth anniversary of Madison’s death.

Nothing ever felt right since that morning, especially not at home with my mom and dad. When parents lose a child, most of the time, they lose themselves. They neglect responsibilities in turn for their grief, which is understandable. Only, during their grief, my parents forgot about me. They forgot about how much pain I was in, too. They didn’t see how much I needed them. Or maybe they did, and they just didn’t care.

I haven’t seen my parents in eight years. Eight long, lonely years.

After I graduated, it seemed as though this black cloud loomed over my family’s heads—more like the entire town. When I left Ferndale, my parents offered no resistance. They didn’t beg me to stay or offer to be present in my life as I’d hoped. They didn’t even attend my graduation



ceremony. I guess it was too hard for them to watch me walk across the stage without Madison.

I hoped the college experience would help me move on from her death. A new coast. A new city. A new crowd of people. A new everything.

It didn't.

If anything, my time away from Ferndale made me think about Maddie more than I wanted to. She was everywhere, yet not really where I needed her to be. My thoughts of her verged on obsessive. Why did this happen to her? Did she suffer? And my biggest fixation was, why would someone want to murder my sister, and why hadn't her killer ever been brought to justice?

When a murder in a small town like ours goes unsolved, it leaves a taint. And that's exactly what Maddie's death did to Ferndale. The happy-go-lucky town turned into a sad, neglected place tourists no longer wanted to visit.

Young girl gets brutally murdered in the woods? Yeah, that's not the best advertisement to entice tourists and vacationers to bring their families.

"I'll give them a call sometime later," I mumble, opting to gulp a mouthful of my strawberry mimosa to avoid saying any more lies.

Kat shares a look with our friend Vera before she shoots me a look across the table, her perfect brows arched and all. "You know, Kenz, I think —"

"Can we not talk about this right now? Please."

Her mouth snaps shut, and she nods. I think this is the most self-restraint I've ever seen from her.

Vera and Katherine don't know everything about my past, but they do know my sister died, and I no longer have a close relationship with my parents. What they don't know is that my sister was my twin, and I've blamed myself for her death for the past nine years.

Kat goes back to flipping through the pages of her gossip magazine. Vera and Kat live for those things—the who's who and most eligible bachelors here in New York. All the stuff I really couldn't care less about.

When she lands on something particularly juicy, she lets out a squeal and starts fanning her face. She's about as dramatic as they come. Immediately, Vera scoots closer, trying to get a look at what she's squealing about. As they scan the page, their eyes widen, and if possible, their eyes sparkle. I can damn near see the money signs in their gazes.

“Holy shit.” Vera gasps. “This is going to be the hottest event of the year. Can you imagine how many connections we could make? We *need* to be at that club opening.”

The glint in Kat’s eyes says she wholeheartedly agrees with that statement.

“Check this out.” Kat, completely giddy, slides the paper they’ve been glued to toward me, and I roll my eyes, preparing to read something that will no doubt be a waste of time.

That’s when I see it.

Or him.

The tattoo on his forearm is a dead giveaway.

My mouth goes dry as I stare at the man in the photograph. It’s been years since I’ve last seen him—any of them, really—and I’m instantly transported back nine years in time.

*I sprint out of the house, the front door banging against the wall in my haste. I don’t bother looking over my shoulder to see if Sheriff Keller is following me or still trying to console my parents. I have one thing on my mind, and one thing only—Trent Ainsworth.*

*What happened last night? Was this his plan all along? Did he and Madison get in a fight at the kissing rock, and that’s how she wound up dead? So many questions and possible answers hit my brain at full force, but I don’t like any of them. I need to know what happened last night.*

*The real story.*

*Still dressed in my pajamas and the fuzzy slippers Mom and Dad bought for me last Christmas, I sprint down the dirt road, heading toward the one place I know the Savages will be. The courts.*

*Every Sunday, the guys play basketball at the courts. Just as every Friday since the dawn of time has been reserved for their football games. It’s been that way for as long as I can remember, which is why I know, deep in my gut, that they’ll be there.*

*Gravel and pebbles of dirt kick up against the backs of my ankles and calves as I sprint through the streets of Ferndale. The bitter coldness of the morning clings to my skin and seeps into my chest. It almost feels as if I’ve swallowed a block of dry ice. With each puff of air, more plumes of white vapor escape my lips. My chest feels like it’s on fire, and there’s a tight stitching in my side that almost has me doubling over and vomiting along the road, but I can’t stop now. I can’t give up now.*

*Fatty Kenzie will not give up.*

*My heart squeezes at the nickname Madison gave me. Tears sting my eyes, but it's not for the reasons one would think. I'm used to Maddie and her harsh words, but the thought...God, just the thought of never hearing her voice again, never seeing her curl her beautiful long hair in the mornings before school, never watching her tip her head back when she laughs devastates me. I can't get any of the moments back with my sister. My twin. The girl I shared the womb with.*

*She's gone.*

*She's really gone.*

*Tears stream down my face as I think about my sister. She wasn't always so snobby and mean. She used to be my best friend. My protector. Hell, we even shared the twin phenomenon of feeling each other's pain and sharing the same thoughts once upon a time.*

*So why didn't I feel her last night?*

*Why the hell didn't I feel how afraid Madison must've been during the last seconds of her life?*

*Shaking my head, I dig deep and run through the pain. My calves start to tighten and cramp. When the abandoned streets clear, I know I'm getting closer. In the distance, I can see the courts ahead and the low fog that clings to the earth, almost hiding the dark figures playing up ahead. But I can feel them. I know they're there.*

*My slippers slap against the pavement as I near their game. The fog hanging close to the grass near the courts starts to disappear, and before I know it, I'm there, standing before the five—wait, scratch that—the four formidable devils—the Savages of Humboldt County. I'm sure I look absolutely insane still dressed in slippers and pajamas with bedhead and tears streaming down my face. I can only imagine what they're thinking.*

*Four pairs of eyes swing toward me, but my gaze is only riveted on one of them. Trent stops bouncing the basketball, his brows dipping as he takes in my distressed state.*

*"Why?" I croak as a fresh wave of tears burns the back of my eyes and nose. One of the Savages—Zach Covington—barks out a sharp laugh.*

*"Who the fuck is this nerdy-looking bitch?"*

*The rest of them laugh. Except for Trent. He's still staring at me as though I'm a puzzle he's trying to put together.*

Ignoring Zach's comment, Trent asks, "Can I help you with something, kid?"

*Kid? Kid? Are you kidding me?*

*My lips purse into a thin line. I take a threatening step forward and jab my finger toward him. He doesn't flinch or move away, just raises an inquisitive brow.*

*"You know exactly why I'm here."*

*"Can someone please remove this cow from the court? She's fucking up the game!" Vincent Hawthorne—another one of them—growls.*

*I angrily swipe at the tears streaming down my face, hating that I look so weak. Hating that Trent is staring at me as though he has no clue who I am.*

*"Please, Trent," I plead, trying for a different approach. "Just tell me what happened at the kissing rock last night with Madison. I promise I won't be upset. I just...I need to know you didn't hurt her. I need to know our kiss last night was real."*

*Laughter.*

*Loud, soul-crushing laughter is the response I get from Trent and the rest of the guys.*

*Trent drops the basketball. The sound of it bouncing against the asphalt echoes around us, and he crosses his arms over his solid chest, a taunting smirk playing on his lips.*

*"Kiss? You having dreams about me, sweetheart?" He turns toward the guys, laughing and fist bumping as if this is some sort of sick joke. Marcus Whitehorn—another devil of Humboldt—makes a show of crudely humping the air.*

*My teeth grind together as I work to control my anger. "You kissed me last night at the bonfire, Trent. You called me beautiful. You even told me to meet you at the kissing rock later on that night."*

*Trent tips his head back and laughs. The column of his neck works vigorously to support his booming hysterics.*

*"Look, sweetheart, I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but I never kissed you yesterday. Hell, I wouldn't come near you with a ten-foot pole. So why don't you do us all a favor and get the hell out of here?"*

*Angry tears prick my eyes. "You're lying!" I yell. My shrill voice bounces off the courts. "You kissed me yesterday. All of you were there!" I pin them all with my glare before focusing back on Trent. "You asked me to*

meet you at the kissing rock, and Madison went instead, only, this morning, she never came home, and I'm sure you all know why."

I let my words, my insinuation, hang in the air. Among all of us.

Their laughter and smugness taper off. Instead, it's replaced by anger. Both Trent and Zach take dangerous steps forward, but Marcus and Vincent place a hand on their shoulders, stopping them from closing the distance.

"Listen, you little bitch, I don't know what you think you know, but I already told you, I don't know who the fuck you are. We didn't kiss, nor will we ever. I wouldn't be caught dead kissing a freak like you. Now, leave."

"But you know me. You all do," I choke out, tears clogging my voice. As I stare at Trent, I can't help but wonder where the guy from last night went. That guy was actually sweet to me, but now he's back to his asshole ways.

"Do we know this...thing, fellas?" Trent asks the guys, looking over his shoulder. They all laugh, shaking their heads.

"Please, Trent," I sob, taking a step closer. "Just please tell me what happened to my sister."

"I said to fucking leave!" Trent abruptly barks. I flinch at his tone, almost stumbling over my own feet.

"Get the fuck out of here while you still can, freak," Vincent growls, picking up the discarded basketball. I shake my head, trying to see through the torrent of tears streaming down my face.

How could he? Last night happened. I know it did.

Why are they lying? Why can't he just admit he kissed me last night? Was it all some sick joke? Was Madison right about everything?

"Trent—" I start to say, but Zach snatches the basketball from Vincent's grasp and throws it at me. The ball hits me right in the stomach, knocking the air out of me.

"GO!" he barks, and I do. I stumble back on trembling legs, and I run away. My body wracks with sobs as I weave through the streets. Tears and snot run down my face, and I can hardly see where I'm running through the flow of tears. My slipper suddenly catches on something, and I fall forward. My body thuds against the moist earth, and I rest on all fours, sobbing into the still air.

I cry for Madison.

I cry for a brokenhearted freak who never stood a chance.

I cry and cry until I have no tears left.

*The sound of tires on gravel has me wiping my face on the sleeve of my sleepwear and looking up toward the source.*

*“Dear God, Mackenzie. Where the hell have you been? Your parents need you!” Sheriff Keller says, throwing open the driver’s side door of his squad car.*

*I don’t even bother wiping the tears off my face. Instead, I let a desperate sob slip free and look up into his worried eyes as he scrambles toward me.*

*“Sheriff Keller.” My voice quakes, and my lip trembles uncontrollably. I have no doubt my next words will cause a shitstorm of problems. “I have to tell you something about last night.”*

“Mackenzie? Hey, you all good, babe?” Vera asks, snapping me out of the memory. “You spaced out for a second.”

I clear my throat, my eyes still glued to the photo and the words above it. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. I just ... I guess I was just thinking about work stuff.” The lie slips easily from my lips, much as it usually does around these girls. They’re my friends, sure, but I’ve never been truthful with them. About my past or even my present.

Katherine and Vera have always been the popular rich girls, and looking at me now, you’d never know that, at one time, I wasn’t. I’ve changed a lot over the past years. So much so, I don’t think anyone from my high school would even recognize me, let alone remember me.

I’m no longer fatty Kenzie. Now I’m just Mackenzie. Socialite.

After graduating from Ferndale High, I turned down my academic scholarship to San Francisco State University and made a spur-of-the-moment decision to move to the Big Apple. I haven’t set foot in California since then, and I haven’t so much as given any thought to going back either. There’s nothing left for me there, hasn’t been for a long time.

My friends are the crème de la crème here in the rich world. Their jobs? They don’t work. They just spend Daddy’s money, wear the latest in fashion trends, and get paid to look good. They appear in the hottest clubs, party with celebs, and spend a fortune on unnecessary things, like this meal that I’ll probably have to dig into my savings to pay for.

Pretending to be something or someone I’m not is what I’m used to. It’s how I’ve gotten by all these years. The nice girls? They don’t make it. They get stomped on and taken advantage of. I had to learn that the hard way. But

the mean girls? They weather the storm and somehow always end up on top.

And that's exactly what I've turned into—a mean girl.

I should hate it. I've turned into the vile version of my dead sister, and honestly, I don't know what that says about me and my head space. I should be disgusted with who I've turned into, but if I'm being honest, I haven't felt anything in a long time. I've been numb, coasting by without emotion. All until I saw the photograph Kat and Vera are still fawning over.

Katherine Van Der Pont is the daughter of a mogul. We met at an event I was working. She was an attendee while I was catering on the side, barely making ends meet. I had just gotten off my shift and was changing in the restroom when she ran into me. She thought I was another guest and struck up a conversation. The rest is pretty much history.

Vera Caspian is the heir to a family that owns a shit ton of land with oil. I met her a few years ago through Kat. The two have been besties for a while now, and I guess I was the final piece needed to complete their trio. Instead of telling them the truth about my family and me, I gave them some half-assed sob story—my sister died when I was younger, my parents cut me off financially years ago, and we no longer have any contact. That's it. The fraudulent story of Mackenzie Wright.

I never felt the need to elaborate. We're thousands of miles from that previous life, so there's no way they'd ever find out the truth. The girls don't need to know how broke I really am, where I really come from, or what I had to overcome in the past.

The girls think I work so many jobs because I'm trying to spite my rich family, but in actuality, I'm just trying to survive and scrape together a living. They have no idea. They offer help whenever they know I'm penny-pinching just to stay afloat, but for the most part, I try not to take the handouts from them. It's not like I deserve them.

I'm a liar and a fake. That's the sad truth.

"Worried about your deadline?" Katherine asks, referring to one of my many jobs. I force a fake smile.

"Yeah. I guess I'm just a little worried I won't make it in time."

She scoffs. "Oh stop, you're a brilliant writer, and you're insanely talented. They'll love whatever you give them."

If she only knew.

She's merely being a good friend, trying to shower me with praise. They've never read a word of what I've written. I'd imagine not many have.

My friends think I'm a freelance writer, which I am, but what they don't know is, I've been a struggling writer on the side as well. I take the freelance jobs for extra cash since it's my only means to survive, but what I'm really focused on is my writing career. I've been working on the same project for six years, but I've been stuck in the middle without enough information on where to go with it.

My gaze drifts toward the photo in the gossip rag again, and a plan starts to take shape in my head. Feelings I've buried rapidly claw to the surface, demanding to be handled.

*I think I've just found the answers for the project I've been working on.*

"This looks fun. We should definitely go to this opening." I find myself saying, my eyes still glued to the photo of Trent Ainsworth with his arms slung around two other guys. Going by their bone structure, I'd say it's Zach Covington and Vincent Hawthorne. The only two devils missing from the photo are Marcus Whitehorn and Sebastian Pierce.

For the fifth time, my eyes scale over the caption above the photo:

*The Hollywood Scoop—SoCal's biggest playboys are at it again. Three of the infamous five were spotted out on Tuesday night promoting the grand opening of their new, exclusive club in West Hollywood, fit for the elite—The Kings. The guest list is already a mile long filled with your favorite A-list celebrities, guaranteeing the club's opening to be a success.*

Absentmindedly, I rub the pad of my finger over my lips, processing. We can get a flight out of New York to LA with no issues—Vera and Kat are party girls down to their core. They wouldn't miss an exclusive club opening like this for the world.

"You're serious? You, of all people, are willing to fly to LA for this? What about your deadline and your PA job at the firm?"

One of my part-time jobs is as an assistant for the marketing director at MainCorp Marketing. It's a shitty job, but it helps pay the bills. All it costs is my dignity. I don't usually mind grunt work, but when your boss is an asshole who gifts you with impossible tasks—like picking up dry cleaning, buying coffee and all his other meals throughout the day, oh, yeah, and buying his condoms that I'm one hundred percent certain he isn't using with his wife—that's always a fun time.



I shrug my shoulders noncommittally at Vera and nod. “It might be a good distraction from work. I’ve never taken a day off, so it’s not like they can tell me no.”

Kat squeals and pulls me into an air-restricting hug. “Yes! I love you! I love you! I’ll book our flights and set up an appointment with Genevieve for Brazilians. We are going to be the *hottest* in that club come opening night. Those men won’t be able to keep their eyes off us. Who knows, maybe one of us will even bag one of the millionaires who own the club.” She waggles her brows suggestively.

I smile. A real, genuine smile.

*That’s the plan.*



I study my reflection in the floor-length mirror in my suite. I can’t get over how different I look. Two days ago, after Kat made sure our bodies were waxed and plucked free of almost all hair, I decided it was time for a change. It wasn’t so much a spur-of-the-moment decision, though. It was something else entirely. I wanted to be a new person. I didn’t want to head back to the West Coast feeling like the same sandy blond, hazel-eyed Mackenzie Wright. Even though I was no longer that girl from high school, I couldn’t help but feel that being near the Savages again would change things. I had to make myself unrecognizable to keep the upper hand, and as I stare in the mirror, I think I’ve accomplished that.

Picking up a strand of my hair that has been dyed jet black and straightened down my back, I have to admit, the hair was a difficult change. Seeing my blond smudged away with black was like watching a piece of me die, and my alter ego emerge. It’ll definitely take some getting used to, but as I rake my gaze over myself for the first time, I can’t help but feel... different. Seductive. The fire engine red wrap dress hugs my curves to perfection and fits damn near like a glove. All the running in the world couldn’t get rid of my backside, so years ago, I decided to embrace it. I switched out the horde of cardio in place for Pilates and weightlifting. Now, my backside is something I’m proud of.

I look dangerous—like a vixen. A sexy, dangerous vixen getting restitution for her sister.

My cell vibrates on the end table. Snapping my gaze away from my reflection, I glance at the message on the brightly lit screen.

Kat: Once you're ready, the concierge will be waiting with a Town Car. Courtesy of my dad. Kisses.

I roll my eyes. Kat's father, the mogul, has always worked at his daughter's beck and call. Vera and Kat are staying at Kat's family vacation home, but I opted for some privacy because I didn't want to be a burden. I also wanted time to gather my wits before insinuating myself in the lives of the elite once again. Kat wasn't happy at the thought of me staying at some random hotel alone, so she had her daddio pull some strings. Instead of staying at a cheap, decent hotel like I intended to, Kat's father got me a room at the Kings Resort and Spa. It's as pretentious and snobby as it sounds, but it's also incredibly beautiful. My suite is otherworldly, and the staff here has been absolutely incredible. For the first time, I feel like a princess. That's how everyone treats you in a hotel like this. Now I see why people dish out so much money for five-star hotels—because the Kings Resort? It's more like a hundred-star hotel.

And believe me, I had my qualms about staying here. I mean, the name alone, Kings Resort, felt like some sick joke, especially since I was preparing to deal with the infamous royalty. My staying here is an omen of sorts, but I'm just not sure if it's a bad or good one.

I stuff my phone into my clutch and check my hair one last time before I leave my room to meet the girls. We're supposed to have dinner tonight at Nobu, which I'm positive will cost an arm and a leg. I can already feel my credit card sighing at me from within my wallet. I file into the elevator, not surprised to see it filled with handsome men in suits and beautiful women hanging off their arms. If I remember Kat correctly, the owner of the resort chain is throwing some kind of party here this weekend, which means the hotel is filled to the brim with rich uppity people.

Great. Just what I need.

Navigating my way through the crowded lobby, I try not to let the sound of voices grate on my nerves. My phone vibrates in my clutch, and I blow out a sigh, ready to reprimand Kat for rushing me, even though I'm already on my way out.

When I glance at the screen, my heart screeches to a grievous halt, and my mouth goes dry. I swallow thickly, flitting my gaze around the multitude of bodies, looking for a moment of reprieve. I find it in the form of a

restaurant labeled The Den that's blocked off with a "RESERVED—EMPLOYEE PERSONNEL ONLY—KEEP OUT" sign. Saying to hell with it, I sneak past the velvet rope and the sign, finding a small slice of solitude.

With the privacy I need for a conversation like this, I slide my finger across the screen, and my voice wobbles when I say, "Hello?"

"Hi..." The voice sounds surprised I answered. I'm just as shocked. We always let these calls go to voicemail. We haven't talked on the phone in years; I usually leave voicemails to say what needs to be said.

After brunch with the girls, I finally gave her a call before my flight and left a voicemail. Much like I do every year. Though I didn't expect to hear back from her. A text message? Sure. A formal email? Most likely. Definitely not this.

"I heard your message. I guess I just ... I wanted to see how you were doing."

I step farther inside the quiet, dimly lit restaurant, taking in how gorgeous and modern the décor is.

"I'm doing fine. How are you, Mom?" I ask. The word *mom* tastes bitter on my tongue.

"That's good," she says quietly, not answering my question. "Are you busy? It sounds like I may be interrupting you. I hope I didn't ruin your night." Her voice sounds tired, sad even. And goddammit if it doesn't make my heart twinge. Of their own accord, my legs take me deeper inside the restaurant, farther away from the vibrant voices in the hotel.

"Uh, yeah. Well, no, you didn't ruin my night. I was just on my way out with a few friends for dinner and drinks."

"That's ... wonderful. I ... I'll let you go, Mackenzie."

For some odd reason, sadness engulfs me. It squeezes my chest in a vise, filling my already battered heart with ice.

"Okay," I whisper.

Then the line goes dead.

I pull my phone away from my ear and stare down at it, trying to piece together how I feel. Part of me wants to feel angry. How dare she call me like this, after all these years. But the other part of me, the bigger part—the Mackenzie I've worked so hard to hide—feels like going home and falling into her arms. Just as I did so often when I was a kid.

She's my mother, and I love her. No amount of time away from her can change that.

A throat clearing behind me has my heart lurching in my throat and me whirling on my heels toward the source.

“You obviously don’t read very well.”

My eyes widen when they land on the owner of that rich, decadent voice. A man, a very handsome man, dressed in a pristine gray bespoke suit is seated at a table, apparently enjoying a private dinner. Well, that was before I walked in.

“I-I wasn’t ... I-I didn’t ...” I manage to say in a noncoherent sentence. Not even one minute with this guy, and he’s turned me into the blubbing loser from high school all over again.

He cocks his head to the side, a blank expression on his face. “Not very articulate either.”

His words irk me. “I ... well, I ...”

He raises his brow in challenge as if I’ve just proven his point.

Well, surprise, surprise, he’s devastatingly handsome and a complete asshole, too. I know his type all too well.

“Sorry,” I mumble, clearing my throat, “I guess I wasn’t expecting to crash in on someone’s dinner, and I certainly wasn’t expecting that person to be such a royal asshole.”

Surprise shadows his features. A small, sexy smirk plays on the corners of his lips.

Good god. That smirk is doing things to my body that should *not* be happening right now.

His eyes rove over my body, sending a chill down my spine. It’s not an unpleasant chill, though. It’s actually quite the opposite.

“Royal asshole?” There’s a hint of inflection in his tone. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

This time, it’s my turn to raise my brows. “Yet?”

Like gasoline on a fire, his smirk spreads to an all-out smile that has my breath hitching.

“Sit.”

My body jolts at the order—no, the command—but I don’t give in, even if the strangest sensation burning down my spine is begging me to do it. To give in to this darkly handsome man.

“I don’t take orders from assholes.”

My remark makes him chuckle. The sound is raspy, dark, and oh, so enticing. My gaze is riveted to his Adam’s apple that bobs deliciously to

accommodate his humor. He's ... gorgeous. Completely gorgeous in a dark, rugged way. His hair is black—not brown or dark brown, but black—and unkempt. The color mirrors mine except his is natural. His chiseled face is reminiscent of a Greek god. His cheekbones are sharp, and his lips are full, and, if I'm being completely honest, extremely distracting. By the width of his shoulders and the build of his upper body, I can tell he's fit—extremely fit.

Even with all these amazing qualities, I can't tear my eyes away from something else. His eyes. At the surface, they don't seem that special, just a deep blue that matches his dark looks. It's a common blue that would be easy to overlook. His brows are the prominent feature and what people most likely notice. Thick and arched, they darken his expression with heat, but his eyes remain icy, chilling me to the bone.

My legs clamp together as I ogle him, trying to find my voice or another smart remark. Instead, I turn on my heels, ready to leave, but his voice stops me.

“Have dinner with me.”

An electric shock bursts through my spinal column and vibrates in my fingers and toes. Slowly, I glance over my shoulder, and he points at the empty side of the table. “No company. Might as well humor me.”

I open my mouth to say something but snap it shut. I mean, seriously, what the hell do I say to that? I should leave. I *need* to leave. Go and never come back because this man is so out of my league, it's not even funny, but for some reason, I don't. I suck in a lungful of air, pivot, and stride back toward the table, trying like hell not to wobble in these six-inch heels.

Seemingly out of thin air, someone dressed in a hotel uniform brings a chair for me and helps me sit, all the while tall—even sitting down, this man would tower over my small frame the moment he stands—dark, and handsome watches my every move. I had no idea hotel employees were waiting in the wings and shadows of this restaurant watching my strange yet arousing encounter with this man.

Slowly, I lower myself into the seat, feeling my nerves rise. The decadent, savory smell of his food hits me first, and my stomach rumbles. My mind immediately drifts to Vera and Kat, who are probably waiting for me to arrive at Nobu. I don't want to be that friend, the one who ditches her girlfriends because she meets a man, but Jesus Christ, when will I ever get

the chance to enjoy a meal with a man as gorgeous, intimidating, and intriguing as the one sitting across from me again? The likelihood is never.

“I’d like to make it known I’m only sitting because I’m hungry.” *And not because you’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.*

I keep that last tidbit to myself.

The handsome stranger lets out a dark, husky chuckle that hits me in places a laugh never should. It’s so foreign yet titillating.

His face splits into a mind-blowing grin that has my lady bits clenching. I take in the boyish gleam in his iridescent blue eyes and his masculine features and cock my head to the side. There’s something so familiar about him, but I can’t put my finger on it.

“Noted,” he remarks in a deep, raspy voice that travels through my body in waves. The way he speaks, his timbre is so incredibly sexy, and it has me forgetting why I came here in the first place. “I didn’t catch your name.”

The heat brewing in his eyes has my chest rising and falling erratically as it tries to accommodate my heavy breathing.

“I didn’t give it,” I say in a breathy voice, getting lost in his turbulent gaze. He smirks as though he knows his effect on me, then rests his forearms on the tablecloth and slowly leans toward me. My eyes widen, and my lungs squeeze painfully, restricting air, just waiting for him to make his next move. His head dips low, his lips grazing my ear. His masculine scent wafts around me.

“It’s a pleasure, no name.”

I smile and try to ignore the buzz of butterflies in my stomach and the thrill shooting up and down my spine. “It’s Mackenzie.”

He pulls away just enough to look into my eyes.

“Mackenzie,” he repeats my name as if he’s testing out the sound of it on his tongue. And fuck me if hearing my name come from his lips doesn’t do strange things to my body. “Tell me about yourself. What brings you to the resort?”

“Well, I ... Wait, I didn’t even get your name. Seems a little unfair, don’t you think?”

He seems slightly surprised and taken aback by the question. Did he think I could read minds and would automatically know his name?

“It’s Baz.”

“Hmm. Interesting name.”

“So I’ve heard,” he replies nonchalantly. “Now, tell me about you, Mackenzie.”

The same hotel employee from earlier rolls in with a silver tray and stops the cart right next to me. The plate of food revealed is the same as what the man across from me is eating. The smell of the grilled salmon in a savory red wine with roasted vegetables on the side has me salivating as he slides my plate in front of me.

“Thank you,” I mumble, still feeling a bit out of sorts with the knowledge that this man has hotel employees at his beck and call. He didn’t even have to tell them to prepare me a plate or grab me a chair. They just automatically knew. If I didn’t know it before, I sure do now—this man must be someone with a lot of pull if he has these people scrambling after him.

The employee pours me a glass of wine while tall, dark, and handsome sips on what I think is whiskey in his tumbler. Or is it bourbon? What do rich people prefer to drink?

After taking a large gulp of wine for courage, I remember what Baz asked me before my food came.

“Well”—I clear my throat—“I’m from New York, and I’m a writer—well, sort of—just here on a small getaway with my friends.” He doesn’t need to know that this getaway is disguised as a plot with much more ... cruel intentions. “And what about you, Mr. No-Company-for-the-Night? Tell me about you.”

Baz’s face shadows with confusion, but then it suddenly clears and morphs into a blank mask, save for his plump lips that are now pursed in a thin, grim line.

“I don’t like it when women play dumb, Mackenzie. It certainly doesn’t do it for me.”

My brows raise, my face colored in surprise.

*What the hell is he talking about?*

“Excuse me?” I ask, tone affronted.

He watches me carefully as I pause with my knife and fork buried into the salmon.

“You really don’t know who I am, do you?” he inquires, head cocked to the side as though he’s waiting for me to decide on the truth. I slow my chewing and stare at him more intently.

Absolutely no recognition.

Other than his eyes. When I stare into his eyes, I feel like I know him. There's familiarity there. Whatever darkness lurks there mirrors mine as if we're one and the same.

"Am I supposed to?"

I can't possibly know him, can I? Surely, I would've remembered a face like his had I ever run into him before.

He watches me contemplatively for a moment, absentmindedly tracing his fingers through the condensation on his tumbler filled with amber liquid. "I suppose not."

"Well?" I prompt, now growing antsy, wanting to know the truth.

"Baz Kingston, CEO of King Spas and Resorts."

My mouth gapes. "You own this place?"

He smirks at my reaction. "I do."

"Wow," I breathe. "Was not expecting that."

"Interesting."

"What is?"

"Most people already know who I am. But you ... you're different. I can't tell what your agenda is."

My brows furrow. "Agenda?"

Baz smirks, but it's not warm or sexy like all his other ones. This one is different. Darker. "Everyone has an agenda, Mackenzie."

I blush at his words. I don't even know why, but for some reason, what he says makes heat rise to my cheeks. Maybe because he's closer to the truth than he realizes. Because I do have an agenda. It's the whole reason I'm here in California. The whole reason I changed my appearance.

"The hotel is incredible. I mean, you should be really proud of everything you've done here."

"I am, thank you. We're set to open another chain in Fiji as well as in the Hamptons soon."

"That's incredible." I force a smile, trying to ignore my clutch that's currently burning a hole through my lap. Here I am, sitting across from a CEO millionaire, while I struggle to make enough money to scrape by on.

Sometimes, the universe can be a son of a bitch.

"Enough about me." He leans back, tone indifferent. "Tell me more about you. What brings you to California?"

*Vengeance.*



Instead of saying that, I clear my throat, opting for a version of the truth. “My friend’s father got me a room here. You must know him, Mr. Van Der Pont? Well, his daughter is a good friend, so we decided to make this a weekend getaway. Just the girls enjoying their time away from work.”

His eyes are practically incinerating me with the way he’s regarding me. It’s like he’s searching for a lie, something tangible for him to hold on to. Absentmindedly, he rubs the pad of his thumb across his lower lip. It’s incredibly distracting.

“And no boyfriend?”

A squeak slips past my lips. “Uh, no. No boyfriend.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Oh?” I raise a questioning brow. “And why is that?”

He leans forward, again, into my space. “Because, Mackenzie, you’re too sexy not to drive all the men back in New York crazy. Hell, you’re doing it to me right now.”

*Ohmygod.*

“I ... well ... I ...”

He chuckles at my frazzled response. “Here’s the thing, Mackenzie. You intrigue me as no other woman has. And I like that. A lot,” he muses, settling back in his seat. “You say you came here with your friends to have some fun, so I have a proposition for you.”

My brow arches. “What kind of proposition?”

His eyes darken, and the blue of his gaze sears into my flesh. “The dirty kind.”

“Oh god,” I choke out.

“That’s not the name I’d prefer to fall from your lips, but we’ll work on that. Right now, I’d like nothing more than to fuck you six ways to Sunday, Mackenzie.”

My core spasms, and my lungs heave.

Something happens in my stomach, and it feels like there are Pop Rocks in my veins. My body is going haywire at his words.

*Holy shit.*

*He wants to fuck me.*

*Jesus.*

“That’s ... that’s incredibly forward, Mr. Kingston, don’t you think?”

His grin reminds me of a predator. “I’m very forward when I know what I want, Mackenzie. And the truth? I want to fuck you. Very, very much.”

A low whimper falls from my lips, making him chuckle as if he enjoys watching my misery. Enjoys watching me squirm.

*Keep your head in the game!* My brain yells, reminding me why I'm here. I cannot lose sight of everything just because a hot guy wants to have wild, crazy sex with me. I can't.

I will not.

"I-I ... I should probably go. I'm supposed to meet m-my friends."

Christ. The nervous high school stutter is back in full force.

Baz clucks his tongue. "Shame. I was looking forward to seeing the dirty girl inside you," he says, his thumb swiping across my lower lip. I'm so out of it, I didn't even notice when he moved in closer or when his hand came toward my face.

I shoot away from the table and wobble on my heels, attempting to make a quick escape.

Baz smirks. "Until next time, dirty girl."

I run away, out of the restaurant, through the crowded bodies, toward the elevators.

After locking myself in my room, I rest my back against the heavy door and fight to control my breathing. My nipples are as hard as rocks, and with each intake of breath, they achingly graze against the material of my dress. I clench my thighs together and whimper when I feel just how wet my panties are. I've never had an encounter with a man like that before. I've never felt so wanton, so sexy, so desired. I've never wanted to have a one-night stand with a stranger so badly.

So why did I stop it then? Why didn't I just say yes? What could one romp have the potential to destroy?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Wiping the back of my hand across my forehead, I push off the door and stride toward the bedroom to help alleviate the need, but then I stop. Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm spinning on my heels and throwing the door open. With my clutch still wrapped around my wrist, I head to the elevators and pick my gaze up to press the button to recall the elevator. Just then, the doors slide open, and my breath catches.

"Oh, fuck," I breathe.

Baz smirks. "Oh fuck, indeed."

Enjoying *Kiss Me with Lies*? Want more of Baz and Kenzie?

Grab your copy [here](#)

# Acknowledgements

I can't say thank you enough to everyone who helped make *Hate Thy Neighbor* everything it is today. If you followed the link, I hope you enjoyed the sneak peek of the extended epilogue/*The Consequence of Hating You*, told from Oliva and Roman's daughter's POV. Originally, I planned on leaving the extended epilogue in the book, but after much thought (and suggestions from editors and friends) I decided to cut it and give everyone a chance to decide *if* they wanted to read it or not. I love HEA's, just as I imagine everyone else does, but for Olivia and Roman, I wanted to remain true to their story and not sugarcoat what the future may or may not have held for them. I hope every reader can respect that. And if you chose not to click the link and were perfectly happy with the first epilogue, that is completely fine, too. <3

I honestly wrote this story on a whim. I had no expectations or anything for this book. This was just meant to be a purge project. Something for me to write, then toss. The idea came to me, and annoyingly, it wouldn't go away, so I ran with it. Six chapters in and I *knew* I couldn't toss this book out. I knew I'd fall in love with these two by the time I typed "The End". And I did. This story is so unlike my usual, and I loved that. I loved stepping away from all the angst and suspense, into something (relatively) lighter.

Before I bore everyone, I need to thank so many people for making this story possible. My team of kick ass Beta Readers: Chelé, Elizabete, Ratula, Sarah, Aundi, Serena, April, Annette, Michelle, Sonal, and Becky. Thank you all for taking the time to read this story. All of your feedback is invaluable and this story wouldn't be possible without you babes. I love each and every one of you so freaking much. <3

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Please consider leaving a brief, honest review if you have time.

Always grateful,  
Selena (S.M.)

Let's keep in touch!

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## *About the Author*

S.M. Soto was born and raised in Northern California where she currently resides with her son. Her love for reading began when she was a young girl and has only continued to grow into adulthood. S.M. lives for reading books in the romance genre and writing novels with relatable characters. She refers to herself as a bit of a romance junkie. S.M. loves to connect with readers and eat copious of donuts that will surely lead to her demise.

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