

3 years ago she ruined my life, now I'm going to ruin hers.

UNTIL
I
GET
YOU

A Romantic Suspense Novel

New York Times Bestselling Author

CLAIRE CONTRERAS

UNTIL I GET YOU

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CLAIRE CONTRERAS

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***There's a content warning on the NEXT page. If you don't like warnings, please skip it.**

Dear reader,

I took a break from my mafia series to write the book I was dying to read, and ended up with a story that has a million tropes. I would describe it as hockey/college/new adult romance with an obsessive hero who falls first, and some suspense.

“Dark romance” would not be my first description of it. However, it does have dark themes, so I provided a content warning on the following page.

Thank you for reading!

**XO,
Claire**

Ps. Lachlan Duke is my favorite hero to date. It took some convincing for me to share him with you since I wanted to keep him to myself, so I hope you fall as hard as I did <3

CONTENT WARNING:

Possessive, obsessed hero

Stalking

Talk of suicide

Violence

Sexual Assault (enough to be triggering)

*They tried to knock you down, but you got up and stood taller.
They tried to clip your wings, but they grew back stronger.
They thought their threats would silence you, but your courage is deafening.*

I see you.

Xo

PART ONE

PAST

PROLOGUE

SOMETIMES WINGS ARE BUILT from despair. That was the thought at the forefront of my mind as I stared at my car, fighting the cold chill slithering down my spine. At first glance, it looked like a random act of vandalism, but I knew the truth. Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward, glass crunching under my shoes as I circled to the driver's side. I opened the door and used the t-shirt to wipe the driver's seat before sitting down. As soon as I shut the car door, the smell of cigarettes filled my nostrils, and I gagged. It was a visceral reaction. I tried to push through it by squeezing my eyes shut and tightening the grip on the duffel bag on my lap.

My breath caught when I turned to set my bag on the passenger seat and saw a piece of glass very deliberately placed on the left side. My hands shook as I switched on the engine. There was another cigarette bud on the dash. I left it there as I drove away, careful to show no reaction. I knew he was watching. I didn't know where he was, but I knew he was watching. He got off on shit like this, but he didn't deserve access to my emotions, and I wouldn't grant it. We both knew his message was clear.

I drove home feeling sick with anxiety, but otherwise, I was calm. As soon as I parked, I raced to my apartment, locking the door behind me. I dashed to my bedroom and did the same. With a heavy heart, I looked at the photos before me, my silent reminder of why I shouldn't have let my guard down. Marissa had laid out an outfit for me. I considered skipping the event. I should have, but I'd spent the last two years of college living like a hermit.

I was tired of it. I was tired of *him* wanting to destroy everything that brought me joy. I just wanted to go to a party like a regular college student and not worry about the consequences. There were strict rules for this particular party—a small and vetted list of guests, no phones, and no pictures.

I knew I could go without worry. I knew he wouldn't come after me there. He couldn't. I wasn't sure it even mattered anymore. He already knew about us. In two days, we'd be out of here. Two days. I stood up and looked at the dress one more time. His message reminded me of what he could still do to me. He'd tried to cut my wings before. He probably thought he'd rip them up and burn them this time. I wouldn't let him. I got up and got ready for the party.

CHAPTER 1

LACHLAN

WE MET under a multitude of improbabilities. For starters, I almost didn't go to the party that night. Earlier in the week, I'd been in a car accident. It was my brother's fault. He'd veered off the road, trying to avoid hitting a deer. He was successful but killed two coyotes that were left wedged between the front bumper and an oak tree. Needless to say, Mr. PETA was a mess. He broke his left arm. I got a couple of stitches on my jaw. Our mother acted like the world was coming to an end. Local newspapers and magazines plastered my face across their front pages: *Fairview Hockey Star in Car Accident*. It was all very dramatic.

Two days later, I was back on the ice, scoring the goal that pushed us into the semifinals. Usually, it was something I would want to celebrate, but I was dealing with a killer headache and had to be up early to help my brother move his shit to his girlfriend's place. Besides, I'd already done this celebration twice. This year would mark the third in a row if we could pull it off. I didn't see why we wouldn't, as long as I was starting. I wasn't being cocky. The Fairview Hockey Team was trash before I decided to come here four years ago. Once I signed, I'd gotten a few other players to sign, and we dominated.

I'd been an underdog my whole life before I started playing hockey. I also had a chip on my shoulder the size of Alaska. These days, it was more like Georgia since I finally got my deserved recognition. I was revered as one of the best players in the country; I already had a lucrative contract presented to me by a professional team last year to prove it.

My friends thought I was crazy to pass it up. My advisor harped on it for months before he let it go. I had a plan. I'd finish my four years here, sign as a free agent with my dream team, and get even more money and

opportunities. It wasn't just the money for me, but it would help. I wouldn't have to rely on my deadbeat father anymore. To be fair, my father wasn't a deadbeat by anyone else's standards. No, Henry Duke, heir to Duke Tech Enterprises — a now billion-dollar company that provided the government and elites with information and security — was a fucking golden boy. I'd received a full-ride on a hockey scholarship, but Liam would have relied on grants and loans had it not been for Henry Duke paying his tuition in full. As well as his company did, it was the least he could do. As far as I was concerned, the only thing Henry and I shared was blood and a last name — and the latter was only until I got around to changing mine. To me, Henry Duke might as well be a nobody. With as little as I saw of him, I was sure the feeling was mutual.

I let out a breath as I walked through the house. I'd gotten here thirty minutes ago and had yet to make it out back. Every time I turned, someone new wanted to speak to me. It was like this all the time. I'd always received this kind of attention and loved it for the most part. Lately, not as much, and definitely not tonight.

My plan for tonight was to stay home. Friday was my laundry and homework night unless we had a game. Everyone knew I wouldn't be at any party on Friday nights. I made an exception tonight since it was Aaron's birthday, and his girlfriend was throwing him a party. I finished talking to the last person I would greet inside, grabbed a beer by the door, and headed outside. I said I'd be here. I didn't say I'd mingle. I twisted the cap off and started drinking my beer as I reached Nash and Drew. They were helping some of the sorority girls doing keg stands; from the looks of it, their help would be rewarded.

"Are you here to help us out?" A blonde walked up to me, pushing her tits against my arm. I knew this one but couldn't remember her name. I sucked with names. Faces I could remember. Names, not so much.

"Nah, it looks like Nash and Drew have it under control." I lifted my beer and walked away.

Get to the wall. Get to the wall. Get to the wall. Even with the drunken crowd, I kept my eyes on my destination: the white wall I'd claimed as mine the first time I attended a party here. It was the closest thing to a sanctuary for me, away from the crowd — not so far that I couldn't enjoy the party, not so close that they'd rope me into one of their games. I cringed at the reminder of the last time I'd participated in one. I was almost to the wall when I noticed a

girl leaning against it. That wasn't new. Sometimes, they waited for me there. It was like a contest to see who spoke to me first and who I took home at the end of the night. It wasn't hyperbole. Fairview lived and breathed hockey and had been on a ten-year losing streak before I got here and turned it around. So, everyone wanted a piece of me, especially the women.

This one stood out from the others. She was dressed wrong for this party, with a baggy top that almost reached her knees and black Chucks. It was the look on her face that stood out, though—the clouded look in her eyes, void of emotion, as she watched everyone enjoy themselves. Could she be a new pledge? That was impossible since the semester was almost ending, but she had to be new. She had the kind of understated beauty that was unforgettable — caramel complexion, perfect features, and legs too sculpted for her not to have played a sport. Her dark brown hair hung down to her waist, and her lips were full and currently pursed, which was the only indication that she was paying attention to the partygoers. I hadn't even realized I'd stopped in my tracks to stare until someone bumped into me and snapped me out of it.

“Oh shit. I'm so sorry.” Someone giggled and squeezed my arm, gasping when she saw who I was. “Oh. Maybe I'm *not* so sorry.”

I didn't even bother looking at her as I yanked my arm away. Even if I'd wanted to, my eyes wouldn't wander away from baggy clothes girl. Why? I had no fucking idea. I closed the distance between this outsider and me. She didn't acknowledge my arrival, but I knew she noticed my presence from the way she tensed. I took a step and blocked her view of the party. She finally looked up, and up, and up, until she reached my eyes, and all I could think was *holy fuck*. They were brown. I'd seen countless brown eyes in my life, but hers felt different in a way I couldn't quite describe. They seemed to hold a vortex, a black hole that threatened to hook and drown you. Her snappy voice pulled me out of the momentary spell she'd cast on me.

“What are you doing?”

“You're in my territory.”

“Your territory.” She frowned. “Are you pledging this sorority or something?”

She knew damn well it was an all-female sorority, and even though her response was funny, I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of laughing. She continued to study me, her eyes wandering over each of my facial features. I wondered if she'd lie and say she didn't know who I was. That was how some girls liked to play it, coy and shy and “*Oh my God, no way you're*

an athlete,” as if my body wasn’t a dead giveaway. I had to admit, from the way she looked at me, this one was either a great actress or genuinely didn’t know who I was.

“This wall is my territory,” I repeated.

“You own this wall?” Her lips moved like she was trying not to laugh. “Okay, John Smith.”

“Who the fuck is John Smith?”

“A terrible person, but I was referring to the Disney version. From Pocahontas.” She scrutinized me so intensely that I had to fight the urge to wipe my face just in case. “You know, the settler.”

Not what I was expecting. “Yeah, I don’t think I ever saw that movie, and no, I don’t own the wall, but this is where the team usually stands.”

“What team?” She gave me a full once-over.

“The Blaze,” I said, even though I wasn’t convinced that this wasn’t just a ploy to get my interest.

“Oh. I’ve been here a while, and no one else has stood here.” She leaned against the wall, crossed her arms, and turned her face away from me.

If that wasn’t a dismissal, I didn’t know what was. I couldn’t believe the nerve of this girl—ignoring me and acting like I was nobody. I leaned against the wall, leaving space between us, and wondered what had captured her attention. The girls doing the keg stands? The ones running around in the sprinklers someone had turned on? People were already in various stages of undress. Two girls were making out with Nash simultaneously, which was hot and entertaining. Maybe they had her attention. I continued scanning the lawn. There was so much going on tonight. My eyes caught the woman who had bumped into me earlier, and she gave me *the look*. I looked away quickly, hoping she didn’t walk over. Most of the time, only the women I looked at long enough walked over. It was how I sealed the deal. Or, rather, how they did, since I wasn’t always a sure bet. For the time being, I wasn’t interested in anyone coming over here. I didn’t even want the one next to me here, but at least she was quiet. Silence was what I wanted tonight. Better silence than small talk, which was why I couldn’t understand why *I* was the first one to break it. There was a first time for everything, I guess.

“Are you new?” I asked.

“No.”

“Really? And you don’t know me?” I realized it made me sound like a douchebag, but my face was plastered everywhere.

“I guess you look a little familiar.” She side-eyed me. “Are you going to tell me you do porn?”

“What?” Laughter rumbled in my chest and left my mouth before I could stop it. “Do you watch a lot of porn?”

“Can’t say that I do, but it’s a thing. If someone says you look familiar, you’re supposed to say you’re in porn films. It’s stupid, but the world is full of idiots, so. . .” She shrugged.

She didn’t seem impressed by me at all, and I had to admit, it felt strange. Maybe that was part of why I was still standing here beside this girl with the face of a goddess and the personality of Wednesday Addams. *Was she one of those people who wanted to be chased?* If so, good fucking luck. Chasing after someone was a foreign concept to me — one that took up more time and energy than I was willing to give. I studied her again. She watched the party with such disinterest that I wondered why she was there.

“You’re unimpressed.”

Her eyes snapped to mine. “By you?”

“By everything.”

She seemed to consider that for a moment, a little wrinkle forming at the center of her face. “I’m not unimpressed. I’m just bored.”

“What are you bored of?”

“Everything.” She huffed and then let out a tired, unamused laugh.

“I can get you un-bored if you’d like.” I gave her my charming, panty-dropping smile.

She stared at me for a moment. “No, thanks.”

No, thanks. I brought the beer bottle to my lips to hide my amusement and gulped to avoid laughing. I’d lost count of the number of women who’d thrown themselves at me from the moment I walked in the door. Now, the one I actually asked — which I never fucking did since I never fucking had to — said *no, thanks* the way you’d turn down being spritzed in the perfume aisle.

“Are you in this sorority?”

“Hell no,” she said and quickly added, “Not that there’s anything wrong with sororities at all. I’m just not interested.”

“Right. Because you’re bored.” I turned, pressing my arm against the wall and crossing my arms to look at her as we spoke. She didn’t mimic my movement. Shocker. “So you have friends in the sorority.”

“My roommate.”

“Your roommate isn’t a friend?” I took another sip of beer.

“She’s my best friend.” Her brows pulled together as she looked around, maybe trying to find her roommate/best friend. I fought the urge to reach out and iron her frown away. She looked like she’d knee me in the balls if I touched her.

“Do you want a drink?” I asked. I don’t know what the fuck possessed me to ask that question. Maybe I was as bored as she was.

“I don’t drink at parties.”

I opened my mouth to ask another question when a shout pulled her attention from me.

“Lyles!” I looked up at the sound of Prescott’s voice and realized he was heading straight toward us.

My stomach sank. God, if “Lyles” was Prescott’s girlfriend, I wasn’t sure what to do. I hung out with Prescott often enough to know he didn’t have a girlfriend, but maybe she was someone he was trying to get with. In that case, I wondered if he was serious or if she’d just be a fuck to him. We had an off-limits policy regarding anyone the guys were serious about. If any of the guys wanted to get with one specific girl and they said, “Dibs,” the rest of us had to back off. It was a stupid tradition implemented before I started playing here and would continue long after I left. Each year, the captain of the hockey team picked a random number, and that was the amount of women each player on the team had to fuck that season. If you didn’t participate and bowed out of Dibs, you had to put \$100 in the pot. If you failed to reach the number of women, you also had to put \$100 in the pot. Aaron was our captain this year, and he chose the number 10. Since I always met the goal, I’d never had to put a dime in that pot.

Pres threw a peace sign at me as he jogged the last steps to close the distance between us. I watched as he wrapped little Wednesday in his arms and twirled her around once. She didn’t laugh, but she was smiling. It was a nice fucking smile.

“I can’t believe Marissa convinced you to come.” He pulled back and took her in from head to toe. “You look good, but you always look good.”

I snorted. They both looked at me. I took a swig of my beer and looked away. It wasn’t that she didn’t look good. She was fucking gorgeous. But she was wearing a t-shirt with Harry Styles’ face that was so big that it probably fit *me* loosely. The bagginess of her clothes practically screamed, “Don’t come near me.” I wondered if I would have noticed her if this had been any

other night and she hadn't been standing in my space. My attention vacillated between Prescott's hand on her shoulder and Aaron, already drunk and about to do a keg stand. I kept my eyes on him while I listened to their conversation.

"How are you?" Pres asked her.

"I'm good. Banks. You know." She shrugged.

"The semester is almost over. Maybe you can come and party for the next month before we leave."

"Maybe."

Liar. Her interest in partying sounded like my interest in chess — nonexistent.

"You know I'm here for you, right?" He lowered his voice as he pulled her into another hug.

"Thanks." She pulled away, setting both hands on his chest to establish distance. "I was actually on my way out, but I'm glad I got to see you, Pres."

"What? No way, Lyles. Come on. You haven't been to any of my games, you haven't come over, and whenever I've gone over, you haven't been home. You can't just leave," he said, touching her shoulder again. Jesus. Pres was handsy. "Why are you standing out here anyway?" He glanced at me. "Wait, you two know each other?"

"Nope," she said. "Haven't even met."

My brows rose. I mean, technically, she wasn't wrong. We hadn't formally introduced ourselves, but she made it sound like we didn't have a conversation. I already knew four things about her: she liked Harry Styles and Pocahontas, didn't drink at parties, and was bored with life. I couldn't tell you four things I knew about any other woman at this party, and I'd fucked some of them, so that was saying something.

"Oh." He looked between us. "Lachlan, this is Lyla. Lyla, this is Lachlan."

"Pleasure to meet you, Lachlan." She faced me and extended her hand for me to shake.

The way she did it amused me, but I didn't let it show as I took it. Her hand was tiny and fragile, and her touch sent an odd electric jolt through me. It made me keep her hand in mine longer than I should have. I tugged her a little closer to me, just to fuck with her, to see if the look on her face would crack. Her expression never wavered, but I saw something shift in her eyes for a millisecond before she finally pulled her hand back. She continued

looking at me, those curious eyes making me feel more vulnerable than I cared to admit. Finally, she stepped away and turned to Pres.

“Come to the country club on Sunday,” Prescott said to her. “A few of us are having brunch by the pool. Deidre always asks about you. She’d be so happy to see you.”

“I haven’t seen her in so long,” she said, glancing at the ground and back up at him.

“Come out with us,” he said, smiling as he tapped the tip of her nose.

“Maybe I will.” She smiled at him.

Fucking smiled. It looked real, too. I wondered what it felt like to have someone who didn’t smile often direct something that magnificent at you. I wanted to experience it, even if it was just once.

She patted Pres’ chest. “Well, I’m off, bitches.”

That was so unexpected that I laughed. She walked away from us, holding a peace sign over her head. She never looked at me to say goodbye. Technically, she had, since she’d said bitches, plural, but she didn’t look directly at me. I watched her, waiting for her to look at me as she wove through the crowd. Surely, she’d look back at me. They always did. She stopped walking for a moment when some douchebag bumped into her, and I waited. This was the perfect opportunity for her to look back. She never did. *What the fuck?*

“She’s. . .” Pres shook his head. “Something.”

“She’s antisocial.”

“This coming from the guy who leans against the wall and watches the party like we’re his peasants.” Pres raised an eyebrow.

I grunted. “Who is she anyway?”

“Lyla James Marichal.” He stuck his hands in his front pockets and rocked on his heels. “She used to be everyone’s wet dream in Olympia High School.”

Huh. I didn’t see it. Antisocial, wearing huge clothing, and giving clipped answers? She’d caught my attention, but no high school kid would salivate over that. I tossed my empty bottle in the recycling bin a couple of steps away and burped as I leaned against the wall again. Lyla James Marichal. Funny. We had the same middle name. I imagined myself telling her and could picture the blank stare she’d give me.

“Marichal. The former baseball player who’s mayor now?”

“Yep. That’s her father. He’s a legend around here.” Preston pressed his

back against the wall. “Immigrant, pro athlete, self-made businessman, and now mayor.”

I nodded. I’d met him once, and he seemed nice enough. He was a major donor and heavily involved in all things sports at Fairview University. Because I never left our college bubble unless I was driving home, I didn’t rub shoulders with Fairview’s elite. Most of us didn’t, but we’d heard crazy stories about the parties they threw. I’d been invited to Mayor Marichal’s house a few times for his annual sports gala and turned it down each time. It wasn’t my scene. Wearing fancy clothes and sitting at a table with a bunch of stuffy assholes wasn’t exactly my idea of a good time.

“Why was Lyla everyone’s wet dream?” I asked, going back to that topic. “I don’t see it.”

Pres raised an eyebrow. “She’s hot as fuck under those baggy clothes.”

“How do you know?” I stood straighter and turned to him.

“She didn’t always dress that way.”

“Did you two ever hook up?” I asked and frowned at my own question.

“No.” He chuckled, a low, almost defeated sound.

“Why is that funny?” I asked, “I thought she was *everyone’s* wet dream?”

“She was.”

“But, not yours?”

“Nah, she was mine too, for a time.” He shrugged. “Even if I’d tried something, she wouldn’t have given me the time of day.”

That gave me pause. Prescott didn’t pull as many girls as I did, but he was pretty damn close. I had to be missing something. I had never asked this many questions about anyone. Certainly not a fucking girl. Definitely, not one I knew wasn’t down for my style of hookups. I needed to shut up. I was bored, though. I was bored, and we were just standing here anyway.

“I feel like I’m missing something,” I said aloud. “Weren’t you the most popular guy at your school?” I asked. “That’s what all the girls who went to your school say.”

“Yeah, I guess I was up there.”

“So...?”

“Lyles is different. She’s the kind of girl that you don’t let go of if you get her, which is near impossible as it is.” He looked at me again, a serious expression on his face. “Ever.”

“Ah,” I nodded. “She’s the commitment type.”

“Her?” He laughed. “Hell no.”

I stared at him. I was definitely missing a lot of things here.

He smiled, shaking his head as if Lyla James Marichal committing to anything was a joke. If that was the case...

"She's the girl you can't let get away," he explained.

I wanted to ask why but bit my tongue. I didn't care about forever or letting someone get away. I'd already had one important person in my life abandon me. I sure as hell didn't need another. If you don't let them in, they can't hurt you. It was simple.

He sighed. "Look, I've known her since we were in daycare. I've only seen her as a friend, as a sister, for a long time now. But, yeah, she was the hottest, most popular, coveted girl, at school. Probably because she didn't give many people an actual shot, and that was before."

"I don't see it," I said instead of asking more questions. "The hottest, most popular shit. I don't see it."

"You wouldn't. Not anymore." He chuckled, but it sounded sadder than the previous. "She was. . .different back then. Social. Alive."

Alive. "What happened?"

He inhaled sharply. "Let's just say she's on the official 'do not call dibs' list."

"What happened?"

Pres hadn't asked me why the fuck I was asking so many questions, but he blinked at the bite in my tone. "I know she's not your type, so I don't need to tell you this, but I'll say it anyway. She'll never fall at your feet, won't hook up with you for the hell of it, and won't want to be another notch on your bedpost."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is she a lesbian?"

"No." Pres rolled his eyes, and he leveled me with a serious look. "I mean it, Lach. She's been through enough. If you see her, don't bother." He turned and waved at someone. "That's her roommate. She's more your type."

I looked up and saw a pretty brunette with big tits wave back. The way she looked at me told me she'd be over here soon enough. I mulled over what he'd said. I didn't like that he assumed Lyla wasn't my type. He could have simply meant that she wasn't someone who would be down for a fuck, two max. In which case, she wasn't my type. I'd never been told to stay away from anyone, though, and I didn't like it.

She seemed unbreakable, which made sense. You can only truly break someone once. Everything after that is just chipping at pieces. I wanted him

to tell me what happened to Lyla James, but the roommate was already in front of us. She gave Prescott a quick hug and turned to me. I didn't have a type, not really. For years, I'd been fucking girls from behind anyway. Not to say I didn't do other things, but when it came to actual fucking, it was something I did to set a clear boundary.

"I'm Marissa."

"Lachlan."

"Oh, I know who you are." She smiled, her dark brown eyes roaming up and down my body. Unlike her roommate, Marissa looked like she wanted to climb me right here, which did nothing for me tonight.

"Ah, shit. I have to handle this." Prescott pushed off the wall and rushed over to an argument brewing between his ex and the woman.

"That's going to get messy," Marissa said.

"It'll be a nightmare." I watched Pres stand between them and felt bad for the guy.

"So. . ." Marissa started. I looked at her. She licked her lips. "I was heading out, and since I'm the only one standing here, I guess I should ask if you want to come with me?"

"Where?"

"To my place." Her smile was slow and seductive.

"Where's your place?"

"Two blocks down."

"Hm." I thought about it. *Really* thought about it. Everything about tonight was unprecedented. It wasn't like I fucked every single person who came onto me, but any other night, Marissa would make my list.

"Anyway, my roommate is home, but she's used to company, so that won't be a problem."

I set my hand on her lower back. "Lead the way."

The moment she said roommate, I pushed off the wall and was ready to go. She gave me a look that said this wasn't her first rodeo, which I knew. Not that I cared. As we walked out, I kept some distance between us. I still hadn't decided what would come of this, but I needed to know where she lived. Maybe it was an asshole move to use her like this just to get closer to her roommate, but it was the only one I had right now.

CHAPTER 2

LACHLAN

IF I WAS BEING COMPLETELY honest, Marissa was the last person I wanted to see tonight. I'd left last night's party with her and normally would never have come back here just to pick her up, but Prescott's place was only two houses down, and I had to walk by here anyway. That was the excuse I'd given her and what I told myself as I sat in her living room, waiting for her to get ready. She'd been very persistent last night, but I'd managed not to fuck her. A first for me, I had to say. I probably would have caved if I thought Lyla would forgive that indiscretion, but I didn't think she was up for her friend's sloppy seconds. I hadn't figured out why I cared, which was annoying me. I'd thought about it on my way home after dropping Marissa off. I'd continued to think about it before going to bed, and the only thing I could come up with was that Lyla James intrigued me, which was unfortunate for her. Women didn't usually intrigue me. What they looked like underneath their clothes and how wet their cunt would be when I slid my dick into it intrigued me, but that was it. Once I'd had sex with a woman once or twice, the illusion was gone.

Twice was my limit. Women started getting attached the third time. If anyone ever did a study on this, I had enough information for them to base their analysis on. Fuck number one usually happened after a game or a party, so it was fun and new. Fuck, number two was more of a "Was it good, or did I imagine it?" Fuck number three. . .well, I'd only gotten to fuck number three a couple of times and regretted it every fucking time. They'd get attached. It went from a fun hookup to "We should meet up for drinks or coffee or whatever." Sure, they hinted we'd fuck after, but I wasn't interested in talking to them and I could get coffee or a drink with my freaking mother.

The Lyla Phenomenon was something else. That was what I was calling it

now (in my head, of course). I hadn't even spoken to my teammates about her, but I hadn't called dibs and hadn't fucked her, so there wasn't much to say. It wasn't like I would ever openly admit what I was currently doing. I'd been at Lyla and Marissa's apartment long enough for the Taylor Swift album that Lyla was playing to get to a song about someone's tears ricocheting, which seemed to be a favorite of hers with the way she mouthed the lyrics. It was a sad fucking song. She was washing dishes now. When I got there, she'd been curled up on the couch, reading a book. I'd asked her a few questions about it, which she ignored, so I'd swiped it out of her hands to gain her attention. I still hadn't gotten it. It was maddening.

"It's Saturday night," I said. "Don't you have anyone else to hang out with?"

"Don't you?" She looked up at me from the sink.

"Sure, but Marissa and I are going to the same party, so I figured I'd swing by to pick

her up." *And I wanted to see you again.*

She ignored me and looked back at the cup she was washing, now mouthing the lyrics to the next song.

How many fucking songs were on this album? The music was distracting my distraction, and I wasn't sure I could take it any longer.

"Do you want to join us?" I asked.

She pulled a face. "You just said you're going to a party."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing."

I stifled a groan. This fucking girl. Why couldn't she just indulge me in a simple conversation? I was going to have to start fucking singing. If I knew any of the lyrics, I probably would have. That was how desperate I was for her to talk to me. Between her nonchalant attitude and Prescott telling me she used to be completely different, I became morbidly intrigued. Anyone else would have just been curious, maybe tried to learn a few things, and let it go. I became fixated on it. On hockey, cars, grades, and right now, Lyla James Marichal. The only other person who could intrigue me this much was my father, who only came around when it was convenient. In his absence, I would fixate on his life. *Where was his office? Who was his secretary? Why was he fucking Nancy from accounting instead of staying with my mother, whom he supposedly loved more than anything (including his children)?* The music suddenly stopped and snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Why don’t you want to go?”

“Because I don’t like people.” She said it so matter-of-factly that despite my annoyance with her, I huffed out a laugh, and then she added, “*But* if the issue is that you’re planning on having sex and can’t perform while I’m here, I can leave and come back in. . .” she sized me up. “Five minutes.”

I looked the other way so she wouldn’t see me laugh. How was it that her insults amused me and turned me on?

“Why don’t you want to stay? You think you’ll get turned on and want to join us?”

At that, she laughed wholeheartedly, and damn it, I tried not to react, but her laughter was a thing of beauty. Her eyes twinkled, and she threw her head back a little. It was infectious. I wondered if she’d walked around with that twinkle in her eyes before whatever happened broke her. She switched off the water, dried her hands, and grabbed her bag. She was leaving. *Where? With who?* I gripped the book tighter, wishing it was her hand. Her waist. Her throat.

“Why is that funny? It’s not a far-fetched scenario. You must have seen it in one of the porn videos you watch.”

She rolled her eyes, but I saw a ghost of a smile. She was wearing baggy jeans and an oversized shirt. Biggie Smalls, this time. Even with it, I could see the sway of her hips as she sauntered over. She kept her eyes on mine the entire time. My heart sped up. People were predictable. I could typically gauge what they would do before they did it. It was one of the things that set me apart from most people on the ice. If you looked for certain things, you could probably predict at least half of what someone would do next. Not Lyla James, though. With how she was walking, she looked like she would either straddle my lap or slap me. Maybe both. Those were the options. She stood between my legs, so close to me that I could pull her onto my lap. Fuck, I wanted to. She was so close that if she looked, she’d see the outline of my dick with how hard she was making me. Baggy clothes, hair in a messy bun, random taste in music and all — I’d never seen anything sexier than this woman.

“For starters,” she said, leaning down, so we were eye to eye. This was the first time I saw something other than a void in her eyes. There was fire and amusement, and the mixture made it hard to breathe. “I don’t need a storyline in my porn.” She snatched the book from my hand and moved her face even closer. I could smell her minty breath and the gardenia scent that

floated everywhere with her. Our noses were almost touching. Was this a test? For a split second, she looked at my lips and back to my eyes, and I thought she'd surely kiss me. I didn't know how I felt about that. I didn't let anyone kiss me. "Secondly, I like sex as much as I like people."

I blinked hard, my heart pounding.

She turned and walked away, looking over her shoulder with the most sinful smile I'd ever seen. "Have fun at the party."

I wasn't easily surprised, but color me fucking surprised. She didn't like anything, fine. But who the fuck didn't like sex? Damn it. I hated her for getting me worked up and playing me like that. I hated her even more for dropping that piece of information and leaving. I'd obsess over it until she gave me an explanation.

CHAPTER 3

LACHLAN

WHEN PRESCOTT MENTIONED that Marissa and Lyla were going to the country club, I offered to pick them up. Thankfully, he didn't question my motives. He should have since I'd never offered to pick anyone up, but he probably thought it had something to do with Marissa. Little did he know, I wished I could leave her ass at home and just take Lyla with me. Being stuck in a car with her for twenty minutes meant she'd have to speak to me. Of course, when I got to their apartment, Marissa told me that Lyla had already left. I sat in the living room, waiting for Marissa to finish getting ready, and Googled Lyla for the second time. Her socials were set to private, and I'd already requested her on every single one, even the ones I didn't use. She hadn't accepted any of them. Thanks to her father's notoriety, I found that her birthday was January 28th. She'd played soccer and apparently was pretty good at it. She went to prom with some douchebag named Skylar Wyatt Parker, whose socials were set to public, and I was able to stalk the shit out of her. I went as far back as his first post, which was a feat since the guy had made over four thousand posts. He played lacrosse in high school and was currently playing for Yale. Pre-med.

There were two pictures of them together, one at prom and one with his hand over her shoulder. She was wearing a Yale hoodie that was so big on her that it obviously belonged to him. The caption was an emotional face emoji. I felt my face twist in disgust. On the fifth page of the search, I found a message board discussing a car accident she'd been involved in. They didn't give details, and most of the comments were redacted. It must have been her father's doing. Maybe she'd been under the influence and got into a car accident? One comment on page three of the discussion said: *pls stop talking about this. People's lives were shattered!* It was left a little over a

year ago by the screenname PiKaChOo9. I clicked the screen name and scanned what else they'd commented on, but it was primarily Pokemon-related.

"Ready." Marissa walked out of her room. I clicked the side button on my phone as I stood.

She was wearing a sundress that I was sure her asscheeks would be hanging out of later. It was a pool party, though. Truthfully, I was almost at my limit with Marissa. At last night's party, she'd finally gotten the hint that I wasn't interested and stopped trying to rope me into hooking up with her. I'd resorted to extreme measures and let some girl in my ECON class sit on my lap right in front of her. It was a dick move, but I'd known people like Marissa my entire life, and I knew she wouldn't stop unless I gave her solid proof that I wasn't interested.

"I can't believe Prescott invited all of us to the country club, of all places. I haven't been in years," she said in the car, taking breaks between words as she applied mascara – clear mascara, she'd said, because of the water. "He rented out the pool space, which is a big deal. And Lyla going? Even bigger deal."

I couldn't be sure, but my heart pounded a little harder at the mention of Lyla. I played it off. "Why is that a big deal?"

"She's been through a lot," Marissa said, flipping the sun visor. "The first year and a half of college, she lived with a group of girls, and even though we're best friends, we didn't really go to the same parties. Then. . ." She shook her head. "Then she moved into her dad's guest house, and last semester, she finally caved and moved in with me like she was supposed to four years ago."

"I've never seen her around," I said.

"She only takes online classes so she's never on campus unless she has to do labs or whatever. Nothing interests her, so the fact that she's coming out twice in one weekend is a big deal. This will be good for her."

"Everyone is different. Maybe people need to let her grieve in peace."

"Grieve?" I felt her eyes on the side of my face for a long time before she spoke. "You know what happened?"

"I have access to the internet." Damn, someone *died* in that car accident.

"YOU GOOGLED LYLA?" she shouted. "Why?"

Because she's beautiful and funny when she wants to be, but mostly because she makes me feel something I've never felt before, and I'm intrigued

by her. “She’s weird, so I Googled her.”

“Weird?” Marissa wrinkled her nose. “Look, if you want Lyla, just say the word.”

My head whipped to her. “What?”

“I’m just saying, if you want her, I can put in a word.” Marissa shrugged. “You and I never hooked up. She’s not weird about sharing, so even if she thinks we did something, she probably wouldn’t care as long as she knows it was never serious between us. NOT that I want to be with you if you want her. I don’t do the sister wives bullshit.”

I didn’t know what part to focus on — the sharing comment or the rest. Of course, I was going to fixate on the sharing comment. I’d have to do more digging. Did that mean she was into threesomes? If so, how? Two girls, one guy? Two guys, one girl? She didn’t strike me as someone who would enjoy that, but if her best friend said she was into sharing, I had to believe her. Unless it meant she was into open relationships? Or only hookups? Only hookups would be the best-case scenario for me. Two hookups, to be specific. I shook all of those thoughts away. I was getting ahead of myself. For now, I’d put all that aside and add it to the list of things that made me curious about Lyla. I hadn’t even sent Marissa a friend request because I didn’t want her to think anything of it, but I might have to see what pictures she had of them together.

“Why are you saying this?” I turned into the parking space and shut off the engine.

“Because you had, what, two conversations with her and then GOOGLED her?” She was laughing as she got out of the car.

“So? I Google people all the time.”

“Did you Google me?” She stopped walking when we got to the door and put a hand on her hip.

“No.”

“You want Lyla.” She pointed at me. She didn’t seem upset or confused, or jealous. If anything, she was amused by this.

“I don’t want her.” I scowled and opened the door for her.

“Look, I’m going to tell you two things, and then you can decide if you still want her.”

I stopped walking and faced her. “I’m listening.”

“One, if you break her heart, she’ll never, and I mean *ever*, give you a second shot,” she said. It seemed like an obvious one. “Two, you know those

girls who like to play hard to get?” She waited until I nodded. “Lyla is hard to get, but man, when she opens up, she’s just. . .she’s honestly one of my favorite people on the planet.”

“Why is she so closed off?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I thought you weren’t interested.”

“Cut the shit, Marissa. Why? Because of the accident?”

“She was always a little guarded and selective with her inner circle, but she was voted Miss Congeniality for the high school yearbook if you can believe it.”

“I can’t.” I started walking again. “So, the accident?”

“I don’t like to talk about it, especially behind her back. Maybe Prescott will tell you.”

Motherfucker. Another thing to add to the damn list. A hostess greeted us, and I let Marissa talk since I was now trying to figure out why Lyla was hard to get. Was she a virgin? Maybe she was saving herself. She *did* say she didn’t like sex, though, which meant she’d experienced it already. Probably some two-pump chump who didn’t get her off. Asshole. Now the rest of us had to pay for his selfishness. We took two towels from the hostess and walked in the direction she pointed.

“Have you been here?” Marissa asked.

“For brunch, not the pool.”

“Oh, my God. Get ready to have your mind blown. It’s indoors but it feels like you’re on a beach.” She smiled wide.

When we reached the pool area, I had to pause to take it all in. It was huge, and it did look like a beach. The guys waved us down when they saw us from their seats. Prescott invited ten of us for brunch and the pool. I counted eight, including us. Prescott and Lyla were the only ones missing. The thought of them being alone together irritated me more than it should have. I had no claim on her; even if I did, she could be friends with whomever she wanted. I told myself all that, but I still felt hot. My mind drifted to other things. This was a pool party. Did that mean she’d finally take off her baggy clothes, or would she keep them on and sulk on a chaise? All thoughts of her were put on the back burner when we sat down and started talking to everyone.

“Coach wants us there tonight,” Drew said across from me. “He’s going to make us pay for last week’s game.”

“Does that mean you can’t drink?” Marissa asked.

“Well, it wouldn’t be ideal,” he said.

I tuned out their conversation and spoke to Nash about the new skates. He told me about a training camp he attended in Canada last year and how some of the CHL coaches had gone by, which was how he ended up signing a contract with Montreal when he’d turned eighteen. I told him about a similar contract I’d signed at that age and how my agent was able to get me out of it and make me a free agent.

“Man, I would kill to be a free agent. I was telling my—” He stopped talking mid-sentence, his mouth dropping for a moment before recovering. He slapped Drew’s arm. “Holy. Shit. Dibs. Dibs. Dibs.”

I’d heard Nash chant dibs more times than I could count these last four years, but when I looked at Drew, who had the complete opposite taste in women, and caught him eye-fucking whoever was behind me, my skin prickled.

“Yeah, right. Pres would murder you,” Drew said, still staring.

“It would be fucking worth it,” Nash said under his breath.

The back of my neck suddenly felt hot. They had to be talking about Lyla. If that was the case, I needed to brace myself. We’d all been with hot-as-fuck girls, and Nash was worse than me. He wouldn’t fuck the same girl twice, no matter what. Something ugly and foreign curled in my stomach as I watched them continue discussing this under their breath.

Marissa snorted. “I’m guessing Lyla’s here.”

Neither of them answered. They were still busy ogling. I hadn’t even confirmed that it was Lyla and already wanted to stab their eyes out. Another first for me. Marissa pushed her seat back, stood, turned to look, and gasped. She squealed as she ran over, “Oh my God. That’s my girl.”

I took a breath, let it out, and turned around. Prescott was talking to an older lady, and Lyla fucking James was wearing a beige dress that molded her body. It was more holes than material and reached her ankles. Underneath, she wore a white bikini. I was sure I’d stopped breathing. I’d made peace with the baggy clothes and told myself I didn’t care what she looked like underneath them. She had my attention regardless, but holy fucking shit, this was unexpected. While Prescott kept talking, Lyla spoke to Marissa, who was touching her hair. It was down and in waves today.

“She’s off the table,” I said, forcing myself to turn around.

“Aw, come on, Lach. Can’t you be satisfied with the thousands of women who want a piece of you and let me have this one?” Nash asked.

“Why is she off the table?” That was Mason, who was sitting on the other side of the table and had no business in this conversation.

I leveled him with a stare. “Because I said so.”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” Drew said.

“Marissa is more your style, Drew, trust me.” I turned to Nash. “Lyla is off the table unless you want to lose your fingers. I’m not fucking around.”

“Damn.” His eyebrows shot up. I didn’t know what that meant and didn’t care enough to ask.

“Gentlemen,” Prescott said at the head of the table, then looked at Marissa and Lyla beside him. “Ladies. Thanks for coming. Let’s eat, and then we’ll play.”

Lyla gave a small smile and waved. When our eyes locked, hers widened a little. I was sure it wasn’t noticeable to anyone else, but I felt a wave of satisfaction. There was an empty chair to my left, but she sat between Marissa and Prescott. I wanted to shove everyone away and pull her next to me. Fuck, I wanted to shove them away and splay her on the fucking table and have her for brunch. I felt a pinch on my arm and glared at Marissa for snapping me out of that daydream.

“Set me up with Drew,” she whispered, “And I’ll try to set you up with Lyla.”

“I already put in a good word with Drew,” I said. She beamed until I added, “And I know you’re full of shit because Lyla doesn’t even like people. She told me herself.”

Marissa snorted and whispered. “Didn’t she also tell you she didn’t like sex?”

I frowned. “Was it a lie?”

“I mean, she’s been hanging out with one guy a lot. He’s not a boyfriend, but judging by the amount of times he texts, he’s trying hard to be.”

This was irritating. “Who is it?”

“Some guy on the football team.”

Football? What the hell? The football team was popular, but Fairview lived and breathed hockey.

“Does she go to the games?” I asked, keeping my voice down since she was right there. That dress was so tight on her tits that if she sneezed, I was sure one would come out of her tiny bikini. I simultaneously hoped it happened and didn’t.

“Most of them.” Marissa had a gleam in her eye like she was holding

back a joke.

I wanted to know more. Why didn't she go to our games? Prescott said she hadn't been to any recently, but that didn't mean she'd never been. Prescott was a close friend of hers so it wouldn't be far-fetched, and if I was being completely honest, I didn't look up at the stands much. Drew started talking to Marissa before I could ask any questions.

"I don't think we've met," Nash said, looking at Lyla. He smiled. She didn't. "I'm Nash."

"Lyla."

Prescott leaned in to whisper something in her ear and set his hand over hers on the table. I was going to fuck him up tonight at practice. Maybe I'd jam a finger or two. I didn't care that they'd known each other forever. His hand over hers made me see red. Fuck. When was the last time I'd felt like this, if ever? She was driving me crazy. She took her hand from under his and picked up the menu, studying it longer than necessary. There were only six choices on it. It didn't take more than a minute to narrow it down. Marissa's phone buzzed in her purse, and she excused herself when she looked at the screen. She leaned in and told Lyla what to order her.

Without her as a buffer between us, I had a much better view of Lyla, but I couldn't keep staring without looking like a creep, so I decided to talk to her instead.

"Is this a nightmare for you, being around all these people?" I asked quietly.

"Kind of." She turned her face to me. Christ, that face, those lips, those eyes. "They make a mean chicken and waffles, though, so dealing with you guys is a small price to pay."

I bit back a laugh. "This is a new look on you. Do you only ditch your baggy clothes on Sundays?"

She set her hand on Marissa's empty chair and leaned closer to me like she was telling me a secret. I did the same, setting my fingers just centimeters from hers. She licked her lips. I bit back a groan. She was doing this on purpose. *She had to be*. For some reason, probably because she showed no interest, I wanted her to want me. It was beyond my comprehension because, as Nash stated, I had countless women constantly throwing themselves at me. None of them held my attention. Not like this. When Lyla finally decided to grace me with her words, they were low, almost a whisper.

"Do you and your douchebag friends only make bets on who will fuck me

first on Sundays?” Her eyes danced. Fuck. How much did she know about that?

“Would you like me to take that bet?” I moved my hand closer to hers, the tips of our fingers touching.

“Only if you intend to lose.” She took her hand back and sat straight in her chair.

I’d never lost anything in my life (my father’s affection notwithstanding), but I had no comeback for that. I spent most of the meal talking to the guys and ignoring Lyla. At least openly. My ears perked up whenever she spoke, which wasn’t often. I hated Mason, who was sitting across from her with the best view in the house. I was irritated with how Prescott got all up in her personal space whenever he spoke to her. I took out my phone and Googled how long I’d go to jail if I kidnapped her. After breakfast, we all walked outside to take in the view of the marina and golf course. Everyone scattered on the terrace to take selfies while I watched Lyla. The spring temperature was just right, but she kept running her hands down her arms like she was cold. I unbuttoned the shirt I had on and set it around her shoulders.

She jolted and looked up at me. I thought she would fight me on this for a moment, but she just said, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” I looked out at the marina. “Do you come here a lot?”

“Sure.” Her eyes darted to mine briefly. “I’ll put myself through just about anything when I’m in my self-loathing phase and want to torture myself.”

I laughed. I tried not to because I didn’t want to give in to her little attitude, but she was funny. I caught her looking at my bare chest for a second before she turned away. I grinned at the back of her head. Mayyyybe I was getting somewhere. Everyone else walked inside, but Lyla stepped forward, setting her forearms on the wall and closing her eyes as the breeze hit her face. I stared at her. I’d never noticed how much shorter than me she was. Then again, even though she stood at eye level with my pecs, she carried an air of grandeur.

“Are you going to hit me if I tell you that you look beautiful?”

She turned her face and studied me. After years of being in the spotlight, I was used to people analyzing me, but I’d never been scrutinized as Lyla did. I wanted to reach over and touch her hair, kiss her lips, fucking hold her in my arms. *Kiss her and hold her in my arms? Who the fuck was I?* I never kissed the girls. My brother called it my “Pretty Woman bullshit,” but kissing was

too personal. I knew it was a strange thing for someone who had no qualms with eating a girl's pussy to be put off by kissing the lips on her face, but it was something I just wasn't interested in doing.

"Thank you." She smiled. It was tiny but there; best of all, it reached her eyes. "You look beautiful as well."

"One of these days, Lyla, you're going to say something nice to me and mean it." I laughed and shook my head as I looked at the boats in the marina.

She turned to face me and leveled me with a serious expression. "I never say things I don't mean."

"We have that in common."

"Hm." She turned back to the water. "Are you coming over tonight for some porn sex?"

"Are you offering yourself to me?"

She shot me a look. "You know I'm not."

"Why?"

"You're having sex with my friend." She turned her attention to the marina again.

"I'm not."

"Oh." Her gaze flashed to mine, a small frown between her eyes.

"Now that we cleared that up, are you down for some porn sex?"

"Still no."

"Is it because of that guy you're dating?"

"Lachlan Duke," she said, keeping her face forward, but I could hear the smile in her voice. "Are you stalking me?"

Was she smiling at the thought of me stalking her? She had no fucking idea how much stalking I'd already done and would continue to do. Was she smiling because she was thinking about him? I didn't like that option.

"Would you like it if I was?"

She peered up at me and searched my eyes. "No."

I groaned. "So, it's because of the guy you're dating?"

She said nothing as she turned around and started heading inside. I followed behind her like the lost puppy I was — no use in acting tough about it. This fucking girl was turning me inside out with her bullshit.

I opened the door for her. "I'm going to take your silence as a yes."

She shrugged. "Okay."

I had never wanted to chase anyone my entire life, and the first person I genuinely wanted to chase didn't care whether or not I tried. Maybe she was

unaffected by me because she was used to guys falling at her feet. Before today, I would've had a harder time believing that, but no one in their right mind wouldn't think she was hot. And she was funny. And Marissa said it was worth it when she opened up to you. I kept my eyes on her the entire time. She reached the lounge chairs first, kicked off her flip-flops, and carefully folded the shirt I'd given her. Once she was done, she peeled off her cover-up and gave me a full view of her toned ass in those tiny bikini bottoms. I had to take a breath and avert my eyes. I didn't want the guys to see how much she affected me. I didn't know how, but I would have Lyla James or die trying. For the first time in four years, I was going to put \$100 into the dibs collection, and I didn't even care.

CHAPTER 4

THE ONLY THING I hated more than a party was a stuffy party, especially ones I was required to attend. I'd already looked out the window of the guest house fifty times, trying to figure out when would be a good time for me to make an appearance and leave. I was aware that many college girls (and guys) would kill for the opportunity to be at my father's famous Senior Sports Ball. Dad came up with that very original, cringy, on-the-nose name for the event. Only a few seniors from each team were invited. The four themes were recycled: Gatsby (of course), Egyptian, Masquerade, and 1920s (which honestly was Gatsby with another name). Dad loved that theme, which was why this year was the 1920s. I'd done this charade so many times that I had three outfits for each theme. Tonight, I wore a short but loose black and gold flapper dress. The fringe at the bottom hit me at my knees. I'd been waiting to put on my heels when I was ready to go out there. I'd almost gone out twice, but since the party took place in the backyard, it was steps away from the guest house, and I wanted to sneak into the tent without getting noticed.

I already didn't want to be here, but tonight of all nights, I wished I could disappear. I hated my father and hated him even more for hosting it tonight. I hated Marie for agreeing with everything he said and did. When I begged them to move it to another night, she'd said, "We need to create good memories to replace the bad ones." As if anything could ever let me forget this day. I didn't like Marie much, to begin with. She'd always been kind to me, but my mother passed away a couple of years ago, and Marie was already moved into the house my parents shared just two months after the funeral. My mother never liked her, and the reason was obvious. It didn't take a rocket scientist to conclude that Marie, who'd been my father's

secretary for the last six years, was fucking him. Such a cliché. Before she moved in, I'd been living in the guest house, where I'd tried to stay afterward — not for my father's sake, but for my own. The guest house made me feel closer to my mom, and no one bothered me. I never set foot in the main house anyway, so her presence shouldn't bother me as much as it did. I'd order take-out or drive to get food instead of walking over there. I'm not even sure my father noticed. He only liked playing the role of father, not actually *being* one. That was before Mom died in the accident. Afterward, I guess he tried a little harder to be there for me — if you counted the therapist and the money he kept depositing into my bank account each month as helping. Dad didn't put a Band-Aid on things; he threw piles of money at them until they were no longer something he had to deal with.

Tonight, my guilt and sadness weren't because of Mom, though. Tonight was the anniversary of Luke's death. Luke, who Dad had treated like a son. Who he'd encouraged me to date. When he'd found out I was going to prom with someone else, he'd called Luke and apologized to him personally, as if he had anything to do with our lives. I loved Luke so fucking much, but I was never going to marry him, no matter how often he boasted about that — and he'd boasted plenty. I wish he hadn't. I wish he'd never announced that he'd bought me an engagement ring and that he'd never stood up during Friendsgiving with our parents' friends to talk about things like that and joke that we might elope. I blinked quickly to evade tears. I hated crying, and if I started, I wouldn't stop. I hadn't cried in so long, I didn't even think my tear ducts worked anymore, but tonight they would. Tonight, all the emotions I normally buried would be exposed.

No one would bring up Luke's death tonight. They knew better, but even a squeeze of my arm telling me they were sorry would set me off. Usually, I found ways to distract myself from feeling anything at all. It was quite possibly the best and worst skill my mind had acquired throughout all of this. Best, because only a handful of brave souls tried to get me to open up again. Worst, because once you learned how to numb yourself from pain, you took the risk of it happening to all of your emotions. That was the case for me, for the most part. Until recently, I didn't think I could feel anything besides guilt and sadness. My phone buzzed on the bed, snapping me out of my thoughts, and I saw a text from Banks.

Banks: I'm here. Table 10. Where are you?

Me: omw

I put on my heels, rechecked my makeup, and left the room, shutting and locking the door. I took deep, calming breaths on my way to the tent and hoped no one stopped me for small talk. Of course, they did anyway. Whenever I dressed up for these godforsaken events, people saw it as the perfect opportunity to get me to open up again. It was as if a little bit of makeup and doing something with my hair meant I was no longer this fucked up, broken version of myself. I was just starting to breathe a little easier as I walked away from the latest cordial conversation when I felt a hand on my elbow. The smells hit me first — they were always wearing the same colognes, one with a spicier scent than the other. Since they both always hit the spray one too many times to cover up the smell of cigarettes, it was overpowering when they were next to you. I froze as a million dark emotions instantly coursed through me. I settled on boredom.

“You weren’t planning on saying hello?” Jameson asked, his voice low behind my right ear. I held my breath, yanked my elbow away, turned around quickly, and caught sight of the two men before me.

“You look incredible, Lyles,” Officer Hughes said beside him, tossing his cigarette in the grass as his blue eyes roamed my body.

I was so grateful the dress was loose, and there wasn’t much to see. Not that it made me any less uncomfortable. I thanked him under my breath as I tried to stop tensing up, but it was useless. Both of them kept me on edge; they were cousins and always around, which made it worse. Officer Ned Hughes was the chief of police, the hero of Fairview, and a total fucking creep. He was always at Dad’s beck and call, though. He was always mixing drinks for everyone. Always the life of the party. Beside him was David Jameson, formerly Coach Jameson, who was also revered in Fairview. His family was important as hell in society. When he decided to coach hockey at the university, everyone looked at it like he was doing some kind of charity, as if they weren’t paying him a boatload of money. He didn’t need the money, though, so he was seen as “so kind” and “so gracious.” Women fell at his feet. A record number of guys he’d coached had made it to the NHL or CHL. These were achievements that could be linked to Coach Jameson directly. He was my father’s best friend and my godfather. I *despised* him. I despised every single adult with ties to Fairview at this event, yet here I was, about to let them make me feel small and uncomfortable.

“I hadn’t seen you,” I said, my voice serious and expression blank, as I looked between them.

“I figured as much.” Jameson smiled, his blue eyes roaming my face. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks.” I looked around for anyone to come and rescue me from these two.

Thankfully, I spotted Jameson’s long-term girlfriend walking over. Thank you, universe. Sydney was the only one I could stand in this crowd, probably because she was a transplant from Chicago. She always looked flawless and was kind — unlike Hughes, Jameson, my father, and that cunt Marie. I couldn’t fathom why Sydney was in their clique, but I was sure Jameson’s looks, stature, and charm had a lot to do with it. Hughes was actually married, which was even more mind-blowing. But again — looks, stature, and charm were enough for some people.

“Hey, Lyla. You look gorgeous,” Sydney said, smiling as she hugged me.

“So do you,” I said, holding her arm. “Well, I have to get going. It was great seeing you all. I’ll catch you later.”

I turned around, pushed my shoulders back, and kept walking. Inside, I looked around until I found Banks. Of course, table ten was on the other side. I didn’t even want to sit at his table, but I knew it was for the best. Prescott’s eyes caught mine as I passed, and I could see a sadness mirrored my own. He managed a small nod and turned away to speak to his teammate. He knew as well as I did that tonight wasn’t a good time for us to interact. He had been friends with Luke and missed him as much as I did. I took in the tent, equipped with chandeliers and white and purple centerpieces on each table. It looked more like a wedding than a sports event. Marie’s doing, for sure. She was probably trying to show Dad what their wedding could look like if he proposed to her. The tables were big enough to seat eight and twelve people and consisted of agents, athletes, and professional coaches from each sport. It was a fancy networking event — a loophole for student-athletes to brush shoulders with agents and coaches they probably shouldn’t be speaking to yet.

I grabbed a number ten since Banks was sitting there. It didn’t matter who else was at the table. I’d be uncomfortable no matter what. Banks was waiting for me, and he smiled and opened his arms for a hug. I returned it before taking my seat. After saying hello to the volleyball player Banks had been speaking with, I looked around more. If this went my way, I’d be a ghost at this table, and then I’d get up and leave without anyone noticing my absence. It happened often enough these days. I spotted Dad and Marie

mingling and moved further down in my seat, hoping the tall figures of Banks and the volleyball players would serve as shields. I was staring at my black and gold nails when I heard new voices approach our table. I kept my eyes down. If I didn't look, I wasn't there. That was my motto. Someone sat beside me, and I stilled, straightening in my seat and pushing my shoulders back. I knew that scent. Jesus Christ on a cracker, this could *not* be happening right now. I kept looking at my nails.

“If I tell you that you look beautiful, will you throw your glass of water in my face?” he asked, his deep voice tickling my ear.

My heart raced the way it did every time he was around. It had become such a foreign feeling that I thought I was dying the first time it happened. I tried to fight the shiver that rolled through my body and, hoping to keep my face impassive, continued to count to ten. I didn't know what I'd done to earn Lachlan Duke's attention, but I wish I could undo it. It would make things so much easier. A few times, I'd given in and flirted back, kicking myself each time for doing so. The last thing I needed was to give him a reason to think we could be friends. Or worse, more than friends.

It wouldn't have been a question if I'd met him a few years ago. I would have welcomed this insanity. I would have thrown myself into it without a second thought. Now, though, I couldn't open myself up to anyone, especially not him. He had a bright future ahead of him, according to the sports articles I'd found when I searched for him. I waited for another three counts and braced myself to look at him. He was too good-looking and even more so in that suit. I let my eyes take him in — his thick brown, normally tousled hair was brushed back. My gaze drifted down his perfect olive skin, full lips, and carved jawline. His dark lashes were to kill for, and those eyes — olive green with specks of brown — wrecked me every time. He was tall and imposing in a way that either made you feel safe or terrified. He evoked both for me.

He'd never know it, though. He'd never know how much I wanted to reach out and touch each one of his features. He'd never know that he was the only one who had ever made me feel this way. People threw the word love around all the time. I didn't know what this was, but I didn't think it was that. There was just something about him. He looked at me like I mattered. Like he saw *me*, the person hidden beneath the grief and the guilt.

“Thank you.” My lips moved. I smiled or gave him whatever was left of it these days. “You look beautiful as well.”

His eyes danced. He leaned in and whispered, “Is this a nightmare for you?”

My body went rigid. He couldn’t have known just how much of a nightmare it was for me to do anything tonight, let alone be around people. He’d just said these words to me the other day and gotten a response, but tonight was different. The other day, the question was amusing. Tonight, the words cut through me like claws, shredding whatever was left of my broken heart. I continued to count and breathe until I got myself together. The last thing I needed was to draw attention and drag him into this. I swallowed hard. Fuck. On any other night, I would have been able to keep my impassive, blasé attitude. I might have even been able to laugh at his comment. Tonight, my eyes watered without permission. I bit my lip hard as my nails started blurring on my lap. I counted to ten and started again. I felt his hand, just a brush of his fingertips on my shoulder, and shook my head, biting my lip harder. At the first taste of blood, my brain snapped out of it. When I finally trusted myself to speak, I cleared my throat and pushed my chair back.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Hey, you okay?” That was Banks.

“Yep. Just saw someone I need to say hi to.” I pushed my chair in and walked out of the tent.

Thank God, there were four exits to this thing. I walked through the nearest one in the direction of the guest house. A group of people talking near the door forced me to change course. I side-stepped the purple flower bed Marie just had put in for this event — official Fairview school colors — and pushed open the gate that led to the small area between the houses. It was a sanctuary where I used to hang out and talk and sometimes drink or smoke pot with my friends. It was where I’d had my first kiss and lost my virginity. I was so reckless back then — so carefree, so trusting, so fucking stupid.

Thinking about how I used to be made me want to scream. I should have just left the event, but I knew that decision would have repercussions. I sat on the bench and focused on taking calming deep breaths. When that didn’t work, and I still felt like crying, I stood up and started pacing. I chanted my usual mantra: *Just get through this. Just get through tonight.* I was pacing back to the other side, still chanting quietly, when I saw his form in the dark and froze mid-step. He took a step forward, right underneath the tealights Marissa and I helped Mom put up. God, that felt like a lifetime ago.

“What did I say?” Lachlan had his hands in his pockets and a genuine look of concern on his face.

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “Please go back to the dinner. I’m fine.”

He walked over slowly, the way zoo keepers walk into cages. I could have run, could have hurled insults at him, could have done several things to push him away, but I stayed put. He didn’t take his hands out of his pockets when he reached me. He didn’t say anything. He just stood there with his overbearing presence and his scent underneath a dab of cologne that oddly brought me comfort each time he was nearby. I wanted to throw my arms around him. I wanted him to throw his arms around me. Something about him spoke to me on a level I couldn’t quite understand. There was a hint of anger and pain underneath the athletic body and disarming smile. Maybe that was why he wanted to get past the walls I’d built around myself. I let that sit for a moment, let the fact that this sought-after hot hockey star, possibly the most handsome guy I’d ever laid eyes on, kept showing up for some wild reason. Tethering him to me would be selfish. Reckless. As much as I wanted him, I couldn’t do that. As it was, I should’ve forced him to walk away, and I would’ve—any other night. But tonight, I was tired. So fucking tired.

My bottom lip began to wobble, my eyes filling with tears, as I stared at the second button of his white dress shirt. I took another breath, sniffing, and swallowed hard to keep from openly crying, but I couldn’t stop. I didn’t even know Lach, not really. I couldn’t tell you anything about his family or his favorite food. Yet, somehow, I felt more comfortable around him than most people. Despite that, I hated feeling weak, especially in public. I hadn’t broken down in front of anyone besides Marissa, and it had been a while since she’d seen me like this. I’d give myself grace tonight. Maybe seeing me this way would finally make him run for the hills, and I would no longer have to try to push him away.

I didn’t care anymore. It wasn’t like I had a choice in the matter. There was no way for me to pretend nothing was wrong or hide my emotions. So, I didn’t. I wiped under my eyes and looked up until I finally met his eyes. I let him see me. This version of myself who bleeds the same as everyone else, who hurts like everyone else, who *feels*. He swallowed hard as his eyes took me in. I was sure he’d think I was nuts, but in his eyes, I found understanding. And that was what made the next sob leave my chest. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight, engulfing me as he set his chin on my head.

“You’re okay.” It was a chant, a mantra, a promise. “I got you. You’re okay.”

That made it worse. My chest shook with that promise. I wished it were true. I wished things were different and I could allow myself to believe it, to welcome it. I hated this so much. He held me and let me cry until I had no more tears left. When I finally came down from it, I took a breath, pulled away, and wiped my face a few times. I was sure my makeup was a disaster, though, and I’d need to wash my face and reapply it.

“This is so embarrassing,” I whispered to the second button.

“Don’t do that.” He tilted my chin. “I would never judge you.”

I swallowed, took a shaky breath, and wiped my face again. “Thank you.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I can’t.” My lip wobbled again, but I contained myself. “Not tonight.”
Not ever.

He wrapped his arms around me again and exhaled as he held me, caressing the back of my right shoulder with his thumb in soothing, circular motions. I wasn’t sure how much time went by, maybe minutes, maybe an eternity, but I felt content for the first time in two years. I felt safe. I *felt*, period. And I knew it was wrong. Part of me wished I could tell him what happened, but I knew I couldn’t. What would I say? That no matter how much stalking he did, he’d never beat my actual fucking stalker, the person who had ruined my life multiple times? That I couldn’t go to the police like a regular person because the entire city was in his pocket? In the end, I said nothing. Not tonight. I’d have to put an end to it, though, because if this continued, I would be his ruin. And even I wasn’t strong enough to bear that much guilt.

CHAPTER 5

LACHLAN

I WALKED Lyla to the guest house and waited for her to fix her makeup. I wanted to carry her away from this house. From this town. From this state. From this country. From this fucking planet. Whatever it would take to make her smile. I'd never been one to care much about women crying. I'd seen my mother cry often. I'd made girls cry when they tried to guilt me into wanting more. Tears annoyed the fuck out of me. They always came with some sort of expectation — comfort, sex, whatever. Seeing Lyla cry fucked me up. Maybe because she rarely showed emotion at all. Maybe because I cared a little more than I wanted to admit.

Whatever the case, she didn't want to discuss it with me and completely shut back down when we walked into her dad's yard. Her expression was impassive again, her eyes vacant. I fucking hated it. I preferred tears over indifference — only hers. I didn't know how she did it, but she even looked beautiful when she cried. Her eyes were soft and held a plea that practically screamed, "Save me." From who or what, I wasn't sure, but I had the awful feeling it was from herself, and as much as I hated to admit it, that was something only she had the power to do.

I shut my eyes and took a breath. *How the fuck did I end up in this situation?* I'd always been a selfish person. It was easier that way. Only my mom and brother were allowed inside my bubble, mostly because I couldn't get rid of them even if I tried. Everyone else was kept at arm's length. Garnering attention from such a young age meant constantly questioning everyone's motives. I loved and respected my teammates and valued their friendship, but I didn't sit around talking to them about my problems. To them, I was a badass center who had reached a level of notoriety they could only dream of, a playboy who discarded women. It wasn't like the women

cared. Most of them were puck bunnies that just wanted to say they fucked me, as if that earned them a medal of honor or some shit. And then there was Lyla fucking James, with her indifference and snarky comebacks. Someone who truly didn't give a shit who I was. Who hadn't even fucking heard of me until a week ago. If I kept everyone at arm's length, she kept them on a different plane altogether.

While she was in the bathroom, I looked around for anything that would tell me more about her. I was starved for her. Not just her body, but her. Her attention, her secrets, her smiles, her laughter. Anything. Everything. I wanted to break inside her brain and rummage through her memories, worries, fears, likes, and dislikes. Fucking everything. I didn't like that my left wing knew what happened to her. It was unfair since Prescott had known her a long time, but I didn't want to play fair when it came to her. I wanted to win at all costs. I wanted to be the sole keeper of her secrets. I wanted to possess her. The smartest thing would be to walk away now, because I knew I'd get lost in this girl if I waited any longer. I was already lost, and I'd only known her for a week. Lyla was a walking red flag. She'd given me every reason to run in the opposite direction, but I was stuck in some weird gravitational pull she had on me.

I kept perusing. She didn't have much in the guest house — a small jewelry box with a dancing ballerina and a bookshelf. There was a glass soccer ball on the bookshelf that caught my attention. It was fucking nice. Maybe her father got it for her as a present? When I stood in front of it, I realized it was a trophy. Not *just* a trophy. It couldn't have been. The only thing I'd seen that was this nice was our NCAA title trophies, and we didn't casually keep those at home on a bookshelf. This one had her name on it and was dated two years ago. She would have been a second-year student then. Maybe it was an MVP trophy. I leaned down to read it.

Hermann Trophy. I took my phone out and Googled it. I'd seen things about her playing soccer, but I hadn't paid it any mind since the season was over, and I figured she was just good enough. According to this, Lyla fucking James was to soccer what I was to hockey. *Very* impressive. I went to the school's sports page and confirmed that it ended in the fall. I wished I'd known about this sooner. I clicked on the roster and saw she wasn't on it. She wasn't on last year's, either. *What the fuck?* I looked at the trophy again. It made no sense. Had she quit after the accident? I understood taking a break, but quitting was unfathomable to me. I tried to put myself in her position and

couldn't wrap my head around it. My competitive nature would never let me stop playing before I was forced into retirement. She could have gone pro. I knew that wasn't something that appealed to everyone. Prescott wasn't interested in playing beyond college, which was also unfathomable. He'd hang up his skates after the final tournament and go into law, like his parents.

At the sound of the bathroom door opening, I put my phone back in my pocket and turned around. She walked toward me with that ghost of a smile I now knew was the best she'd give. I still had yet to be on the receiving end of her blinding smile, but I'd take this one. I'd take all of them. I'd even take her gloomy attitude if it meant I'd have her. I almost laughed at myself. I was alone in a bedroom, inches from a bed, with the hottest girl alive... thinking about her smile. *WHO THE FUCK WAS I?* Jesus. Maybe my last concussion was worse than I thought.

"Your makeup looks good again," I said, like a fucking moron. It looked good. She'd just spent fifteen minutes fixing it.

"Thanks. I'm ready when you are."

"Do you want to hide out here until it's over?"

She cocked her head slightly. "With or without you?"

"With."

"Then no," she said, and my heart dropped just like that. My. Heart. Dropped. What. The. Fuck. I watched her lips move into that tiny smile again. "Just kiddiiiiing."

"That's not funny." I stared at her, my heart flipping as it started pounding again.

"Really?" she asked, her face neutral. "Rumor has it you don't give a shit about anyone or anything except hockey."

"Rumor, huh?" My lips pulled into a slow smile. "Have you been asking around about me, Lyla James?"

"No." She scowled, looking offended that I dared to think such a thing, which made me want to laugh. "I was at the grocery store and saw your face in a local magazine. The girls behind me were talking about you."

"Hm." I closed the distance between us. "What else did they say?"

"I stopped listening."

"Why?" I cupped her face, thumb on her cheek, the rest of my fingers fanning over the side and back of her neck.

Her breath hitched, eyes widening slightly as I tilted her face. Fuck. Those eyes would be the death of me. Even vacant, they were beautiful, but

she didn't have her mask up right now and I wanted to kiss her. I didn't know what was wrong with me, but I was dying to kiss her. I wouldn't, though. I wasn't sure what she was sad about, but I assumed it had to do with her mother's car accident, and I didn't want her to link the memory of our kiss to that. I searched her eyes, waiting for her response.

"What?" She whispered.

"Why did you stop listening to them?" My lips twitched with the satisfaction that I'd made her lose her thought.

"Because a million different things can be said about you, about anyone. Some may be true, but in my experience, most accounts aren't. I don't want to hear anything about you unless it comes from you."

This fucking girl. When had anyone given me the benefit of the doubt? Never. I'd had to prove myself repeatedly to get to where I was today because people questioned my skills, my mindset, everything. My mind raced with a million questions: did this mean she would no longer push me away? Was it an invitation to kiss her, to ask her out? I mulled that over and realized I'd never actually asked a girl out. If I had it my way, I'd lock us in here and throw away the key. Every version of Lyla James fascinated me, but this was my favorite.

"I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." I ran my thumb in soft circles against her cheek.

I looked at her plump lips. They parted slightly. She'd dabbed some kind of colored gloss on them. I didn't kiss women, but when I did back in high school, lip gloss annoyed the shit out of me. It was sticky and usually had a flavor I hated. I didn't know what was on hers, but I wanted it on my lips. I wanted to kiss her more than I'd ever wanted to kiss anyone in my entire life. I wouldn't unless she initiated it, but fuck, I wanted to.

"We should go," she whispered, holding my gaze.

"We should."

She took my hand, pulled it from her face, kissed the palm, and walked out the door. It was one of her ninja moves, where she dropped something on me and walked away before I could react. I stared at the door, my mind reeling. It took me a moment to move. I left the guest house and shut the door, but I didn't try to catch up with her. I let her walk back into the tent by herself. Something told me she needed that. When I walked back in and headed to the table, she was talking to the guy next to her, but her eyes were locked on mine as I approached. I wasn't sure she was still listening to

anything he was saying, which brought another wave of satisfaction.

I sat down beside her again. To my left, I had two basketball players I'd already met. To my right, I had the most maddening woman I'd ever met. I had no idea who was next to her or sitting next to him. She was the only reason I was at this table. She was the only reason I was here at all. I'd turned it down for three consecutive years, but Prescott mentioned she hated it and was always forced to come, so here I was. I could've sat with my agent, who had already stared at me like I'd lost my mind for not sitting with one of the three NHL coaches here, but I didn't care. And after the display of emotion she showed me, I was even happier with my choice.

"Banks," the guy next to her offered me his hand.

I shook it. "Lachlan."

"Hockey, right?" he asked. "Lachlan Duke?"

"That would be me."

"I've caught some of your games. You're, hands down, the most fun to watch."

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

"You're going pro soon," he said matter-of-factly.

"That's the plan," I said. "What do you play?"

"Football." He turned his body slightly toward Lyla.

I stared at him for a moment. This fucker was probably the one Marissa was talking about. We could've been friends in any other situation, but that automatically put him on my shit list. Now, I'd have to scour his social media platforms for pictures of them together. And I'd sit here on high alert trying to see whether or not he touched her and if she'd let him. I wanted to put my arm around her chair to stake my claim. I wanted to scream dibs so loudly that everyone in this goddamn room would hear it because even though it was a hockey thing, it seemed like everyone fucking knew about it.

I looked at the basketball players to my left and continued our conversation about March Madness, but I was tuned in to Lyla and Banks's conversation. She was obviously comfortable with him. She'd said more words to him tonight than she had to me in a week. I closed my hand to calm the itch I felt to pull her away from him and smiled when I felt the stickiness of her lip gloss on my palm.

"Dude, you can totally make it from the twenty," he said. "You've done it before."

"Yeah, but not against *them*." She brought her hands up to cover her face

and let them drop. “I don’t want to do it.”

“Lyles.” He groaned. “When have you ever doubted yourself?”

“Never, but this is different.”

“If you don’t make it, no one will care. It’s not a real game,” he said, “Besides, your winning kick was the only reason we won the game that closed out our season.”

“I don’t need you to convince me that I’m good. I know I’m great and definitely better than the lousy kickers on your roster,” she said. Her cocky attitude created an instant problem in my pants. I shifted. “If I miss this, even though it doesn’t count, they’ll talk about how I’m another example of why women can’t play male-driven sports. They’ll put my face on their stupid little Gazelle Newspaper. You know they will.”

“They won’t.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, unable to stop myself.

“Football. We have a *fun* game coming up against our rival team.” Banks looked at Lyla briefly. “Lyla kicked for us a few times, but she’s scared of losing this one since they’re our rivals.”

“I don’t lose,” she mumbled, looking at her nails.

“You kick for the football team?” I looked at her, taken aback by this new information. She continued to look at her nails. “That’s pretty badass. Maybe we can recruit you, and you can join me on the ice.”

Her eyes snapped to mine. “Hard pass.”

“Aw, come on. I thought you liked some of the hockey players.”

“That’s a lie.”

I bit back a laugh.

“Don’t take it personally. Lyla doesn’t like anyone,” Banks said.

Her eyes hadn’t left mine since she snapped her little comment at me. I loved it.

“Is that true?” I raised an eyebrow.

“I like a handful of people,” she said quietly. “Only one hockey player is on the list. There’s no one on it with a name that starts with the letter L.”

That bothered me more than it should have, but I didn’t let it show. I knew Prescott was on her stupid fucking list, and again, I had to remind myself that he was just a friend and they’d known each other a long time.

“Yet.” I winked.

She tore her gaze from me immediately, like she was offended by my wink. I held back another laugh. I knew she didn’t like people, but she liked

Banks. She liked Prescott. She liked Marissa. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she definitely liked me. I wanted to hear her say the words, though. And because I never did things half-assed, and like her, I never lost, I wouldn't just be on the list of people she liked. I'd fucking dominate it.

CHAPTER 6

LACHLAN

“I DON’T THINK you’ve ever talked about a girl like this,” my mom said as she set the garlic bread in the oven. “Do you like her? What am I saying? Of course, you like her.” She closed the oven and set the timer. “You wouldn’t bring her up if you didn’t.”

“Yeah.” The wooden dining chair creaked as I shifted to stretch my legs.

“Does she like hockey?”

“I’m not sure.” I frowned.

“You don’t know?” This shocked my mother. “So, this isn’t one of your puck bunnies?”

“No.” I laughed. “She didn’t even know who I was when we met.”

Her brows rose. “Truly?”

“Yep.” I stood up and started setting the table.

“That’s interesting.” Mom smiled. “What’s her name?”

“Lyla James.”

“Lyla James.” Her smile grew. “I love that. Does she know you share a middle name?”

“No.” I pressed my lips together to keep from smiling.

“Does she like you?” she asked, then laughed with an eye roll. “Of course, she likes you. Every girl in the universe falls at your feet without you saying a word.”

Every girl except Lyla James. I didn’t want to get into that with my mother. How was I supposed to explain that I didn’t think she liked anything or anyone without making her sound like a bitch? The only indication I had that she liked me was what happened at her father’s house. I hadn’t been able to stop replaying that scene or thinking about how she let her guard down in front of me. Was it a right place, right time situation? Would she have let

Banks see her in that state if he'd been the one to check on her? Would she have let him hold her the way she let me? Fuck.

Whenever I thought about her, I felt like a fish out of water. Most guys my age knew how to navigate this since they'd had girlfriends in the past. The only official girlfriend I'd had was freshman year of high school, and the only reason we were an item was that she was hot, a dancer, and insisted that we'd be good together. It lasted six months before she broke up with me because I "didn't show enough interest in her." I walked her to class, fucked her every day, and took her to parties. What more could she have possibly wanted from me? I never got the answer because I didn't care enough to ask. In hindsight, I should have. It might've helped me a little in this situation.

"Lach?" my mom said. I set down the last knife and turned to look at her. "Does Lyla know what an athlete's life consists of? Practices, away games, merch deals? And soon, you'll be going pro, so it'll be multiplied by a hundred."

I pulled a face. "I'm not gonna marry the girl, Ma."

"You might." She shrugged.

"This is why I wasn't going to bring her up," I said, taking a seat again. "I knew you'd start planning a wedding right away."

"I am not planning a wedding." She laughed, shaking her head.

I shot her a look. "You do it to Liam all the time."

"Liam was with Robin for two and a half years! They lived together."

"And look at how that turned out." I shifted the chair across from me and rested my feet on it.

"I'm just asking if she knows about the life of an athlete," she said, turning around to chop tomatoes. "Sue me for being interested in the only girl my son has ever mentioned by name."

"She played soccer," I said. "She got a fancy national award and everything."

"That's nice. Does that mean she's going pro?"

"She quit."

Mom set the knife down and turned quickly, crossing her arms as she leaned against the counter. "Why did she quit?"

"No idea."

"You didn't ask?" She frowned. "Lach, if you genuinely like this girl, you can't treat her the way you treat the others."

"I haven't had a chance to ask her yet." I shot her a look. "And I treat 'the

others' just fine."

"Sure." She shook her head, pushing off the counter and opening the fridge.

"They're puck bunnies. Technically, they're the ones mistreating me," I argued. "If they wanted a relationship, they'd go after Lee."

"Don't bring your brother into this." Mom shot me a warning look. "Do you want a relationship with this girl?"

"I don't know," I said honestly, surprising myself.

"You don't know?" She shut the fridge and turned around quickly, giving me her full attention.

My knee started bouncing nervously. The thought of being stuck in a relationship made me sweat, even if the relationship was with Lyla. *Especially* if the relationship was with Lyla. It would be a distraction and pressure me not to mess things up with her. I couldn't commit to that right now. I knew this, yet this need to possess her made me want to try. It was fucked up and selfish, but I couldn't help it. When I was with her, I felt the same anticipation as when I tried to score a point. The feeling of striking the puck on just the right trajectory and watching it sail through the air with the potential for anything to happen. It happened in less than a second, but it always felt like time slowed as I held my breath and waited for the outcome. That was how she made me feel. Like I was holding my breath in anticipation. One thing was feeling like that on the ice for a few minutes, but to feel that way every time someone walked into the room? It had to be bad for the heart.

"I'm about to enter the draft," I said, since it was one of the many reasons I couldn't pursue a relationship.

"What is Lang saying about the draft?"

"Everything is set. There's nothing to say."

"He's your agent. He should be keeping you updated," she said. "Are you still the number one pick?"

I cocked my head. "What do you think?"

"That arrogance will bite you in the ass one day." She pointed at me. "Speaking of which, your father came by."

I stiffened. I hated her mentioning him as if he showed up regularly and was a decent father. The only commendable thing anyone could say he'd done was throw money at us. He'd paid for this house, our education, my hockey equipment, Liam's computer shit, and his college tuition. Even if I

explained the situation to a stranger and told them that he was an absent father who was never there for us and only showed up a few times a year, they'd say it could be worse. He could be an absent father who didn't pay for shit. That would be preposterous, though. The Duke family was rich as fuck. My mother practically made a killing just by birthing us. I would say it was why she'd always come to his defense, but it wasn't.

My sweet, naive mother was in love with the fucking asshole. I couldn't comprehend how anyone could love a man who didn't love your children and, in our case, *his* children. The entire situation was mind-blowing. My mother kept up with her appearance and looked much younger than she was. She was fun to be around and had a heart of gold. All things that should make any man shower her with attention, but nope. She chose Henry Duke, who couldn't give a shit if he tried.

"Did you tell him to fuck off?" I asked when she didn't add anything to her statement.

"Lachlan!" She whipped the kitchen towel at my arm. "He's your father."

"He's dead to me."

"You need to stop saying that." She turned back to the oven. "He wants to start trying with you guys."

"Trying what exactly?" I sat up straighter.

"To be more present," she said quietly.

I blinked. "Why?"

Why the fuck would he want to try now? Because he knew I was going pro and suddenly wanted to show me off? I knew that couldn't be it. My father showed up to some of my games and watched me play with the same expression he probably had when he was going through his taxes. Afterward, he'd take us out to eat, let my mother ask questions, and quietly listened to our answers. We'd always get a pat on the back and one of three things: "Good job," "You did good out there," or he'd pick one thing we mentioned during our flash quiz answers at dinner and say something about it. Then, he'd leave and not show up again for weeks, sometimes months. It made no sense that he wanted to try now. Maybe he wanted to tell us directly that he would no longer pay for our shit and that we needed to get "real jobs." Maybe he wanted to come around since I was about to graduate from his alma mater, and he wanted to show face so people wouldn't forget who he was. Fuck him. My face must have shown that I was brooding because Mom waited a long moment before finally speaking.

“You’re his heirs,” she said.

“So?”

“He’s sick, Lach,” she said quietly.

“Oh.” I laughed loudly, unamused. “Is he dying? Is that why? We’re the only ones he can leave his empire to, and he wants to make sure we won’t burn it to the ground?”

Mom flinched. “Lachlan.”

“Tell him not to bother. If he wanted us to be his heirs so badly, he would have been there when he was supposed to.”

“I know, honey, and he feels bad that he wasn’t.”

“Mom,” I shook my head with a sigh. She just didn’t get it. “Showing up to celebrate us and ignoring us the rest of the time isn’t enough.”

She waited a moment before saying, “He wants me to move in with him.”

My knee stopped bouncing. I stared at her. I knew my mother. She was only saying this because she’d already made the decision. . .ohmyfuckinggodthismotherfuckingasshole. I was going to explode. I took a large cleansing breath that did nothing to calm me down. I needed to leave before I started breaking shit. I hadn’t done that in a long time, but I felt like I might. This motherfucker wanted my mother to move in with him because he was dying and needed someone to play nurse? Fuck him. I wish I could shake my mother hard and make her see the light, but I’d never do that to her. Even if I did, she wouldn’t see it. Her weakness toward him was so fucking disappointing.

“You could have divorced him a long time ago. You can date anyone you want. You’re a fucking catch, Mom.” I shook my head. “If you’re lonely, cut him off and start dating.”

“I don’t want to date anyone.”

“Of course not, because you’re waiting for him to change. He’s never going to. How do you not see it?” I hit the table with my fist. She didn’t even react.

“Says the guy who suddenly wants to *date* a girl.” She raised an eyebrow.

“No. Fuck that. I’m nothing like him.” My chair screeched as I stood. I couldn’t do this today. “You know, maybe I’ve been angry at the wrong parent all this time. He never promised us he’d keep us safe. He didn’t promise us shit. You, on the other hand, have been dragging us along on this fucked up journey all our lives.”

“Lach.” She grabbed my arm as I walked by. “Please don’t leave.”

“I can’t be here right now.” I glared at her.

“Just listen to what he has to say.”

“I don’t give a fuck what he has to say.” I yanked my arm away and headed to the door.

I grabbed my car keys and wished I could throw them in the gutter. My car was just another reminder of something he’d done for me. It had been waiting for me outside, the morning of my eighteenth birthday, with a note that said, “*Happy Birthday. I’m proud of you, son.*” I’d wanted to burn it to the fucking ground. I’d kept it because the car I’d been driving at the time had given out two weeks before, and I’d been borrowing Mom’s car or hitching rides with people.

Now, as I sat in the driver’s seat and listened to the engine roar, I could only think about getting rid of it as soon as possible. It was what I would do with my first paycheck. I closed my eyes and reminded myself of all the good things coming my way. I’d officially sign with my dream team, make the money I’d been promised, add more from sponsorships, and never look back. When I calmed down, I started the two-hour drive back to Fairview. I was lost in thought, still thinking about the NHL and CHL, when my phone started ringing with a call from Liam. I pressed the button on my steering wheel to accept it.

“What the hell, Lach?”

“What?”

“You couldn’t wait thirty more minutes?” he asked. “Did you even eat?”

“Did Mom tell you what she wanted?”

“Yeah, Dad wants to talk to us.”

I hesitated before I asked, “You’re going to talk to him?”

“Nothing wrong with listening to what he has to say.”

I could practically see him sitting at the table I’d just left, playing with his lasagna — my favorite food — as he casually spoke to me about this. I wish I could telepathically tip the plate all over his clothes. I hadn’t been able to eat or take some like I usually did because I’d been riled up, and this asshole was sitting there eating it and buying into our dad’s bullshit. I already knew his reason and didn’t want to hear it. I’d accepted that our father would never be who we needed him to be. Liam always kidded himself into thinking he loved us and would return when the timing was right for all of us. Liam had always been like that, searching for the good in others even when it wasn’t there.

“I can’t have this conversation right now.”

“Lach,” he called out as I was about to end the call. “The lasagna is amazing.”

“Asshole.”

“Wait,” he called out again as my finger hovered over the end button. “We’ll be at your next game. Maybe we can hang out after?”

“I’ll text you.”

I ended the call. As soon as I got to Fairview, I’d head straight to the rink. I needed to blow off steam; this energy was best left on the ice.

CHAPTER 7

SOMEHOW, I'd let my father drag me to a stupid sports luncheon. He'd bribed me with money. Growing up, I'd been one of those kids who couldn't be bought. If my parents didn't show up and gave me a gift in lieu of their absence, I didn't accept it. These days, I took whatever Dad wanted to throw at me and put it in savings. I'd need every penny when I moved out of here. I'd been accepted to three universities to continue my journey in sports medicine. Though I hadn't chosen where I was going, money would be necessary no matter where I landed. I may have hated my dad now, but I had fond memories of him from childhood. In the grand scheme of things, sitting at this luncheon should have been a small price, but the verdict was out on that one.

My skin had been crawling since I walked in here, the feeling in the pit of my stomach becoming worse with each passing second. For starters, the object of my worst nightmares was sitting in this room. I'd been able to avoid him this semester, but he always found a way to sneak back into my life somehow, and since he knew he'd done a good enough job silencing me, it was something he tried to do often. Secondly, it was a sports luncheon for athletes, and I was no longer one, in large part because of him. Anger sizzled deep in my stomach, but I couldn't let it boil over. I couldn't react. Prescott, Mason, Lachlan, Coach Jameson, and my dad were at the table and I refused to show any emotion around them. Dad and Jameson were lost in conversation. Prescott was texting someone. Mason was openly checking me out, even though I'd made it a point to wear a loose blouse and pants. Lachlan was sitting to my right, his glare set on Mason. It was such a weird thing. I'd felt nothing all day. *Nothing*. And the moment I smelled him near me, I felt butterflies.

“It wouldn’t kill you to smile,” my father said.

“If you wanted someone who would smile, you shouldn’t have asked me to come,” I said through gritted teeth.

Beside me, Lachlan coughed into his napkin.

“They want to give you something,” Dad said. “You should be grateful you were invited after quitting.”

God, I wanted to tell him to go fuck himself so badly. I wanted to grab the fork in front of me and stab him repeatedly. Instead, I remained silent since I didn’t want to call attention to myself. The guys to my right started talking about their next game. They’d killed it last night. Marissa asked me to go with her, but I’d turned her down. I was considering going to the next one, though. I figured there was no harm in hanging out in an open space that held so many witnesses.

“Lyles, you’re coming to our game, right?” Prescott said, smiling at me from the other side of the table.

“Maybe.” I took a sip of water. “I’ll have to check my calendar.”

Pres rolled his eyes. “Just go.”

“You should,” Dad said. “Gina says you barely leave the house.”

I said nothing. I didn’t understand why Marissa’s mom even spoke to my dad after he allegedly cheated on Mom and moved on with his mistress right after she passed. Maybe she had to speak to him since Marissa’s dad, and mine played golf together. I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair — something my father loathed — but it took me out of Coach Jameson’s line of vision, and therefore, that would be one less conversation to have.

The guys loved Jameson, though. It seemed Lachlan was Jameson’s favorite, which made me inwardly roll my eyes. Jameson had coached Lachlan for two years and led the team when they won their first championship. Lachlan was talking about the teams he’d kill to play for — his first choice was in Toronto, his second in Boston. Those were two places I hadn’t even considered moving to. Not that it mattered. When he left, would he ask me to follow him/come with him? I wouldn’t have gone if he did. I almost laughed at myself. I wasn’t sure if we were even friends, yet somehow, the boundaries were still blurred because of these stupid emotions that only he could pull from me.

Coach Bev tapped the microphone twice to call our attention before she started addressing the room. I missed her so damn much. She’d been the reason I chose to play soccer here, to begin with. With so many choices at my

fingertips, I chose Coach Bev, and look at where that got me. She gave her usual inspiring speech, everyone clapped, and she waited for it to quiet down.

“I’ve spent the last thirty years coaching a lot of talented young ladies.” She looked around the room. “But every once in a while, one stands out from the rest. I’m not saying our current team is anything short of amazing, but this young lady is a superstar.”

Across the room, the soccer table cheered and hooted. I looked over there, and my heart sank. I should have been sitting over there right now. I’d roomed with some of them my first year here and missed them so fucking much. I still texted some of them, but it wasn’t the same. I wasn’t part of the team anymore, so we no longer shared the same inside jokes or saw each other daily. I missed having a family like that. I fucking hated *him* for doing this to me. Loathed him.

“Now,” Coach Bev continued. “She was only able to play with us for two full years. She took us to the championship both years and helped us win,” she said, her voice excited. I stopped breathing. *What was happening?* The soccer girls banged against the table, making utensils clatter against plates. Coach Bev side-eyed them. “Quiet down, girls.” She looked right at me, her voice wavering with emotion. My heart dropped again. No no no no no. This could not be happening. “She’s gifted. She has a smile that can light up a room, a heart of gold. She’s a true leader. I wish she still played for us, but I understand the difficult circumstances.” She took a breath. “Not a game has gone by where we haven’t mentioned her name, so we knew honoring her with this plaque was necessary. It’ll go on the wall of our tunnel, so each time the girls run by it, she can inspire them.” She sniffled. Oh fuck. I swallowed. I felt like crying but somehow held my emotion in my throat. “Miss Lyla James Marichal, please come up here.”

I scooted my chair back and kept my eyes on the stage as I walked toward it. If I made eye contact with Prescott or Lachlan, I’d lose it. My former teammates stood up and ambushed me with hugs and kisses, making it even harder to keep my tears at bay. I kissed and hugged them back and continued until I reached Coach Bev. She hugged me tightly.

“I miss you so much,” I said, burying my face in her shoulder.

“I miss you more, and of course, I wanted you to come back. You’re the best player I’ve ever coached.” She pulled away, and I looked in the opposite direction of the crowd to wipe my face quickly. “I really wish you’d consider going pro.”

I smiled sadly and hugged her again. Playing in the USWNT had been a dream of mine. I'd idolized Michelle Akers. I'd been mentioned in conversations with some of the best players, and then, nothing. After the tragedies, I'd tried to go back, but I couldn't without Mom watching. The weight of my guilt didn't let me concentrate enough to dribble the ball, let alone be the striker I used to be. When we pulled away, Coach Bev showed me the plaque. It was surreal seeing my name memorialized like that. I'd won the most prestigious award in the nation, but somehow, it meant more to me, knowing that girls for generations to come would see this and be inspired by it. I ran my fingers over it and breathed, enjoying this brief moment. I pulled up the microphone and said, "Thank you," as everyone stood and clapped. What else was there to say? I felt unworthy and wasn't going to stand here saying it had been the honor of my life to play soccer for this school. It had been, but saying it aloud felt fucked up since I'd quit on them halfway through. We posed for a picture, and Coach Bev and I spoke a little more when we left the stage. I returned to my seat, giving high fives on the way, while a basketball player started speaking into the mic.

When I got there, everyone at my table stood. I gave Coach Jameson a quick side hug, kissed my father on the cheek, and gave the rest of them a side hug before taking my seat. Everyone kept talking. Jameson and Dad got out of their seats for something while the rest of us stayed seated. Despite the despondent look I knew was on my face, my hands shook in my lap. I felt a hand reach out and settle over them. Lachlan was terrible for my emotions. His touch felt like a defibrillator, jolting me back to life, but it also made me feel safe enough to stop shaking.

"Nightmare?" he asked quietly. I finally met his eyes and felt my mouth move into a small smile. His eyes dropped to my lips, making wings flap inside my stomach.

"The worst kind." I turned and ignored him for the rest of the luncheon, for his sake more than mine.



"You're being very rude, Lyla," he said as I stepped out of the bathroom.

The air in my lungs left me as I stood there. Frozen. Panicked. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. The luncheon was over. I thought for sure I'd escaped him.

Apparently not. I hadn't been alone with him in a long time. I wasn't entirely sure what my options were, but the thought of him cornering me here, of all places, was making my heart rate triple in speed. Not in a good way, like Lach did. My eyes darted around quickly, searching for someone to help me escape, but no one was around. This man had to be the luckiest creep alive. I took a breath and summoned all of the courage I had inside.

"Fuck you," I said, quieter than I meant, as I tried to get around him.

He grabbed my arm and squeezed tightly. "*Respect, Lyla.*"

"I hate you." I yanked my arm away.

"You know what they say about love and hate." He smiled, walking toward me. I moved back so fast that I crashed against the wall behind me. He lowered a hand and squeezed my left breast over my shirt. My heart stopped beating. "Do you need a demonstration of how much I love you?"

I was shaking, but somehow, I pushed him off me with both hands. He was much bigger than me, so I knew he'd moved on purpose. Maybe because we finally heard voices approaching. It didn't matter what the reason was. I ran. Behind me, I heard him laugh. My heart was pounding so hard, my head spinning so fast, that as I turned the corner, I almost ran right into Lachlan, who grabbed my shoulders to stop me.

"This isn't what I meant when I said you should play hockey." He smirked. I looked over my shoulder and back at him. He frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I looked over my shoulder again. "I . . .I...I have to go."

I started to walk away, but he grabbed my wrist. I met his eyes, and a shiver went down my spine at what I saw in them. Unlike the encounter I just experienced, Lachlan's touch didn't make me panic or want to run away. It filled me with comfort and something else. I wasn't quite sure what.

"Let me drive you."

I nodded and followed him. Dad had driven me here and would surely be pissed that I didn't wait for him, but I couldn't stay here a second longer. Outside, I kept my distance from Lachlan in case we were being watched. He unlocked a black two-door BMW, and as we sat inside and I clicked my seatbelt on, I was thankful for the dark tints.

"What happened in there?"

"I can't, Lach." I bit my lip and hoped he'd read my face well enough to know I wasn't okay but also didn't want to talk about it. He sighed heavily and started to drive.

“Why did you quit?”

My eyes snapped to him. “What?”

“Soccer,” he said. “I can’t imagine quitting. I mean, a fucking plaque? That’s a big deal.”

“Dad probably paid for it.”

“No, he didn’t.” He eyed me.

My response was a shrug.

“At least your dad was there. Mine probably would’ve only showed up for a photo op,” he said.

I looked at the side of his face for a long moment. Maybe we had more in common than I thought. Not that having awful fathers was the best thing to bond over, but it was something. I was just grateful for the change in subject. I didn’t want to talk about soccer, but I could talk about hating my dad all day.

“You really think my father went for something other than a photo op?” I asked after a moment. “He’s a fucking politician. Photo ops are on his to-do list’s top five.”

He chuckled. He had the sexiest laugh I’d ever heard. His eyes lit up as he glanced over, and butterflies started to come alive inside me. I looked away quickly.

“My father thinks throwing money at us is the key to everything,” he said. “As if money can cover the bill for absence.”

“Are you sure we’re not related?” I asked, looking at him.

He visibly cringed. “We are definitely NOT related, Lyla James.”

I bit my lip and looked out the window again to keep from laughing. “Maybe we should start a ‘poor little rich kids with absent asshole fathers club.’”

“I’m not rich. Well, I guess I am to some people’s standards. Definitely not yours,” he said, shooting an amused look in my direction. “But I’ll be part of your club anyway.”

“Well, now you’re going to have to try out.”

He laughed. “What do I have to do in the tryouts? Cry to prove my father fucked me up emotionally by never showing up for me?”

“Or not cry,” I said. “I guess it depends on who makes the rules.”

“Hopefully, it’s not you.”

“Rude.” I frowned. “Why not me? I just came up with the club.”

“You don’t like people, so you’d probably be the only one in the damn

thing,” he said. “And you’re a harsh judge. No one will ever live up to your expectations.”

“Wow.” I kept my eyes on the road. “That’s. . .pretty accurate.”

He laughed again, shaking his head.

“Maybe we should have a pretend try-out here, so you don't waste your time trying out,” I added. He bit his lip; eyes still amused as he shook his head and looked at the road ahead.

“What does this pretend try-out consist of?”

“Any sob story.” I shrugged.

He bit the side of his lips and narrowed his eyes slightly as he thought about it. Finally, after a few moments, he spoke. “On my eighth birthday, my dad was supposed to take me to a hockey game. It was the Bruins against the Maple Leaves,” he said. “My mom brought it up all the time. She thought this would redeem him from not coming to any of my games that season.”

“He didn't show up?” I whispered.

“He didn't even call.” He stopped at a red light and glanced at me.

I felt the air go out of my lungs for a moment. I wasn't sure if the pain was apparent on my face, but I felt it. I thought about him as a little boy—probably the cutest fucking boy—and my heart broke for him. I was okay with my father being too busy for me. I'd even made peace with my mother, following him around everywhere and leaving me behind all the time. But I hated that for Lachlan. He may have been a player and an asshole, but I knew he was a good guy. Besides, no kid deserves to be given broken promises by someone who was supposed to protect them and show them how the world worked.

“Your dad sucks,” I said after a moment.

He laughed as he started driving again. We were quiet for a moment before he broke the silence.

“You know my favorite part about Coach Bev’s speech?” he asked quietly as he parked at the curb, in front of my apartment building.

“Let me guess, the heart of gold part.”

“Close second.” His lip twitched.

“What part?” I asked. I despised guessing games.

“Don’t sound so excited,” he said when I deadpanned my answer. “I wouldn’t want to think you’re interested in me.”

“If you think that, you’d be lying to yourself.”

“Would I be lying to myself, though?” He raised an eyebrow. I didn’t

understand how he did it — I was numb one minute, and the next, my heart was beating out of control. He glanced over when we got to a red light. “One of these days, Lyla James.”

I looked out the window to hide the smile I felt forming. Not only did he make me feel; for a moment, he made me forget what broke me, to begin with. Just for a moment, but those moments added up. He also never quit flirting with me and trying to get me to cave, and for some really, really dumb reason, I loved it.

“I see your reflection, you know,” he said. I jolted and looked at him. He glanced away, two guys bouncing a basketball up the sidewalk catching his attention as he spoke, “What she said about your smile was my favorite part.”

Weird. “Why?”

“Because you don’t give it up freely.” He met my gaze. “But when you do, it’s fucking magical.”

I wondered if he said things like this to all the girls he was trying to sleep with. Something told me he didn’t have to say much to get them in his bed. I squeezed my hands on my lap and turned my attention to the bouncing basketball.

“Why’d you quit?” he asked again.

“Do you want the truth or what I tell everyone?” I asked, looking over at him.

He scowled. “The truth.”

“I can’t give it to you until the semester is officially over.”

He shot me a look. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “What’s the story you tell everyone?”

“That I’m overwhelmed with grief.”

His brows hitched. “Are you?”

“I don’t feel anything at all,” I whispered.

I wanted to tack on: *unless you’re around*. I wouldn’t, but it was the absolute truth. I didn’t know what this feeling was, but it was better than nothing, and that terrified me.

CHAPTER 8

LYLA

“LET it be known that the only reason I’m going is that I love you,” I said as Marissa applied eyeshadow.

She stopped and pulled back to shoot me a look. “I know, and let it be known that I will be watching you like a hawk.”

“I’ll be on my best, happy-go-lucky behavior.” I winked. She laughed, shaking her head.

Marissa’s birthday had always been a day of dress-up of sorts. For years, she’d do my makeup and dress me up however she wanted. She would make the perfect show mom to one of those beauty pageant children. I’d missed her last two birthdays since I couldn’t get out of bed, let alone interact with people. Marissa, being the best friend that she was, attended both parties for an hour and then came over to mope with me. She was sad, too, of course. When my mother died, she also felt like she’d lost a mother. When Luke died. . . God. I tried not to even think about it too much. Every time I did, I felt like throwing up. That year was such a blur that sometimes I could pretend none of it had happened until I thought about calling Mom. Or Luke. Each time, a fresh wave of grief would hit me, realizing they were both gone forever. Then, it hit me that they were both gone forever.

This year, I wouldn’t think about that. I’d go to my best friend’s party and have fun. That was the only thing she’d asked me on her birthday. I didn’t fight her on it. Was I ecstatic? No, but I would try my best not to be a Debbie Downer, for her sake. Banks would be there with some of the football team, and Prescott would make me feel safer.

“All done,” Marissa said, grinning when she stepped back to look at me. “Holy shit, Lyles. You look so fucking hot.”

I stood up and walked to her full-length mirror. I wore wide-leg jeans and

a flutter-sleeve smocked crop top that only covered my breasts and tied in the back. I loved the top. It was cute and sexy and normally something I would no longer wear in public. My baggy clothes made me feel safe, but it was bullshit. I shouldn't have to cover myself up because some men did not understand what "no" means. I wouldn't have thought twice about this outfit if I knew *he* wouldn't see me in it. This was who I'd become because of him. I hated him for it, but I hated myself even more for giving him this power over me. It wasn't like he'd be at the party, but the fear remained. I took a deep breath. Fuck him. It was Marissa's night.

I gave myself another once-over. Marissa had styled my hair in beachy waves that reached around my elbows. She'd created a beautiful braid that looked like a crown on the back of my head but left the shorter strands of my hair loose in the front. It was a version of myself I hadn't seen in a long time. That was a lie, though. I'd dress however I wanted when I was far away from here, but I'd never be the trusting, careless person I'd once been. I shook that away and focused on tonight. The jeans had rips at the knees, left thigh, and just beneath my right ass cheek. They were so long that I'd either wear heels or fold them to wear sneakers. Marissa chose comfortable block heels that weren't too high. I tested them out by running into the living room and back. Yep, I could wear them.

When we were completely ready, we stood next to each other in the mirror and smiled. Somehow, she'd managed to do the same thing to her hair and was wearing jeans and a crop top that read "Kiss me (if you're cute). It's my Birthday". She looked amazing. She always did, though. Marissa was beautiful, of course, but what made her beauty shine was the confidence which she carried herself with. I loved it. I once had it myself. While it still existed, it was buried underneath an air of superiority that I didn't feel. It was the only defense mechanism I had to keep people from wanting to talk to me. I'd once been social, still a little dry and sarcastic, but I'd been well-loved by my peers. The ones who knew me from high school completely understood the 180 I'd made. The rest of them probably thought I was a huge bitch, which was fine by me.

CHAPTER 9

MY FINGERS TIGHTENED on Marissa's as we walked into the party. We'd pre-gamed at the house and were very fashionably late, which meant everyone had already been here a while. As we got here, I'd ditched my oversized sweater and tried not to feel too uneasy about it. At least it was dark in the house. It wasn't like I cared what this specific crowd thought or whether or not they saw me. I just felt weird about being this exposed after hiding for so long. The party was legit. They had a DJ set up with a whole light show going on. A couple of girls from Marissa's sorority walked up to us immediately, enveloping us in welcoming hugs.

"Let's get a drink." Marissa started pulling me toward the living room.

I wasn't even fully in the room when I caught sight of Lachlan. Every time I saw him, he took my breath away, and this time was no different. He was reclined on the couch, his long, muscular arms sprawled across the backrest. A beer bottle hung from one hand as he spoke to Drew, who was to his right. Mandy Roberts sat to his left, pressing her tits into his left arm. When that didn't get his attention, she set her hand on his left thigh. I blinked twice to make sure I wasn't seeing things, but little by little, her hand was moving north, and she was indeed about to actually feel him up. Jealousy charged me like a lightning bolt — unexpected, fast, and hot. I'd heard people talk about jealousy, but I'd never experienced it. It was as bad as they'd described it, or worse.

I'd dated Luke for nearly three years, and one night, while we were high, I'd suggested an open relationship. Not because I didn't love him, but because I wasn't *in love with him*. Our parents had been playing matchmakers since third grade, and they were the only reason we even gave the relationship a shot. Staying together ended up being more convenient than

breaking up, and explaining it to them would have been a pain, especially since Luke was the only boy my parents approved of me dating, so we maintained an open relationship. The first time I saw him with another girl at a party, I was slightly surprised but not upset or jealous.

Watching Lachlan with another woman felt like a punch in the gut. My fingers squeezed tighter on Marissa. It was the only way I'd kept the nonchalant look on my face. It was the only way for me not to concentrate on my ears, which felt like they were burning — or my heart, which felt like it was breaking. It was annoying and frustrating beyond belief. We weren't a thing. For God's sake, we hadn't even kissed, but this felt worse than any breakup I'd ever experienced. It was madness. Marissa tugged me along, and I was grateful because I was so angry that I could barely think, let alone walk. I hated every single second of that feeling. He wasn't even paying attention to her, but Mandy kept going, now running her hand up and down his thigh.

I tore my eyes from the scene, so I wouldn't see whether or not she was going to touch his dick over his jeans and faced forward, focusing on breathing. The DJ had set up his equipment right in the middle of our trek, so Marissa had to divert and lead me toward the couch. Like a prized horse in a race, I set up blinders so I would no longer see them. Unfortunately, mental blinders were a one-way thing. It wasn't like it gave me the power of invisibility. My heart pounded harder as I walked by. I was focused on the back of Marissa's head when a hand shot out and grabbed my wrist. I knew it was him based on the electric wave that shot through me. I hated that reaction. I wished my body would get with the program and stop feeling things he didn't deserve for me to feel. I stopped walking and hooked a finger through the loop of Marissa's jeans to stop her. She did, looked back, assessed the situation, glared at Lachlan, and gave me a tiny nod. It all happened in a fraction of a second. I let go of the hook, and she started talking to Drew. I looked at Lachlan, who was still holding my wrist.

I didn't even say anything as I met his eyes. I just stared at him, even though inside, I was shaking. He let go of my wrist and took me in, his eyes heating each patch of skin he devoured. He bit his bottom lip as his hooded eyes explored me one more time. He shifted on the couch. My eyes swung from his to Mandy, who had put some distance between them but not much. Her hand was casually resting on his arm over the backrest like she was staking a claim on him. I fucking hated her right now. She smiled warmly at me and said hello, and somehow, despite my blind, irrational jealousy, I

returned her greeting with a nod. She'd always been nice to me and wasn't at fault here. Butterflies flapped when my gaze met Lachlan's again, and I stomped on every single one.

"What?" I snapped, giving him the bitchiest look I could muster as if I couldn't understand why he'd dared to touch me. And truly, I fucking didn't.

"You're at a party." His green eyes studied my face intently and explored my body for the third time. In any other situation, I might have felt something different. Right now, all I felt was rage as it continued to build inside me.

"Yep. It appears that I am," I said evenly.

My tone earned a look from him that I wasn't expecting. Hurt? Confusion? Was he fucking kidding me right now? I needed to move before I threw up or caused a scene within five minutes of arriving. Thankfully, Marissa was one step ahead of me.

"Let's go." She turned around and grabbed my hand. "Hey, Lach. You and Mandy should probably get a room. Fondling each other in public is a little tacky."

My gaze was focused on Marissa when she spoke and started moving. Behind us, I heard him shout, "What the fuck?" as if he was shocked about it or something. I rolled my eyes. *Whatever*. Marissa moved faster through the crowd, and we managed to get lost in it. That was how crowded this place was right now. In any other situation, I would have laughed and made a joke about feeling like a school of fish, but the void in the pit of my stomach didn't allow me to find humor in anything. I reminded myself repeatedly that I had no right to feel this way, but the pain in my chest wouldn't quit. Why did it hurt this much? Marissa took a deep breath in the kitchen and shook her head as she let it out. She didn't say anything; she just pulled the unopened tequila toward us. I'd bet money she'd requested one bottle to be left sealed. I'd always been adamant about things like that.

"Did you see his face?" she asked, shaking her head as she opened the bottle.

"No." *I couldn't look at him any longer out of fear that I'd vomit.*

Her hands paused on the bottle. "You're upset."

"I'm not."

"Lyla James Marichal." She angled her body toward mine.

"What?"

"Oh, my God. You actually like him," she said. I groaned, which earned me a sympathetic look from her. "He likes you a lot. You know that, right?"

I laughed. *Yeah, he likes me so much that he was with another girl at a party and didn't even bother hiding from me. Not that it would make a difference if he had. It might have been worse.* “Just pour the fucking shots.”

She did as I asked, pouring two shots each. “He looked horrified and pushed Mandy off so fast. She nearly fell on the floor.”

“Yeah, well, he’s still a fucking asshole for letting her be all over him in the first place,” I said, my voice sounding foreign in my ears. We clinked our tiny plastic cups and downed the shot first, our faces cringing slightly, then reached for the second.

“I doubt he even notices shit like that anymore. Women flock to him constantly at parties and try to get his attention.” She lifted her cup, and we downed another shot.

“Can you not?” I muttered. “Why are we talking about this?”

“Because you like him, and you don’t go out enough to know anything about him. I want to give you details before you shut this down.”

“Mar.” I shot her a look. “You literally just told me that he has a million women all over him at parties. How is that supposed to make me feel any better?”

“I’m telling you that he doesn’t pay attention to them, Lyles. He hasn’t for a while now. He doesn’t even take girls home anymore.” She arched an eyebrow. “*And he’s different with you.*”

“To play devil’s advocate, let’s say you’re right, and he pushed her off or whatever. All he said to me was, ‘You’re at a party,’” I said, mimicking his deep voice. “What the fuck?”

“Dude, you rendered him speechless.” She opened her eyes wide, the way she did when she wanted to get a point across. “He looked like he was going to have a heart attack right there on that couch. He didn’t take his eyes off you.”

“It doesn't matter.” I shrugged. “What would have happened if he hadn’t seen me? Would he have hooked up with her?”

“No,” she said plainly. “I just told you, he hasn’t done that in a while. Look, I completely understand where you’re coming from, and you’re right to be upset, but I know for a fact that he really likes you, and that’s unheard of. Lach doesn't even like any of the girls he’s ever taken home.”

“Whatever, it doesn’t matter. There’s no point to this.” I looked out the window and saw some people playing beer pong before looking at her again. “We’ll be parting ways soon enough, and I don’t want to bring attention to

him. I can't."

She sighed heavily and shook her head. I knew exactly what she wanted to tell me — that the point was for me to do something that brought *me* happiness for once — but I also knew that she wouldn't go there. As it was, I hated myself for being this consumed by him. I replayed what just happened, and my stomach felt hollow again.

"Another shot?" Marissa asked.

"Fuck it, why not?"

She laughed. We took another shot.

"You know what the worst part about this is?" I asked. "I've never cared about shit like this. Ever."

"I know." She nodded gravely. "That's why I think you should keep an open mind here."

"I hate this. I fucking hate feelings."

"I know, babe." She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed. "Anyway, let's move on. I love you so much. Thank you for being here. And for letting me play dress up with you."

"I love you, too. Thank you for *always* being there for me. Even when I feel numb and impossible to be around." I pulled away from her.

"You're never impossible to be around," she said, searching my eyes. "You're my sister and you're going through a lot of shit. I'll always be there."

I swallowed. "Please pour the shots before I cry in front of people."

"Oh, God. We wouldn't want that." She grinned, poured the next shot, clinked my glass, and we downed hers. "Should we stop?"

"Stop?" Both of my eyebrows raised. "This is the only thing that'll keep me here, laughing and being social and shit."

Marissa laughed loudly. "Two more?"

"One more," I said. "For now."

"Good idea." She poured another, we downed them, and she closed the bottle. "I'm going to hide this."

She hid it in a cabinet and threw an arm over my shoulders. "God, I missed this, Lyla."

Me too. Me freaking too. The Lyla she was referring to partied and had fun. She'd never been jealous, though. I took a breath and grabbed Marissa's hand as we walked out of the kitchen. Making our way through the sea of people was challenging. We froze by the door when we stepped outside,

taking in the yard. They'd set up balloons on the fence that read, "Happy Birthday, Mar." There were two beer pong tables. I didn't normally drink beer, but I freaking loved beer pong and had mastered the game. I was too competitive to do anything half-assed, so senior year of high school, I'd made Luke and Prescott practice with me until I felt like I got the angle and flick of my wrist just right. As Marissa walked around and said hi to people, I stood next to her, pretending to listen to her sorority sisters talk about a barbecue they were planning. Prescott, Mason, and some other guys were at one of the beer pong tables. The shots had seeped in while I'd been standing there, and I felt tipsy enough to join in on the fun.

I leaned into Marissa. "I'm gonna go play beer pong with Pres."

"I'll find you later." She pulled me into another tight hug. "Seriously, love you."

I kissed her cheek and smiled as I stepped away and walked to the beer pong area. When Prescott saw me, his jaw dropped. It was his reaction when he saw me anywhere these days, but I was sure that wearing this outfit like this to a crowded party was the main reason for his disbelief. He ran around the table and lifted me in the air, like we were in Dirty Dancing, before setting me back on my feet.

"Damn, Marissa really went all out this year." He eyed me up and down, shaking his head. He pulled me into a side hug. "Are you abiding by the rules? Smiling, socializing?"

"If you keep going, I'll have no choice but to sit in the corner sulking."

"Shutting up now." He pressed two fingers together and gestured like he was zipping his mouth.

"Can we play?" I nodded at the beer pong table.

"Fuck yeah! Let's gooooo!" he shouted as we turned around. I waved at Mason and the other guy.

"Lyla's on my team." That was Mason, who was still checking me out.

He wore a gray hockey t-shirt that seemed to be sculpted over his muscles and black joggers. He grinned when our eyes met again. I returned it with a small, polite smile so he wouldn't get the wrong idea. Just because Lachlan was doing whatever he was doing didn't mean I'd do the same. My God, thinking of him pissed me off all over again. I needed to stop. He wasn't mine. We shared some moments that probably meant more to me than they did to him. I probably only felt this way because I hadn't even glanced at a guy in two years. Maybe if I hadn't been closed off and at home sulking all

the time, my moments with Lachlan would have meant nothing. I knew I was lying to myself. It wasn't just that Lach was hot or that he paid attention to me. It was the way he made me feel that set him apart. I sighed heavily. Fuck him. I was over it. I looked at Mason again. He was cute in that laid-back, California surfer dude kind of way, with blond hair that reached his shoulders, glimmering blue eyes, and a sun-kissed complexion.

"Fuck no. She's on my team," Prescott said, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

"Come on." Mason rolled his eyes. "Dustin and Lyla never come out and party, so we need to even out the playing field."

"Bro." Prescott shot him a look. "Lyla's the best player in this entire fucking party. I'd bet money on that."

"Yeah, right." Mason scoffed and shot me an apologetic look. "No offense, Lyla."

"None taken." I smothered a smirk. "I love being the underdog."

"Whatever." Prescott groaned. "Lyles, you can be on Mason's team if you want."

"I mean if he needs me to pull all the weight." I shrugged and walked over to where he stood.

Mason laughed loudly. "Oh, she's cocky."

Prescott told us to wait for a second and ran off. When he returned, he was holding cans of beer. Maybe it was the alcohol already in my system, but I felt like I would cry then. I didn't deserve him and Marissa. They were, by far, the most thoughtful people on the planet. Pres filled the cups, and the game kicked off. Mason wasn't wrong. I hadn't played in quite a while, but it was like riding a bike. I missed two shots, and the rest were buckets. Mason, on the other hand, wasn't as good as he thought he was. We won three consecutive games before Prescott and Dustin threw in the towel.

CHAPTER 10

LYLA

“DON’T BE A SORE LOSER, Prescott Sanders.” I bumped my hip against his side as I helped him pick up the cups and toss them.

“You are so not the underdog,” Mason said with a comical look of disbelief.

He’d had the same look on his face every time I made a shot, so basically, the entire time we played. I’d been having so much fun that I forgot about everyone else at the party, but now that it was over, my thoughts drifted back to Lachlan. I wondered what he was doing but quickly followed it up with *who the fuck cares? Seriously, Lyla, who fucking cares what he’s doing or who he’s doing it with?*

“I’m going to take a break,” I said to Pres.

“Are you going to spend the rest of the night alone, leaning against the fence?” He shot me a stern look. “Do I need to remind you of your binding contract?”

“That’s a no to both,” I said as I walked away. “I just need a short break.”

“She won’t be alone,” Mason said behind me. “I’ll hang out with her for a little.”

Prescott said something in response that I couldn’t hear, to which Mason scoffed loudly.

“How did you get so good at beer pong?” Mason asked. I glanced up as he reached me.

“Practice.” I slowed my steps to watch a group of people playing Stack Cup.

It was another game I enjoyed and was good at. It was beer pong on steroids, but I knew my limits and couldn’t even consider playing that tonight. Between the tequila sunrise Marissa made for us at home for the pre-

game, the shots of tequila we'd taken here, and the beer (which hadn't been much, but still), I'd gone from a little tipsy, to tipsy, to drunk. I wasn't slurring my words drunk, but drunk enough that I felt a smile on my face and probably needed a lot of water to get back to tipsy. We stopped walking when we reached the wooden fence, just a few steps away from the Stack Cup people.

"You play that one too?" Mason asked, propping a foot on the iron fence behind us and nodding at the Stack Cup game.

"I used to," I said. "I don't really party anymore."

"I've noticed, but I've seen you at parties and events these last couple of weeks."

"The semester's almost over. I figured I'd go out with a bang." I looked up at him. "And it's Marissa's birthday. We have a deal that's kind of set in stone."

"Oh?" He let his eyes rake over me. "A deal where you let us admire how hot as fuck you are?"

I bit my tongue.

"Sorry," he said quickly.

I smiled. "Don't apologize for giving me a compliment."

He grinned. "I think this is the most we've ever spoken."

"Don't get used to it." I crossed my arms. "Tomorrow, I'll probably go back to the same ol' boring Lyla."

"Why?" He frowned.

I shook my head. "If I get into it, I'll start sulking, and that's against the rules tonight."

"No questions, then." Mason did a little salute like we were soldiers. "Actually, I have one."

"Let's hear it." I shifted my body, so I was facing him. We weren't uncomfortably close, but we'd be within kissing range if we took one more step. "Is anything going on with you and Lach?"

"Oh, God." I let out a short laugh and shook my head. "Next question."

"I need to know." He shifted closer to me. "Is that a yes or a no?"

My stomach tightened as I became aware of what he might do if I said no or didn't move away and put an end to the situation. Maybe it was the alcohol or the fact that if he tried anything I disapproved of, a ton of people would witness and stop him, but I stayed put. He stepped closer and closer until he was just a breath away. My eyes shut on their own accord, a habit that had

developed from years of kissing. When his lips didn't touch mine, I opened my eyes and gasped as Mason stumbled back a few steps. For a moment, I thought one of the drunken Stack Cup people lost their balance and bumped into him, but then I looked up and saw Lachlan glowering.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Mason stood straighter, suddenly in fight mode as he walked forward.

My mouth hung open for a second. The alcohol was making my brain a little slow to process the situation. Lach was standing so close to me that I could feel the anger radiating off of him. His glare was so intense that I thought, for a moment, Mason might burst into flames. What just happened repeated itself in my head, and finally, I snapped out of my reverie.

"What the hell, Lachlan?" I grabbed his left arm. He narrowed his eyes at me, my hand, and back at his teammate.

"Seriously, dude," Mason tacked on.

"You know exactly what. Don't act like you don't," Lachlan growled, taking a step forward, jaw grinding, angry eyes locked on Mason. I squeezed his arm and tried to pull him, even though there was no way in hell I'd be able to hold him back.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" Mason's eyes went wide for a fraction of a second before he shook his head and laughed lightly. "Is this because you called dibs? We didn't agree on it. Prescott wouldn't even appro. . ."

"She's not Prescott's," Lach shouted.

"So what, she's yours?" Mason arched an eyebrow when Lach didn't respond. "What if I call dibs right now?"

"Mase, I love you, you're my boy, but I swear on fucking everything. If you don't back off, this won't end well." Lach took another step forward. My nails were short, but I dug the tips of my fingers into his arm. He didn't even flinch.

Mason's gaze swung from me to Lachlan. "We've been hanging out all night."

Lachlan's jaw ticked. He took one more step forward. One more, and he'd be in Mason's face. A series of things ran through my mind in sequence: the dibs comment, Mason and Lachlan were going to fight and ruin Marissa's birthday party, and *holy shit*, I'd never had two guys fight over me. Those thoughts were quickly followed by: *What the actual fuck was happening?* This was the first time in a long time that I'd fully participated in a party in

two years, and this asshole was about to ruin it over some archaic bullshit that privileged jocks made up a hundred years ago? That was the thought that made me snap. I dropped my hand and took a step between the two of them. Even wearing heels, I was sure I looked like an ant between two giants.

“I can’t freaking believe you right now.” I turned my back on Mason to glare at Lachlan because, ultimately, all of this was his fault. “I’m not something you ‘call dibs’ on. I’m a human being. I’m not the front seat of a fucking car.” I stabbed his hard chest with my pointer finger and narrowed my eyes a little more as I stepped forward. His jaw ticked. “You do *not* get to ruin my best friend’s party, and you do *not* get to tell me who I can and can’t speak to. What happened to Mandy Roberts? Was she not doing it for you, or did you finish with her and decide to come find me because you were bored and needed some entertainment?”

Lach’s eyes darkened, his expression harder, but he said nothing as he stared at me. Around us, a couple of people let out a series of *oooohs* as if this was a fucking rap battle. My narrowed eyes snapped in their direction momentarily. I closed my hand into a fist and set it between his chest, pushing it in slightly as I glared at him again. I wanted to punch him so badly, but violence would get me nowhere, and it wasn’t like I’d hurt him anyway. I let my hand drop.

“Fuck you, Lachlan Duke,” I seethed, barreling my shoulder against him hard as I walked away.

Behind me, a loud, angry growl ripped through the silence. I saw flinches and shocked faces as I walked by, but I kept going. My entire body was shaking. I tried to contain it by balling my fists up and keeping my vision on the open glass double doors of the house. I clenched my fists tighter as anger continued to shoot through me in a way it hadn’t in a very long time, *if ever*. It felt like the longest walk I’d ever taken, with every pair of eyes glued on me. There were a lot of them. I still hadn’t spotted Marissa. She was probably inside dancing, oblivious to this. That would be the best-case scenario right now. This was a fucking nightmare. I’d almost reached the doors when I heard Lachlan call out my name once. Twice. Three times. I ignored each of them and focused on keeping my angry tears at bay because if I started to cry in front of people, I was really going to hate him.

“*Please* wait, Lyla.”

“What?” I snapped as I whirled around. “What can you possibly have to say to me?”

“I didn’t do anything with her.” He ran his fingers through his thick hair. “I swear. I know what you saw and what you think, but. . .”

“I know exactly what I saw,” I said, lowering my voice since I was pretty sure I was yelling now, but I wasn’t going to let him gaslight me on top of everything else. “It’s fine. You don’t belong to me.” I blinked at my own words, the truth in them hitting me for the first time and making me realize how stupid all of this was. Lach’s jaw twitched when I said that, but I continued because I needed to end this right now. “We’re not together. We’ve never even. . .it’s fine. You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“I do.” He stepped forward until he was right in front of me. My treacherous heart skipped. “I should’ve pushed her away sooner. I didn’t even know who the fuck was next to me. I wasn’t paying attention to her at all.”

I rolled my eyes but didn’t even bother to entertain that statement.

“I swear, Lyla.” He put his hands up like he was pleading, praying. “I swear.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re allowed to do whatever you want with whomever you want.” I shrugged. “It still doesn’t excuse your stupid little temper tantrum or acting like you have any right to say who I can and can’t hook up with. You realize how fucked up that is, right? For you to do as you please and expect the opposite of me.” I paused, a growl escaping my lips. I was so angry at myself for entertaining this at all. “You know what? This is fucking stupid. I can’t do this.”

I spun around and continued into the house. Thankfully, no one in there noticed me at all. Between the loud music and the dancing, I was just another partygoer looking for the bathroom. My body was still humming when I finally reached it. I rushed in, slammed the door behind me, and locked it. I did a quick sweep to make sure I was alone and gripped the edge of the sink with my shaky hands as I stared at my reflection.

Even with my makeup, I could see the flush on my cheeks. It had to be the alcohol making me feel this way. I took several deep breaths. I really wished I’d never brought Mandy Roberts into the conversation outside. She had nothing to do with this. Oh my God. We’d just had that argument in front of the entire party. This was scary and mortifying. I hated that I’d let my guard down for him. Most of all, I hated that even now. As I replayed every word he’d said, my stomach was somersaulting like it was participating in the fucking summer Olympics. I moved to the toilet, sat on the toilet lid, and buried my face in my hands. I knew he was outside. I felt his warmth

following me through the house as I searched for this bathroom. Maybe if I waited it out, he'd get sick of this and leave.

Every girl at this party was vying for his attention, so soon enough, one of them would catch it, and he'd walk away. My heart sank into my stomach at the thought. *This is what you get when you let someone in. You knew this would happen. You freaking knew it, and you allowed it anyway.* God, I wanted to go home but needed to stay until Marissa was ready. I wouldn't leave without her, and I refused to rush her at her own birthday party. I did need to find her to make sure she was still okay, though, and for that to happen, I'd have to open the door and face whatever awaited outside. I slapped my forehead once lightly and twice more when I thought again about how everyone at the party was talking about this. Most of them probably didn't even know who I was. But Lachlan Duke, praised hockey star, the hottest guy on the team, and quite possibly at our university? He'd undoubtedly be the subject of their gossip chain, and I would be as well. Fuck Lachlan for this. Fuck Mason. Fuck the hockey team and any man who thinks they can claim a woman for the hell of it. And you know what, double-fuck Lachlan for making me *feel* things. I used the bathroom and washed my hands before opening the door.

Lachlan was taking up the door frame with his imposing figure, with his stupid beautiful eyes, and his stupid disheveled hair, and his stupid strong jaw, and his stupid plump lips, and his stupid amazing body. He was looking at me like he was about to apologize again. Even though I didn't want to hear it, I refused to have him follow me around, acting like a dissonant shadow.

"Seeing you with him felt like a punch in the gut," he said when he finally spoke. "When you walked by me earlier, I wanted to carry you over my shoulder and keep you to myself. It wasn't until Marissa made that comment that I noticed Mandy was there. I'm not kidding about that, Lyla. . ."

I put a hand up to stop him. "Is admitting that this is the norm for you at parties supposed to make me okay with it? And if you really wanted to 'carry me over your shoulder,' you would have gotten off that couch and gone after me much sooner."

"I did." He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "I fucking did. As soon as you walked away and disappeared into the crowd, I stood up and looked for you everywhere. When I finally found you, you were playing beer pong. I watched you the entire time from the kitchen window like a fucking

stalker because I didn't want to miss a second of it."

He sighed and continued. "I turned around for a minute. One fucking minute and suddenly you were gone; when I located you again, you were with my fucking teammate." He let out an unamused chuckle, looking up at the ceiling as he ran his fingers through his hair again, tugging it. He set his gaze on mine again. "This has never happened to me before. I don't know what the fuck to do. I don't even know how you feel. I just know I never want to feel the way I did when I saw him with you again."

"I..." My eyes darted to his black t-shirt. Was I really going to share my feelings? *Oh my God, I was.* This was worse than I thought. I waited until my heart settled down before looking him in the eyes again. "Seeing her all over you like that was a nightmare. I hated it. I hated it so fucking much, and I hated that I hated it."

The breath he let out was heavy and relieved. He searched my eyes for a long time. He had to be the most confusing playboy in the history of the universe. I'd expected him to kiss me or walk me back into the bathroom to fuck me. I would have let him. Instead, he cradled my head to his chest and hugged me. Lachlan Duke, who had a revolving door of women, *hugged* me. I should have been offended that he didn't make a move, but then he kissed the top of my head as he held me, and the only thing I could think about was how fast his heart was beating, how warm his skin felt against my naked back, and how good he smelled.

"God, Lyla James," he breathed against my head. "What the fuck am I going to do with you?"

"What do you want to do with me?" I asked, my face squished against his chest. His body went rigid. His arms held me a little tighter. I put my hands on his chest and slightly pulled back to look up at him. "That's not a trick question, you know."

His eyes dropped down to my mouth momentarily. "How much did you drink?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does to me."

I groaned. "What, you don't hook up with drunk girls?"

"Not unless I'm also drunk," he said, searching my eyes. "And you're not *just* a girl to me."

Ugh. Why did he say things like that?

"I'm only a little drunk. Your temper tantrum sobered me up some," I

said, feeling myself smile. His gaze softened. Our eyes remained locked as he cupped my face with his large hands. He got closer. My pulse raced in anticipation. He set his forehead on mine and shook his head.

“I can’t,” he breathed.

“Why?” I brought my hands up and wrapped them around his wrists.

He groaned a sound that vibrated through me. “You’re making this really difficult.”

Just as I opened my mouth to respond, to tell him to just fucking do it, two very drunk girls cut in, bumping into us and telling us they needed to use the restroom. Lachlan quickly moved out of the way to allow me to step out. One of the girls walked up to him and ran her finger against the side of his right arm. She took a few steps and paused by the bathroom door, eye fucking him. I really wanted to punch her. Lach kept his eyes on mine the entire time, which didn’t completely redeem him from the Mandy thing, but it helped. The girl huffed and made an annoyed face as she walked into the bathroom and shut the door loudly.

“I hate that they treat you like they have any right to touch you,” I said.

His eyes were sparkling, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

“What?” I asked, knowing I shouldn’t have disclosed that.

He leaned down again and brushed his cheek against mine until his mouth reached my ear. “I don’t bore you.”

I couldn’t confirm or deny it, so I said nothing. I cared too much. That was the problem.

CHAPTER 11

LYLA

I SECRETLY WISHED last night's joy would last, but it was gone by sunrise, when I saw the picture of Luke and my mom and remembered the things I wanted to be left buried. Parties were happening every night, including tonight. Marissa had already told me about it, and the only question on my mind was whether or not Lachlan would be there. Not that I'd ask her or go either way, but morbid curiosity begged for an answer. He didn't kiss me last night, but he remained glued to my side the rest of the night. His hand on my lower back as we spoke to his teammates. His fingers brushing against mine as Marissa very loudly told a story about the time I locked myself out of my car in high school. His arm flush against my side when we were standing around. His wide stance caging me when he sat on the edge of the couch, and I remained standing. It felt like a warning to every other guy at that party. And I freaking liked it. *Loved* it. After all the shit I'd talked about the stupid dibs thing, there I was, wanting him to claim me. This had never happened to me before. Even when I was carefree Lyla, I'd never met anyone who made me feel like he did, and that was a real problem. I needed to remember what happened to Luke. I hadn't even known Lachlan for a long time and the mere thought of losing him made me want to throw up.

"You sure you don't want to come out tonight?"

I blinked. "I can't believe *you* want to go out tonight after the way last night ended."

"Oh, stop. I wasn't that bad."

"Marissa! You threw up three times before Lachlan dropped us off."

"Oh God, I didn't throw up in his car, did I?"

"No. I would have killed you!"

She laughed and raised an eyebrow. "You realize *everyone* is talking

about you two, right? My sorority group chat has been lighting up all day about it.”

“What are they saying?” I bit my lip and looked at the floor, bracing myself.

“That they can’t believe someone managed to tame him.”

I laughed. “I’m not even with him. How would I tame him?”

“Lyla.” She shot me a droll look.

“What?”

“He practically declared his love for you in front of everyone.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“He totally freaking did.” She laughed, shaking her head. “Just let it play out. You know you want to.”

“Of course, I want to, Marissa,” I snapped. “But I can’t. You, of all people, know I can’t.”

“I hate it, but you’re right.” She smiled sadly and nodded her head slowly. “Why don’t you see him in private until we leave?”

“I don’t understand why he’s so adamant about me.” I threw my head back and closed my eyes. “I’m broken. Why would he want me?”

“Hey. No, don’t say that.” She sat next to me and threw an arm around me. “You’re not broken, and he wants you because you’re a fucking catch.”

“He’s only into me because I’m difficult.”

“That is not true.” She laughed as she pulled back. “You *are* difficult, but that’s not why he wants you.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You don’t have to. Prescott says he’s never seen him this way,” she said. “He’s never chased a girl or picked a fight with a teammate. Pres said, ‘Especially Mason, who roomed with him for three years.’”

My heart skipped. “I’m scared.”

“We’re almost out of here.” She squeezed my hand.

“God, I can’t wait to leave.” I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “I think I’ll even smile more once we’re gone.”

“Lyles.” She laughed. “I love you, but you’ve never been an overly smiley person. Even when you were sort of nice.”

I laughed. “That’s not true. I still smile sometimes.”

“Oh, God.” She laughed harder. “What you consider a smile is not what the rest of us consider a smile.”

I laughed again as she stood up and disappeared into her bedroom to

finish getting ready for the party. When her music started blasting again, I brought my legs up to my chest and turned sideways. Luke dreamed of going to a brand new city where no one knew his name or family, where he could reinvent himself. We'd talked about it endlessly, how our friend group would get an apartment together. We'd already broken up for good, and our friendship had never wavered. I missed him so fucking much. I was just starting to drift off into a nap when there was a loud knock on the door. I groaned but kept my eyes closed.

"Marissa, someone's at the door!"

"I'm doing my makeup. I still have to finish my hair," she shouted. "*And* I'm not expecting anyone."

I uncurled myself and walked over, my pulse racing when I saw Lachlan standing on the other side. Did he ever look less than perfect? He wore a black t-shirt and joggers, and his hair looked damp like he'd just showered. Just looking at him made me want to do things I shouldn't. I guess this answered my question about whether or not he was going to the party. I didn't know how that made me feel. Not good, that was for damn sure, especially after last night. I didn't think I could look at him right now. Not if he was here to pick up Marissa and leave. Maybe I should unlock the door and sprint to my room. After staring at him for a moment, I opened the door and leaned my hip against the frame for a second, taking him in as if I hadn't just ogled the shit out of him through the peephole. I pushed off, turned around, and started walking back to the living room.

"She's still doing her makeup."

"She's not the reason I'm here." His words made me freeze midstep.

I whipped back around. "Why are you here?"

"Really?" He let out a soft chuckle. "That's how you wanna play it?"

I crossed my arms, examined him, and told the thing inside my chest to chill out. He still hadn't walked inside, which was hilarious since nothing had ever stopped him before.

"Are you a vampire?" I asked. "You need permission to walk inside all of a sudden?"

He bit his lip as he walked inside and shut the door behind him.

"No apology flowers?" I asked when he faced me again.

"I would have brought some if I didn't think you'd toss them."

I loved flowers. They were one of the few things that still brought me genuine happiness. I shrugged. "Flowers die anyway."

One side of his mouth hitched, but he said nothing as he closed the distance between us. I tilted my head up. My black heart turned red and pumped harder when he looked at me like that — like I was the only person he wanted to look at in this universe. I'd lost count of the times I was sure he'd kiss me. Honestly, I'd either jump him or kick him out if he didn't do it soon.

“Are you going to kiss me now?” I whispered.

His eyes darkened. “I've been *dying* to fucking kiss you.”

“Then do it.” I grabbed his t-shirt and pulled him to me.

His lips crashed against mine with a groan that vibrated through my body. Time vanished as he lifted me off the ground. A bomb went off inside me. Everything outside of him became nonexistent. Kissing a new person usually took adjustment, but not him. He invaded my mouth like he owned it. He kissed me with possession and abandon, holding me tightly against him as if to make sure I wouldn't go anywhere. He devoured my mouth as if it were our last kiss, and he needed to make sure he got it right in case I didn't let him do it again. The intensity of it flayed me, traveled deep inside me, and formed a crevice I knew no one else would fill. It was exhilarating and utterly terrifying. And it was just a freaking kiss.

“Holy shit.” That was Marissa.

It was a whisper, or maybe that was what it sounded like through the pounding in my ears. Her voice made me break the kiss and pull away. My eyes remained locked on his as my feet found the ground beneath me. *What the fuck was that?* Was this how he kissed everyone? Was this how everyone felt when they kissed him? Jesus. I hated that idea. I took a breath and a step back, finally facing Marissa, who was full-on grinning. I couldn't even find my voice to say something snarky. I couldn't find any of my senses. He'd taken everything in that kiss.

“I thought you didn't kiss? ‘Ever.’” Marissa arched a brow at him. I lowered my gaze and focused on his chest. I really didn't want to hear this conversation right now.

“I don't.”

My head shot up. He was still looking at me. My heart dipped again. Fuck, this was a terrible idea. I turned to Marissa, who looked stunned to silence. As she started walking away, she looked at me pointedly as if to say “Let yourself have this.” I wished I could scream and ask her to please stop me before this developed into something more, but I remained silent because

I wanted it. I wanted him. And I could no longer fool myself. This was already more than I'd bargained for.

"Don't wait up for me, kids," she called over her shoulder as she shut the door behind her.

My lips were still tingling from the kiss, but I wanted more. I faced him. We remained silent as his eyes searched mine. I wanted to ask him if he felt this crazy energy shift between us, but I couldn't make myself do that. For two years, I'd counted the days so I could leave this godforsaken place, and then he came into my life. I still wanted to leave, of course. I just wished we had more time together. I snapped that thought away. *More time for what? To sneak around, as Marissa suggested?* It was the only way we might be able to do this, and I doubted he would want that. His eyes were still burning into mine.

My heart pounded hard in my chest and ears. I wasn't sure who moved first, but before I knew it, we were kissing again, my hands buried in his hair, his large hands holding me tighter each time I tugged. Kissing him woke up every nerve ending in my body, sending waves through my veins — reminders that I was still here. Without breaking the kiss, he lifted me with one arm. My legs locked around his waist, my hands moving to the back of his neck. I didn't want to exist outside the confines of his arms. He kissed me slowly this time, savoring me in a way that made me rock against him, searching for more. He groaned deeply again. We broke the kiss to come up for air, both panting.

"God damn, Lyla James." He set his forehead against mine and tightened his grip on my thighs. "God damn."

CHAPTER 12

LACHLAN

I WAS STILL sore from weight training earlier, so my arms started to burn from carrying her for so long, but I couldn't stop kissing her. Nothing had ever felt this good, this right. When she tried unwrapping her legs from my waist, I gripped her thighs harder, and took her mouth one more time, in case she was about to try to shut me out completely. The next time she pulled away, I reluctantly set her down. Neither of us spoke as she reached for my hand and pulled me toward her room. Or when she shut the door behind us and guided me to the bed. I kicked off my shoes and socks, not because I was expecting anything to happen — I wasn't — but because lying in bed with socks on made me overheat. I found myself on my back, with Lyla's lips pressed against mine again. I didn't want it to end. It was like I was making up for the ten years I'd avoided kissing. When she pulled away, she nestled against my chest and let out a breath, one that sounded content.

I'd stopped trying to make sense of all of this when I saw her with Mason. I'd never fought anyone over a woman, but when I saw him. . . *Fuck*. When I saw him about to *kiss* her, a beast unleashed inside me. And then, when we argued, she said I wasn't hers, and I wanted to tell her to take the fucking words back. I'd never been anyone's, but belonging to her didn't sound so bad. *What the hell was wrong with me?* No one came up to us after the argument — not to flirt with either of us, anyway. Lyla scared away all of the women just by existing, and I scared away all the men by not letting go of her for a second. Even then, I'd caught a few looking at her like they were picturing her naked, and I had to check myself. I'd managed to remain somewhat calm. I'd remember their faces, though.

After the party, I'd brought her and Marissa home, walked them to the door, and managed to leave. I went straight home to take care of the situation

in my pants. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd gone home to jerk off. I was certain that Lyla James was just as affected by me as I was by her. After last night, no amount of scowling or glares from her would convince me otherwise, not after tonight. We lay silent for a while, and I took a moment to look around her room.

"This isn't what I expected," I said against her hair.

She smelled like gardenias. I'd always associated the scent with the flowers my father sent my mother on her birthday each year. Now, it would forever remind me of Lyla.

"Kissing me wasn't what you expected?" She pulled back to look at me.

Her eyes were so expressive right now. So fucking incredible. I kissed her again softly, quickly, so I didn't lose my train of thought.

"Your room." I nudged the tip of her nose with mine.

I wanted to tell her that kissing her felt inexplicable. Like magic. But I didn't want to push it. Not yet.

"What did you expect?" She laughed lightly. I closed my eyes to relish it, wishing I could bottle it up.

"I don't know. Black walls. Spiders. Weird shit."

She pulled back again, mouth agape, and slapped my chest. "Rude."

"I'm just saying." I couldn't help but laugh as we settled back onto the bed with her head on my chest.

"It was originally dark green, almost black, but Marissa painted it this color while I was away."

"Away where?"

"Away may not be the correct term," she said. "I roomed with my teammates the first year and a half here, then moved back home for a year, and finally moved here."

"Is that why I'd never seen you around?"

"Maybe," she said. "That and I took mostly online classes. I didn't even see Prescott for a while, so I couldn't have seen you either."

My hands had been leisurely moving up and down her arm until she said his name. The feeling I had in the center of my chest when I was with her was unnatural, but it didn't scare me. The fact that it didn't scare me should have scared me, but it didn't. Lyla made me want to break my rules about kissing and monogamous relationships. Hell, maybe even sleepovers. Okay, maybe I was a little scared. This was the last thing I should be doing with the number of things on my plate—the upcoming draft, and the final games we

had to win, for starters. I really didn't have time to explore this right now. I also knew I couldn't afford not to.

I scanned her room again and focused on two pictures that stood out amongst the rest — one was her and a woman that I assumed was her mother; the other was her in a jersey and a guy wearing a baseball uniform. High school, I assumed. They were both sweaty and smiling wide at the camera — that smile of hers that had never been directed at me. I didn't know who he was, and it didn't matter. I still hated him. I wanted that fucking smile.

The bed shifted, as she sat up and straddled me. My dick was now about-to-explode-out-of-my joggers hard. I wondered if she could feel it underneath her baggy Foo Fighters shirt and sweatpants. She rocked against it and bit her lip, and holy shit, that answered my question. I grabbed her hips to stop her from doing it again. There were at least three layers of clothing between her pussy and my dick, more clothes than I'd ever had between myself and a woman on a bed. Right now, those layers were the only thing keeping me from impaling her. I took a mental snapshot of her on top of me. She didn't have any makeup on, and her hair was in one of those messy buns that looked messier than it did cute. Her clothes were too big and hid her incredible figure, but none of that mattered.

She could have been a green alien and she *still* would have been the hottest woman to ever have been on top of me. She gyrated her hips again and leaned down to bite my bottom lip. My dick jumped; I knew she felt it when she moaned into my mouth. My heart was beating so fast, I was sure I'd die either from the embarrassment of coming in my pants or from the heart attack she was sure to give me.

“Lyla.” My hands went to her waist to stop her movement.

“What?” She set her hands on my chest and pushed herself back up as she ground her hips again, her eyes full of mischief.

“Fuck.” I bit my lip hard and groaned. “Do you want to kill me? Or is your goal to make me come in my pants?”

“Would you come in your pants if I keep doing it?” she asked, lowering her lips to mine and dropping three soft pecks on them.

“Fuck yes, I would,” I said against her mouth, taking her bottom lip and sucking it. I reached up and pulled off her hair tie, letting her hair cascade around me as she deepened the kiss.

“I like seeing you coming apart at the seams like this, Mr. Unattainable Hockey Star,” she said, sitting up again.

“You always have me like this,” I breathed, keeping my eyes on hers.

And then it happened. Her lips moved painstakingly slowly as if breaking through ice. Her eyes danced first, and then her mouth finally — *finally* — broke into the most incredible smile I’d ever seen in my life. *The* smile. Fuck. I thought I’d wanted it, but now that I’d experienced it, I couldn’t go back to seeing the perpetual scowl she wore.

“I thought you wanted to fuck me, Lachlan Duke,” she said, still smiling. Fireworks went off inside my brain. “But I guess you’re not interested.”

“Does it feel like I’m not interested?” I gripped her hips and thrust up hard.

She bit her lip again, her eyes heating in a way that would make me say yes to anything. “Stop thinking and do it.”

“Are you going to stop thinking?” I sat up slowly, so we were face to face.

“Maybe.” She smiled again, this time, her ghost of a smile. “Remind me to tell you something after.”

“After wh—”

Before I could finish my question, she whipped off her baggy shirt and revealed that she wasn't wearing a bra. Her bare chest rendered me speechless for an instant, before I reacted and dropped my mouth to twist one nipple and pull the other into my mouth. She writhed and moaned in pleasure as I licked, sucked, and bit. I focused on her other breast while teasing the one I'd just kissed.

“You have perfect tits,” I groaned, swirling my tongue around her nipple and sucking it.

“You have a perfect mouth,” she moaned, tugging at my shirt. “I want this off.”

I took my shirt off, tossing it in the same direction as hers. She roamed her fingers across my body, wandering over every inch of me, taking in each groove and bump of my muscles. Her eyes met mine and stayed there for an eternity before she stepped out of bed, swiftly discarding her baggy shorts and panties. I stopped breathing at the sight of her, fully naked. Sure, I’d seen her in a bikini, but this was some next-level shit. She wasted no time pulling down my joggers and underwear but stopped midway at my thighs to stare at my dick, which twitched under her scrutiny. I didn’t know exactly what she was thinking, but I knew she liked what she saw. She finished undressing me and straddled me again. Her warm, wet pussy gliding on my lower abs, right

above my cock, did me in.

I couldn't take it anymore. I'd exercised enough patience. I flipped her over. She landed with a loud oomph and a startled laugh. The sound distracted me for a moment before I went back to my task, kissing her lips again and making my way to each of her nipples and then her stomach. I dipped my tongue into her belly button, making her suck it in. I wanted to taste and explore every inch of her. When I finally reached her pussy, I paused to admire her. She was fucking perfect.

"You have the most perfect pussy," I said, as I lowered my mouth and gave her clit a hard lick with the surface of my tongue.

Fuck. Her hips bucked, and her hands instantly grabbed my hair. Fun fact, I didn't let women touch my hair. I usually batted their hands away and glared long enough that they knew not to do it again. I moved a little lower and gave a hard lick up her folds. Her back arched with a gasp. I forced her legs wider and pumped one finger inside her as I swirled my tongue on her clit. She gasped loudly when I added another finger. Holy shit, she was tight. Her body bowed off the bed, and her grasp on my hair tightened to the point of pain as I licked her. I fucking loved it.

"Holy shit, Lach. . ." she gasped. "Holy shit. Don't stop."

Don't stop. As if I ever could. I took my fingers back, gripped her thighs, and ate her like a starved man. I wanted to fucking devour her, to own this pussy, to make it so that she never wanted another mouth on it. She bucked against me, grinding on my face as she whispered a chant. I was already turned on, but fuck, I wanted her to scream whatever she was saying. I added two fingers again and sucked her clit into my mouth.

"Ohmyfuckinggod. Lachlan, oh my. . .oh my Godddd," she said loudly as she came against my mouth, and her entire body began to shudder.

I leaned back and pulled my fingers out slowly, moving them gently over her clit. I watched her face, mouth open and eyes screwed shut, as she rode out the orgasm. I smiled against her chest when another orgasm rocked her body, and she started chanting my name. Fuuuuuck, that was hot. I backed away slowly, sucking her come off my fingers as I sat back on my knees and watched her entire body sag into the mattress. She was still catching her breath when she opened her eyes, and damn, those fucking eyes.

"Did you bring a condom?" she said, panting.

"Are you going to be mad if I say yes?"

"Livid," she said, deadpan, as she sat up.

I smiled as I got off the bed to get the condom. I'd brought one, just in case, not because I thought this would happen. I mean, in my dreams, it would. I ripped the wrapper with my teeth and pressed the condom on my tip when she moved toward me.

"Wait." She set a hand on mine. "Please."

I didn't know what she was asking for. For me to use the pull-out method? For me to. . .all thoughts subsided when she lowered the front of her body, ass up, and swirled her tongue around the head of my cock.

"Oh. My. Holy fuck, Lyla." My head fell back.

She licked it all around before finally taking it in her mouth. She tried twice before she could take it all and gagged as she deep-throated me, but she did it again anyway. I forgot how to breathe. My toes curled. She did it a third time as she played with my balls. Fuck. This was by far the best head I'd ever gotten, and I wasn't even going to let myself come in her mouth. I gripped her hair as she moved. I wanted to fuck her mouth so badly. If she were a random hookup, I would have. I looked at her again, taking another mental image, this time of Lyla fucking James sucking my dick. If she kept going, I wouldn't be able to fuck her, so I took it out of her mouth. She looked up, confused.

I grabbed her chin and pulled her up. "I want you to come on my cock."

"Oh fuck." She shuddered.

I slammed my mouth on hers and kissed her. It started fiercely but turned into a slow, deep kiss. She pulled away, looking at me in a daze like she was turned on and maybe confused. I finished sliding on the condom and moved her, so she was lying on her back. As I settled between her legs, I tweaked her nipples and mentally prepared to take my time thrusting into her. I wanted to feel her pussy clench over every single inch of me. I moved against her to prepare her, and then I sank in slowly. Just the tip at first, but once the tip was in, and I felt her around me, I fucking lost it and thrust in hard, deep.

"Fucking hell, Lyla." A growl ripped through me.

"Lach." She screamed, tears slipping out of her eyes. I stopped moving.

She shook her head. "I'm fine. You're just. . .huge."

I felt myself smirk as I lowered my lips to hers and brought a hand between us to play with her clit. She jerked her hips and pushed my hand away.

"Please fuck me, Lach," she whispered against my lips, clenching around me. I groaned, grinding my jaw at the feel of her. I was trying to be gentle,

but this fucking woman made it impossible. “Please, please, please move.”

Fuck, the begging. Lyla James freaking begging. I rocked my hips again, starting with slow thrusts. She was so fucking tight. I would have believed her if she’d told me she was a virgin. She felt too good. So perfect. The kiss had been indescribable. Her pussy tasted like something I could eat all day. And now *this*? *This* was what sex with her felt like? I wanted to take the damn condom off — something I’d never done — and fucking mark her with my seed. Her breath hitched when I sped up my thrusts. I pulled out slowly and thrust in hard again. Again, again, and again. Her eyes were screwed shut as she lifted her hips to meet each thrust. Her hands were gripping the sheets underneath us so hard, her knuckles were white. I’d always avoided eye contact during sex. When a woman gave me head, I looked at her, but it was mostly because I got off on the way their eyes widened when I fucked their mouths. Eye contact during sex seemed like overkill. Why would I even want it if I was going to fuck and leave anyway? Staring at Lyla’s eyelids did something to me. I wanted her eyes on mine. Needed them.

I pinched her nipple. “Open your eyes.”

She moaned, biting her lip as she shook her head. I stopped moving.

“No.” She gasped. Her eyes popped open as her hands flew from the sheets to my thighs. “Oh my God, Lachlan, please don’t fucking stop.” She ground her hips against me, and fuck, while it felt amazing, I held her and stopped the movement.

“Look at me when I fuck you.” I tightened my grip on her hips when she tried to move again. “I want to see you come. I want to see everything.”

“I don’t know if I can,” she whispered. “I’ve never done. . .I don’t do that.”

“You think I do?” The chuckle made my dick twitch inside her. “I don’t do a lot of the things that I do with you.” I leaned down and kissed her. “Look at me, Lyla James. Let me have this.”

“I’ll try,” she whispered.

I lifted her hips off the bed when I started fucking her again. She kept her eyes on mine. Okay, I said I wanted it, but this was intimate as fuck. It was intense. I pulled out nearly all the way and thrust deep. She clenched around me again.

“Holy fuck. The way you squeeze my cock.” I gripped her hips tighter, fucked her faster, faster, and harder.

Her legs started to shake. Her pussy clenched tightly around me as she

started to come. She opened her mouth and let out little gasps, biting her lip as her eyes started to roll back. My pace grew wild. Heat engulfed me from head to toe as I came apart, growling and throwing my head back as the last drop of my come hit the condom. I'd never seen anything more beautiful than the sight of her coming on my cock.

CHAPTER 13

I WAS SPENT. I got more condoms from Marissa's room, and we had sex three more times in different positions. It was like he had memorized a Kama Sutra manual. We were lying in bed after going to the bathroom, cleaning up, and putting on some clothes. We both put on our underwear, and I threw on a t-shirt as if a few articles of clothing would stop us from doing it again. We were back in bed. I linked my fingers with his. I didn't know why I did it, but it felt natural. Too much of this felt like we'd been doing it together for a lifetime. When he asked me to look at him during sex, I didn't think I could. At the moment, I almost looked away, but the intensity in his eyes held me captive.

"I don't do sleepovers," I said. His body coiled beneath me. I looked up and met his gaze. "I mean, I've never done it, but you can stay. . .if you want."

"Why?" He turned his body, brought his elbow to the pillow, and propped his head on his hand. I did the same. I knew what he was asking: why was I letting him stay?

"I don't know."

He searched my eyes. "You don't know, or you don't want to tell me?"

"No, I really don't know." I landed on my back and looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I shouldn't be doing *any* of this, but I can't stop because you're just. . .I can't. . ."

"Come here." His large, rough hand gripped my hip and turned me toward him again. "You said you were going to tell me something after."

"Did I?" My heart pounded.

Why did I say that? I couldn't tell him now, not after everything we'd done, not after he'd made me hold eye contact during sex each time we'd

done it. Well, he'd made me do it the first time, but we'd done it without speaking of it in the times that followed. It was intense and not necessarily comfortable, but Lach was right. The look in his eyes was a sight to behold when he came apart. I'd never do it again. Not with anyone else, at least. It was too personal.

"You did. You told me to remind you."

"Hm. I don't remember what it was."

"Well, I'll have to stay until you do." He smirked.

"Do you stay over at girls' houses after you hook up with them?"

"Lyla." He stared at me.

I bit my cheek, trying to fight the jealousy that crept up on me as I awaited his answer. Maybe it was better that I didn't know the answer to that.

"You don't have to answer that," I said quickly.

"I don't even kiss the girls I hook up with. What makes you think I'd stay over?" His expression was serious. "This is. . ." He shook his head again like he couldn't find a way to describe it.

"I know." I scooted closer to him and ran the back of my hand over his face. He looked at me for a long moment. I opened my mouth to speak and shut it quickly, averting my eyes as I thought about how to broach the topic I needed to discuss with him.

"No. Fuck no," he said, pulling me from my thoughts. "Don't shut me out. Not now."

"I have to," I whispered.

"No, you don't." He ran his fingers through my tangled hair and searched my eyes. "How can you shut me out after this?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "That's why this shouldn't have happened to begin with."

"Explain." He sat up suddenly. His legs were too long. They took up most of my queen-sized bed.

"I can't." I sat up, crossing my legs between his. "I'll tell you after your last game. I swear I would tell you if I didn't think it was dangerous and could cause some serious shit, but I can't risk it. You can't risk it."

"Okay. After my last game, then." He stared at me for a long moment. "When are you leaving?"

"Two days after your game."

"What will you do now with your fancy biology degree?"

"I applied to three medical programs to start working in sports medicine."

They've all accepted me, but I haven't picked one yet." I bit the tip of my thumb. His eyes darkened, so I dropped my hand.

"Where will you be in the meantime?"

"I'm going to California with Marissa for a week."

He raised an eyebrow. "Where in California?"

"All over. We'll start in San Diego and make our way up," I said. He looked at me for a long time, and I could tell he wanted to say something but was holding back. I scooted forward, getting closer to him. "What?"

"Nothing." He sighed heavily. "The timing of the universe sucks sometimes."

"Why? You want to go to Cali with me?" I asked.

"Keep smiling at me like that, and I just might say fuck the draft and follow you around instead."

I laughed. "You would never."

"Don't tempt me." He raised an eyebrow.

"I would never let you do that."

"I know." He smiled, but it was gone in an instant. "I want to ask you something."

"Okay." I braced myself.

"Why don't you go pro?"

"I can't," I said instantly and looked at the wall I had dedicated to soccer.

"Can't or won't?"

"Is there a difference?"

"You were good," he said, pride in his voice.

I raised an eyebrow. "I was better than good."

"I love it when you get cocky." He growled as he kissed me.

"You would love that." I laughed against his mouth and pulled away. He looked at me for the longest moment, so I frowned. "What?"

"When you laugh, when you smile. . .It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he said. "With the exception of you coming on my cock, of course."

I slapped his chest, rolled my eyes, and grew serious again. "To answer your question, I tried to keep going, but my heart was no longer in it."

He held my chin. "Because of the accident?"

My eyes widened. "How do you know about that?"

"Google."

"You Googled me?"

“Yeah. You didn’t Google me?” He raised an eyebrow.

My lips pursed. “Yeah, but only to confirm you were on the hockey team and weren’t just making it up to stand against that wall.”

“You didn’t believe me?” He chuckled, shaking his head. “That was a blow to my ego, you know.”

“I figured,” I said. “You couldn’t have been *that* hurt. You ended up coming home with my roommate that night.”

“I only came home with Marissa because I knew she was your roommate.”

I blinked. “What?”

“I wanted to see where you lived,” he said. I stared at him and waited for him to tell me he was kidding. He didn’t. “I wanted to know more about you.”

“So you thought, ‘Let me find out more about her by fucking her roommate?’”

“No.” He shot me a droll look. “I was never going to do anything with Marissa. Nothing happened between us.”

“I know,” I said. “But you let a girl sit on your lap at a party the following night.”

His lips spread into a slow smile. “You sure you weren’t interested in me, Lyla James?”

Ugh. I pressed my lips together and stared at his chest. I was grateful not to discuss the accident or soccer, but talking about this while I looked at his perfect body wasn’t any easier. No wonder every woman wanted to fuck him. The thought instantly soured my mood. Oh my God. Why was I doing this to myself? And why did I even care? I was being ridiculous.

“What are you thinking about?” He tilted my chin up.

I shook my head, still staring at his chest.

“Lyla.”

My eyes snapped to his. “I’m not thinking about anything.”

“You may not want to admit that you were curious about me from the beginning, but I was really fucking curious about you, and I watched you closely and often,” he said, searching my eyes. “I know every scowl, every frown, every hidden smile. I even know the ones you’ve never graced me with.”

“No, you don’t.” I scowled.

“I know your tells, Lyla James. Every single one of them.” He leaned in

and kissed my forehead, tilting my head a little more, so we were just a breath apart. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“It’s really nothing.” I met his eyes. “I was just thinking that now I understand why all these women want you so badly.”

He looked at me for a long moment. Just looked. No smile. No frown. Nothing to give away what he was thinking. I waited; I was good at that. He brought his hand up and cupped my face, his expression softening as he searched my eyes. “Why are you thinking about that? None of them had me the way you do.”

“No, but they still touched you.”

“They didn’t mean anything.” He kissed my lips softly. “You think I like to think about anyone who touched you before me?” He gestured his head at the framed photos. “You have a framed picture with some guy, and I had to tell myself that whoever he is doesn’t matter because you’re with me now.”

“His name is Luke,” I said, looking at his chest again.

His muscles tightened. “I don’t want to know.”

“He’s dead.” I met his eyes again.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he said. “The car accident?”

I shook my head slowly. “You want the real story or the one everyone got?”

“There are two stories?”

“Yep.”

“What’s the one everyone got?”

“That he committed suicide.”

“What’s the real one?”

I stared at him. “He was murdered.”

“Murdered?” He spoke slowly. “Wait, is that why you want to keep me at arm’s length?”

I nodded.

He searched my eyes. “Why do you think he was murdered?”

“Luke hated guns. Hated them. And he died of a gunshot wound to the head.”

“And you don’t think he could have. . .” He let his sentence drift off. I shook my head. No way in hell Luke would have taken his own life. “How can you be sure?”

“Well, I can’t be sure, but I know.” I bit my lip and looked at my hands.

I couldn’t revive Luke to ask him, but the proof was there. I knew that the

detective walked into the house, saw the same thing I did, and thought the same. He would never say it, though. I hated all of them. Every single one of them. I took a deep breath and bit my lip as I thought about that day again and all the days that followed. Suicide had never crossed my mind until then.

I swallowed. "Have you ever thought about killing yourself?"

"No."

"I thought about it so many times after the accident and Luke's death. I just. . . I felt like I was done, you know? If the universe really wanted me here, why would it throw all of these awful things at me? And yet, I was never able to go through with it." I met his gaze. "Why do you think that is?"

I wasn't sure why I was telling him any of this. I'd never told Marissa and Pres because I didn't want it to be one more thing on their ever-growing list of worries. Not that I thought about it anymore. I had, though. The accident had taken a toll on me, and Luke's death sent me over the edge. Marissa and Prescott were also distraught and traumatized, but they were able to mourn along with everyone else. For months, I couldn't imagine going on. The pain was too raw, and the load of the burden felt crushing. Yet, something stopped me each time I tried.

"You want the real answer or the one I should give you?" he asks.

"The real answer, smart ass." I rolled my eyes, but felt myself smile a little.

"Because the world would be empty without you," he said. "Because we wouldn't have met, and my soul would be lost for the rest of my life, searching for yours."

"Jesus, Lachlan." My voice was a whisper, my heart gripping my throat too tightly to speak any louder. "You can't say things like that."

He stared at me for a long time, saying nothing. I was difficult to make uncomfortable, but he managed it under his penetrating gaze.

"Do you say these things to everyone you want to charm?" I asked quietly, trying to break the silence, even if his answer might hurt a little.

"I've never wanted to charm anyone," he said, still looking at me with those intense green eyes. I stared back, lost in them.

I blinked away when I couldn't take it anymore. "What's the answer you should give me?"

"You have a long life ahead of you. You'd be doing yourself an injustice by cutting it short."

"How very political of you." I felt myself smile wide. He looked at me as

if in awe. “What?”

“That’s my favorite smile. You have no idea how often I dream of it.” He brought a hand up and brushed his thumb against my bottom lip. “I want to possess it. To keep it for myself.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. The butterflies were having a field day in my stomach.

“Tell me about the accident,” he said again, searching my face.

“There’s not much to tell. I was driving the car when it happened. I walked away with three cuts and a broken arm,” I said, my voice even. “And my mom died from it.”

“Fuck.” He pulled me into his arms and held me. “I’m sorry.”

I accepted his words even though they didn’t make me feel anything anymore. When I thought about the accident these days, I felt nothing. When I thought about Luke, I felt nothing. I was just blank all the time. Blank all the time unless Lachlan was in front of me.

“It was horrifying,” I whispered. “I blacked out and broke my arm from the force of the airbag, but I came to while I was still in the car and. . .” I shivered. “It was awful.”

“I’m sorry,” he breathed against my hair.

“It’s another reason I need you to stay away.”

“Why?” He pulled back. “The accident wasn’t just an accident?”

I shook my head. He watched me for a long time. I could see the wariness in his expression as he looked at me. I mean, these were some crazy allegations. He had no reason to believe me. But then, his expression shifted from wariness to confusion to anger. He remained there.

His jaw ticked. “Do you think you know who caused it?”

“I know who did it,” I said quietly as the image of him popped into my head. I pushed it away quickly. “As I said, I’ll tell you everything when I know it’s safe.”

“So, what, in order to keep me safe, you’re not going to see me until then?” He stared at me, disbelief clear in his expression. “After tonight?” He held both my hands in one of his. “You’re leaving for the other side of the country, and you think I’m not going to see you every chance I get until then?”

“Did you not hear a word I said?” I searched his eyes, hoping the gravity of the situation would sink in. “This is exactly why I tried to keep this from happening.”

“Come on, Lyla,” he said, tilting his head like that idea was absurd. “This was always going to happen.”

“I don’t understand why,” I said. “Why me? Because I’m difficult?”

“You know why you.” His eyes bore into mine. My stomach did a flip. “What if I come here? Or you go to my place?”

“You shouldn’t spend the time you have left of college hiding out and not going to parties,” I said.

“I’m not interested in parties.” His gaze was intense again. “I’m not interested in any of it.”

“I’m just saying we’re going our separate ways, and you might regret it,” I pointed out. “You’ll go to Toronto or Boston, and I’ll be elsewhere.”

“Lyla James.” He smiled one of his slow, sexy smiles. “You *sure* you weren’t interested in me?”

I pursed my lips. “Be serious.”

“I’m being serious.” He chuckled, lifting my hand and nipping the tips of my fingers with his teeth. “I could be in Toronto and you in Tokyo, and I’d still find a way to keep exploring this.”

“Lach.”

“Look, if sneaking around will make you comfortable, fine. I don’t give a fuck what I have to do.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Okay?” He raised an eyebrow. “Okay, what?”

“Okay, let’s keep seeing each other,” I said, adding, “*In private. In secret.* Until we leave.”

“And then?” He lifted my hand again and kissed the inside of my wrist.

“And then we’ll see.” I inhaled sharply when he pressed his mouth over my pulse.

“Hm.” He dropped my hand and kissed me again, biting my bottom lip into his mouth as he pulled away. My heart skipped every time he did that.

“Come closer,” he said quietly, bringing me closer to him under the sheets. He reached out to turn off the lights and pulled me so my back was against his chest. He pressed his lips to the back of my neck. “You know we have the same middle name?”

I laughed. “No freaking way.”

“Hm.” He nuzzled against my neck. “I was going to tell you the second time I saw you, but I thought you might knee me in the balls.”

I bit back my smile, even though it was dark and he couldn’t see me. I

wouldn't have kneed him, but I could see why he'd think that.

"Hey, Lach." I smiled in the darkness.

"Hm?"

"I remembered what I was going to tell you."

"What is it?" He asked as I turned in his arms to face him.

"I'm always numb unless you're around. You make me feel." I couldn't see his face, but I heard his sharp intake of breath.

"Fuck, Lyla James." He pulled me closer and pressed his lips to mine in a slow kiss.

CHAPTER 14

I WAS WALKING into the tunnel and fell into a fit of laughter when I saw Lachlan. I had noticed him in the stands. Even if I hadn't, his resonating shouts every time I ran on and off the field would have made him hard to miss. The football stadium was at capacity, but somehow I could hear his, Prescott's, and Marissa's shouts everywhere. I'd kicked twice for an extra point and nailed it both times. I had to admit that I would miss the heck out of this. I was hesitant when Banks asked me to do it after speaking to his coach and the team. The first time I ran out there, everyone was confused. The second time, they acted like I was Elvis performing his last concert. The energy in the stadium was palpable every time I ran out there. I knew it was because I was a girl and kicked ass, but it still reminded me of my glory days in soccer, so I loved it.

And because the football coach was such a stickler, no one was allowed near the stadium outside game hours. That included parents and faculty. It was the only reason I did it. Otherwise, I would have passed up on the offer. I couldn't risk *him* lurking around here. I shivered at the thought of that psychopath watching me as I walked over to where Lach was standing at the end of the hall. He was near the locker rooms. I didn't even want to ask how he gained access to this area. As sneaky as he was, he probably had someone hack into the system to add him to the football roster for this. I wouldn't put anything past him. I smiled wide when I finally reached him and lifted me in a tight hug. I was sweaty and cross and still had the helmet in my hand, but he didn't care. And right now, in his arms, I didn't either.

"You fucking killed it," he said, grinning with pride. I thought my heart might explode.

"Good work out there, Marichal," one of the guys said behind me.

“Thank you, Jacobs.” I turned to face him. “*You* did good work out there running in that last touchdown.”

“You did, man. That last one was insane,” Lach said.

“Thanks, bro. I appreciate that.” He put out his fist for us to bump and started walking away backward. “See you tonight, Marichal?”

“You just might,” I said with a shrug as he walked away.

“What’s tonight?” Lach grabbed me by the shoulder pads and crouched a little to meet my eyes. “Is he talking about Pres’ party?”

“Yup.”

“We’re going?” he asked, frowning slightly. I loved how he said *we* about everything.

“*You’re* going,” I said. “*I* might pass by.”

“Seriously, Lyla?” He shot me a look. “If you pass by, I pass by.”

“Fine. We’re going, but we’re arriving at separate times,” I said.

“How much time are we talking?” he asked as we started walking down the hall.

“I don’t know, twenty minutes?” I stopped at the door of the bathroom and unlocked it.

I obviously didn’t shower and change with the guys; I used the bathroom down the hall. All of my things were already in there waiting. I was going home and straight into the shower, but I needed to give back the pads since I wouldn’t be using them anymore. Lachlan stopped in front of me.

“Fine.”

“You know how it is. Marissa is going to want to pick out my clothes and go with me,” I said.

“What are you wearing?” he asked, his mouth pulling into that sexy smile of his.

“I have no clue.” I shrugged. “I just go with whatever she throws at me.”

“She picked the outfit you wore to the last party?”

“Yep.”

His eyes darkened, and he hooked his finger through the front of my jersey, leaning down so we were at eye level again. “I’m getting hard just thinking about it.”

I leaned in and licked his lips. He groaned and kissed me. When we broke apart, he nodded at the bathroom door.

“We can go in there.”

“Hell no. I’m disgusting right now. I barely want you to kiss me, let alone

fuck me.” My face pulled in disgust. “I hate sweat, which is hilarious since I spent most of my life running on fields, sweating.”

“You’re so fucking weird.” He chuckled and gave me another kiss, letting go of the jersey.

“I’ll see you tonight.” I kissed him one last time. He tried to deepen it, but I pulled away from him. “Tonight, Lachlan.”

“Fine,” he groaned and stepped away. “Tonight.”

Sometimes, wings are built from despair. That was something my grandmother used to say, and it was the thought at the forefront of my mind as I stared at my car and fought the cold chill slithering down my spine. At first glance, it looked like a random act of vandalism, but I knew the truth. Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward, glass crunching under my shoes as I circled to the driver's side. I opened the door and used the t-shirt to wipe the driver's seat before sitting down. As soon as I shut the car door, the smell of cigarettes filled my nostrils and I gagged. It was a visceral reaction. I tried to push through it by squeezing my eyes shut and tightening the grip on the duffel bag in my lap.

My breath caught in my throat when I turned to set my bag on the passenger seat and saw a piece of glass very deliberately placed on the left side. My hands shook as I switched on the engine. There was another cigarette butt on the dash. I left it there as I drove away, careful to show no reaction. I knew he was watching. I didn't know where he was, but I knew he was watching. He got off on shit like this, but he didn't deserve access to my emotions, and I wouldn't grant it. We both knew his message was clear.

I drove home feeling sick with anxiety, but otherwise, I was calm. As soon as I parked, I raced to my apartment, locking the door behind me. I dashed to my bedroom and did the same. With a heavy heart, I looked at the photos before me, my silent reminder of why I shouldn't have let my guard down. Marissa had laid out an outfit for me. I considered skipping the event. I should have, but I'd spent the last two years of college living like a hermit.

I was tired of it. I was tired of *him* wanting to destroy everything that brought me joy. I just wanted to go to a party like a regular college student and not worry about the consequences. There were strict rules for this

particular party — a small and vetted list of guests, no phones, and no pictures. I knew I could go without worry. I knew he wouldn't come after me there. He couldn't. I wasn't sure it even mattered anymore. He already knew about us. In five days, we'd be out of here. Five days. I stood up and looked at the dress one more time. His message reminded me of what he could still do to me. He'd tried to cut my wings before. He probably thought he'd rip them up and burn them this time. I wouldn't let him. I stood up and got ready for the party.

CHAPTER 15

“EVERYTHING WILL BE OKAY,” Marissa said, holding my hand as we walked to Prescott’s house, which was only a block away.

“I know,” I said, reassuring both of us.

My window was fucked, but thankfully, we knew a guy from high school whose dad owned a car shop where they happened to repair windows. He would pick up the car tonight while we were at the party and return it as soon as possible. I was trying not to think about it too much. The glass would be fixed, and we would leave and never have to deal with this crap again. I refused to waste any more energy on him. I’d given him enough of that and more through the years. I was done. I’d go to this party, have fun with my friends, and act like a regular college girl. It didn’t take much to deduce that if it weren’t for Lach, I would have been at the apartment right now, watching whatever television show caught my attention. God, I couldn’t wait to get out of here and go somewhere where we could hold hands — without me having to look over my shoulder constantly. I pushed all of that aside. Tonight was about having fun.

“Do you think I look naked?” I asked, looking down at the dress I was wearing.

I didn’t look naked inside the apartment, but now, I thought I looked naked.

“Not really.” She glanced over at me, eyed me up and down, and started laughing. “Okay, maybe a little since it’s dark out here. Lach’s going to fucking die.”

“Marissa!” I slapped her arm. “It’s going to be dark there, which means I’ll look naked.”

“Who cares? You wore a dress covered in holes at the country club with

only a bikini under. This is a one-piece.”

“I was wearing a cover-up and a bathing suit to the pool that day,” I pointed out. “This one-piece looks the same color as my skin, and this mesh and glitter dress just adds to the nude look.”

“You look amazing, and no one will think you’re actually naked.” She rolled her eyes. “Think of it this way. You won’t have to worry about flashing anyone if you bend over since you’re wearing a freaking bodysuit underneath that covers your entire torso.”

I pursed my lips. She had a point there. I eyed her outfit — a tight dress covered in cut-outs. It was super revealing, but at least the scraps of cloth covering her private parts were hot pink and made sure you knew she wasn’t naked. The body suit covered all of my privates. It was beautiful, and I knew that people wore this nude-looking thing to red carpets these days, so maybe she was right.

“Stop overthinking this,” she said. “You look hot.”

I took a deep breath and nodded.

At least Prescott’s parties were by invitation only, and he had a no-phone rule. You could keep your phone, but you had to either turn it off or set it on airplane mode. If you were caught using it or taking any pictures, you got kicked out and banned from future parties. Because it was such a big deal to be invited at all, everyone followed the rules.

I took a deep breath as we walked in and decided that Mar was right. I looked hot and felt comfortable in the damn dress. And she was right about the nude aspect. I’d seen at least three celebrities wear this style to award shows this past season. Fine, no one would think I was naked, but they’d be able to get a better picture of what I might look like if I was. And for someone who’d worn baggy clothes for two straight years, that made me panicky. I took another breath. It didn’t matter, at least not at this party. And I was technically more naked wearing a bikini. I followed Marissa inside and said hello to the guys who greeted us by the door. Marissa grabbed my fingers as we continued walking.

“I feel like he has the same crowd every time,” she said.

“It’s better that way. It means he trusts everyone here.”

“I guess.” She sighed as we beelined to the kitchen.

We found Prescott and Drew pouring themselves drinks. I looked around for Lach but didn’t see him and didn’t ask. I said hello and let Pres pour me a shot. I looked outside. His favorite wall wasn’t here, so he couldn’t be

guarding it. There was a beer pong table and a keg set up, so maybe he was outside.

“You look. . .” Drew’s eyes went up and down my body, then he shook his head.

“Naked?” I supplied.

“I know you’re wearing a bathing suit, but yeah, you look naked.” He chuckled. “Regardless, you look hot as fuck.”

“Thanks,” I muttered quietly.

“I’m also here, asshole,” Marissa said.

“Yeah, but you always dress like that, and you know you always look good.” He smirked and pointed at me. “This one hides it.”

“No one will think you’re naked,” Prescott said, knowing that might freak me out. He took a sip of his beer. “And you look hot, so who cares?”

“You’re right.” I nodded. “We’re out of here in a few days, so fuck it.”

I finally let myself relax and forget what I was wearing. We talked about where everyone was going next week after we got out of college for good. Drew was saying he was also going to med school, and we started talking about that. He wanted to be a surgeon, and I wanted to be a sports medicine specialist — a completely different career path — but the first three years of school would be the same.

“You’re done in three years, though, right?” Drew asked.

“I am. I mean, as soon as I figure out where I’m going to school,” I said.

“You still don’t know?”

“Nope.”

“She was accepted into all the ones she applied to,” Pres supplied.

“She’s going to pick while we’re in California,” Marissa added.

“What are you going to do?” Drew asked her.

“Probably open up my own business,” she said and went into all the details.

Our parents had set up bank accounts for us when we were kids, but graduating college meant we’d have full access to them. Marissa would use her money to open up a healthy cafe featuring smoothies or bowls; she hadn’t decided. While she spoke about it, I heard someone behind me shout my name.

“Lyles!” he said again, closer now.

I turned around to see Banks standing there with a dart in his hand. His eyes returned to mine after he quickly took in my outfit.

“Uhhh. . .hi, and what the fuck?” I said, nodding at the dart in his hand.

“Oh.” He laughed and pointed at the dart board behind him. “I’m practicing.”

“Is this new?” I looked at Prescott.

“Not really. You just haven’t been here in ages.”

“True.” I turned and walked over to Banks and the board.

“I heard you kick ass in beer pong,” he said.

“Wow, people actually talked about that?” I shook my head.

“Mason did, since he won,” he said. “People were talking about your heated exchange with Lachlan.”

“Oh, God.” I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“Who cares?” Banks shrugged. “Fuck them. You can do whatever the hell you want.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” I laughed at the way he said it.

I didn’t bother to point out that I didn’t give a shit what people said about it. I just didn’t want word to spread too much. I watched Banks for a while, laughing each time he cursed when he hit the outermost part of the board.

“I think you need to tilt your elbow a bit,” I said, studying the board. “All of your darts go right.”

He lowered his arm and looked at me. “Don’t fucking tell me you’re good at this too.”

“Okay, I’m not.” I shrugged, but I was smiling a little.

“How the fuck are you good at everything?”

“Trust me, I’m not, but I *am* good with my aim.” I put out my hand so he could give me one of his darts. “Pay attention to my elbow. If you throw it like this.” I threw it to demonstrate. “You’re going to go that way.” I lowered my arms. “If you center your elbow, you can hit your target.”

“Show me.” He put the rest of the darts in my hand.

I started to throw them — I hit the inner circle, the inner circle again, the bullseye, and the bullseye again. Drew and Prescott clapped and cheered, inspiring the few random people who must have already been drunk to clap and cheer. Banks was too stunned to say anything, and I was too mortified by the attention to move. I did a little bow, a 180 to get out of there, and ran into Lachlan. He was wearing a gray V-neck t-shirt and jeans. So simple, but he looked so fucking hot, as usual. I looked at his face and studied it, committing it to memory. I wasn’t sure why I did that so often since I saw him every day and at all hours unless he was at hockey practice or a game.

Our eyes locked, and I felt the breath go out of my lungs.

“Hey,” I said, my heart beating uncontrollably at his heated green eyes.

“You’re great at that.” He nodded behind me and lowered his mouth to my ear, nipping it quickly and sending a jolt through my body. “How the fuck am I supposed to keep my hands off you?”

When he pulled away, I tried to set enough distance between us — the way I did with Pres and Drew and Banks — but I felt that we could be on different planets, and the tension between us would still be palpable.

“Hey, Lach,” some girl said as she walked by.

She wasn’t flirting, just saying hello, but he ignored her and kept his eyes on mine. I smiled at him, which made his eyes darken even more. I loved knowing I was the only one who got this reaction from him. I loved the way he looked at me like nothing else in the world mattered. Maybe I should have been a little wary of his intensity and how he could easily take over my thoughts and emotions, but I knew the feeling was mutual. Going from someone who got used to not feeling anything to feeling everything when I was with him should have scared me, but for some inexplicable reason, it didn’t. Conversations were happening all around us.

People weren’t paying attention to the way we’d been locked in this all-consuming staring contest, and I really wanted to kiss him. I could lead him away from everyone and take him to the bathroom or Pres’ room, but I didn’t want to. I wanted to see what he’d do if I gave him the green light not to hide whatever this was. I knew his reputation. I’d heard it all already — the way he didn’t kiss anyone, the way every puck bunny was obsessed with him, the way he only slept with the same girl twice because he felt like a third time would make them get attached. He’d given me that morsel of information on our fifth night together. We’d spent every night together, either at his place or mine.

This was a new experience for both of us in so many ways, and it felt nice to be on the same playing field. I glanced away for a moment, taking in the room. There were more people here now, but they’d all been carefully picked by Pres. I thought about it. I looked at him again and licked my lips. His eyes caught the movement, and I watched as he shut them and took a breath. Okay, I was doing this. I tugged his shirt, bringing him close so I could speak in his ear.

“We’re almost out of here. This is a small party, so fuck it, who cares?” I said. “These people have been vetted by Pres anyway, so they have to be trust

—”

He didn't even give me a chance to finish my damn sentence before his lips were on mine. It was so unexpected that it took me a second to kiss him back. Without breaking the kiss, he crouched down and lifted me. My legs instinctively wrapped around his waist, and my arms around his neck as he cupped my ass to hold me steady. Our tongues danced along with the upbeat music playing. When I pulled away, I felt eyes on me. The kitchen was so quiet that you could probably actually hear a pin drop. We still hadn't looked away from each other, so my eyes widened at his.

I buried my face in his neck. “It feels like we're in a 90s rom-com.”

“Is this a nightmare for you?” he asked, his voice low and husky in my ear.

I pulled back and smiled at him. “It never is when I'm with you.”

He growled as he kissed me again, one hand gripping my ass tight and the other holding me by the nape of my neck, pulling me as close as possible to him. I think someone cheered, but mostly, they were still silent. When we pulled away again, I forced him to set my feet on the ground. He did, but as soon as I was standing beside him, he grabbed my hand and linked our fingers together as we turned around to get a drink. Everyone around us was staring. Prescott and Marissa laughed and shook their heads at everyone's stunned silence.

“It makes sense,” Drew said after he picked his jaw up off the ground. “You're both unattainable,” he brought up a finger like he was counting. “You're both the best at your sport, even though you don't play anymore,” he added quickly, looking at me.

“And you're both hot as fuck,” one of the girls there added — the one that said hi to him earlier. I looked at her and laughed.

“Still, man,” Drew said, eyes wide on Lach. “How?”

I didn't know what he was asking. How did he manage to crack me, of all people? How did I manage to get him, of all people? How had he managed to keep it a secret? It could be anything. Drew was waiting, and apparently, the rest of the nosey people around us also wanted an answer. Lach let go of my hand and hugged me into his side, but I pulled back to look at his face.

He smiled at me. “I chased and chased and chased until she finally gave me a fucking chance.”

That answer seemed to stun them even more, but at that point, we were done being the freaking main attraction. We spent the rest of the night

playing beer pong, which we dominated, and then talking and drinking with our friends. Lach's hands were all over me every moment he wasn't occupied, which continued to draw surprised glances the entire night. I thought it was hilarious, but I understood the reason. The guy who fended people off at parties was the one who couldn't seem to keep his hands to himself. The guy with a no-kissing rule kissed me every opportunity he had. I had butterflies in my stomach and smiled at him all night.

When we decided to leave the party and return to my place, I let go of his hand. We were walking next to each other, but at what I hoped would appear like a friendly distance. I tried not to be obvious about checking for my car. I wasn't going to tell Lach about what happened. It would only lead to questions and concerns. He had enough on his plate, and we were almost out of here, so I didn't think it was worth mentioning.

"You drank," he said suddenly as if he'd just noticed.

"Are you saying that because I'm swaying a little?" I asked with a laugh as I looked up at him. "If so, I want to point out that I'm wearing heels."

"I would carry you but that's against the rules." He chuckled when my eyes widened. He grew serious again, his brows pulling slightly. "The liquor was unopened and you drank."

"You were there." I shrugged. "I know you wouldn't let anything happen to me."

His steps came to a halt when we reached my place. He turned to me, searched my face for a few seconds, and shook his head.

"Lyla James. . ." He exhaled a deep breath, still shaking his head as we walked up the stairs as if he had no words to describe what he felt.

The feeling was mutual.

CHAPTER 16

THE DAYS PASSED SO QUICKLY that I went from wanting to leave Fairview to wishing I could stay cocooned in Lachlan's arms a while longer. It wasn't just the sex. That was mind-blowing as well, but it was more than that. It was being with him. We'd binged shows, watched movies, ordered takeout, and ate it while we critiqued the shit out of whatever we'd just watched. We cooked dinner together, which was a freaking mess, but it was fun. Behind closed doors, I'd been grinning nonstop, and I hadn't stopped grinning because the only time I'd stepped outside my apartment was to go to his. It was weird. Marissa had seen us together a million times and was still in shock. I wasn't sure whether it was because of my complete change in mood, because I was smiling (which she liked to remind me that I didn't do *this* much even before), or because Lachlan Duke was with the same woman every day and showed no interest in anyone else. Maybe it was all of the above.

Tonight, I'd swapped the confines of my apartment for the arena, sitting between Marissa and Banks, watching the Blaze' second championship game. I hadn't told Lach and knew I was the last person he'd expect to see here. Despite the number of times Prescott had invited me, I'd never been to a hockey game, so this was a new experience. So far, based on the nachos I was currently stuffing my face with out of pure anxiety, it got a ten out of ten. When my stomach wouldn't quit coiling, I handed the nachos to Banks, who was virtually a human trash can. He'd already had Marissa's Skittles, my Peanut M&Ms, and a bag of popcorn.

"Relax," Marissa whispered as she set a hand on my bouncing knee.

"I'm trying." I bit my lip.

I wouldn't relax. When I told Marissa I wanted to come, I figured we'd

sit somewhere in the stands, and Lach wouldn't see me. She didn't tell me that the tickets Prescott gave her were in the first row right next to the . . . sin bin? Ice box? Penalty box. Marissa had called it all three, but I settled on that one since that's what it was. I stared at it. I wondered what you had to do to end up there and how often Lach was sent. I wasn't sure if I wanted the answer to be a lot or never. It seemed kind of dumb to end up there, considering it shaved off minutes you could have spent on the ice. It probably would've helped if I'd listened to Prescott every time he talked about his sport instead of tuning him out and going over soccer plays in my head. He couldn't take offense since he did the same thing to me.

The lights in the arena dimmed, and some strobe lights picked up. My knee started bouncing, and when the guys started coming out, and the crowd's deafening roar invaded the place, my heart felt like it would burst out of my chest. The arena must have been at capacity with its loudness, but I didn't take my eyes off the ice. When I saw Lachlan skate by, my pulse skyrocketed. I was wearing a replica of his jersey that Marissa got for me at the merch stand outside. He wore the number ten like I wore in soccer, which he said was another reason we should be together. When Marissa handed it to me, I was unsure whether I wanted to wear it. I could've borrowed one of his if I thought that was a good idea. It seemed like such a public display, but after looking around the arena and realizing most people rooting for The Blaze were also wearing it, I slid it over the shirt I had on. According to Marissa, Lach had signed to be part of the NIL and made more money off his jersey than any other student-athlete in the sport. I'd done the same and was still getting paid for sales off mine, even though I no longer played, which was pretty incredible. Marissa had most of their jerseys but was wearing Prescott's tonight, while Banks wore a school hoodie.

Lach skated to the center of the ice and positioned himself in front of a player from the opposite team. I shifted in my seat, my excitement making it hard to sit still. I watched as the referee dropped the puck between them and let them try to get it. Lach passed it back, and Mason got ahold of it before the opposite player could get there. Then, I watched them skate around, vying for the puck as they shoved each other out of the way. I laughed loudly. Hockey was a savage sport.

I leaned into Banks, but my eyes remained glued to the ice. "Don't you wish you could do that in the field without getting flagged every five seconds?"

He laughed. "I'm in the wrong fucking sport."

"Can you skate?"

"I grew up in Colorado," he said, and I knew he had one of his WTF expressions on his face. "Of course, I can skate."

Marissa's hand shot out and clutched my knee to stop the bouncing as Prescott gained control of the puck. They were so concentrated on the game that I didn't even know why I'd been nervous about Lach seeing me. Every time he skated past us, the woman behind me screamed louder than anyone else, which made me laugh. It was cute. She reminded me of my mom standing on the sidelines. I let the memory of her pass through me and waited to feel something. I didn't. I'd thought for sure after Lachlan seemingly opened up a vault of emotions inside me that I'd suddenly feel all the time, but that hadn't been the case. I was laughing more, as Marissa and Banks pointed out during our ride.

Only the people at the party knew about Lach and me, and I hoped to keep it that way. Soon, we'd be free to see each other wherever we wanted. Outside of Fairview, that was. *He* couldn't possibly threaten to follow me around the country. A cold shiver spread through me as I thought about that possibility. He wouldn't do that, would he? I shook it off and focused on the game. A player from the other team passed the puck and set himself up to score a goal. I sat at the edge of my seat, holding my breath as the rest of the arena screamed. The player pulled his stick back and hit it. Lach skated right in front of him and blocked it, then pointed at Drew to reprimand him for something.

"He's a defenseman," Marissa said in my ear. "Drew, I mean."

"So, he was supposed to be there?"

"Yep."

"How the hell did Lach even get there so fast?" I asked quietly, more to myself.

"He's fast as fuck," Banks said.

"The fastest in the nation," the woman behind us said.

The three of us turned around and looked at her. She smiled proudly, and I immediately knew it was his mother, which filled me with more nerves than I could handle. A guy sitting next to her looked exactly how you'd picture Lachlan's brother to look. He was younger and leaner with shorter hair, but their features were similar. He had much lighter hair than Lach, but that was the only glaring difference. He met my gaze for a moment, smiled, and

looked away. He was nicer than Lach, as well. Lach was nice. . .to me. I'd seen him interact with other people enough to know that he was mostly only polite to them. He had four smiles — his sexy smirk and charming smile, both of which brought anyone to their knees; his polite smile that he used with most people; and his real smile, which was a mix of both and lit up his eyes. That was the one he always directed at me. He talked a lot about my smiles and how I didn't give them away freely, but he wasn't unlike me in that. He might have smiled more than I did, but they weren't all real.

"Are you his mom?" Banks asked.

"I am." The woman smiled wide. She was freaking beautiful, with dark brown hair like her sons, brown eyes, and delicate features.

"I'm Banks." He stuck his hand out and introduced himself.

"Valerie." She shook his hand with a smile.

"Liam," the brother said, introducing himself and shaking Banks's hand.

Marissa went next because we'd look like assholes if we didn't follow suit now that Banks had introduced himself. Inside, I was glowering at him. Outwardly, I tried my best not to scowl too hard. The last thing I wanted was for Lach's family to think I was an unhappy bitch the first day they met me. I didn't know why I cared but judging by the way my hands were suddenly sweating. I seemed to care a lot. His mother looked at me next.

"Lyla." I offered her my hand and a small smile. She stared at me for a moment, taking in every one of my features in a way that made my knee want to start bouncing again. Liam bumped her shoulder, making her blink out of whatever she was thinking.

"Valerie," she said slowly, still studying me. "Lyla James?"

My heart sped up. No way. No fucking way he'd told his mother about me. I managed to nod, mouth hanging slightly open.

"Um, yeah. That would be me," I said, suddenly a little more nervous than I had been.

Valerie smiled wide, confirming that he had indeed told her about me. What had he said? Oh my God. I was going to kill him for this.

"Liam," his brother said, ripping his mother's hand from mine and shaking it. His lopsided smile made him look even more like his brother.

"It's so nice to meet you both," I said, smiling as I took my hand back and turned around.

Marissa's fingers clawed into my thighs. I squeezed them, saying *I know. I KNOW*. My entire body felt hot. I wondered if I was blushing. Of course, I

was freaking blushing. I wondered if they could tell. We focused on the game again. Number eight from the other team was pushed into the plexiglass directly in front of us. His eyes went wide like the air had been knocked out of him momentarily. He looked at me, or at least that was what it felt like, and then he was gone, chasing after Drew.

“That’s Nolan Astor,” Marissa whisper-shouted in my ear. “Hottest college hockey player. Not only at Ellis U, I mean everywhere.”

I laughed. “You’ve said that about three guys.”

“Well, after Lachlan, he’s the next hottest on the ice right now. Then it’s Jonah, then probably Prescott.”

I shook my head, biting back a smile. As I looked around, though, I did notice that the only jersey that rivaled Lach’s number ten was Astor’s number eight. I wondered if they were friends. I played against the same handful of girls since I’d started on competitive teams. Sometimes, we’d end up on the same travel team. Other times, we’d played against each other. On the field, we were rivals, but off of it, we’d become friends. However, we didn’t hit each other the way these guys did. I wasn’t sure I could be friends with someone who slammed me into a wall every five seconds. Mason was the next one slammed against the plexiglass in front of us. I jumped in my seat again. Sitting in the first row was probably not a good idea for someone as wound up as I was.

Our team tried unsuccessfully for a goal twice. They tried three times unsuccessfully. My stomach was still tight from nerves as I watched. I played a lot of soccer games. Watched even more of them. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt this anxious. As I watched Mason take hold of the puck and pass it to Prescott, who then passed it to Lach, I held my breath. They were right freaking there, right in front of the goal again. Lach passed it back to Mason, who tried to get it in unsuccessfully. Number eight from the other team hit it straight to Lachlan’s stick. The goalkeeper hadn’t even fully stood from blocking the last goal attempt, and Lachlan hit it right above his head.

The crowd went WILD. I jumped out of my seat and cheered right along with them. It was impossible not to get caught up in the moment. They celebrated in a group hug as a loud horn blared, and we continued to cheer. After pulling apart, Lach set a hand on the plexiglass and dragged it around the rink, which I guessed was the hockey version of high-fiving the crowd. When he reached our section, I caught his eye immediately. Surprise flashed in them but was quickly replaced with what I could only describe as joy. I

smiled wide. He smiled wider, then glanced over my head and raised his eyebrows at his mom and brother before skating off. As he did, I felt a pat and squeeze on my shoulder and looked back to find his mom smiling at me. Oh, my fucking GOD, I WAS GOING TO KILL HIM FOR THIS. I smiled back and looked forward quickly. When time ran out, a horn went off, and the players headed where they'd skated out from in the beginning.

CHAPTER 17

“BEER?” Banks stood up with the empty nacho tray in his hand.

“No, thanks,” I said.

“I’ll take one,” Marissa said, grabbing my hand and pulling me to stand.

“Come on. We have eighteen minutes. Let’s go to the bathroom.”

“Eighteen minutes?” I stood, shaking my head. “They are so spoiled.”

Lachlan’s mother laughed as she stood up. “No breaks in soccer, right?”

“We get fifteen minutes between the first and second half, but we play for forty-five minutes consecutively,” I managed to say, without shrieking at the fact that he’d even told her I played soccer. How much had Lachlan told this woman about me?

“I prefer soccer,” his brother said.

We were walking out of our rows at the same time. At the edge, I let them go ahead of me. Behind me, Marissa squeezed my arm to stop me from walking.

“He told his fucking family about you,” she whispered. “Holy shiiiiit.”

I shot a glare over my shoulder, and she returned it with a wide smile and a knowing twinkle in her eyes. Valerie wanted to keep talking to me upstairs while Liam started texting, and Marissa stood in line for the bathroom. There was a long line to get into the women’s bathroom. Of course, there was. My phone buzzed in the bag I was wearing across my chest, but I couldn’t take it out while Lachlan’s mom told me about his love for hockey. We spoke about soccer, and I told her I’d missed it initially but had grown used to living without it. It wasn’t a complete lie. I missed being on the pitch. I was competitive by nature, so, of course, I missed games, but I no longer felt like I’d wither without them.

“Maybe one day, you’ll get back out there,” Valerie said, offering me a

kind smile.

“Maybe.” I shrugged, looking away briefly. “We’ll see.”

“My son never talks about girls,” she said suddenly. My eyes snapped back to hers. I felt like I might throw up, but I let her continue. “When he mentioned you by name, I knew it was serious.”

My heart dropped. “I hate that we met late. I can’t imagine how we’d be able to continue seeing each other, with him going pro and me going to med school, you know?”

“I can’t imagine how you wouldn’t,” she said. “Lachlan doesn’t half-ass anything. If he’s serious about you, he’ll go through hell and high water to get to you.”

I bit my lip. “He may not want to. There are a lot more puck bunnies when you go pro.”

At that, she laughed wholeheartedly. The way her eyes danced reminded me so much of Lach that I had to smile. “Oh, honey. I don’t think you understand what it means to catch my son’s attention the way you have. I’ve only seen him this way over hockey.” She raised an eyebrow. “Make of that what you will.”

My chest gripped tightly. “We just met.”

“Love has no logic.”

Love. My heart pounded harder. I couldn’t respond, but I nodded slowly to let her know I understood what she was telling me. I couldn’t deny that I was in love with him. I couldn’t confirm it, either. I didn’t know what being in love felt like, but if it was this persistent ache in the center of my chest, then maybe I was. When the fuck had that happened? Holy shit. We spoke a little more about where she lived and where I’d grown up before she was dragged away by Liam, who shot me an apologetic smile as we went our separate ways. Marissa was still in line, though she’d almost reached the front. I headed over, thinking about Lach. He’d been so good about having to sneak around to see me. He’d only said once that he felt like a dirty secret, and even that he’d said with an amused laugh as if he couldn’t believe that he was the one being kept secret in all of this. Cocky motherfucker. We’d be out of here soon and wouldn’t have to sneak around anymore. And this wasn’t the 1800s; we had FaceTime and airplanes. We could see each other often if we made it a priority. *Maybe* it could work. I pulled out my phone as I reached Marissa and saw two texts from him. My heart skipped.

Lachlan: you look so fucking hot wearing my name on your back

Lachlan: i hope my mom isn't bugging you too much

Me: everyone is wearing your name on their back

Me: she's so nice and I want to murder you

I didn't expect him to respond, but it was instant.

Lachlan: i only see you

Lachlan: lol you would never. you'd miss me too much

I bit my lip and felt myself smile at the screen. Thankfully, we were in the bathroom, so no one could see me. Even though I decided to come to this game, I was still worried. I was out of my apartment, which was weird enough. I was wearing his jersey. He looked at me when he was on the ice. There were so many reasons for me to be paranoid. Initially, I'd been tuned in to my surroundings, looking around and ensuring I wasn't being watched. At some point, I'd let my guard down, though. I let myself forget that I was a danger to us, and that alone put us in graver danger. Still, I responded the way I wanted to because no one could gain access to our text exchange.

Me: i'd miss you so fucking much

Me: stop texting me. Get your head in the game, Duke

Lachlan: yes, ma'am

I set my phone away and found Marissa staring at me when I looked up.

I frowned. "What?"

"I just. . ." She shook her head. I thought she would poke fun at me, but her eyes filled with tears. "Seeing you like this makes me so happy. I've said that a million times, but I thought I'd lost you for good."

"Same." I sighed. "I don't know what it is about him."

"Who cares?" She side-hugged me. "I just want you to stay like this forever."

She had to let me go so she could walk into the stall that had just freed up. I walked into the next one. When I finished flushing and was ready to walk back out, I stood in the stall with my eyes closed as I took three deep breaths. Not to calm me down, keep the mask on my face, or bury my feelings, but to savor the moment. Everything about Lachlan felt right. I knew that didn't happen often, and I'd lost too much to take any of this for granted. We made it back to our seats with thirty seconds to go. Valerie and Liam were already sitting in theirs, sharing nachos.

I looked over my shoulder and smiled at her when the horn went off to alert us that the game was starting again. I held my breath as I watched them start. We gained control of the puck, which earned a roar from the stands. I

watched, enthralled, as they skated around the rink. As they played, Banks explained D-men and hip-checks and told me to call the penalty box the sin-bin unless I wanted to sound like an amateur. I bit back a smile. Maybe Banks should have played hockey instead of football.

“How do you even know all this?” I asked.

“My older and younger brothers play.”

My mouth dropped. “How the hell did you end up playing football?”

“Middle child syndrome, I guess.” He laughed, shaking his head. “I thought I was being rebellious. I’m good at it and love it, but I would’ve been okay out there.” He nodded at the ice.

I kept my eyes on Lachlan the entire time he moved. He skated with such ease and dribbled the puck well. I frowned and took out my phone, searching: *is dribbling a thing in hockey?* The answer wasn’t clear, so I asked Banks, who laughed but didn’t get a chance to answer because number eight on the opposing team ran into Lach and pinned him against the plexiglass. I held my breath.

Lach shook it off and kept skating. I would’ve been on the floor for at least a minute, catching my breath and letting myself breathe through the pain. The guy was sent to the sin bin, and the asshole smiled as he took his helmet off and skated over. I glared at him, which he caught and made him smile wider. I glared at him when he got to the sin bin *next to us*. He laughed, got near the plexiglass, and blew me a kiss. It was so fucking unexpected that I froze. The balls on this fucking guy! He was as hot as Marissa claimed but *what the hell?* My eyes swung back to the rink, and I caught Lachlan’s eyes on us. *Oh. fuck.* I did Astor the favor of not looking at him again. Lachlan would kill him.

“Holy shit,” Marissa breathed. “He’s pissed.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I hope he realized I was glaring at the guy and not checking him out.”

She laughed. “I don’t think it matters what *you* were doing. Astor loves to start shit. He does this every freaking game. It’s kind of funny. He’ll single a girl out and fuck with her throughout the game. It’s part of his charm.”

“Yeah, real charming.” I scoffed.

“Well, it’s supposed to be fun and games, but he started shit with the wrong person tonight,” she said in a low voice.

Astor went right back on the ice when his two minutes were up. The opposing team was passing the puck around, but Mason got in there and stole

it, earning a cheer from us. He drove it back to the other side and passed it to Pres, who passed it to Lach, who shot it in over the goalie's head. We jumped out of our seats and cheered. The lights went out, and strobe lights appeared on the ice for a moment. The crowd was deafening. This time, instead of giving the crowd a faux high five, Lach power skated across the ice and pushed Astor, who seemed to be waiting for him, and pushed him back.

That started a fight. This wasn't the little push I was used to on the pitch. On rare occasions, we argued with the opposing team. This was a real fucking fight. They'd both dropped their gloves and gone at it, even as the whistle from the ref went off. My mouth was hanging open as I watched. I didn't want Lach to get hurt, but I couldn't deny that it was fun to see it unfold. This was part of the reason people liked this sport. I could tell from the way everyone was screaming and cheering. Lach reached up to remove his helmet, but Prescott was right there, stopping him from doing so, which made no sense.

"Why do they have their helmets on?" I shouted.

"It's a rule," Banks said.

"It's a sign of respect," Valerie said behind me.

"So they don't break their knuckles," Liam added.

"This is crazy," I breathed, my heart pounding in my ears. "They just let them fight?"

"It's part of hockey," Marissa said, eyes wide on the spectacle in front of us.

My mind went to the night of the party when Mason tried to kiss me, and Lach pushed him away, and I realized that he'd shown restraint. He wasn't showing any here. They both ended up on the ground and got pulled off each other by their teammates as the ref blew the whistle again. They were both sent to the sin bin this time. There were two guys between them, and Lach still managed to bare his teeth at Astor, who was in the one beside us.

"Damn, Lach. I thought we were friends," Astor shouted.

The asshole was still laughing. I doubted Lach could hear him over the noise. Even if he did, he continued to glare. My heart skipped when his gaze caught mine. It continued to skip the entire time we looked at each other. The crowd was locked into the game and screaming, so I was sure they weren't paying us any mind. I felt like we were in our own bubble. I felt Astor's eyes on me and looked at him quickly. His brows shot up as he looked between the two of us and shook his head, laughing as he turned around. I hoped this

didn't mean he would use me to antagonize him.

If he did, I'd have to assume he was crazy and wanted to live in the sin bin. Lach's jaw was tight. He was looking at Astor when I looked at him again, and I willed him to turn his attention back to me. As if he had access to my brain, he did. I tried to relay to him to calm the fuck down and keep his head in the game, but I wasn't sure how I could say all of those words with just my eyes. I mouthed it to him, earning a smirk before he looked away to set his helmet back on his head and get back on the ice. Astor got next to him, and my stomach clenched as I waited for Lach's reaction to whatever he said. I was going to be pissed if he got another two-minute penalty. Instead, Lach nodded, and they gave each other a fist bump. Men were so fucking weird. We won 3-2. Lach scored two, and Mason scored the last one. It was unreal.

CHAPTER 18

IT WOULD BE impossible for us to sneak around here. He had to know that. It was the only reason I said goodbye to his mom and brother after the game instead of sticking around. There was a crowd waiting for him anyway, all holding their phones out for selfies or something in their hands for him to autograph. Pride swelled inside me when I saw them. I remembered the feeling I got the first time I'd signed autographs, taken pictures, and smiled as I stepped off the pitch. I took my phone out and texted Marissa and Banks, telling them I'd wait outside by the entrance we'd walked in through. Since Banks didn't want to carry his keys, he'd given them to me to put inside my bag, so it wasn't like they could leave without me, but I needed to make sure they knew exactly where I was. I pressed my back against the glass and watched as the crowd continued walking through the doors.

According to Mar's last text, I'd been standing there for three minutes when I felt the hairs on my neck stand up. My heart stopped beating as I stood straight and started looking around. I wondered if this feeling would go away when I left Fairview or if it would persist forever. I couldn't imagine it going away; as long as he knew my name and location, he'd find me. I didn't want that to be true. I kept telling myself that there was no way he'd leave Fairview to look for me, but he was completely unhinged, and I wasn't feeling too sure about that. My eyes looked through the crowd of people leaving, but I didn't see him. Maybe I was being paranoid. Yes, I was being paranoid. Still, I jumped when my phone buzzed in my hand.

Marissa: wait for us in the truck

I stared at her text for a long moment. What were they doing that would take long enough for her to tell me to wait in the truck? I looked at the parking lot where Banks's black truck was. It wasn't far, and he'd parked

near the light, so anything that happened outside the truck would be visible. There were enough people around to hear me if I screamed and see me if I struggled. I took a breath and joined the wall of people walking toward the lot. A group of people from Ellis University talked shit about Lachlan, which made me irrationally angry, so I focused on them.

I had to remind myself of all the times people openly talked shit about me after they lost a game and their pride was bruised. Still, hearing them trash Lachlan was different. I wanted to pull them by the jersey and punch them. Maybe I would have if a. I was crazy enough to do it, and b. they weren't guys and a whole foot taller than me. They must have been basketball players with their build and height. When I made it close enough to the truck, I clicked the button to unlock the doors and took off in a sprint. I got into the driver's seat, locked the doors, and turned the truck on. I made it. I took a relieved breath and moved to the back seat, where I'd sat on the way over.

I took a deep breath, and on my exhale, there was a loud knock on the window next to me. I screamed so loud and jumped so high out of my seat that the top of my head hit the roof. With a hand over my rapidly beating heart, I looked outside and saw Lachlan standing there. *What the hell?* I unlocked the door and grabbed the handle. I had barely touched it before it swung open, and Lachlan was in the backseat with me, shutting and locking it behind him. His eyes burned into mine. I could only stare at him, mouth slightly parted, still in shock — and now instantly turned on. He'd just had a shower; his hair was still wet, the smell of his soap filling the car. I wanted to lick him. My eyes must have shown something because his darkened even more if that were possible.

He said nothing, just wrapped a hand behind my neck and slammed his lips against mine with a deep growl that worked its way through me and settled between my legs. Our tongues danced in a fury of need, our hands tugging at hair, our shirts, anything we could grab ahold of to make us get closer. Without breaking the kiss, he pulled me onto his lap so I was straddling him. Through my thin biker shorts, I could feel how hard he was and instinctively ground my hips into him. He groaned into my mouth and pulled away from the kiss, still holding both sides of my face. His eyes were a deep green right now, still burning through me in a way that made a shiver rock through my entire body.

“Fuck,” he growled and brought his mouth to mine again. He pulled away to look at me. “I don't have a condom, baby.”

“I don’t care. I’m. . .I don’t. . .you already know I’ve never done it without one.”

His eyes darkened as they searched mine. “Me either.”

I ground my hips into him, and he crashed his lips against mine in a frenzy that I matched. He slowed this kiss, teased my lips, and swept his tongue into my mouth in a sensual dance. I rocked against him again, earning another growl. I pulled back slightly and bit his bottom lip as I rocked one more time before I settled back and rested my ass on his thighs.

“Aren’t you supposed to ride back with the team?” I searched his eyes, willing my heart to stop skipping for a moment.

“I told the coach I had a ride.”

“Can you do that?”

He cocked his head, a sexy smirk spreading across his face. “Did you not see me on the ice?”

“I saw everything.” I bit my lip to keep my smile at bay. It didn’t work and earned me a twinkle in his eyes.

“Everything, huh?” He leaned in and bit my lip again, gripping my hips. “Take my cock out.”

I immediately looked around. There were still people walking by. Some were standing in front of cars, busy in conversation. Banks’ tints were blackout dark. He’d gotten three tickets because of them and still refused to lighten them, but still. The car would surely move if we fucked in here.

“Lach.” My eyes widened at his.

“Take my cock out, Lyla James. I won’t ask again.”

I scrambled to do as he said. My hands shook as I lowered his sweats until they were beneath his thighs.

My eyes snapped to his. “No underwear?”

The spark in his eyes lit up in amusement. I shook my head but couldn’t reprimand him. Of course, he’d planned this, but when? When did he have time between the game and the short time he’d had to shower? I started to undress, not wanting to waste any time, now that I knew we were doing this.

He gripped the front of the jersey I wore, a fire in his eyes when I looked at him. “Keep this on.”

Jesus. I was a goner. I’d probably come before my shorts were completely off me. Somehow, I managed to undress from the bottom down quickly. He pulled me back onto his lap, his fingers digging into the flesh of each of my ass cheeks. That alone was making me shake. He let go of the left

one and watched me as he brought his hand between us, his fingers moving slowly up and down my folds. He bit his lip and groaned, as if what he was doing to me was bringing him pleasure. I smiled at the sight. I loved seeing him like this, loved knowing I was the only one who had ever made him this way.

“Damn. So wet for me.” He dipped two fingers inside me, took them out, and massaged my other hole.

“Lach,” I breathed, eyes widening as I gripped his shoulders.

“Relax for me, baby.” He returned his lips to mine, his hands moving between both holes. He pumped a little faster and dipped a finger inside my ass. I squirmed.

“F-f-f-f-uuuuuck.” I dug my nails into his shoulder blades.

“God, you’re so fucking hot.” He bit my bottom lip as he moved his fingers inside me.

He moved his thumb against my clit, and that was it. My orgasm hit so hard that I forgot where we were. Unintelligible things left my mouth as an orgasm ripped through me. He took his fingers back and wiped them against his sweats as he positioned me over his dick. I used his shoulders as leverage and sank onto him ever so slowly, watching the expression on his face. He whispered my name like a prayer as his eyes shut, and he threw his head back when I finally had him fully inside me. He brought his gaze to mine and held my hips to keep me from moving. I slid my hands from his shoulders and wrapped them around his neck.

“Let me move,” I moaned, needing the friction he provided.

“One second, baby,” he said, eyes hooded.

“I feel like I’m going to die if I don’t move,” I whispered. The smile that spread over his face was sinful, but he finally loosened his grip on me and let me move.

“Fuuuuck. You feel so fucking good,” he groaned, lifting his hips to meet mine each time I came down on him. “Fuck fuck fuuuuck.”

Our bodies moved in perfect harmony together, the way we always did. When I was with him, I couldn’t remember anyone I’d been with before. The way he felt inside me, the way he held me, kissed me, looked at me. It was perfect. I slowed down, lifting and rocking my hips slower. Each time I took him in again, I was sure we both stopped breathing.

“You look so fucking hot riding my cock, Lyla,” he said, his voice gravelly as he slid his hands underneath the jersey and found my nipples. “So

fucking hot with my name on your back.”

“Fuck.” I threw my head back. He was so deep like this, and the way he was touching me was dizzying. His fingers tightened on my nipples as he inhaled sharply.

“Fuck, Lyla,” he breathed. I felt the orgasm climbing. I was almost there. Almost.

“Oh, fuck. I’m gonna come.” I threw my head back.

He lowered his hands and grabbed my hips again. “Eyes on me, baby.”

My gaze flashed to his and I exploded, convulsing on his lap as the orgasm continued to hit me. He followed quickly behind me, chanting my name as he unloaded inside me. It was such a strange feeling. He kissed me slowly, pressing my chest to his in an embrace. He held me so tight against him that I thought I might disappear inside of him. I wanted to. God, I wanted to. When we pulled away, he set his forehead on mine. We were both breathing heavily, as the silence stretched between us. Sex with him was always intense. Sex with him after he’d won a game was fire, though.

“You fuck me up, Lyla James,” he said quietly.

I pulled back and met his eyes, smiling. It must’ve been his favorite thing about me, because every time I smiled, it looked like the world stopped for him, which made me want to do it all the time, only for him.

“You’ve ruined me, Lachlan Duke,” I said. “Ruined.”

He searched my eyes for a long moment. Too long. And kissed me again.

CHAPTER 19

LACHLAN

4 HOURS EARLIER

TODAY WAS GOING to be perfect. We'd win this game and close out our time here as champions. My agent had everything ready to go, so I could start the next chapter in my career, and Lyla and I could finally be together freely. I wasn't sure where, but I'd make sure of it. As it is, the thought of being apart from her for a week was making me antsy. I told her I'd give her the week before I flew my ass to California to look for her. She laughed like I was joking, and laughed harder when she realized I wasn't. She was perfect for me. If it were up to me, I'd propose tomorrow and lock her down right now.

Other guys going pro were excited about the puck bunnies they'd get now, but I was over that life. I'd been there, done that, bought the shirt, and Lyla James burned it. I only wanted her. Of course, proposing was out of the question. I may be ready to get it over with, but I had to respect her decision of wanting to wait. It was annoying, but it wasn't like I could force her to marry me. The idea sat in my mind for a moment too long before I shook it away.

After today's game, she was finally going to tell me everything and give me the name of the person who'd ruined her life. I couldn't fucking wait to beat the motherfucker. She'd warned me not to do that, but I couldn't see how I'd keep my hands to myself after everything she'd told me. I'd scoured the social media profiles of everyone she knew, including her father, trying to find bits of information that could tell me who it was, and I came up short every time. I felt for her when she told me about the crash and Luke's death. That had to be a heavy cross to bear, especially since she blamed herself for it. But when she told me about the rape, I fucking lost it. I was going to make them wish they'd never been born. Man or woman, I didn't care. Though if it

was a woman, I might need to hire a woman to do the dirty work for me. I asked her why she didn't go to the police, and she looked so scared at the mention of them that I knew it wasn't an option. It was okay. I'd take care of it.

I was lost in thought, packing my shit, when Prescott and Mason walked into the locker room to pack their stuff.

"You going back home this week?" Mason asked.

"Yeah, until I figure out my next move."

"You going to the party tonight?" he asked. "And are you finally going to tell me why you haven't been going to any recently?"

"He went to mine," Prescott said.

"Yeah, and everyone is tight-lipped about it, so I couldn't even get any dirt," Mason replied.

"I wanna know why you put money in the pot," Aaron added as he walked in, catching the tail end of the question.

Drew and the other guys had come in having conversations but stopped when they heard Aaron's question. They were nosey motherfuckers. I understood why they were so fascinated by this, though. Unless it was Friday night, I'd never been one to skip a party. I'd never put money in the dibs bin. Anyone who'd been at Prescott's party already knew, but Mason was right. People had been tight-lipped about Lyla and me. It was shocking and nice to know that the people Prescott vetted were loyal and followed his rules. Lyla hadn't given me the green light to tell people about us, but it was the *last* freaking day. It was my last day to talk shit with these guys and I wanted them to know. Besides, she would give me a name and tell me everything in detail after we won the game. What did it matter if I told my teammates just a few hours before then? What was said in this locker room always stayed here, so fuck it.

"I have a girlfriend," I said.

I'd never said that aloud. Lyla had never said it aloud either. It seemed like such a dumb term, but it was the only way to describe what we had in a way people could understand. She was mine, and I was hers, period. So, if the term girlfriend explained that, I'd stick with it. I wasn't surprised to see every single one of their jaws drop — everyone besides Prescott and Drew.

"Who?!" a few of them asked in unison.

"Ho-ly shit." That was Mason.

I laughed and shook my head. The coaches were standing by the door

with a couple of men who might as well be on the coaching staff, as much as they were around. They were cool, though, so I didn't mind them hearing. Prescott seemed on edge from the beginning of the conversation, though, and I wondered if he'd go tell Lyla I did this. It didn't matter.

"Did I just hear that Lachlan Duke has a fucking girlfriend?" Coach Rob asked loudly as the rest of them laughed.

"You did."

"No fucking way." That was Tucker, our goalie.

I shrugged.

"Who is it?" One of them said.

"You can't drop some shit like this and not tell us."

"Oh shit. I know who it is," Mason said, eyes dancing.

"Who?" everyone shouted.

"Can I tell them?" he asked.

I shrugged. It was going to get out after the game, when I picked her up and kissed the fuck out of her in the middle of the ice, in front of everyone anyway.

"Lyla Marichal," Mason announced, like she was about to walk into the room.

"Daaaaamn," one of them said.

"You always get the hot ones," another added. I couldn't argue there.

"The one who wears all the baggy clothes and shit?" one asked.

That one made me laugh. I answered no questions. I didn't need to. Even though they hadn't heard what happened at Prescott's party, rumors had already spread like wildfire from the previous one where I'd almost fought Mase. I wasn't sure whether or not she knew. I had a feeling that if she found out people were talking about us together, she would have tried to get us to hold off on seeing each other. No way I was going to let that happen. I kept packing my shit, as I listened to them go on and on about the women who talked shit about Lyla because they were jealous of her. I didn't like to hear that, but I knew it made no difference to her. Lyla didn't give a shit what anyone thought of her.

I convinced the coach to let me drive to the game. He'd agreed and let a few

of us take our own cars. We'd been following each other during the drive, but at some point, everyone scattered in the darkness and rain on the way. I was sitting in my car, calling Lyla before I went inside. She'd told me she'd be at this game, and I wanted to ensure she wouldn't drive alone. The call went straight to voicemail. She could have been driving Marissa and Banks today. When he took us home last time, she'd complained about him getting too close to the cars in front of us. I wouldn't put it past her to be the driver. The thought of her out in these conditions worried me even more. She was an excellent driver, but she'd told me it had been raining the night her mom died. Even though she'd found a way to numb herself to those feelings, I couldn't imagine it wouldn't cross her mind. I called again — straight to voicemail. I sent her a text.

Me: text me when you get here

I waited another minute, looked at the time, and got out of the car. She'd text while I was changing. As I walked toward the arena, I kept looking at my phone just in case. While I looked down, I saw my shoes had become untied, so I set my phone in my pocket and knelt. I heard something shift behind me as I tied my shoe, but I ignored it. After that, everything went black.

CHAPTER 20

I SHOULD HAVE NEVER BEEN SO careless driving here and letting Marissa and Banks go ahead without me. They were waiting for me in the parking lot, but still. Driving separately meant I was forced to park further away than I'd liked. It also meant that I'd have to walk alone. All day, I'd had the worst feeling in the pit of my stomach. Marissa brushed it off when I mentioned it, but the feeling remained. Mom's book about trusting your instincts hummed in the back of my mind. Of course, she'd given it to me years too late. I knew that when I read the chapter about not trusting anyone. The smell of cigarettes hit me and my stomach instantly coiled. I walked faster and continued looking over my shoulder as dread continued to build in my chest. I crossed my arms and clutched my phone for comfort. The parking lot was mostly deserted — everyone was already inside as they got ready for the hockey game.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I unlocked my phone and went to click Marissa's name. My finger hadn't even touched her name when a sudden force yanked me back by my hair. I clicked something on my phone just before I dropped it and let out a piercing scream. I kicked desperately at their kneecaps and tried to turn around to fight them, but their grip on my hair was too tight. So tight that tears sprung down my face. I kept screaming as they yanked me against them.

“Did you think you would get away from me this easily?” He said behind me. “Did you think you and your little boyfriend would skip town without consequence?”

The dread weighing on my chest turned into a raking sob that I let out in a mix of surprise and terror. “Please,” I screamed, setting my hands over his on my hair. “No. Please. Don't.”

“Are you pleading for yourself or him?” He asked, his familiar voice near my ear. “You’re late for both.”

As I screamed, I processed his words. “No.” It was a whispered cry. “No. No. No.”

He turned me around and let go of my hair, grabbing my arm and the front of the jersey I had on — Lach’s jersey — tearing the top of it with his grip as he brought my face to his and tried to kiss me. I pressed my lips together and punched him, scratching at him as I continued screaming. He was too big, too strong. Nothing would work. Even as I fought and screamed, I knew that nothing would stop him from doing whatever he would do to me.

“Oh.” He laughed loudly. Harshly. “I see how it is. You’re not going to kiss me? This is exactly why your boyfriend won’t live through the night.”

Oh God, oh God, oh God. I looked into his hard-blue eyes. Had he hurt Lachlan, or was he just fucking with me? Was he planning to, later? I needed to warn him. I needed to warn Marissa and Prescott. I needed to tell someone. I screamed again, but this time, it came out a shaky sob.

“Leave him alone! I won’t see him again. I won’t talk to him! Please!”

A harsh laugh escaped his lips as his eyes narrowed. “I’m supposed to believe that?” he asked, his voice low before he screamed, “AM I SUPPOSED TO BELIEVE THAT AFTER I HEARD HIM SAY HE WAS GOING TO KEEP SEEING YOU?”

I threw all my strength into a punch and tried to knee him in the groin. My hits became desperate as I started throwing punches, knees, and kicks, screaming with everything I had. He released my jersey suddenly, making me stumble backward, and threw a punch at my face so hard that I fell back instantly. My ears felt hollow as I fell, my eyes doubling with burning tears. It hurt so much that I didn’t even feel the fall when I landed on the pavement. The scream that ripped out of me sounded animalistic. Through my hazy vision, I saw him kneel and get closer.

“You beg for *his* life?” He spat in my face. He grabbed my throat and squeezed. “You belong to me, little girl.”

He pressed his lips against mine so roughly that I was sure he’d break my gums. I punched at him, but my arms had grown weak in the attack. I kneed him again and felt myself make contact with something. He pulled back, the motion setting me free, and I began to get up, but he recovered too quickly, and I only made it to my knees before he pulled me back down.

“This is what happens when little girls are disobedient,” he hissed.

“Remember that when you try to let another man have you.”

Another sharp blow landed on my face — everything went black. My ears were ringing loudly, and the taste of iron filled my mouth when I came to again. I tried to open my eyes, but they wouldn't open fully. He cupped me over my jeans and squeezed. I whimpered, waiting for him to pull them down, but he let go. His form looked like a black shadow rising above me as he stood. I felt him place something firm against my torso, his foot maybe. He pressed down hard, sending a different kind of pain through me. My throat formed what it could of a scream before everything went dark again.

I heard voices near — so many voices. Someone touched me and I screamed again, as my entire body shook. I felt someone move me, carry me, and place me down on a hard surface. A pinch on my arm made me yelp.

“For the pain. Just hang on,” the person said.

I tried to nod but sobs ripped through me again. “It hurts. It hurts. It hurts.”

“Hey, I'm here. You're going to be okay.” I heard Marissa say shakily.

“Lachlan,” I tried to say in my hoarse voice. “Lachlan.”

Then, everything went dark again.

Opening my eyes felt impossible, but I knew I was at the hospital. I heard the machines beeping; I felt the sting of tape over my hand from where they'd put an IV. I'd felt this all, once before, when I'd had an asthma attack and had to stay overnight. My face still hurt, but not as much as it did, and I knew, without asking, that they were filling me with morphine. I opened my eyes slowly to cloudy vision.

“Hey.” Prescott squeezed my hand. I started breathing hard, my eyes filling with tears.

“Lachlan,” I said in a broken voice. “Please. Lachlan.”

“He's okay.” He ran his fingers softly over mine. “They took him to another hospital, but he's okay.”

A sharp wail filled the room, and I realized it was coming from me. He'd hurt him. He'd hurt him enough to put him in the hospital. Would he survive? Oh my God. My chest heaved.

“Hey, hey,” Prescott said. “He's okay. He's fine, Lyles. He's fine.”

“She’s awake?” That was Marissa. I heard her footsteps rush over, heard tears in her throat as she said, “Oh, thank God. We were so worried.”

“Lachlan,” I whispered.

“He’s okay,” Marissa said quickly. “You need to focus on your recovery.”

I tried to shake my head. Maybe I did. The tears wouldn’t stop running down my face. I couldn’t see him anymore. It didn’t matter where he went. As long as I was around, he’d be in danger. The realization caused a sharp pain in my chest that no amount of morphine could numb. I’d found what people search for their entire lives and lost it in an instant. They let me cry until I ran out of tears. The nurses came in, messed with the IV, and asked questions that I answered numbly. By the time it was just us again, I could form shaky and hoarse words they could understand.

“Pres, I can’t see him anymore.” A sob formed in the center of my chest, but I fought it.

He ran both hands down his face. “Lyles, he’s not just going to let you walk away. He’s already been asking about you.”

That set me off crying again. When I took soft, shaky breaths, I looked at my friend again.

“I need to leave.” I swallowed. It hurt. Everything hurt, but most of all the words leaving my mouth. “I don’t know what it’ll take. Change my identity. Move somewhere he wouldn’t think to go to. I don’t care. I can’t. . .” I took another shaky breath, as tears filled my eyes. “I can’t see him again.”

“Lyles,” Marissa whispered, running her hand over my head. “We need to figure out a way to tell the police. Even if it’s over the phone when we’re someplace safe, he can’t keep doing this.”

I nodded. “I’ll call when I’m untraceable, and he won’t go after me.”

“Rest,” Prescott said. “I’ll be back later.”

“Are you going to see him?” I asked. Fuck, it hurt to ask.

“Yeah.”

“Can you do something for me? Can you try to get black roses?”

“Sure. I’m not sure anyone sells goth roses, but I can try.”

That made me smile a bit, but the smile quickly turned into a full-on sob.

“I need to write something for him.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Marissa said.

“If you want to disappear, I’m sure I can make it happen, but I don’t think writing him something will help matters,” Pres said.

“I need to. I need to do this.”

“Okay. I’ll be back before I go visit him then.” He walked to the door.

“Pres.”

He stopped and turned around, waiting.

“I love you.” I started sobbing again. “You’re the best support system I could ever ask for.”

He walked back. The three of us hugged. When we pulled back, all of us were wiping our faces.

“I’ll be back,” he said and walked out.

“You’re going to be okay, honey.” Marissa sat on the bed. She said that but cried each time she looked at my face. She wiped her face. “We need to take pictures. We need to have some kind of proof that he did this.”

“I agree.”

I let her take pictures. I couldn’t recognize myself in them. My thoughts returned to Lachlan. The same questions continued to run through my head — what did he do to him? What does his face look like? My mouth quivered whenever I pictured him lying on a hospital bed because of me. My light was gone. I promised myself that as soon as I was far enough, I’d call the police. I just hoped they’d listen to me.

CHAPTER 21

LACHLAN

I WOKE up in a hospital bed surrounded by people. What the fuck? I tried to move and my head felt like it might explode, so I immediately stopped. Did something happen during the game? I tried to think about it, but my mind was blank. I remembered getting to the arena and calling Lyla. I remembered sending her a text telling her to let me know when she arrived. Then, I got out, and then. . .nothing.

“Can’t they look at the camera feed?” Coach Jameson demanded. “There are cameras everywhere.”

“That’s true. And people were still getting there,” Coach Rob added. “A student from Ellis found him and called 911.”

“We’re trying to get the camera feeds,” someone else said.

“What’s happening?” I asked, my voice a croak. *How long had I been lying here?*

“You need to come back and ask your questions later,” my mom said. “He needs to rest.”

A man, Officer Hughes, I realized, sighed. “Just one question. Do you remember anything?”

“Nothing at all.” I frowned at my own words.

They all said goodbye to me as they left the room, and then it was only Mom and Liam. Both had worried looks on their faces that made my heart drop. I moved my arms and legs to make sure they were working. They were. Why were they so worried? I was fine. I’d *be* fine. . .right?

“How long have I been out?”

“Three days,” Liam said.

“Three days?” I tried to move up but instantly regretted it again. Mom launched forward to help me lie back down.

“You need to rest, Lach.” She fluffed my pillow.

“Where’s Lyla?” I asked, and followed the question with, “Did we win?” He blinked. “You’re not serious.”

“Did we or not?”

“You’re in the fucking hospital, and you’re worried about the stupid game?” Liam spat. “You won by default. The game wasn’t played,” Mom replied.

“Because of this?” I asked. When Mom nodded, I shut my eyes and thought about my teammates.

Most of them weren’t going pro, either because they weren’t good enough or didn’t want to. They’d been looking forward to that game, since it was their last. I tried to comfort myself with the reminder that we’d won both previous games, but it wasn’t enough. Guilt still took hold of me. I shut my eyes and felt myself dozing off. Thoughts of Lyla infiltrated my mind, my dreams. When my eyes snapped open again, I expected her to be there. She wasn’t. My mom was still there, but Liam was gone.

“I’m going to go get coffee,” Mom said, kissing my forehead. “Liam went to get food. He’ll be back before me.”

She was walking out, as Prescott walked inside.

“Hey, man,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit. I heard you didn’t play the last game.”

“Who cares?” Pres frowned. “They gave us the option, and not one person on the team said yes. Same with Ellis. When they heard what happened, they chose to end the series. We were up anyway.”

“That’s fucked.” I shook my head.

“We won.” He shrugged. “We’re good with that.”

I believed him. My team was selfless like that.

“Where’s Lyla?” I asked. His sudden change of expression made my heart sink. “Did something happen to her?”

He sighed heavily. “I’ll be right back.”

He walked toward the door, opened it slightly, grabbed something, and shut it again. When he turned around, he was holding a bouquet of black roses. My heart dropped again. She wasn’t coming. I was sure of it. He placed the vase with the rest of the flowers I’d received — all lively and positive in comparison. Hers were my favorite. I swallowed thickly and took a sip of the water the nurse brought me earlier. Pres plucked the attached card and brought it over, handing it to me. My hand shook as I took it. I didn’t

have to read it to know she was gone. I already felt her absence.

“She left, didn’t she?” I asked, voice hoarse.

Pres looked down, a sad expression on his face when he glanced back up. I watched him swallow it back before he responded. “She’s gone, Lach.”

My heart stopped beating. “What do you mean gone?”

“She’s safe,” he said quickly, “She said what happened was a wake-up call, and she’s too scared to be anywhere near you, just in case.” He paused, swallowing again. “You won’t see her again.”

So many things were happening inside my body, I thought I might explode. I felt like crying for the first time since I was seven years old. I sniffled and realized that I was crying. I wiped my face and clenched my jaw to hold back the rest of my emotion. I knew I would lose it as soon as he walked out of the room. Since I had nothing to throw, my anger would come out as tears. I knew it. I took a deep breath.

“How was she when she left?”

“Fucking destroyed.” Pres let out a laugh that sounded like he wanted to add more but held it back. I had to swallow again. “I’ve never seen her like this. Not even after. . .” He paused, tears filling his own eyes. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Not even after Luke. Not even after her mom.” He took a deep, shaky breath and wiped his eyes. “We could’ve lost you, Lach.”

“I’ll find her,” I said quietly.

“I’m sorry, man,” he whispered. “She doesn’t want you to look for her.”

I let out a sharp laugh. “That’s not up to her.”

“She’s a ghost now, Lach. I’m telling you, you won’t find her. She wants you to live your dream life and says you can’t if she’s in it.”

That made me laugh. She wanted me to live my dream life without her in it. What a fucking. . . I gritted my teeth. How the *fuck* did she expect me to do that? Prescott stayed around a little longer. When he left, I didn’t cry like I thought I would. Anger had taken the place of the sadness I’d previously felt. I opened the card. It was written in sharpie, her handwriting, though. I read it. Stared at it. Reread it.

I’m so fucking sorry.

I love you too much.

X, Lyla James

The words were blotched as if her tears had fallen as she wrote them. A smile formed on my face. I didn’t need a mirror to tell me it looked more sinister than happy. I felt it in my bones. She thought she was going to leave

me? She thought that after writing that she loved me, actually writing it, I was going to just, what, let her go? Oh, no. I chuckled at my thoughts. I was going to find her, and when I did, she would wish she hadn't run from me.

PART TWO

3 YEARS LATER

PROLOGUE

STARRING in the NHL All-Star Game is a good way to go before I hang up my skates. Our team annihilated our opponents. Not because the other three teams aren't good. They're fucking great, but they put the three best hockey players of our generation on the same team. They couldn't expect it to be a fair fight. Today, the competition is less aggressive since we're doing fun drills. I hope it'll give me a moment of respite from all the questions I've been fielding all weekend.

I've spent the majority of my time here telling the guys I'm friends with that I'm retiring. I don't want them to hear it on ESPN, and knowing those fuckers, they'll have the news sitting in front of a sportscaster by the end of the day. I'm going to use my final media time here to announce it. I already know it'll be plastered everywhere. There's no chance in hell she'll miss it. Not that it matters at this point. What's done is done, and my anger has been festering with each day that passes.

"Duuuke," Nolan says, stopping in front of me and giving me a fist bump.

"Hey, man. You missed breakfast."

"Yeah, I've been dealing with some shit." His eyes darken as he looks off into the crowd.

I look up at the seats with him. It's still pretty empty since the shootout challenge doesn't start for another hour. Our options are to get on the ice or do media time. A no-brainer. Nolan Astor and I had already been close friends, but our bond grew even stronger when we were drafted into the pro league. We relied heavily on each other to figure out what was going on. Thankfully, Logan Fitzgerald was around to answer our questions. That's the good thing about playing in competitive leagues your entire life. You end up making friends along the way. I'd played with Nolan and Fitz on various

occasions, but the three of us had never been on the same team together before this All-Star Game.

“Do you need me to fuck someone up for you?” I ask him after a moment, since he’s still scowling at most seats.

He laughs. “No, but if I did, you’d be on my short list of people to call.”

“At your service,” I say.

“I can’t fucking believe you’re retiring.” He gets serious and shakes his head. “I’ve had three days to sit on that news, and I still can’t wrap my head around it. Why? What’s the *real* reason?”

“I told you. I have some things I need to take care of, and my dad. . .”

“Oh, fuck you,” he says, lowering his voice but keeping his eyes narrowed. “Don’t try to feed me that bullshit about your dad again. I know how much you hate him. He was an asshole your entire life. I can count on one hand the number of times he was at your games, and we’ve been playing together since fucking middle school, so cut the bullshit.”

“We’ve been working on our relationship,” I say and look back at the stands, where two women wearing shirts with our names written across their tits are pressed against the plexiglass.

When they notice me looking in their direction, the one wearing my name on her shirt smiles, waves around an all-access pass, and points at the tunnel, telling me she’ll be waiting for me back there. Nolan notices my distraction and looks over. The woman wearing his name does the same thing. He lifts his stick in greeting, and we turn our backs to them.

Nolan shakes his head. “They never stop.”

“You just waved your stick,” I point out. “That’s a clear invitation.”

“Nah. They won’t have access to me. I already told security not to let any puck bunnies through. I’m not fucking around anymore.”

“How honorable of you,” I say, feeling my lips twitch.

“Look who’s talking.” He shoots me a look. “At least five women were sitting around waiting for you the last time you came to Boston, and you ignored them.”

“I’m not interested.”

It’s the same at every city that we spend more than a night in — puck bunnies and parties. It doesn’t do anything for me. Or Nolan. The three of us — me, Nolan, and Fitz — have had the same experience with women our entire lives. We smile and they drop their panties. It’s that easy for us. It’s probably the reason we’re sick of it.

“No luck here either?” he asks after a moment.

“Nope.” I skate to the nearby puck. We start passing to each other as we talk and skate around the rink.

All of my teammates know about Lyla. It’s hard to keep a secret like that, when you don’t show up at parties and look for the same person in every city you play in. It was annoying initially when they gave me shit about it, but when they realized I was serious, they started keeping an eye out for her. Fitz and Nolan know, because during last year’s All-Star game, we drank too fucking much one night and talked about everything. At this point, I might as well wear a shirt with her picture on it.

Nolan’s dry laugh pulls me from my thoughts. “Leave it to us to fall for the most infuriating, impossible fucking women on the planet.”

“At least you know where yours is.”

His responding laugh is short and bitter. “Trust me, that’s a different kind of hell.”

“I’m sure it is, but it only took you a few months to find her.” I stop the puck and skate with it a little further, passing it from another angle.

“Look at the fucking circumstances.” He stops the puck and smiles, nodding a greeting to whoever’s skating behind me.

I see Fitz skating toward us, distractedly looking at the stands. When he reaches us, he stops and keeps looking around.

“Who are you looking for, fucker?” I ask, even though I know damn well.

He shoots me a look. “Mae’s supposed to be here by now.”

“Maybe she’s hanging out with the other wives,” Nolan says, skating a little further away to pass the puck again.

He passes it to Logan, who lets it slide by, since his eyes are still on the stands. I see the puck bunnies again. There are six of them now. They’re all looking at us, but they don’t try to get our attention, which is odd.

“Puck bunnies don’t even waste their time on him anymore, since they know they’ll get rejected,” Nolan says, answering the question in my head, as he brings the puck back.

“I bet they had a pity party about it,” I say.

“Who the fuck cares? He’s a lucky motherfucker,” Nolan says. “Even I’d beat his ass if he fucked around on Mae.”

Fitz narrows his eyes over his shoulder as he sets the phone to his ear,

probably calling Mae as we speak.

“I don’t think Fitz would ever be that stupid,” I say, looking at the side of his face. “I’d beat his ass with you, and then I’d make my move and try to get Mae.”

“You wanna fight, Duke? Is that what this is?” Fitz turns to me immediately, expression threatening. I laugh. He doesn’t. He skates closer to me, but before he can say anything else, he softens his voice as he speaks into the phone. “Hey, where are you?”

“Everything good?” I ask when he hangs up the phone.

“Yeah. Her brother checked out of his hotel and wanted to put his suitcase in our room until we leave,” he says.

“Even if she weren’t Logan’s girl,” Nolan starts, since he can’t seem to let this go. “You wouldn’t try to get with her.”

“And you would?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Stop talking about my fucking wife,” Fitz growls.

“We’re saying we wouldn’t go for her,” Nolan says. “Because we’re fucking pathetic.”

I nod gravely. Fitz rolls his eyes.

“Look at what we can have.” Nolan lifts the stick in the direction of the puck bunnies.

The three of us look.

“They’re fucking hot,” Nolan says.

“They are,” I agree, as I look at each of them.

I already know how this ends, though, and it isn’t with my dick in any of their mouths. I’m sure no sane person would pass them up, but what the fuck would I know about that? Lyla took what was left of my sanity with her.

“The two of you are single,” Fitz says, turning his back on them to face us. “You do realize that, right?”

I glare at him and turn my back to them as well.

“That’s why I said we’re pathetic.” Nolan gives them his back. “I can’t believe they’re still standing there.”

“And I can’t believe they’re making us do this shoot-out,” Fitz says, stealing the puck from me. He’s complained about the shoot-out five times.

“Are you scared cuz you know I’m gonna whoop your ass?” I steal the puck from him, as we skate to the other side of the rink.

“Please.” He scoffs.

“Speaking of ass whoopings,” Nolan starts. “Which idiot thought it was a

good idea to put the three of us on the same team?”

“Someone who wanted to watch an ass whooping,” I say.

“I bet a club is trying to get the three of us on their roster now,” Nolan says, shooting me a hard look. “But one of us is retiring, so that won’t happen.”

“What’s the real reason you’re retiring?” Fitz asks as we stop. He passes the puck to Nolan, who passes it to me.

“I told you, my father. . .”

“Oh, fuck off with that,” Fitz says, cutting me off the same way our friend did earlier. “You’re going to walk away from this.” He signals around the arena. “For your dickhead father? Don’t give me that shit.”

“He didn’t even go to any of the finals games, and they were right by his building,” Nolan says.

My stomach still tightens at the mention of that tournament. No one blames me for the game not taking place, at least publicly, but the guilt eats me alive each time I think about it. I know the attack wasn’t my fault, and there was no way I could play, but it pisses me off that it affected everyone else, too. I try to push the thought aside. I’ve been in a semi-good mood this weekend, because I’m trying to savor each moment of this — being on the ice, the comradery, the atmosphere — all of it. I’ve managed to push most negative thoughts of Lyla James aside for this, but I have no doubt that when I step off the plane in Chicago, the resentment will grow.

“Look, you need a break? Fine. It’s off-season anyway,” Fitz says. “But don’t fucking retire.”

“Have you considered that maybe finding her isn’t a possibility?” Nolan adds.

I grit my teeth. “It’s not a possibility.”

“What are you gonna do if she’s moved on?” Fitz asks, brows shooting up in reaction to whatever he sees on my face.

“She hasn’t.” I grip the stick tighter.

I would kill the motherfucker she’s moved on with; that’s what would happen, but I know she hasn’t. If I haven’t been able to move on, she hasn’t either. There is no moving on from this.

“What will you do when you find her?” Nolan asks, looking as concerned as Fitz. “Every time you talk about her, it looks like you want to fucking kill her.”

“He’s not wrong,” Nolan adds.

I look at both of them. I don't need a mirror to tell me what my expression must look like. "I'm going to make her life hell."

With that, we start skating toward the goal, passing the puck between each other. The way we're perfectly synchronized is insane. I've never played with anyone like this. Not right off the bat, anyway. It happens when I play with Mason, but that's because we've been playing together for so long. This shit is different. The moment the three of us get on the ice together, it's fucking magic. We're like fucking Jordan, Pippen, and Rodman. Wade, LeBron, and Bosh. Fitzgerald, Astor, and Duke had a pretty nice ring to it. Maybe in another life. For everyone's sake, I hope in that life, I'm not this fucking bitter.

CHAPTER 22

DELILAH

(FORMERLY KNOWN AS LYLA)

“COME ON! PASS IT! PASS IT!” Wade shouts from the other side of the pitch.

Before I get a chance to turn around, I cover my mouth and laugh. God, I hope no one saw me. The last thing I need is to deal with some parent’s bullshit today. It is funny, though, how Wade talks to them like they’re already playing serious soccer. They’re freaking five, for crying out loud. One of them already scored a goal for the opposite team. Another one is sitting down next to the goal because she’s tired.

“Come ON, RIGBY!” Another shout from Wade.

Rigby just stands there, watching the ball roll right past him and closer to the opposing team’s goal. I really shouldn’t laugh, but this is my source of entertainment. It’s what I do for fun on the weekends, when I’m not training teenagers and working at Tackle Sports Center. Saturdays are training days, but since I had the day off, I said yes when Wade called and asked me to help referee the little kids. If I hadn’t, I’d be helping Marissa with her smoothie shop (the one beside her flower shop) or at home doing laundry. My life revolves around those things now. For the past three years, it’s revolved around medical school, and on Saturdays, my internship at Tackle, but now that it’s over, I’m left adrift before I start my specialty training.

I’m dreading the time off already. Maybe I’ll help Marissa out full-time or tell the facility to throw more training sessions at me. Anything to not stand around for too long. Standing around leads to thinking, which leads to depression, which leads to numbness, and I’m finally starting to let myself feel things — trying to, anyway. Thank goodness for therapy, I guess.

Therapy is the only contingency Prescott put on keeping my secret from Lachlan. It’s also the only way I got him and Marissa to agree never to

mention him to me. Forced or not, I can't lie and say therapy hasn't been helpful. It absolutely has, but in working out my grief, I've opened myself up to emotions I don't want to have. It has taken me five sessions to start opening up, and even now, I only do it through hypnotherapy. It's intense.

I have the therapist record my sessions. I'm not sure why, since it's not like I'm going to break out a bucket of popcorn and watch myself relive my trauma. I want to have it, though. My therapist is big on "showing your emotions," so she's had a field day with me. I still don't show my emotions often, but I'm pretty sure I was like this before everything caught fire. I don't know anymore.

Every night, I sit down, shut my eyes, and do breathing sessions to help me relax and replay scenes of the past. It hurts, of course. I'm a fucking glutton for pain. I think about Mom, Lach, and Luke. Since I don't let my friends talk about him, it almost feels like Lach died. Somehow, it hurts much more than when I lost Luke. It's a shitty thing to admit, but Lachlan is just different. He found a way to my heart when no one else could. He made me feel when no one else could. Sometimes, I want to call him just to hear his voice and wedge the knife a little deeper into my chest.

When I feel extra brave, I picture myself going to the authorities and telling them what happened, but that's always short-lived. We tried that the moment we landed in California and nothing happened. They don't believe us. I'd always known they wouldn't, so even if I went back there and did it in person, I'd just be dragging myself back into the pits of hell for nothing. It would mean I changed my entire identity to stay hidden for nothing. It's not like I'd get Lachlan Duke back. Maybe his forgiveness, but even that seems far-fetched. Besides, for all I know, he could be married. I get an instant stomach ache when I think about that. Even if he's not married, I bet he has a girlfriend or *girlfriends*. I don't want to know. It's best I don't. I stopped watching sports networks altogether, when I realized they were always talking about him. It hurts too much. The only thing that helps is the reminder that he's okay. He got out of that hospital, signed with a professional team, and is living his dream. That's as much as I know about him, and it's enough for me. He deserves to be happy.

My phone buzzes in the fanny pack I'm wearing as a crossbody, and I immediately cringe. I forgot to text Marissa to let her know I was going tonight. When Wade blows the whistle to alert me that the game has ended, I snap out of my thoughts and check my phone.

Marissa: remember tonight

Me: you really think i'd forget your bday?

Marissa: no, i really think you'd purposely not show up and stay home studying like a fucking nerd

Me: FU

Marissa: FU too

Me: i'll see you tonight.

When I set my phone away, the parents are still cheering and grabbing their kids. As I'm bending to pick up the soccer ball, I see a flash of blue and stand when I see Danica running to me from the other side of the pitch, her blonde hair sticking to her adorable sweaty face. She's one of the few who is always on time, which is definitely her father's doing, and she always wants a picture with me when she sees me.

"Coach Dee, can I take a picture with you?" she asks, breathing hard when she finally reaches me.

I crouch to her level. "Of course, sweetheart. Where's your dad?"

"Right here," Cooper says, waving his phone as he walks over. "She was upset that you weren't here last week."

I squeeze her small frame to my side. "Sometimes, I have to coach the big girls."

"I know," she pouts, jutting her bottom lip out.

"I keep telling her that now that you're starting your residency, you probably won't be here as much, but she doesn't want to accept it." Cooper shakes his head, smiling. "You're her favorite coach."

I lean in and get close to Danica's ear to whisper, "That's nice since you're my favorite player."

She beams at me, then at her dad's phone as he snaps the picture.

"You must have a million pictures of me." I dust off my knees as I stand up.

"I think I might." He laughs.

Cooper's the owner of Tackle, so even though I don't report to him, he's technically my boss. He's kind and always smiling. It's a good smile, a genuine one that reaches his eyes the way I wish mine did. I'm not there yet.

"All right then, see you next Saturday?" Cooper reaches for Danica's hand but keeps his blue eyes on mine.

"I guess so," I say. "You could see me on Monday at work, but you kicked me out of the facility."

He laughs. "You need a break!"

"Yeah, whatever," I joke as they walk away.

I continue picking up the soccer balls, cones, and nets while Wade speaks to a couple of moms on the other side of the pitch. Wade is popular with the moms here. He's good-looking, but I think his status on the U.S. Men's Soccer Team is really what does it for them. They're that type. I know this because I've stood next to them enough times to hear that they only talk about athletes. As Delilah, I've tried to apply a "do you" personality, but this disturbs me. It's not like they need the money. I'm pretty sure they were rich before they met their rich husbands. If I'm being honest with myself, I think what upsets me is that I can see this happening to Lach. Wade glances over at me while I'm picking up a cone and shoots me a look that all but screams, "help me." I toss the rest of the things in the bucket and jog over, waving at the moms and saying hi when I reach them.

I turn to Wade. "You're supposed to be back with the equipment by five."

"Aw crap. I forgot about that." He chuckles, showing off his dimple to the ladies.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. The excuse works, though. They apologize for taking up his time, and he tells them he loves when they do. The minute they're out of earshot, he groans and picks up the bucket.

"You can't even complain," I say. "You always flash your dimple and tell them you love talking to them, which is why it keeps happening."

He glances at me sideways. "You seem to be immune to my dimples and charm."

"I may be the only one in all of Rhodes who feels that way."

He bumps his arm against mine, and I stumble a few steps. When I regain my balance, I push him hard enough that he stumbles, and things fly out of the bucket. He shoots me a murderous glance, and I take off, jogging to my car while he picks up the fallen supplies. He's still talking to me when I turn on the car, but I drive off before he can stop me again. I'm dying to get home and shower. And I still have to mentally prepare myself to be excited for Marissa's birthday tonight. That's one thing that hasn't changed.

CHAPTER 23

DELILAH

I TURN on the television as I walk to my kitchen and groan when it switches on ESPN. Fucking Prescott. I never watch TV, but if I do, that's the last channel I look at, especially around this time. There's a breaking news banner on the bottom. I turn around to get a yogurt from the fridge when my phone buzzes.

"Hey," I say, confused. "I'm not getting dressed yet."

"I know, but something's happening and I wanted you to hear it from me and not on a TV at Medley's later tonight."

My heart stops. "What happened?"

"Lachlan. . ."

My heart drops. I interrupt her before I can finish. "Oh, my God. What happened?"

I look back up at the TV, and sure enough, his gorgeous face is there. I set down the yogurt.

"He's retiring," she says.

"Jesus, Marissa. You should've led with that."

"Hey, it's not my fault that your brain automatically assumes the worst of everything," she says.

She's not wrong about that. I was already picturing going to his funeral and dying of a broken heart. The only reason I haven't died from that now is the knowledge that he's alive and well, and the stupid little spark of hope that constantly zaps through me when I think about seeing him again.

"Oddly enough, the TV was already on ESPN when I got here. I guess Pres was watching it last time he was here," I say, staring at the press conference Lach is having. Thankfully, it's on mute. I don't think I can handle seeing and hearing him.

She's silent for a moment. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I turn my back to the TV.

"Do you want me to cancel Medley's and come over?" she asks.

"No." I shut my eyes and shake my head. "I'll be there at eight."

"Do you want me to try to reserve somewhere else?" she asks tentatively.

I laugh. "Where in the universe is that news not going to be reported tonight?"

"Fuck," she breathes.

"I'll see you at eight. I'm totally fine, I promise."

We hang up and I slide down the refrigerator door slowly, until my ass is on the floor. I bring my knees up and bury my face in my hands. I *so* don't want to go to Medley's. I don't want to do anything. Sadness engulfs me as I sit there. Why would he retire? Maybe he was injured? God, I hope it's not due to what happened in Fairview. He loves that sport so much, and I already feel awful that he was hurt in the first place. *He could have died.* My eyes tear up, the way they do every time I think about that. I could have died as well, I know. Sometimes, I wish I had. The all-consuming guilt is something therapy will never fully take away. I know better than anyone that obsessing about the past won't change it, but it's hard not to think about every detail that went wrong. After a while, I force myself to stop thinking about it — about him — and make myself eat the yogurt, so I can get ready for the outing I'm already dreading.

"You're here!" Marissa says, letting out a quiet shriek as she wraps her arms around me.

"Happy Birthday, bitch." My voice is muffled in her hair. I spot Prescott and Wade talking by the door when we pull away. "I couldn't carry your presents, so they're at my place."

"Oh, stop it. My present is dressing you, but you did a pretty good job on your own." She gives me a once-over.

"I learned from the best," I say.

"You sure did." She smiles.

"So, are you excited to be another year closer to death?" I link my arm through hers and start walking.

She shoots me a droll look. “Yes, because it means I’ve survived this long.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asks.

“I am.” I take a breath. “I really am.”

“Do you think you’ll be even a little excited tonight?” she asks.

The previous birthdays we’ve celebrated here consisted of me fake smiling, going home early, and listening to Adele on full blast while drinking wine and bawling in my living room. 10/10 do not recommend feelings. They truly suck.

“I’m inwardly excited.”

“Hm.”

“I’m not going to leave early or. . .cry,” I whisper the word. “Tonight.”

“Good to know you won’t show emotion,” she whispers back.

“Jerk.”

She throws her head back in laughter, and I laugh lightly with her. When we finally reach the guys, Pres says hi to me, lifting and twirling me around. He gives me a full once-over and a sharp nod when he sets me down.

“Am I to your liking, Your Majesty?”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m making sure you’re eating.”

“Stop. She looks amazing,” Marissa says.

“She always looks amazing. That’s not the point,” Pres responds. “She was losing too much weight.”

“She didn’t look so amazing when she used to wear all those baggy clothes,” she points out.

“Yes, she did,” Pres responds.

“Can you stop talking about me? I’m right here.”

“What baggy clothes?” Wade asks.

“She wore things that were like three sizes too big for her,” Marissa says.

“First of all, two sizes too big. Second of all, I had my reasons,” I say. “Third of all, I don’t understand how my attire affects any of you.”

“All right, let’s go before Lyla gets hangry, and we have to deal with even more of her bitchiness,” Pres says, ushering us inside.

Once we’re sitting in a booth — Pres and Marissa on one side and me and Wade on the other — we order drinks and appetizers.

“Did you know Lach was going to retire?” Marissa asks Pres, who shoots her a look. “She already knows.”

“There’s no way to fucking miss it,” Wade says, signaling around to the TVs I’m avoiding.

“I had a feeling he might,” Pres says. “His dad had cancer and wants to step down from the company, so it was only a matter of time.”

I frown. “He hates his dad.”

“I guess the cancer diagnosis put things in perspective,” he says. “At least for his dad. I think Lach is still a little resentful, but his dad’s a fucking billionaire, so I’m sure it’ll help.”

“I can’t imagine him wanting to even see his father,” I say.

“His parents live together, so it’s not like he can avoid him anymore.” Pres shrugs. “I think they’re trying to navigate whatever is left of the father-son relationship.”

“Are you okay with Pres talking about him?” Mar asks.

“Yea, I’m fine. Really.” I shoot them both a pointed look and a smile that appeases them.

What I want to say, but don’t, is that they never had a father-son relationship. It’s hard to make sense of anything he just said. Lachlan was born to be on the ice. I can’t imagine he’d just leave it. It’s probably hypocritical of me to say that since I left soccer, but that was different. That was taken from me. His retirement makes no sense. Unless his dad offered him a shit ton of money. . . I can’t imagine him accepting money over hockey, though. Ugh. I need to stop. It’s none of my business.

“Hey, you okay?” Wade asks, touching my hand on the table.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I blink and look at the menu.

“Why don’t you call him?” Pres asks.

“You know why.” I stare at the menu.

“He’s done with hockey, Lyles,” he says, “And it’s been three years.”

“Do you think time matters?” I look at him over my menu. “Lach is a public figure now. If someone takes a picture of us. . .”

“He’s not famous,” Marissa says. “He’s just an athlete.”

“With a lot of fucking fans,” I respond, pointing at the TV screens I’m avoiding. “There’s a chance a picture of us will be out there and I can’t risk it. Not yet.”

“Do you think you’ll reach out, though? Now that he retired?” she asks.

“I... I think so. Let’s see how it plays out.” I lower my menu completely. “For all I know, he probably has a girlfriend, or girlfriends, or a wife.” *God, I feel sick to my stomach when I say it aloud.*

“I would tell you if he got married.” Prescott rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

He doesn't confirm or deny the rest, which kills me, but I asked for this. If he actually retires and stays that way, I'll ask Prescott for more information. The last thing I need is to show up and see him with a girlfriend or a puck bunny. I think I'll actually die if that happens — stupid, stupid feelings.

“This is the ex you're talking about?” Wade asks, pointing up, “The hockey guy?”

I nod. Wade plays pro soccer and doesn't know shit about hockey, so he'd never heard of Lach until one of us brought him up one day; Marissa filled him in on “all the gossip” while I sat there pretending that hearing it didn't kill me. She left out the part about the attack and made it seem like I just up and left him because I wanted him to chase his dreams without holding him back. It's the closest to the truth she could say, without getting him to ask questions.

“Yeah,” I say quietly.

“You've been here a little over three years now,” Wade says, looking at me like I'm an alien. “Of course, he's moved on. Soccer is arguably the least popular sport in America, and women always launch themselves at me.”

Across from us, Marissa laughs. Prescott looks like he's trying not to. I just stare at Wade.

“Thank you for enlightening us on how much ass pro athletes get,” I say. “I have friends who play in the league too, you know.”

Not that I talk to them anymore, but I don't have to talk to them to know he's right. I'd just rather not hear about it.

“So,” Pres starts. I look at him. “I saw Banks the other day. He asked about you.”

“Oh?” My heart squeezes when I think about my friend. He's the only one I truly regret not being able to speak to, these days.

“I told him I'd seen you once or twice and that you talk about him all the time.” He smiles sadly.

I pick up my menu again. My own father stopped asking Pres about me. He did hound him a lot in the beginning, I'll give him that, but then he just stopped. According to Prescott, my father is actually really hurt by me leaving without saying goodbye. I don't know if I believe that. I toss all thoughts of my dad in the trash bin inside my head, along with everything

else I hate to think about. We spend the rest of dinner talking about other things, like the popular Broadway show coming soon and how tickets sold out immediately, since this is more of a young professionals and college city. The kids live out in the 'burbs and only drive in this way for sports and museums. Whenever something kid-friendly comes around, the parents rejoice that they have a new place to take them, and the shows sell out in less than ten minutes. I like that about this place. It's a great city, but it has a small-town charm. Not everyone knows each other, but if you go to the same places all the time, you'll see the same people.

As the night goes on, we all have too many drinks and share some laughs, which is nice. This is normalcy — grabbing dinner and drinks with friends without worrying about anything. That's the kind of stuff that's priceless to me. Well, it came with a pretty hefty price, considering I lost the only man I've ever been in love with, but aside from that, it's okay. When we're done drinking and eating, we head outside, where Marissa suggests we go to a nightclub a couple of blocks down.

"I don't know, Mar." I purse my lips.

"Come on, Lyles. It's Marissa's birthday," Pres says. "And we haven't celebrated you finishing med school!"

"Well, we celebrated it but you weren't here," Marissa says. "BUT it's my birthday! Come on, Lyles."

"And you've never been to a club," Pres says.

"You've never been to a club?" Wade screams. "How?"

"I don't like people. That's how."

He frowns. "You work with kids all day."

"Okay then, I don't like adults."

He stares at me for a moment. "Let's just go for a little while. If you want to leave, I'll walk you home."

"Fine." I sigh. "I'll go, but know I'm going to hate every second of it."

"You hate every second of every day, unless you're surrounded by kids or working at Tackle, so. . ." That's Prescott, who didn't hear Wade's previous statement. He and Marissa agree with Pres, earning a middle finger from me, which makes them laugh.

I'm pretty sure I laugh too. I'm so tipsy that as we walk in that direction, my curiosity gets the better of me and now I'm dying to see what the hoopla about dance clubs is about.

CHAPTER 24

DELILAH

IT TAKES me exactly three seconds to confirm that nightclubs are not my scene. I feel my face pinching as I look around. It's beautiful and upscale, I'll give them that. The music is loud, which I'm okay with. The sea of people willingly grinding against each other? Absolutely not. Marissa must see my apprehension, since she grabs my hand tightly. When she starts pulling me through the crowd, I want to die. Like for real. My skin starts to crawl when hands touch my back, my ass. I'm sure they're not trying to feel me up, but it still creeps me out. I focus on breathing and keep moving. I don't think it's weird that they're having fun dancing. I love dancing. I think it's weird that they enjoy paying to listen to music that's blasted through a speaker in the dark, getting sweaty, and dancing on a sticky floor with a bunch of strangers. It makes no damn sense. And the strobe lights. Jesus Christ, you'd think they're looking for a fucking criminal in here.

We end up in a VIP section with our own couches, table, and bottle of champagne. Prescott's doing, of course. I don't argue because I'm away from the people on the sticky floor. I take a seat and wiggle my feet a little to see if it helps with the pain the heels are causing. They were a high school graduation gift from my mom. It was a nice gesture. I just don't understand why people pay so much money for uncomfortable shit just because of the label, or in this case, the soles. I take the champagne flute that Prescott hands me. He hovers over us — Wade and Marissa are also sitting down — and gives us a speech that looks very warm based on his expressions. Too bad we can't hear a lick of it. We pretend though, for his sake, and say cheers loudly before we start drinking more alcohol.

It's nice that Prescott is here. He's constantly traveling between Fairview, Rhodes, and New York — Fairview to see his family, Rhodes to see us, and

New York, since that's where he works and the place he primarily calls home, even though he does own a condo here as well. Instead of just going into his family's law firm right off the bat, he did an apprenticeship in New York and was hired by the company. They have clients everywhere so he's always traveling. He's been talking about opening up a firm here and making this his permanent home, but I don't know if he will.

He says dating in New York sucks. He doesn't want to date in Fairview and the dating pool here is huge, so I guess it's a possibility. He and Marissa have been hooking up sporadically for a while now, but that's all they do. Mar says she wishes she liked him for more than just sex, but can't see herself with him forever. Pres says the same about Marissa, and since it's been long enough that they would have made a move by now, they must really mean it. That, and they tell each other about the dates they go on and laugh about it.

"We weren't supposed to mix," I tell Pres when he takes a seat next to me. "Now we're going to feel like double shit tomorrow."

"Ah, you only live once." He shrugs and drinks the rest of his champagne in one go.

I shrug and do the same. Marissa follows and Wade has no choice but to do it. In the back of my mind, all I can think is we're so fucked. Later, though I'm not sure how much later since time is non-existent in the club, I get up and dance with Marissa. We're still in the VIP section, but there are groups of people also dancing here, which makes me wonder what the point of paying for the area is. The couches? After five, six, or seven songs, the champagne is done and so are we.

Outside, Marissa leans against the wall to take off her shoes and tells me to do the same.

I laugh, throwing my head back. "No way. That's disgusting."

"Your feet are killing you and you know it," she says, slurring. "Take them off or have Wade or Pres give you a piggyback so you don't get too many blisters."

"Absolutely-fucking-not." I shoot them both murderous glances. "Don't you dare."

Wade doesn't listen, but instead of crouching so I can get on his back, he lifts me in his arms like a bride and starts walking. I cross my arms and keep glaring, which makes him laugh hysterically. I laugh with him because I can't help it. Prescott comes over and snaps pictures of us.

“Don’t post those!” I point at him.

“Give me some credit,” Prescott says, “I made a close friends account and only have ten people in it. No one with Fairview connections.”

“Ah, whatever. I’m over it.” I wave a hand around, as Pres points the phone to the ground and concentrates on whatever he’s doing. “You smell really good, Wade. I mean, you smell like an ashtray, but underneath that, your cologne is nice.”

He laughs again. “You’re funny when you’re drunk, Delilah.”

De-li-luh. Sometimes I forget my full name — Delilah D. Guzman is how I sign it. I tacked on my mother’s maiden name, but with my first name also changing, I knew no one would find me. On all the documents, my name is Delilah Duke Guzman. Marissa and Pres tried to talk me out of that, but I wouldn’t budge. Fucking sue me for wanting to keep a piece of the only thing that has ever made me feel alive. I don’t know why I did it, since the cut just keeps deepening each time I see it on a document. I guess I did it for the same reason I printed out the two pictures I have of us and placed them by my computer. I’m an emotional masochist. It’s kind of funny when I think about it. I don’t feel emotions all the time, and the one I feel constantly is pain. My therapist is so sick of my bullshit, she just shakes her head and sighs when I say things like that.

Lach will never find out about the name change, but I’m sure if he did, he’d force me to erase it. He’ll probably say I’m not worthy of it, or that I lost my chance, or that he doesn’t want me to have the same last name as his actual wife. Fuck, that hurts. I swallow and take a deep breath. I think about what he’ll say when he sees me again a lot more than I should. About what he’ll do. About whether or not he hates my guts, which is a dumb one, since Lachlan holds a grudge like no one else. I know he probably despises me, but maybe the time that’s stretched between us has made him more forgiving. Maybe he’ll wrap his arms around me and kiss me for so long, I’ll forget I was ever without him at all. Those are the stupid little glimmers of hope that keep me going. The reality is that if he does think about me, it’s probably a fleeting memory. Why wouldn’t it be? He’s fucking gorgeous, and now he’s gorgeous, popular, *and* rich. And even richer now because of his dad, apparently. So, yeah, I’m probably the last thing on Lachlan Duke’s mind.

CHAPTER 25

LACHLAN

“DELILAH D. GUZMAN.” Liam slaps a file on my desk.

My desk. It’s so weird to say that. I’ve had enough time to prepare for it, so you’d think it would have hit me by now. It hasn’t. I’m not entirely sure it ever will. I never pictured myself in the corporate world. Why would I? A deal is a deal, though, and I’m a man of my word. The agreement with my father has always been clear — I’d play professional hockey for three years and then I’d retire to take over his evil empire. This isn’t even on the list of things I’m bitter about. I’m sure down the line, I’ll miss hockey, but I genuinely want to be here. I need to.

Duke Tech Solutions gives me access to anyone and everyone in the world. With a few clicks, I can find out every detail of someone’s life, down to what stores they shop at. It’s quite possibly the worst thing for someone like me to have access to. It would be like giving Lyla James access to the president’s nuclear football. None of us would survive her. Everyone would walk around with crippling anxiety, just waiting for her to push that button. In the contract I signed, I agreed not to use any information for my personal gain, so I’m not going to take advantage of Duke Tech. Liam went as far as making me swear on a bible, which was pretty stupid of him. Mom made us memorize half the passages in it, and to me, it’s just another book. I’m really not going to take advantage of the access I have. For this, I had to bend the rules just a little.

Technically it’s not for *my* personal gain; it’s for the future of the company. My father was the one who decreed this, so he can’t say anything about how I get the information. I feel my brother boring holes into the side of my head when I swivel my chair around to take in the view of the city. He’s pissed at me for this, but hey, that was the department he chose to be in.

At least he knows what the fuck he's doing. I don't know how to be the CEO of any company, let alone a billion-dollar one with thousands of employees and four locations around the world. It's fucking daunting. Sure, my degree is in business, but that paper could never prepare me for the real thing. For the time being, I was working closely with my father and only looking over contracts, making decisions alongside him. Technically, because of this little hiccup, I was working pro bono, which pissed me off. We're meeting in his office in ten minutes, so the file Liam tossed on my desk arrived at the perfect time.

I look at him. "You're late."

He glares at me. "She was hard to find. As you know."

As I know. Yeah, I fucking know. I'm also aware that there was no way I'd be able to find her on my own, and I didn't want to outright ask my father for help with this — with anything. Accepting him into our lives fully has been enough of an adjustment without asking for help. Liam had no qualms about it. He'd even helped Mom move her things over to Henry's estate. He's too fucking nice.

I'll never forget the day I agreed to this. I was lying in a hospital bed in Fairview, staring at the black roses sitting by the sink. It was the only arrangement there now. I'd made my mother take the rest home with her. She wanted to throw it away, but I wanted to watch every single petal wither. My father visited, which was already shocking enough, and then he made an offer that came with more zeros than the ones I'd been expecting to make before my life went sideways. It took me a few days to think about it. I added in the clause for the three years of hockey, since originally he wanted me to start at Duke Tech as soon as possible. I've managed to transfer all of my anger to Lyla. After all, it is her fault I'm here, to begin with.

I've done everything in my power to find her. I stay in touch with Prescott, but the fucker never slips up and tells me shit, so I have to depend on stalking social media accounts. I even pinned a private investigator on Pres and got nothing, but I know he knows where she is. Sometimes, I want to beat the information out of him. Knowing him and his undying loyalty to her, he would let me beat him to death before giving anything away. I look at the file sitting on my desk.

At Duke Tech, we managed to do in a few days what I couldn't do in three years, and now that I have my answer, I'm nervous to see what I'll find. Every morning, I envision what I'll do when I see her again. By the end of

the day, I'm so fucking angry that the only thing I'm certain of is that I'm going to make her life hell, which is where I've been living from the moment she left. Three fucking years in hell. Three years of wondering where she is and who she's with.

My life was carefully planned out before she came along and turned it upside down. Because of her, I got fucked over on everything I'd been promised. In less than two months, she managed to shatter everything I'd worked my entire life for. And, for what? I ended up seriously injured, got fucked over by the team I was supposed to sign with, and didn't even get the girl. I. Didn't. Even. Get. The. Girl. And she didn't just run. No, Lyla James can't do anything half-assed. She had to go and change her fucking identity, making it impossible to find her. Who changes their identity? Someone running from someone. *Obviously*. I need to know who it is and when I find out, I'm going to make them pay triple — once for what they did to her, once for making her run from me, and once for fucking me over.

But first, I'm going to make her pay. For three years, I've pictured her leading a boring life somewhere in her baggy clothes with a permanent scowl on her face, so when I saw the picture of her a few days ago, I went from very upset to fucking livid. On Marissa's birthday, I watched Prescott's IG extra closely, the way I do every year. For the past two years, he's posted little things — drinks, dinner, but nothing that exposes where he is or who he's with. This year, when I was refreshing my feed every couple of seconds, like I was in the queue for fucking concert tickets, he finally made the post I'd been waiting for.

At two in the morning, he shared a picture in his close friends' group. I clicked it quickly, just in case he'd made a mistake. The punch in the gut was immediate. My hands shook, as I paused the picture and screenshotted it. While my finger was on the screen, holding the image steady, I stared at Lyla Motherfucking James. Alive and well, wearing a sexy-as-fuck outfit in the arms of another man. AND SHE WAS LAUGHING. She was fucking LAUGHING. The next post was a video that I'm sure he didn't mean to upload, since it didn't actually show anything.

But I heard her voice as she told some asshole named Wade that, "he smelled like an ashtray but smelled good underneath it." She'd said it in her sarcastic as fuck tone. He laughed loudly and told her she was funny, and I wanted to reach into the phone and strangle him. I'd called my brother in the middle of the night, because even though I was a master screenshotter, up

until now, I hadn't had to save a video from someone's story. Liam talked through it and I kinda wish he hadn't. I've listened to it more times than I can count, and each time I get more heated than the last. Just thinking about it now makes my pressure go up. My fists pound my desk once.

"Lach!"

"What?"

"You need to calm the fuck down," he says slowly, as if he's afraid I'll lash out at him.

I pull the file closer. "What about the guy she was with?"

"What about him?" Liam takes a seat across from me.

"Who is he?"

"You can barely see his face and we only have one name to go by. We don't even know if it's his first or last."

I close my eyes and take three deep breaths to control my temper. These days, it doesn't take much to set me off. I'm a ticking time bomb waiting for someone to push me just enough to make me explode. I lost count of how many times I'd ended up in the sin bin these last three seasons. I pinch the bridge of my nose and focus on breathing. When I'm calm enough, I look at my brother again.

"Isn't that what we do here?" I ask. "Don't we have every single piece of equipment to find people? Don't we have facial recognition programs and shit?"

"Well, yeah, but it's a partial face at best," he says. "We can probably do it, but it'll take a little longer."

I sit with that for a moment. I don't have a little longer, and it doesn't really matter who the guy is. If he's a boyfriend, she'll have to break up with him. If he's a friend, fuck, it's not like I can tell her who she can and can't be friends with. I'm not *that* much of an asshole. I'm so annoyed at myself for caring about this shit. Right now, she's a means to an end. Getting her will kill two birds with one stone — I'll get what I need from her and make her suffer for leaving me. I'm not sure what'll happen after that, but I know nothing will match how much she made me suffer. Besides, when it comes to the two of us, she's arguably the biggest asshole. Not arguably. She is. The wall that she puts up as a defense mechanism might as well be a superpower.

I take a breath and open the folder.

Delilah Duke Guzman. *Oh-ho-ho*. No, she did not. I sit back in my chair with a grin on my face. I was not expecting that shit. This officially just got

better. I read through the file. She works at a sports center and just finished med school. According to this, once she's done with a two-year residency, she'll officially be a doctor. *Impressive*. I probably should have told her to explore other options, since this career means she'll have to deal with people one-on-one every day, and she's not the best at that. Whatever, not my problem. When she's not working there, she's coaching and training with soccer players. I flip the page and find an envelope that contains pictures. I look through each one, feigning disinterest even though I'm starving for more. She's with Marissa in the first picture. In another, she's talking to a guy that might be the Wade character. It's another partial shot. This motherfucker doesn't know how lucky he is. I set the picture aside anyway. In the others, she's doing drills with some teenagers and coaching little kids. The next picture captivates me. She's crouching down talking to a little blonde girl.

It's the little girl who gets Lyla's smile. *My smile*. My heart sinks. Jesus Christ, is this really what my life has come to? I'm one of the most eligible bachelors — I've been ranked number one by the gossip magazines. Even if I hadn't been, I know my worth. Getting women has never been a problem. But instead of focusing on them, I'm brooding over this picture. I've taken ownership of a smile, and now I'm jealous of a fucking child for taking it. I look through the rest of the pictures and pay attention to her face in those. They're all polite smiles. I don't know if it's a polite happy smile or just polite. I'll have to see it in person. I should be content with the fact that she's no longer scowling at everyone, but that just triggers other points of anger inside me. We found her, though. We finally found her. That, I am happy about. I feel my brother's eyes on me, as I take in the information. He's been wary to look for her from the beginning. I'm starting to think he's afraid of what I'll do when I find her. He's right to be. I'm not entirely sure how this will go down when we're finally standing face to face. I would never physically harm her, so there's no worries on that front. There are other ways to hurt her that don't include touching her. I guess we'll just have to see how I feel when I see her.

Delilah Duke Guzman. I shake my head and smile again. I can't remember the last time I genuinely smiled. *Delilah Duke Guzman*. If she wants, she can keep the first name. I'll probably never call her that, so it won't matter. Duke is permanent. I need to get the James back in there.

"Lach?" Liam says across from me. I'm still smiling and the look of

horror on his face makes me smile more.

“Where the fuck is Rhodes?” I slide the partial-face picture across the desk and tap it. “Also, use this one.”

I knock on my father’s door and wait until he invites me in. He grins when I step into the office and stands to give me a hug. It’s still weird as fuck seeing Henry all the time. It’s weirder that after ignoring me for over twenty years, he’s totally flipped and now wants us to get together *all the fucking time*. I’m convinced that the brain tumor made him grow a heart. We have weekly dinners at their house, sometimes with guests, and other times, just the four of us. I try to go when time allows, but only because I would have visited my mother on those short breaks anyway. The whole thing is weird as fuck, but he’s trying really hard, so I’m trying as well. Mom keeps saying that she wants him to retire so they can travel all the time, but he’s not ready. In the meantime, he’s agreed to go on a few trips a year and wants us to learn everything, so he won’t worry while he’s gone and when the time comes, he can retire. I doubt he’ll ever truly retire. Henry lives for this shit. If it weren’t for Mom, he’d probably sleep here. He tries to give me a full-on hug, but I pat him on the back twice and move away quickly to the chair across from him. I’m not a hugger and even if I was, I wouldn’t hug *him*. I’m not there yet. I’m doing much better, but I’m not sure I’ll ever get to the genuinely full-on hugging stage.

“So.” He slaps a hand on his desk as he takes a seat. “What are we discussing today?”

“The acquisitions team wants to reach out to the FBI about the new drones,” I say, “They think they’d benefit from them.”

He gives a nod. “What do you think?”

“It doesn’t really matter what I think,” I say. I’ve already told him that I hate working with the government in any capacity. If they were doing legit let’s-keep-the-peace shit with this tech, I’d be fine, but who knows what the hell they’re using this for. Instead of saying all of that for the tenth time, I say, “If the money is right and they sign a long contract, we can’t turn them down. Especially since another company is probably on our heels producing them as well.”

He nods. “What did you tell the team?”

“To draw up a proposal and email it to us.”

“Good.”

“The call with Texas went well, as usual. Nothing to report there. We vetted the new head of security. . .”

“What are your thoughts on him?” he asks in the midst of my report.

“He’s level-headed. Seems like a good guy.”

“Your mother thinks he’s ‘hot,’” he says, scowling.

It’s funny coming from him, since all the older ladies in the office salivate over Dad. Some of the younger ones even call him “Daddy Henry.” It’s pretty fucking weird. I only know this because my secretary likes to gossip and keeps me informed. According to him, the younger women are now lusting after me, but that’s not happening. Even if I wasn’t set on Lyla, I’d never fuck someone I work with in any capacity.

“I guess he’s good-looking,” I say finally. “How did she even see him?”

“She got here when he was leaving the room yesterday.” He looks at the door as if the scene is replaying. “It doesn’t matter. She’s allowed to find other men attractive. It’s just, he’s young and I’m getting old, you know.” He chuckles. “It’s funny, I never gave a shit about things like this before.”

I nod. That’s understandable since he only grew a heart after his treatments.

“Anything else we need to discuss?” he asks.

“Liam’s still working with IT to try to stop a few hackers from stealing crypto from some rich people that have Duke Tech on retainer, but that’s ongoing and we have no real solution yet.”

“Keep me posted,” he says. “What about your inheritance?”

“I still think it’s bullshit,” I say. “I should be getting that money with no strings attached.”

For a brief moment, I think about tacking on that I should get it with no strings because of the shitty father he’s been, but I don’t. I’m really trying to let go of my anger. Besides, bringing up money’s pointless since it’s the only thing we ever saw from him each month.

“You know, I said the same thing to my father,” he says with a laugh.

“And then you married my mother and only saw her when it was convenient to you,” I point out.

He walked right into that one. He shrugs but says nothing to defend himself. I have to give him some credit.

When he sold me on the deal, he conveniently forgot to disclose that I'd only receive my inheritance — which was triple what the highest NHL player made — if I was at least twenty-five and married. Right now, I only check one of those boxes. What gets me is that he was once in my position, so he knows how ridiculous this is. When Mom moved in with him, she confessed to us that their marriage was out of convenience, and they just happened to fall in love. Well, she fell in love, and he fought it because he was so busy turning the millions he'd inherited from his father into billions. I'm still upset that she didn't tell us years ago.

"I don't understand why marriage is part of the equation. The papers state when I turned twenty-five." I point at the pile of papers on his desk, as if my inheritance contract is somewhere in there.

"Twenty-five *and* married. If you don't hold up that end of the bargain, you won't get your stipend," he says, "And it's a pretty big stipend. Much bigger than any hockey contract."

"I know. I've seen the numbers." I say through gritted teeth.

"Just marry a puck rabbit," he says. "I'm sure they'd be willing."

"I'm not marrying a puck *bunny*."

"It doesn't matter who it is, Lachlan."

It does to me, but I can't explain to my dad something that I barely understand myself. Even if it's out of convenience, I don't want to marry some random woman. They don't even come close. Before I met her, women vied for my attention, but they never had it. They'd never get it. I've come to the realization that Lyla James is the prototype and I don't do knockoffs. And I know the sentiment goes both ways. I refuse to believe that the guy in those pictures means anything to her. What we share can't be duplicated.

I don't say any of this aloud — ever — because I know how insane it'll sound. I fell completely in love with her. What I feel for her now isn't love. I don't know what it is, but I know it's unhealthy as fuck. I also know she's the only antidote, so I need her to agree to this.

"So, what are you going to do?" He folds his hands on his desk. "Do you want to start interviewing people for the wife position?"

"I don't have to interview people. I already have one."

His brows hitch. "You have a wife?"

"Not yet, but I will soon." *I just have to guilt her into it.* I clear my throat. "I'll need the rest of the week off to get this settled."

"Take two. Take a computer with you and keep your phone on," he says.

“Do you have any questions for me today?”

“Actually, I do.” I scoot forward. “How fast can we get information on someone if we only have a partial view of their face to work with?”

CHAPTER 26

DELILAH

I'VE HAD the strangest feeling in the pit of my stomach all day. It's the same one I used to get back home when I thought *he* was watching, which is worrisome since I haven't felt that way at all since moving here. The entire drive from my place to Marissa's smoothie shop, I felt like I was being followed. As I walk from her shop over to Tackle, I feel like I'm being watched. My stomach coils and I look over my shoulder twice before sprinting to the front door. As I unlock it, I look over my shoulder again, and when I finally step in, I shut and lock it right away. Coming here probably isn't the wisest decision. If he's in here, or if any unhinged person with the intent to kill is, I pretty much signed my fate by locking the door.

A cold shiver runs through me as I jog down the hall and head toward my office. I take a deep breath and remind myself that he can't find me. He can't but the damage is done. My gut is never wrong and right now it's telling me someone's following me. *He won't know to look here.* I tell myself this over and over while mulling over all of the things I've done to ensure I'm never found. The apartment, the name change, and picking a city most people wouldn't think to look.

The only people I speak to from back home are Prescott and Marissa. The rest of Fairview thinks I moved across the country. No one really cares. My father texted me the night Lach was attacked and asked if I was okay, which I absolutely wasn't, but I said yes anyway and that was it. The only defense he could have is that I changed my number.

"I thought you were taking the week off," Wade says.

I shriek loudly and jump a foot off the ground, shaking as I pivot to him. "Jesus Christ, Wade."

"Did you not hear the doors close when I walked in?" His eyes widen.

“Or my loud singing?”

“No.” I take another breath to calm down. “And yes, I’m taking the week off.”

“So, you’re here because. . .?”

“I dropped by to get my computer.” I continue the walk to my office.

We all have private offices, which is pretty cool and makes Wade “feel like a real adult.” I guess paying bills and showing up to work on time isn’t enough proof for him. He normally plays for the USMNT but took this year off to recover from a knee injury, and during that time, he’s been working here during that time. He’d already been training here during the off-season, so it felt like a natural progression. He’ll get back to professional soccer next season, though. I grab the bag I left next to my desk and turn to the door, where Wade is standing, leaning against the frame. He doesn’t move the way he’s supposed to when I’m standing right in front of him.

I already played this out in my head. I’m not an idiot. I know Wade likes me. I also know there’s nothing I can do to make myself like him back. It’s annoying since there’s absolutely nothing wrong with him. He’s nice, has a great personality, and is very persistent. And with brown hair that he keeps cropped, dark blue eyes, and that freaking body, he’s definitely got the looks. Our coworkers are always trying to get us together, which is annoying. One time, we got locked in the freaking closet together by someone, and it felt like 7 Minutes in Hell. I’m pretty sure everyone here has a wager on it, since “there’s no way I won’t fall for him.” I wish they were right. Even Marissa is kind of rooting for it to happen. She says I need to stop comparing every man I meet to Lachlan, which is as true as it is impossible. He was the only one who was able to pull me out of the dark and give me light. And even though I no longer live in the darkness, everything around me is still dim. Besides, it’s not like I meet a ton of men. I only know the ones I work with, and I’m not interested in any of them.

“Are you going to move or do I need to manhandle you?” I ask, looking up at Wade.

“Manhandle me?” He raises an eyebrow. “Sounds tempting.”

I roll my eyes and slap his hard stomach. “Move.”

“Fine,” he huffs. He moves and follows me through the building and out the door until we’re in the parking lot.

I stop walking and turn to him. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I was dropping off some papers.”

“Oh.” I look at the cars in the lot. There are only three and his is one of them. “I walked here.”

“From Marissa’s?” he asks.

“Yep.” I look down the block, where her shop is, and head that way. “Talk to you later.”

He starts walking next to me.

“Isn’t your car parked over there?”

“Yep.” He shoots me the lopsided smile that all the women go crazy over.

“Soooo. . .?” I signal between us and the sidewalk ahead, but I don’t stop walking.

“Will you be at Medley’s tonight?” he asks.

“Again?”

“What, you can’t hang out two weekends in a row?”

I keep my face impassive and don’t even roll my eyes or answer his stupid question. The answer is a solid no. It has nothing to do with Medley’s, though. They have great food and drinks, and it’s become one of our hangout spots. It’s also become everyone else’s hangout spot. Over the summer, a plethora of families and young professionals moved to Rhodes, nearly doubling the population at record speed.

“Let me guess,” he says when I don’t respond. “Medley’s is too rowdy for you.”

“No. I’m just. . .” I shake my head.

“Boring?” he asks with a cheeky grin.

“If I’m so boring, why do you wanna hang out with me so bad?” I arch an eyebrow and look at him.

He rolls his eyes. “Fine, you’re not boring.”

“I’ll go,” I say, surprising myself. A drink with a friend can’t hurt, and it’s not like I have so much going on.

“Cool.” His smile shows off his dimple and now I roll my eyes. He ignores it. “Eight o’clock?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll pick you up at seven forty-five,” he says.

“Wait. You’re picking me up?” I stop dead in my tracks, and he pivots to start walking in the direction we just came from.

“Yep,” he says from the other side of the sidewalk as he jogs away backward, still smiling at me. “It’s a date.”

“It’s not a date,” I shout back. “I’m serious.”

“I can’t hear you.”

I don’t even bother. I just turn around and keep walking until I get to my car, which is parked in front of Marissa’s businesses. I unlock it, set my bag inside, and relock it as I head to her smoothie store. I walk in, feeling incredibly annoyed, which is normal, but these days when I’m incredibly annoyed, it shows. I hate it. Marissa looks up from behind the counter and arches an eyebrow when she takes in my demeanor.

“What the hell happened to you?” she asks as I reach her.

“Wade invited me to Medley’s, told me he’d pick me up, and then said it was a date.”

“Whoa.” Her brows shoot up. “He finally grew a pair.”

I bring up my hands and shake them, as if it’ll help me get out the words I want to say. “I don’t want to date. I’m not ready.”

“You’re never going to be ready, Lyles. Face it, you’re going to have to fake it till you make it. That’s how my parents started out, and look at them.”

I massage the back of my neck, which is tense because of all of this. “I don’t want to date Wade, and going on a date will lead him on.”

“It’s been three years!” she says as if I need a reminder.

I shoot her a look. “I know exactly how long it’s been.”

“You’re going to end up being one of those cat ladies.”

“I’m allergic to cats.”

She gives me a droll look. “Seriously?”

“I really am, and I hate that being a ‘cat lady’ is used in a negative way, when in reality, they’re probably happier than most people who have partners.”

“Whatever. No cats then. Come out with me. I can be your wing-woman.” She grins wide. “Or I can tell Pres to call his hot friend from work, and we can go out with him so you can meet him.”

“God, no.” I scowl. “I hate lawyers.”

“You’ve never even been with one!”

“And I hate them already.” I turn around.

“You like Pres and he’s a lawyer,” she points out behind me.

“I knew him before he became a lawyer,” I say, as I open the door. “And who says I like him?”

She laughs as I walk out and get in my car. The entire ride home, I’m thinking about what I could wear that would scream “this is not a date.” I could go baggy on him, but I won’t. That served its purpose (barely) and I’m

past that stage in my life. I shower, dress, and stand in front of the mirror. My skin keeps its golden complexion from being in the sun every day, and I cut my hair shorter so that it rests on my shoulders when I decide to do beach waves in it, which I did tonight. My makeup looks good, natural, and not date-looking (I hope), and my body looks great in the short summer dress Marissa gave me for my birthday last year. I finish applying lip gloss, slip my feet into cute but comfortable tan sandals, and step back. Okay, so maybe I look like I'm going on a date. Fuck, whatever. I'll have to remind him all night if that's what it takes.

CHAPTER 27

DELILAH

MY SKIN IS CRAWLING AGAIN with the sensation of being watched, when Wade brushes his hand against mine as we stand in the crowded bar. I jump and start looking around again, pressing my back against the bar. I don't see anyone who looks suspicious, but the feeling remains. You can ignore warning bells in your head. You can even ignore your treacherous heart. But you can never ignore your gut. I learned that the hard way.

"Who are you looking for?" Wade asks.

"No one. Just looking around. There are so many new faces."

"I know, right?" He turns sideways and props his shoulder on the bar. Now he's really close, almost hugging me. "They texted me that we're number twenty in line for a table, which means well over an hour."

I take another sip of my old fashioned. On the weekends, booths have become a commodity, unless you reserve ahead of time. We already had appetizers and two drinks while standing at the bar, so we don't really need a booth. The only reason I wanted one was so we could sit across from each other. Standing at the bar gives Wade the opportunity to do things like face me fully and put a hand over the bar around me, so it looks like we're on a date. Fuck. I already told him twice that it's not a date, so I'm just going to enjoy the rest of my drink and tell him again if he tries to make a move. I huff out a breath and look around once more. I look up and see they're playing a college hockey game on television and ask the bartender for another drink. Wade has two more before I tell him that I want to go home.

The nagging feeling in my gut is still there when we walk outside, even after I tried drowning it in whiskey. Suddenly, the smell of cigarettes hits me and I really start to panic. My heart's in my throat as I look around. I spot some girl standing near the door, looking at her phone with a cigarette in her

hand. Oh my God. I take a deep breath and exhale. He's not here. He can't be.

"We have to walk," I say when Wade starts heading to where his car is parked.

"You think so?"

I shoot him a look. "I *know* so."

"Fine." He starts trying to do the DUI walk-in-a-straight-line thing and fails miserably.

"You would've gotten arrested for that."

"Maybe." He glances at me. "Unless it's a woman officer and I flash my dimple at her."

"Yeah, I'm sure she'd be willing to put her badge on the line for a rendezvous with you."

He laughs. "Many women would."

"Yep, I see them on the pitch all the time," I say.

I look over my shoulder again, that feeling curling around my gut, telling me someone's watching. I have no connection to this place whatsoever. He couldn't have found me. A cold chill runs down my spine, just the same.

"I don't understand why you're not one of them. Why can't you date me?" he asks, pulling me from my paranoia.

"I just can't," I say, looking over my shoulder.

"You cold?"

"Yep." It's not a *complete* lie. The thought of *him* catching up to me turns my blood cold.

Wade wraps an arm around my shoulder. I stiffen but leave it there. It's not like he's holding me against his side or anything. Prescott walks like this with me all the time, and it means nothing.

"It's not a date," I say, reminding him again.

"So you've said," he says. "It could be."

"It's not." I shimmy out of his arm.

He huffs. "Is it because of that guy?"

"There is no guy."

"The hockey guy," he says and air quotes, "'Lachlan Duke'."

"He's not a fictional character, you know. The air quotes are unnecessary."

"Why can't you just forget about him? Besides, we already had sex, remember?" he asks a little too loudly, and turns to me when we stop at the

crosswalk.

“Yep.” I resist the urge to facepalm myself.

Why, why, whyyyy did I do that? What in the world possessed me to hook up with him? Oh yeah, alcohol, boredom, and loneliness. A dangerous triple threat. It happened once. ONCE and the guy brings it up all the time.

“We can do it again.” He reaches out and slides his pointer across my crossed arms.

“We can’t.”

“We’d be good together and you know it.” He brings his hand up and brushes his fingers against my cheek. “You feel it, don’t you?”

“I don’t.” I lower my arms and turn to start walking across the street.

I should feel bad about this, but I don’t. Am I supposed to apologize for not feeling the same way? My mother would say I should. That nags at me, but when I open my mouth, the words won’t come out. I allow myself to think about her often, these days, and find myself asking whether or not she’d approve of certain things. Not that I’d ever really know how she’d treat me, now that I’m an adult, but I do the best I can with what she gave me while she was alive.

“Is it that you genuinely don’t feel anything, or that you don’t want to feel anything?” He asks, stopping at the end of my building.

“I genuinely don’t feel anything,” I say, looking at the ground and back at him.

“How can you feel nothing?” he asks. “That makes no sense.”

I look up at the sky and ask for help before I look at him again. “I don’t know how to explain it. I just. . .feel nothing. I’m sorry.”

“Nothing?” he asks again, clearly in disbelief.

“Nothing.”

“Okay.” He runs a hand through his hair. “What if we kiss?”

“What?” My eyes widen. I take a step back and hit the brick wall behind me.

“A kiss,” he repeats. “We never kissed when we hooked up.”

“Oh.” I play dumb about the kiss, as I look up and down the block to make sure we’re not being followed.

My stomach is coiled so tight that I should just tell him to walk me up to my apartment. I just know he’s watching. I fucking know it. My hands begin to shake but I keep looking.

“Delilah,” Wade says.

I blink. “Yeah?”

“One kiss.”

“I don’t kiss.” I stare at him when I say it and hope my deadpan face makes him give up already.

Besides, it’s the truth. I don’t want to kiss anyone else. Ever. *God, I’m pathetic. I’m so fucking pathetic.* Maybe Marissa’s right and I should give this guy a shot, even if just to take my mind off Lach for a moment. I know what’ll happen, though. I’ll compare everything he does to the memory of the way Lachlan did things, and then I’ll have to break up with him. Or he’ll break up with me when he realizes he’ll never live up to my expectations. I pause at that. My own thoughts sound ridiculous. It’s official, I’ve gone mad. I focus on Wade again. He’s cute. Hot, even. This is so damn frustrating. Why doesn’t he do anything for me?

“Really?” he asks in disbelief. “Well, now we have to do it. One kiss. Just one.”

“Fine, but we’re only doing it once.”

“Unless you like it,” he says.

I roll my eyes.

“It’s a kiss, Delilah, not the fucking Olympics.” He laughs, shaking his head.

My lips twitch and I shake my head, as well. I’m being ridiculous. It’s not like it’s sex, but somehow this feels more intimate. Still, I’m doing this. Wade looks at me for a moment, his eyes searching mine as he takes one step forward.

He takes another step and I can smell the whiskey he drank earlier. I shut my eyes and tilt my head slightly.

“Put your lips on her and I’ll make you swallow your fucking teeth.” The voice is so unexpected, so low and raw, that every cell in my body goes on high alert.

So many things happen at once: I jolt, my eyes pop open, my heart pounds HARD then sinks into my stomach, and I stop breathing. I practically jump away from Wade, who’s also taking a step back since he has no idea what’s happening. I’m still not breathing as I turn in the direction the voice came from, and find myself staring into a pair of green eyes. I set a hand on the brick wall to steady myself, as my legs begin to shake and my head starts feeling light. I think I’m fainting. I make some sort of noise — half gasp, half scream — as I take him in. Lachlan James Duke is here. *Here.* And he’s

looking at me like he wants to murder me.

CHAPTER 28

DELILAH

“WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?” Wade glares at him and steps closer to me as if to protect me.

I raise my arm up to keep some distance between myself and Wade, because Lach looks like he might snap his neck. He looks like he might snap mine. I take in his all-black attire and overall appearance. His face, still so handsome and sculpted, has stubble, as if he hasn't shaved in a few days, and this somehow makes him look even sexier. His jaw is tight as his incensed gaze burns into me. Suddenly, I realize he's the one my gut warned me about, and I get it. The man standing in front of me needs to be announced by loud bells and trumpets. I swear, even pissed off, he's hotter than he used to be. I can't seem to form words. I can't speak, can't think.

“Dude, seriously, what do you want?” Wade asks after a few seconds.

Lachlan's jaw tenses. “You have something that belongs to me and I need it back.”

Something that belongs to me. OhmygodImgonnafuckingdie.

“What the f—” Wade starts.

Lachlan's eyes are so dark right now, they almost look black. He doesn't let Wade get another word in, or maybe he does. I don't know and it doesn't matter. He lunges forward, wraps an arm around me, lifts me off the ground, and slams his mouth on mine. I whimper. It's a savage kiss. An angry kiss. One I know will leave a mark on more than just my lips. I instinctively wrap my arms around him and deepen the kiss. He growls into my mouth, a rumbled sound that ping-pongs inside my body. The world evaporates. He doesn't savor me, he devours me. He kisses me as if he's making up for every minute and every day we've been apart, as if he's punishing me for it. In the back of my mind, I know our tongues need to stop sparring, and we need to

separate, but I don't want it to and I can tell he doesn't either. I feel his reluctance as he pulls away. A protesting sound forms in the back of my throat. We're still holding onto each other, both panting, searching each other's eyes, trying to make sure we're not mirages. In his eyes, I see heat, longing, and anger. So much anger. It sends a shiver down my spine. I've seen him angry before, of course, but never at me. Because of me, sure, but not directed at me. I know I deserve every bit of it, but it doesn't hurt any less.

"You said you don't kiss," Wade says. He's definitely still a little tipsy. "Holy shit. You're the guy."

"Yeah." Lach doesn't take his gaze off me. "I'm the guy."

I shut my eyes for a moment. When I open them, I start turning my face toward Wade to say something, but Lachlan brings his hand up and grabs my jaw hard to keep my eyes on his. It's at this moment that I realize that he's gripping me the way a snake would its prey. I can't tell if he's holding me because he missed me, or if he's holding me hostage in case I disappear again. When he lets go of my face, I stare at him for a moment longer before I try to look over at Wade again. Lach grabs my chin again, moving my face to the position it was in.

"Don't you dare," he seethes under his breath.

"Lach," I breathe.

"Don't fucking look at him." His grip on my back gets tighter.

"I have to get rid of him," I whisper. I really don't want Lachlan to beat the shit out of Wade and I know he will. I've seen this look. "I have to say goodbye, though." He doesn't budge. "Lachlan, please."

"Make it quick." He makes a disgruntled sound but lowers me until my feet touch the ground and lets me go.

He takes half a step back and crosses his arms. For a moment, I just stare at him. I can barely process what's happening. One minute, I'm thinking about Lach the way I do every freaking day, and the next, he's here and his lips are on mine. I don't know what I'm even supposed to say to Wade, but I have to say *something*. My knees are still shaky, but I manage to face him. At least he looks less drunk.

"Thanks for dinner and drinks," I say, taking a breath. "I . . .I'm sorry."

"Delilah." He blinks hard, shoots Lach a look, and focuses on me again. "Come on."

He says it in the same tone you make when the referee makes a call you

don't agree with.

"You're ending our fate because of him?" He asks in disbelief. Yeah, he's definitely still a little drunk.

I swear Lach growls.

"I repeatedly told you this wasn't a date," I say. "Thank you for dinner and drinks and for walking me home."

He just stares. Why can't he just leave? Does he not understand I'm trying to help him? Wade is like three inches shorter and at least twenty pounds of muscles less than Lach. Even if he wasn't, even if their builds were reversed, Lach's anger counts for two men. There's no way Wade walks out of here intact.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asks, frowning.

"She'll be more than okay. Do you need another demonstration?" Lachlan charges forward but stops beside me when I throw an arm out. "Should I fuck her against the wall? Is that what it'll take for you to understand?"

"Lachlan!" I shoot him a glare, heat rising to my cheeks.

He smirks. It's not nice, but it still makes my heart skip.

Wade laughs in disbelief. "*This* is the guy you've been moping over?"

He's probably wondering if, once again, I've proven that the bad boys always get the girl, but that's not what this is. How the hell do I explain that Lach isn't always like this? How do I explain that yes, he's possessive when it comes to me, but he's also fun and caring? There's no way he's going to believe it when Lachlan's acting like a fucking lunatic.

"It's really complicated," I say. "I'll call you tomorrow and explain. We can meet for breakfast if you want and I'll explain there."

Lach scoffs. I ignore him.

"Breakfast," Wade says, looking at Lachlan when he says, "At *our* spot."

Jesus Christ in a manger. *Why are men like this?* Lach's deep, unamused chuckle makes me shiver, even though I know it's another indication that this can go downhill quickly.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I confirm.

"Okay, that's it. Let's go." Lach grabs my arm and starts walking. "Now, Lyla."

I whisper another apology to Wade and turn around to keep up with Lachlan's pace, which is impossible since his legs are so much longer than mine. His hold on me is tight. Not tight enough to leave marks, just tight enough to make me feel like he's manhandling me like I'm a rag doll.

“Delilah,” Wade calls out as we’re almost at the door. “If you don’t call or show, I’m calling the cops.”

“I . . .” I start, but Lachlan pulls me inside before I can respond. I yank my arm out of his grasp. “What the fuck, Lachlan?”

“Go.” He nods at the elevator, his jaw clenched.

The initial shock of seeing him has worn off. I’ve gone from disbelief and elation to straight-up anger. I punch the button with my fist three times as if it’s at fault for what’s happening. Inside, I stand with my arms crossed and stare ahead as he stands behind me. Maybe by the time we reach the fourteenth floor, we’ll have had enough time to cool off. Highly unlikely. We’ll probably need another three years for that to happen. It’s a scary thought. A sad one. I’ve lived without him for three years, and sure, I’ve been able to live my life a lot better than I ever did in Fairview, but the gaping hole in my heart remains empty. I’m positive that without med school consuming me, I wouldn’t have made it another three without caving and dialing his number. I step out of the elevator and practically stomp to my door, unlocking it and yanking it open. I let it go and let fate decide whether or not it’ll slam in his face. Lachlan catches it.

I pivot around and face him. “What the fuck?”

“What the fuck what, De-li-luh?” he seethes, stepping closer.

“You can’t just barge into my life out of nowhere, make out with me in front of my friend, and manhandle me.” I cross my arms and grind my teeth. “How’d you find me?”

“Friend?” he asks loudly, then says it again louder, “*Friend?* Do you kiss all your friends, De-li-luh?” He looks down, raking my body with heated eyes. “Do you dress like that for your *friends?*”

“Are you trying to slut shame me? Is that what this is? Because if you think for a second that I’m going to believe that you haven’t fucked. . .”

“I wasn’t the one who left!” He roars.

When I feel my eyes burning, I turn around and face the half-window in the living room. I swallow hard. This is not how I envisioned things going when we saw each other again. I definitely didn’t think he’d take my heart and purposely stomp on it. He’s right about me being the one who left. He’s right to be angry and scream at me. He’s right to demand answers to questions that have remained floating around, but it does not make it any easier to hear him practically confirm that he’s slept with other women. I know that it makes me a hypocrite since I hooked up with Wade that one

time, but I can't help it. In my mind — in my heart — Lachlan belongs to me. He told Wade that I belonged to him. For now, I'm going to hold onto that tiny glimmer of hope. I spin around and walk back to the center of the room.

“How did you find me?”

“Why did you leave?” He retorts. “Why'd you change your fucking identity?”

His anger is so palpable that I feel it in my core. I was going to tell him everything that night, and look at how that turned out. For three years, I've been telling myself that when we saw each other again, I would tell him everything in detail. I wasn't strong enough to delve into the details back then. I am now, but I have no doubt that the man in front of me would leave me here and go to Fairview right now to kill the person responsible for all of this. I would let him if that didn't mean he'd go to jail for the rest of his life.

“I left because I was a danger to you.” I swallow. Fuck. I don't want to cry, but tears cloud my vision anyway. I look away. “I should've left sooner. I shouldn't have let you in at all.”

“Oh, but you can let *that* loser in?” He sneers.

“He's not a loser.” My eyes snap to his as I uncross my arms. “Don't be mean out of jealousy. And who the hell says I let him in? I've never kissed him. That's what that was about. He wanted me to kiss him and I couldn't. I can't do anything because of you.”

He runs both hands through his hair and growls as he starts pacing. He looks like a wild animal that just escaped captivity. His pacing stops for a moment and he looks at me, his eyes hard and angry. The pacing resumes and I just stand there, staring and wondering if he's completely unhinged.

CHAPTER 29

LACHLAN

WHY DID I think I could do this? I should've sent someone to kidnap her and bring her to me. I watched her all day, just to get a glimpse of her life here, but the more I saw, the more upset I became. She's living her life. Actually living it. She doesn't walk around with a smile on her face, but I know her and can tell she's content here, which is more than she was at Fairview. That should make me happy. Instead, it fuels my anger because she's here without me, living the life *I* wanted to give her. That I wanted to *share* with her. All of those thoughts ran through my mind before I caught her with that loser. I watched them together the entire night. I should get a goddamn medal for reining in my rage as long as I did. Shit, for reining it in — period. I still want to hurt him for the way he was looking at her, the way he was touching her, the way he almost kissed her. He's lucky I didn't make good on my promise and bash his teeth in.

“Pack a bag,” I say, calmer than I feel. “We leave tomorrow.”

“What? Leave where?” Her eyes go wide. “I can't just leave.”

My body starts heating up again. “Why? Because of him?”

“No! Do you even hear yourself right now?” she snaps. “You accosted me in front of him and he just stood there. Why would he do that if we were together? Think about it.”

“Because he's a pussy.”

That earns me a light laugh and a touch of a smile that she tries to hide by turning her head away, but I saw it. I heard it. The sound makes the chains around my heart rattle. Seeing the way she keeps pressing her lips together to keep from laughing makes my mouth twitch, like if it'll finally form a smile after all these years, but I restrain myself. This time around, she'll be the one working for my smiles.

“Pack a bag,” I say again.

She blinks. “I can’t just leave because you demand it.”

“No?” I close the distance between us. “I think you owe it to me.”

“I owe it to you to leave with you?”

“You owe me for a lot of things.”

She stares at me, pinning her dizzying brown eyes on mine. They fall to my lips momentarily, and I know she’s picturing them on hers again. I want to kiss her so fucking badly it hurts, but I won’t. I shouldn’t have done it in the first place, but when I saw her close her eyes and that shithead step forward, I felt like I was being sucked into the ground. And her dress? My God, that fucking dress. I want to fucking burn it after the images played out in my head of him slipping his hand under it while he kissed her. Thankfully, none of that actually happened, but it doesn’t make me any less upset about the possibility. Kissing her wasn’t part of the plan, but it’s all it took for me to confirm what I’ve always known — she was made for me. For *me*. No one else.

“I have work,” she says quietly.

“I’ll pay you.”

“What?” Her voice hitches. “You’ll pay me for what exactly?”

“For you to leave with me.”

She stares at me for a long moment and finally laughs lightly. “And then what? What’s your plan after I pack a bag and leave with you?”

“You’re going to marry me.”

“What?” She shrieks, taking a step back with a horrified look that further fuels my anger. “I am *not* getting married.”

“Oh but you are.” I cross my arms and grin. “It’s okay, though. You won’t have much paperwork to do since you already have my last name, De-li-luh Duke.”

Her jaw drops. Shock looks beautiful on her. She turns her back to me. I take advantage and check her out while she’s processing this. My memory didn’t do the reality of her justice. For a while, I tried to convince myself that it was just a college fling and that the only reason she intrigued me was that she was different from the rest. I’ve tried to trick myself into believing that when I saw her again, I wouldn’t feel what I felt back then, and I was right. I feel more. How the hell is that even possible? How could I feel more than I felt back then, when she consumed my every waking thought? I take a breath and exhale slowly. I need her to agree to this.

“You. Owe. Me, Lyla James.” I pause for effect. “Or do you prefer Delilah Duke?”

“Why do I need to marry you?” She twirls back around. “Where will you take me?”

“Chicago, then we’re making a stop in Fairview. After that, I can bring you back here if that’s what you want.”

She drops her eyes from mine. I watch as she processes this bit of news. Her face is more expressive, as if the walls she always had up have slowly been chipping away. (This also pisses me off.). After a moment, she sighs. I wait for her to speak. She doesn’t. She wraps her arms around herself as if it’s the only thing holding her together. The look of defeat leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but I didn’t come here to make things easy for her.

“You’ll get one million dollars if we stay married a year, two million if it’s two,” I say.

Her gaze snaps to mine. “Why?”

“I need to get married in order to receive my inheritance.”

“Oh.” Her brows pinch but the expression clears quickly. She shakes her head. “I can’t do it.”

I gawk at her. *Who the fuck turns down that kind of money?* I know for a fact she hasn’t touched a dime in the bank account she had set up before she fled. She transferred some things to the new one, so she’s still making residuals from the college merch sold with her name on it, but that’s dwindling for both of us. I even got into her apps, which is how I know Prescott was helping her out for some time. She paid him back for it, though, and this apartment is rented. The only financial burden she has are student loans and her car, but with rent, food, and other expenses, I’m sure it adds up quickly. She went from having everything she wanted to only buying what she needs. She gets paid well at the sports center, but that’ll never be anywhere near a million dollars. This should be a no-brainer for her.

“You owe me,” I repeat.

“You keep saying that, and I get why you’re upset. You got seriously hurt and ended up in the hospital because of me and that kills me.” She swallows hard. “You have no idea how much it kills me. But you still went pro and lived the life you wanted.”

“The life I wanted?” A harsh laugh flows out of my lips.

“You played pro and kicked ass,” she says, studying me closely. “Which is why I don’t understand why you’d retire after three years.”

“So you’ve been keeping up with me.”

“No, I can’t,” she says quietly, as if pained. “People tell me things anyway, though.”

Right. *People*. Prescott and Marissa. I’m so annoyed with those two, but I’ll deal with their undying loyalty to her later.

“You have a lot of student loans,” I say.

“Oh, my God.” Her eyes widen. “Did you know where I was this whole time?”

I run my fingers through my hair and take a breath. “Do you really think if I knew where you were, it would have taken me this long to get to you?”

She searches my face for a long moment. The thing about it is, we both know she’s going to do it. If the tables were turned, and I felt as guilty as I know she feels, I would’ve already agreed to this. Even if just to try to make up for some of her pain. She frowns slightly and I think I finally have her.

“I can’t just leave,” she says quietly and closes her eyes. “People need me here.”

I stare at her. *PEOPLE NEED YOU HERE? I needed you. I still fucking need you.* I hate myself for thinking that, and even more for wanting to scream it at the top of my lungs. Not that I would give her the satisfaction. I add it to the list of things that piss me off. It’s a long fucking list.

“One week,” I say. “For now.”

“Why me?” she whispers, searching my face intently.

“Do you have any idea how much I lost because of the attack?” I ask. “I dropped in the draft. I didn’t get the money I’d been promised. The teams I wanted to play for, who were interested in me, passed. And then you. . .”

And then you fucking left me there by myself, to pick up the fucking pieces of the heart you shattered because I was stupid enough to fall for you. I don’t say that, obviously, and I don’t think I need to. Sadness flashes in her eyes just the same. It’s gone quickly, replaced by a serious expression as she seems to mull it over. A small frown forms on her face as she opens her mouth and shuts it a few times. I just know whatever she’s going to say is either going to hurt her or hurt me. I wait.

“Can’t you marry someone else?” she asks, finally, her voice a shaky whisper.

She doesn’t even look me in the eye as she says it. She can’t. I know she can’t. I take a moment to revel in how difficult it was for her to say those words.

“No,” I say plainly.

“Lach.” Her shoulders drop. “I can’t go back to Fairview.”

That’s what it comes back to, which is the exact reason I agreed to attend the sports luncheon in the first place. I have no doubt that she would have given me the name of the attacker by now if I hadn’t mentioned Fairview right off the bat. I could extract it from her. Fuck it out of her. I know she’d let me. The thing is, I no longer want just a name. I’ve sat with the knowledge of what they did to her, to me, for too long. I’ve learned to exercise patience. Well, that might be a stretch, but I’ve gotten good at exercising patience. Fuck, okay, I’ve gotten *better* at it.

After I recovered, I wasn’t plagued by my injuries or how they happened, I was plagued by knowing what they’d done to her. She’d only touched the surface of it back then. This time, I want her to tell me, in great detail, what they did. I don’t want a name, not yet. With all the pent-up rage I have, I’ll spoil my own plan before it unfolds, and I haven’t waited this long just to fuck it up in a hasty attempt to get revenge. No. This time, I’m going to sit with the details until we get to Fairview, and then I’ll demand a name from her. She may not give it to me, but I’m ready. I already hired someone to follow us while we’re there without making themselves known. I want every move she makes documented. When the person exposes themselves, I’ll be there to knock the fucking wind out of them, the way they did to me. Worse than they did to me, and I’m not going to catch them off guard with a cheap shot. I’m going to look them in the eye while I do it, because I’m not a fucking coward. They may have been slick before, hiding in the shadows, but I know their game now. They tried to take me out because they saw me as a threat. They think they own her and will scare her into submission again. They may even think they’re an evil menace, but they have no idea what kind of monster they’ve created.

“You *will* go back with me,” I say, with enough venom in my voice to make her eyes narrow.

I relish that, too. This is a side of her not many people get to see. She may have replaced her scowl with a polite smile. But deep down, Lyla James is an angry little concoction stewed by a witch in a cauldron that’s waiting to tip over.

“I’ll hate you for it,” she says, eyes still narrowed.

I shrug. “I don’t really care.”

That shuts her mouth. She’s watching me closely now. She didn’t expect

that. How could she? The man she fell in love with would have thrown himself at her feet by now, begging her to return to him, but I'm not that man anymore. I don't beg. I demand. And this is what I'm demanding from her. Whether she wants to do it the easy way or the hard way is up to her. Either way, she's doing it, but I'll play her little game a little longer and see if she decides to come willingly.

"Okay. I'll do it," she says. "One million dollars."

"Two for a year," I say.

"I don't even know if I can get through this week," she mutters.

My fists clench at my sides. I know that comment has nothing to do with me. She was fucking ecstatic when she saw me. Shocked but ecstatic. And the way she kissed me? There's no way she doesn't still want me. This is about Fairview. I know that unless I tell her my entire plan, I won't be able to convince her that no harm will come to either of us, but I can't disclose that yet.

"I need a few days," she says after a moment.

"I'll give you one."

"You'll give me two if you want me to go through with this." She pins me with one of her no-bullshit stares and fucking A, it still does things to me.

"Why two?"

"I need to coach tomorrow." She looks down as she says it, and I can tell it means a lot to her. "I can't miss it. They'll. . ." She takes a breath. "They're young. They'll be disappointed."

I could take this from her. I could force her to leave anyway, fucking tie her up and put a sock in her mouth, and drive, but I won't. I want to watch who she is and what she does here. Maybe by the time I leave here, I won't feel like throttling her and burning anything that stands between us. Highly unlikely, but maybe.

"We'll leave after," I say.

She shakes her head. "I work all day. I'm refereeing little kids at eleven and training teenagers in the afternoon."

"I thought you were taking a week off," I say. Her brows rise like she can't believe I know all of this. I cock my head. *Come on, Lyla James.*

"I'm on break from the sports center for a week," she explains. "I use the same facility, but this is separate from that."

Huh. That wasn't clear in the paperwork, but I guess it makes sense if it's all under the same company. Maybe that's why she's making decent money.

“Two days,” I say.

“Two days,” she repeats.

I give a nod and try not to let my mouth break out in a shit-eating grin. I knew she'd do it. If there's one thing she doesn't need, it's more guilt on her plate. Then again, she may be doing it because of the money, and that thought pisses me off. It shouldn't, but it does.

“I'm going to breakfast with Wade at nine-thirty,” she says after a moment.

My jaw tenses. I can't fucking believe she's actually going. I remain calm and remind myself that in a few days, we'll be married and I won't have to worry about that little gnat, but it doesn't make me want to squash him any less.

“You can come if you want,” she says quietly, biting her lip as she looks at the floor.

Only because I know her, I know that she means that. If it were anyone else, I'd think they're just trying to be nice, but Lyla James would rather stay quiet than say something she doesn't mean. I think about it. Do I want to have breakfast with that asshole? No. Do I want her to go alone? Also no. I can't promise that I'll be able to sit through it without fucking him up, though. I don't know if I can get as far as coffee before I pound his face in. I decide not to risk it.

“I'll think about it,” I say, finally.

“When will we be back?” she asks, looking at me again.

“You'll be back in time to start your residency.”

“Okay,” she breathes, searching my eyes. She looks at me for too long and I brace myself for whatever will come out of her mouth next. “Where will you be when I come back?”

Ha. That's a trap if I've ever heard one. “We'll see.”

I take my phone out, open up the contract, and hand it to her. Her hands remain very still as she reads through it.

“This is practically a marriage contract,” she says as she continues to scan it.

“Technically, but we still have to get married in court.”

“Shares?” Her brows hike up. “That's insane.”

I grit my teeth. It could be about the money, after all. It doesn't matter. The important thing is that she's going to sign it. She keeps scrolling. Finally, she signs it with the tip of her finger and hands the phone back to me. I

fucking love technology. She storms into her bedroom, and I start dialing my driver. I'd dismissed him, but since he can't fly out until tomorrow, he's still at the hotel. I'll have him check me out of my room early and bring my bag. There's no way I'm sleeping apart from her.

CHAPTER 30

DELILAH

AT LEAST, he lets me shower and change in peace. I can't believe I'm doing this. He must really hate me to take me back there, knowing I'll relive a nightmare. And marriage? I'm not against it. Sooner or later, I know deep down that I would have married the old Lachlan. This one? Not so much. But I'm going through with it because damn it, I care about him, and if this is the only way for him to get his inheritance, I'll help him. Besides, there's an expiration date and he's obviously going to let me finish my residency. That alone will take two years. By the end, I'll cash out and pay back all of my loans. I wouldn't even consider cashing out if he wasn't such an asshole now. He made out with me, manhandled me inside the building, yelled at me, and demanded I leave with him. I keep replaying everything, and I still can't wrap my head around it.

The more I think about it, the sadder I become. I knew that when we saw each other again, things would be difficult in the very beginning. I didn't think it would be like this, though. I knew he'd be upset, so I was prepared for an argument. The difference was that when it played out in my head, we'd argue and have makeup sex and live happily ever after. Dumb, I know. Obviously, really fucking dumb, considering my situation right now.

I need to call Marissa and talk to her about this. I change fast into the first pajama I grab— a cropped t-shirt and matching shorts. It's a freaking Snoopy pajama set, but I don't have many options to sleep in. When I slept with him, I wore t-shirts and panties to bed, which I still wear. There's no way I'll walk around in my underwear in front of this Lachlan Duke. Not that I think he'd give me a second glance. Something tells me that his hatred for me overrides his attraction and whatever else he used to feel for me. The thought makes my heart hurt, but I ignore it and focus. I need to pack, which I hate doing,

since I either overpack or forget everything. At least, my toiletries are somewhat organized and will be easy.

When I leave the bathroom, I feel the air go out of my lungs and freeze on the spot. He's so damn gorgeous. I could look at him for hours. I have looked at him for hours. Seeing him sitting on my bed, as he types on his phone, is unreal. I've never had a man in my bedroom, and I never let myself imagine him here. Not because I didn't want him here, but because I couldn't have him. I was already hurting myself enough without this image.

I continue to stare, making sure that I'm not making him up. I'm completely sober now. After that conversation and the shower, there's no way I wouldn't be, but he still seems like a mirage. He's here and so close that I can touch him, kiss him, and climb on his lap. My heart skips, as I envision myself doing that. That daydream is quickly replaced by a vision of him pushing me off him and yelling at me for thinking I have any right to do that.

That hurtful thought snaps me out of it and makes me move to the closet. I grab my suitcase and focus on packing. I open my sock drawer and pause when I realize I don't know what to pack. It's not like I have a ton of options, but I do happen to have a white dress. Not that it matters. It's not an actual wedding, so it's not like I need one. The thought chips away at my heart a little. I set it aside. I also have a deep green silk dress and a little black dress because, clearly, I've become a walking cliché here.

I've only worn the black one, and it was to this year's holiday party at Tackle. Some people wore red and green, and others wore white and blue. I wore black. I've only worn the other two when I tried them on at the store, but I feel like I should pack them. I have enough jeans, blouses and dress clothes for work events. Most of my clothes have a purpose. I only purchase things I probably don't need on nights when I cry, listen to music, and drink wine. I should probably ask him what we'll be doing. God, I freaking hate surprises. I can't believe I agreed to this.

When I step out of the closet, his head snaps up from his phone, and once again, I'm frozen. His eyes heat as he drinks me in slowly, causing an inferno in their wake. He does it again as if he's savoring every inch of me, undressing me with his gaze. I shift on my feet. I've been a lot of things with Lachlan, but coy isn't one of them. I feel exposed, turned on, and slightly embarrassed by my reaction tonight. When his gaze meets mine, the fire in them licks through me and spreads into my core.

“I don’t know what to pack,” I say, my voice low and needy.

He stares for another second, then tosses his phone on my bed, as he stands and makes his way over. My breath hitches as I watch him, and it occurs to me that this is a terrible idea. The money sounds great, but I don’t know if it’s worth the risk. I don’t think I’ll survive him, this time. He stops right in front of me. I stare at his black shirt and shut my eyes briefly to inhale his scent. Butterflies swarm my belly when I open them and find him watching me with that look in his eyes. The way he looks at me makes it difficult to breathe. When he reaches me, neither of us moves. I keep my eyes on his, heart pounding erratically, as I continue the staring contest that I’m only interested in, if it ends with his lips on mine.

It doesn’t.

He breaks away and moves into my closet. I step out fully. Thankfully, not shaking. At least my body knows when to behave itself. I pivot to look at him. The walk-in closet isn’t big by any means — something that’s demonstrated by Lachlan, who can easily reach every corner without moving. He grabs the three dresses, heels, jeans, tops, and a few other things that he carelessly drops into my suitcase. He knows that shit drives me crazy. I can have a messy stack of books on my nightstand, but my clothes need to be neatly folded. He’s doing it on purpose. Asshole. I don’t react. Finally, he moves to my underwear drawer, and everything inside me comes to a screeching halt.

I have nothing to hide or be ashamed of. Vibrators are normal to have and use, but I know he’ll be mean. The old Lach would have teased with a sparkle in his eye, a smirk on his lips, and promptly used it on me. This one. . . I don’t know what the hell this new Lachlan will do. I fight to remain calm and resist the urge to stop him. He pulls out every single pair of panties I own and studies them. I only have three nice panties, which immediately go in the bag. He tosses some of my others behind his shoulder, not even caring where they land. He does the same with the bras. His brows shoot up when he reaches the back of the drawer, and I know he’s found it. This is going to be a jolly good time, I just know it. He takes it out and examines it. It’s purple and gets used often.

I sigh. “Go ahead. Make fun of me.”

“Why would I make fun of you?” He looks at the vibrator in his hand, at me, and back at it. “Why does it look like a cactus?”

“Are you. . .” I start to laugh, but stop and step in to grab it. He holds it

out of reach like we're in fucking middle school. I shoot him a glare and cross my arms, as I take a step back. "Lachlan."

"Lyla."

"Please put it back."

His smile is slow, cruel. "I will, if you answer a few questions."

"Questions?" I ask, somehow managing to sound nonchalant. "You're joking."

He shakes his head. His smirk is pissing me the fuck off. He must see it, with the way his eyes twinkle in ruthless amusement. I'd expected him to make fun of the thing and then of me for needing one, but questions? He knows damn well that answering questions about sex makes me uncomfortable. Chalk it up to trauma. I can have sex, but I don't necessarily want to discuss it. Lachlan is the only person I've ever felt comfortable speaking to about it, and he knows it. I know he must remember that.

Then again, everything he's done since he got here has been deliberate, so I don't know why I expect this to be any different. I'm already wound up and have more emotions than I've felt all year. For some stupid reason, even though I know this will hurt, I stay put. Maybe to feed my emotional masochism more fucked up nutrients.

"Ask your questions." I uncross my arms and wait for the onslaught.

"How often do you use it?"

I roll my eyes. "What difference does it make?"

"Just curious. Once a week? Once a month? Once a day?" His eyes get this merciless look with each question that makes my core rattle, but damn it, I try to keep my eyes on his.

"Is this the fucking Census?" I ask, bored. "Maybe four times a week."

"Do you watch porn to get you off? Without the storyline, of course."

I bite my lip and look down. I almost smile, but hearing our inside joke in that harsh tone actually stings a little. Fuck, I wasn't expecting that. I don't trust myself to speak, so I just keep my eyes on his sneakers and shake my head.

"Do you think about anyone in particular when you use it?"

His scent engulfs me as he steps closer, invading my personal space. He's so close that the tips of his shoes are almost pressing against my toes. My heart jumps as I realize I could reach out and touch him right now, and he could do the same to me. I've imagined launching myself at him and wrapping my arms and legs around him for three years. His eyes, voice, lips,

and body have been etched into my every waking dream. Three years of longing and for what? Nothing. Instead of having a meaningful conversation, he's playing these stupid little games that amuse him.

I wish so badly that I could. . .I don't know, hug or kiss him, but I'm so afraid he'd push me away that I can't bring myself to do it. I know he'd push me away. It happens in an instant. Tears start burning my eyes at the mere thought of it all. I know what comes next. He's going to remind me that I could have had him, but instead chose to hide from him, as if I had a freaking option. I have to blink fast to keep from crying, but a fat tear lands on my foot anyway. I hope he doesn't see it. I bite my lip harder and nod my head to answer his question. Yes, I think about someone, in particular, you fucking asshole.

“Does it live up to the real thing?”

A myriad of emotions hit me at once — sadness, anger, and humiliation. My intake of breath is sharp but shaky. Still, I force my head to shake no at the question. He takes a step back. I hear the thud as he slams it into the drawer. I keep my head down as I whirl around and dash out of the closet and the room, furiously wiping the tears from my face. I can't do this. I'm not strong enough. The truth in the realization brings tears to my eyes. Rage surges within me — at the fucking therapist who helped me through some of my trauma, but mostly at myself for allowing him to do this to me. No one can break you unless you give them the power to do so, and I gave him all of mine. It's why he's the only one capable of making me feel so intensely, to this day. This feels like a betrayal, and I hate him for using it against me. God, I need to stop caring. I know I can do it again. It hurts that the person making me build emotional walls is also the person who helped me tear them down.

I could ask him to leave. I could leave. Neither of those is a realistic option. I know he'd leave but he'd stay right outside. If I leave, he'll follow me. The worst part of all is that as much as I hate him right now, I don't want him to leave. I just got him back. God, this is so fucked up. A sob rakes through me, but I force it down. When I hear his footsteps growing closer, I open the fridge and practically dive into it. I reach for the strawberry yogurt and turn it in my hand, like I didn't just buy it two days ago.

“I'll be right back,” he says behind me.

I say nothing.

“Will the door lock when I leave?”

I shake my head.

He sighs heavily. "Will I be able to get back in?"

I nod.

He stays behind me for another moment. I put the yogurt back and study the container of strawberries. When I hear the door shut behind me, I take a step back, slam the fridge closed, and run to my bathroom so I can break down without having to worry about him seeing me. Fuck him for this. Seriously, fuck him. When I'm done crying, I splash cold water on my face and take a few breaths as I call Marissa.

"Hey," she says. It's loud where she is.

"Lachlan is here."

She's silent, but I still hear the noise around her, so I know she hasn't hung up.

"Mar?"

"You're fucking shitting me," she whisper-shouts. "How?"

"I don't know, but. . .there's too much for me to say. I'm meeting Wade for breakfast at nine. Can you come?"

"Of course. Do you want me to go over right now?" she asks. "I'm coming over now."

"No, he's here. He went outside for something but he's coming right back."

"I don't give a shit. You don't sound well."

"I'm going to bed. I can't do this." My voice breaks on that word.

"You can, honey. Fuck, I can be there in twenty minutes."

"I'll be asleep by then," I say quietly, because that's exactly what I'm going to do right now. "Breakfast."

She exhales. "Are you sure I can't go over?"

"Just meet me there at nine-thirty."

"I'll be there."

I rush out of the bathroom, set it to charge on the nightstand beside me, turn off the light, and close my eyes. My body is exhausted, inside and out. For a moment, I think I won't be able to fall asleep, but I doze off before he comes back.

CHAPTER 31

LACHLAN

I HAVEN'T EVEN BEEN around her for a full day, and this is already fucking me up more than I care to admit. She was sleeping when I walked back into the room, and I barely slept, trying to make sure I didn't move to her side of the bed and throw an arm around her. It's not like I want to do that, but I think my body would betray me and do it without my consent. She's the last woman I slept with — truly just slept with. The *only* woman. That realization is jarring. For years, I've played out the scenes in my head of how things would go when I saw her again. None of them involved me sitting in a chair in the corner of her bedroom, watching her sleep. For an hour. Like a creep. At least the chair is comfortable. I bet she always sleeps in it, curling up in a ball like she likes to do. I pick up the throw that rests over the chair, inhale her scent on it, and drop it when I realize what I'm fucking doing.

A faint glow comes through her curtains, and I can see her well enough in the dim room. She's so fucking beautiful. Is it possible that she's more beautiful now than she was then? I swear she is. She makes me want to strangle her. She makes me want to fuck the shit out of her. She makes me want to strangle her while I fuck the shit out of her and make her come screaming my name. It's incomprehensible that after everything she's put me through, she could still hold this much power over me.

When she stirs, I pick up my phone to check my emails. It's what I should have been doing for the last hour. When her phone starts buzzing on the nightstand a moment later, I think better of it and hit the side button on my phone. She has no idea I'm here. I'll watch her a little longer to see what she does next. I've already wasted a chunk of my life doing this. I can watch her for ten more minutes. At first, I think it's an alarm she set, but she reaches over and swipes the screen without even looking at it. That minor action

fucks with me. It means she'd answer anyone who has that number.

"Yeah." Her voice is raspy, the way it is when she first wakes up.

My dick instantly gets hard. Harder. Fuck. I swear she conditioned my body to react this way. Her raspy voice in the morning? Instant hard-on. Her bitchy attitude? Instant hard-on. The way she smiles at me? Instant hard-on. The conviction in her words when she speaks about her soccer abilities? Instant hard-on. The fire in her eyes when she's turned on? That's an obvious one. She's turned me into a fucking lab rat in a B.F. Skinner study, for fuck's sake. I really need to get my shit together.

"Yeah, I know. I told you I'd be there." She throws an arm over her face. "Yes. I'll be there too, I'm not irresponsible." She's quiet for a moment. "Of course, we can walk there together. No, he won't. He wouldn't do that. It'll be fine." She sits up quickly, her sheets rustling. "Did you call me to remind me about breakfast or to question me like I'm a fucking suspect in a crime?"

I bite my tongue at her snappy tone. Fuck. She doesn't even say goodbye; she just hangs up. I almost smile, but then I remember that he has her number and I don't. Well, I *do*, but she hasn't given it to me. She tosses her phone on the bed carelessly and gasps when she remembers that I may be lying there. She presses a hand to the area I'm supposed to be in. I can't tell if she's disappointed or relieved that I'm not there, and that, of course, pisses me off.

"Looking for me?"

She screams, scrambling back and hitting the headboard with a hand on her heart. "Jesus Christ, Lachlan! What the hell?"

I get up and open the blinds, squinting against the harsh sunlight. Lyla doesn't even let me get a word in. She throws the covers off, gets out of bed, and heads to the bathroom before I even have a chance to make it back to the chair. I hear the toilet flush, the faucet turn on and off, and the shower start running.

I wonder if she realizes she didn't take any clothes with her. She's probably used to walking around naked. I shut my eyes and take a breath. *Do not* picture her naked right now. If I start, I'll do something stupid, and I can't afford to fuck her. I'm definitely going to. I'll need to jerk off a few times before, so I don't come in a second. That's how long it's been. Still, soon we'll have a marriage to consummate. I try really hard to focus on emails again, and then try even harder not to picture myself walking into the bathroom and fucking her against the shower wall.

The water turns off, and sure enough, a minute later, she opens the door

wrapped in a towel. I should look away. A decent man might, but she took my decency with her when she left me lying in a hospital bed three years ago. She walks into the closet, grabs underwear and a sports bra, and sets it on top of the built-in drawer. She turns and locates some clothes and places them with the underwear. I wait for her to pick them up and go to the bathroom, but instead, she drops her towel. My jaw drops along with it.

She doesn't look at me, but I know she knows I'm watching. I take in her naked form. I thought I was hard before, but this is. . .too fucking much. I want to free my cock and jerk off to this visual. I will, later, but the urge to do it now is strong. It's either that or go over there and bite her ass, her thighs, her tits, and her mouth, which will inevitably lead to her pussy, which will lead to sex, and that's not going to happen yet. She finishes getting dressed, puts her feet into a pair of slides, grabs socks and cleats, and walks out of the closet and the room.

She doesn't look at me or acknowledge me once. It pisses me off, but I give her this. I invaded her life and am about to uproot it. I'm taking her back to a place I know she'd rather burn down than step foot in. I know she's mad at me over the vibrator incident, but I don't give a shit. The confirmation that she's been getting herself off to the memory of me was worth asking, even if I did want to break the vibrator for taking pleasure from me. I'm even angrier after hearing that shit-head say that they'd fucked.

Where did they fuck? Was it on this bed? I'll burn the fucking mattress. I know I shouldn't be upset. Three years is a long time, but when it comes to Lyla, I shouldn't be a lot of things that I can't help. I take a breath. He's obviously a lousy lay, which, no shit. I could see *that* from a mile away. I take a breath and stop thinking about it. It happened. I can't change it. I need to move on. When I hear her grab her keys, I look at the time on my phone and get up quickly.

"Where are you going?" I stand by the bedroom door. "You still have thirty minutes before your breakfast thing."

"Right." She glares at me. "And in the meantime, I'm going to get coffee from a stranger who won't emotionally attack me, just because they think they can."

"I thought you invited me to go with you."

"Fuck you." She turns swiftly, opens the door, and slams it shut behind her.

I laugh. Yeah, she's angry all right. Well, welcome to the fucking club of

the angry and broken-hearted, Lyla James. We don't share cookies, only grievances.

Luckily I got ready two hours before her and I'm able to follow her to breakfast. She probably knows I followed her, but I try to stay out of sight. I'm relieved to see Marissa. Her presence should make it clear to Shit-head that this isn't a pansy-ass breakfast date. Marissa looks worried. Shit-head looks confused. Lyla looks. . .expressionless. This is making her go back into her shell, which bothers me, but not enough to put an end to all of it. She *will* marry me, and I will get revenge on the person who did this to me — to her.

I keep watching. Marissa starts crying. Shit-head looks upset. Lyla is still expressionless. This goes on for an hour. Lyla's expression is the only one that never wavers. Shit-head is the only one who gets a real meal and eats it all. Marissa eats a bagel. Lyla orders the same thing, which surprises me since she only eats the "everything" side of bagels and ignores the bottom portion. I watch her take a bite and set it down. She takes another and sets it down. That's all she eats.

When they finish, Marissa hugs Lyla and gives her a kiss on the cheek. Whatever she says makes Lyla's ghost of a smile appear. Marissa hugs Shit-head next and takes off in the opposite direction. Probably to her smoothie or flower business. Lyla and Shit-head start walking. She picks her hair up into a ponytail as he speaks. His eyes drop to her lips a little too often for my liking. He starts moving his hands like he's trying to convince her of something. Probably not to leave with me. If he is, he's wasting his breath. There's no reality in which that happens. She'll leave willingly or I'll be forced to take extreme measures, and I'm trying to avoid that. Besides, I'm making her life better. When it's all said and done, she'll be a millionaire. Who wouldn't want that?

We end up on one of the soccer fields behind Tackle. They disappear into the building and walk out with nets and cones that they set up promptly. Once that's done, Shit-head walks back into the building and brings out a bucket full of soccer balls. He kicks one to Lyla, who stops it from rolling past her. I don't even think she was looking; her reaction is pure instinct. She immediately starts doing tricks with it. It's enthralling. I've never seen her

play. Not in person, anyway. I've seen videos of some of her games, but I've never seen her do this in person. She's fully focused on what she's doing — serious, even though she's goofing off.

Shit-head joins her on the field and tries to steal the ball. The ease with which they play one-on-one pisses me off. I don't know shit about soccer, but it seems similar enough to hockey. I'd learn to maneuver the ball if it meant getting to play her one-on-one. She'd kick my ass, but I'd do it anyway. She fakes him out, her body moving one way as she holds the ball with her other foot, kicks it right under his legs, and runs after it. It happens fast; blink and you miss it, but the entire play is a thing of beauty, if you're paying attention. That smile — my smile — spreads on her face, but her back is facing him so he doesn't get it.

She's running fast down the field as he tries to catch up. When he realizes he has no chance to take the ball away from her, he goes for a different tactic and wraps his arms around her to keep her from running. I push off the tree trunk I'm leaning against. I swear this guy has a death wish. Lyla squeals as he lifts her up, and I'm a millisecond from running over there and yanking her out of his grip when he sets her down. The moment her feet touch the ground, she pushes him hard and walks away to pick up the discarded ball. His expression falls. I smile, but now I'm left wondering what she'd do if I picked her up like that right now. Probably find something to stab me with.

People start arriving shortly after — parents with lawn chairs and coolers, and little kids wearing their uniforms to run onto the field. I'm done ordering food to be delivered when I see a group of moms walk up to Shit-head. Two of them start openly flirting with him. Instead of taking a clue and accepting an offer from one of them, he glances over at Lyla. If he was just her friend, I wouldn't even care (as much), but he's a friend who wants to fuck her, and that automatically puts him on my shit list. I don't know how much more of him I can take.

At least, Lyla's not paying attention. She's crouched down, tying a little boy's shoes, and has four more standing behind him, waiting for her to do the same for them. As soon as she finishes knotting the laces, each one of them leaps forward, giving her a tight hug. Her face breaks into a smile as she ruffles their hair. It's not my smile, but it's a smile nonetheless and all of hers are incredible, so they eat it up. Seeing the way she interacts with them makes my stomach feel hollow. A vision of her playing with our children crosses my mind. I push it down and bury it.

The little blonde girl I saw in the pictures runs over when the boys are done and throws herself at Lyla, knocking her on her ass. Lyla laughs. I'm standing far but I hear it, and fuck, I miss that laugh. She stands up with ease and helps the little girl up. A blond man, whom I assume is her father, walks over, shaking his head with a laugh. They talk until the little girl tugs Lyla's shorts and forces her attention away from her dad. He smiles like he already knows what she's going to say. I walk over. I need to hear what they're saying and why she takes so many damn pictures with her. I know Lyla sees me. I'm hard to miss, but she pretends I don't exist. As I eavesdrop, I keep my distance and look at my phone screen to check how far the driver bringing my food is.

"Another one for your collection," Lyla says as she stands up, brushing her shorts.

"I don't mind having you on my phone." He winks. If she notices, it doesn't show.

Who the *fuck* is this guy? When she turns around and leads his daughter to the field, he blatantly checks her out. I snap a picture of him and send it to Liam.

Me: who is this?

Liam: idk, who is it?

I know he's doing it to annoy me. It works.

Me: i wouldnt ask if i knew

He doesn't respond.

Me: FACIAL RECOGNITION

Liam: why? Did he rob a bank?

My brother, the fucking comedian.

Me: just do it

Liam: we can't use facial recognition on every guy who talks to Lyla. fucking ask her who it is

Now I'm the one who doesn't respond. Liam has been dealing with my bullshit since I got out of the hospital. I went into the hospital unconscious, but otherwise hopeful, and stepped out bitter and angry. I know my brother thought that finally seeing her again would snap me back to my old self. Thing is, I don't even remember what I used to be like before she left. I'm not going to lie and say seeing her didn't make a difference, because the moment her eyes met mine, I felt like I always used to — watching the hockey puck in suspense. I'm too angry to give in, though. Maybe if I'd

found her moping in her baggy t-shirts and just scraping by, my anger would have vanished immediately. I'm a complete asshole for it. I know I am but what the fuck? I've been living day-to-day like a fucking zombie. Hockey practice, hockey game, home, rinse and repeat. Now I'm at Duke Tech, and it's more of the same — boring and unfulfilling. So yeah, I would have liked to have seen her moping a little.

My brother doesn't understand my resentment. Mom doesn't either. They hung out with her for a couple of hours at a hockey game and fell in love with her instantly. Of course, they did. How could they not? Which is why when I told Liam I needed to find her so I could marry her, he readily agreed. My poor, kind-hearted brother thought I was going to show up here like Eros; he didn't realize I'm on my Anteros shit. I start walking back to the oak tree I'd been standing under.

Me: i need you to find out who he is and hack into his phone and delete his pictures

He calls me. I answer with a heavy exhale.

"I fucking know, okay?" I remove the baseball cap from my head and quickly rake my fingers through my hair before putting it back on.

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" he spits, overlapping my words.

I pause, midstep. "Is that a serious question?"

"Jesus, Lach," he says, exasperated. "Did you tell her why you're there?"

"Of course."

"What did she say?"

"She agreed to leave with me." I lean my back against the trunk of the tree and close my eyes.

"So, she's cool with marrying you after all this time of not seeing you?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't she be?"

He's quiet for a moment. "Does she know you're getting married in Fairview?" When I don't answer, he shouts, "You haven't even told her?!"

"What's there to tell? She agreed to marry me. She agreed to go to Fairview and Chicago," I say. "Can you do what I'm asking? This guy's a creep. He has too many pictures of her on his phone. It's disturbing."

"Oh my. . ." Liam bursts out laughing. "*That's* what you find disturbing?"

"Whatever, Lee. Do it or don't, but don't call me to lecture me on my gray fucking morals. It's her fault I'm like this."

"Lachlan," he breathes into the line.

"I'll see you at home."

“Yeah,” he mutters.

“Will you be at the engagement party?”

“You mean the one the bride-to-be probably doesn’t even know about yet? Yes, I’ll be there.” He hangs up the phone.

Asshole.

Now that I think about it, I should probably invite Marissa and Prescott to the wedding. My original plan wasn’t this elaborate. I was just going to take her to the courthouse and get married, but my wheels started turning and I realized that whoever is responsible for all of this would be livid if they saw her marry a person they also tried to get rid of. My mother thinks Lyla loves Fairview. Liam thought the same until I stupidly let it slip that the reason I hired more security is that Lyla doesn’t feel safe there. It’s none of their business. This is between me and Lyla, and anyone who wants to stand in the way is considered a threat. I grab my food from the delivery guy and keep my eyes on that dad as I eat. For the rest of the game, I try to figure out how I can get his phone.

CHAPTER 32

LACHLAN

WHEN THE GAME is about to end, I walk back toward the field. This time, I don't bother camouflaging. This isn't a Clark Kent situation. I could probably be in a body bag, and Lyla would know who I was, but I want to make sure that she knows that I know that she knows I'm here. I can barely remember the man I was before Lyla barged into my life, but I know I never cared enough about anyone to reduce myself to pettiness. Look at me now. Mr. I Would Never Chase Anyone, and I'm standing on a soccer field in this hot ass weather, in a city I've never been to, chasing someone who is currently acting like I don't exist. Ain't that some shit.

I take off my ball cap and set it facing back, as she jogs to the other side of the field to help a little boy with his laces. My heart tugs again. The reaction pisses me off. By the end of this, I'm going to need a serious psychological evaluation. From my peripheral vision, I see someone walking over, so I look in that direction. One of the hot moms that had been flirting with Shit-head is headed my way. She smiles and stands all up in my personal space. I immediately want her to leave me alone. What is up with people in this city? I bet dating apps have a higher success rate, here, than anywhere else in the country.

"Do you play?" she asks.

I look at her. "No."

"Oh." Her blue eyes roam up and down my body. "But you play something. You look like an athlete."

"Hockey."

"Oohhh, a contact sport," she says with a wink.

She gives me a smile that I'm sure makes a lot of people jump to seal the deal; I don't return it. I may be angry as fuck, but I don't need this right now.

The last thing I need is for Lyla to think that I'm even remotely interested in anyone else. I'm not, fucking obviously, but Lyla always jumps to the most extreme conclusions. She wouldn't only think that I want to fuck this woman. No, that would be simple. She'd think that I would fuck this woman in her ugly minivan, get her pregnant, and marry her. She's sick like that. I love that about her. Right about now, I'm wishing Shit-head or the stupid dad would take this woman's attention from me. With the way he's been staring at Lyla, the dad seems to have forgotten that his daughter is actually on the field playing. I keep my arms crossed and my glare directed at him. If only I had Superman's laser beams right now.

"Does your kid play here?" the mom asks, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Not yet."

"Oh," she says it in a flirty tone as she accidentally brushes up against the side of my arm. "Did you just move here?"

"Not yet," I say through gritted teeth, because of course, that's when Lyla decides to look over here. It's quick, but our eyes meet.

I need to get rid of this fucking lady. I stay quiet. Maybe if I ignore her, she'll leave. The dad is pointing his phone at the field and it takes everything in me to stay put. He might actually be taking pictures of his daughter. God, I need to steal that phone. The mom shifts and clears her throat. I'm two seconds away from walking away, when it occurs to me that she can be useful. It's not like Liam is helping me out.

"Exploring your options?" she asks.

"You can say that."

When I look at her again, she's checking my left hand for a ring, as if that would stop her from trying to get me to her minivan.

"There aren't many dads here," I say, making it a point to look around. There really aren't.

"Nah. Cooper is usually the only one." She points at the blond guy I've been watching.

Cooper. "What does he do?"

"He owns the sports center." She looks over her shoulder toward the building Lyla works at. *Interesting.*

"He owns it?" I ask and look at him again. "Is he an athlete?"

"Was. Soccer. He was good, too. Played pro overseas for a while, but he had too many injuries and decided to hang up his cleats and open up Tackle

to help athletes train, overcome injuries, and stay healthy. People come from all over the country.”

“What about the coach?” I nod at shit-head number one.

“Wade?” She asks. “He plays for the U.S. Soccer Team.”

“Plays?” My brows shoot up. “Why is he here?”

“He took a season off. And he has a thing for Delilah.” She rolls her eyes when she says this.

My jaw clenches.

“She’s gorgeous, sure, but I don’t see the hype.” The woman shrugs. “I hear she’s practically a hermit.”

A hermit. Ha. I saw her out. Twice. She’s definitely not a hermit. This woman probably lives in the suburbs and doesn’t know what happens in the city after dark. I look at Shit-head again. Pro soccer, huh? Pro soccer, yet Lyla’s able to fake him out easily. He’s probably a bench warmer.

“I’m Tammy, by the way,” she says after a moment.

“Nice to meet you, Tammy.” I nod politely but keep my arms crossed as I look at the field, my eyes on De-li-luh’s every move.

Beside me, Tammy’s quiet, probably waiting for me to give her my name. I don’t.

Lyla whistles three times.

“Well, the game’s over.” Tammy turns and very obviously lets her eyes roam my body. Again. “Do you want me to show you around the city?”

“No.” I look her dead in the eye. “I already have someone showing me everything.”

She looks disappointed, but smiles and walks back to the rest of the hot moms who are waiting for her. I wonder if they agreed on who would come up to me, and if they set a bet on whether or not she’d seduce me. People like to shit on men when they make bets about things like that, but when women do it, it’s fine. Annoying is what it is.

“You have got to be kidding me,” a familiar voice says behind me.

“Marissa.” I smile and turn around slowly. “It’s been a while.”

“You’re a terrible human being, you know that?” She narrows her eyes as she closes the distance between us. She plants both palms on my chest and pushes me. I don’t budge, which makes her more upset, so she clenches her fists at her sides. “Taking her back to Fairview? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I have some unfinished business there and a luncheon to attend.” I shrug.

“Why would you do this to her?” she asks. “Don’t you think she’s been through enough?”

“Oh, *she’s* been through enough?” I huff out a laugh. “I’m sorry, do you not remember that I was sent to the hospital?”

“Oh my. . .” She takes a deep breath as if trying to rein in her anger. “So this is you trying to get revenge on her for being the reason you were at the hospital?”

“No, this is me trying to get revenge on the person who did this,” I say. “And on her for leaving me with no fucking explanation.”

“Wow,” she says, searching my face. “You don’t love her.”

“Oh.” I chuckle humorously. “Now you’re going to tell me how I feel?”

“If you ever loved her, you wouldn’t make her go back there. You know she’s going to hate you for it,” she says.

“I don’t give a shit.” I shrug.

She looks at me for a long moment. “Do you remember the first thing I told you when it was clear that you were interested in her?”

“No, why don’t you enlighten me?” I remember damn well what she said, but fuck it. I’m just standing here anyway.

“If you fuck up, she’ll never forgive you,” she says. “If you think this will end with her taking you back, you might as well forget about that right now.”

I look away, scanning the field. The moms are still having their little meeting and glancing over every so often. The dad is still looking at Lyla. Shit-head is staying close by, pretending he’s talking to the kids, but he’s looking at her too much for that to be the case. I’m not at all surprised that she has a little fan club of men who want her. The way she acts here, the way she dresses — this Lyla is the whole package. She may not be smiling or laughing all the time, but she gives them just enough to want more. I should feel bad for them. Even if I wasn’t here to whisk her away, that would have never happened. She can’t give another man more when already gave me everything.

“You should go to Fairview in a few days,” I say, looking back at Marissa.

“Why?”

“Don’t your parents still live there?”

“Yes. . .” she says tentatively.

“You should go.”

“What’s in a few days?” she asks.

“That’s when I’m marrying Lyla.”

“You’re getting married *there*?” Her eyes widen more than I thought possible. She takes a step back, setting a hand on her chest, and breathes. “Holy shit, Lachlan. Does she know?”

“She knows we’re getting married.”

Marissa looks at me, and I wish it was anger that I found in her eyes. Instead, it’s disappointment. She thinks I deserve it, I know. I’d once promised to protect her best friend and now I’m doing this, which she sees as the complete opposite. I am protecting her, though. Once I’m done in Fairview, she’ll no longer have to hide. She can go back to being Lyla James. Hopefully Lyla James Duke.

“We won’t be in danger,” I say.

“Lach.” She frowns. “She was run off the road. She’ll be in danger the moment she gets there.” She looks away momentarily. “Why would you make her marry you in the one place she hates?”

“What does it matter where we get married?”

“That’s the point, isn’t it?” Her jaw drops, but she recovers quickly. “You *want* her to suffer. Do you know how much she. . .” She shakes her head, taking a breath. “Forget it. You don’t deserve to know.” She meets my eyes again. “You know, after the accident, after Luke, I had to endure her tears and screams, and then nothing. Fucking nothing, until you came along and made her feel all of these different emotions. God, I’ve known her since we were born, and I have never seen her as happy as she was with you.” She looks over to where Lyla is. “I was so grateful for you, but now it’s clear that you’re the worst thing that’s ever happened to her.”

I swallow the knot of emotion that creeps up my throat. This isn’t news to me. Lyla told me herself that I made her feel, after she’d been numb for so long. I’d reveled in that. It made me feel like a fucking king to know that I got a version of her that no one else had. I got her tears, her smiles, her laughter. I had her completely. Until I didn’t. Hearing the person who knows her quite possibly better than I do say this is harder than I care to admit. It doesn’t matter, because it goes both ways. We both made each other experience things we never had before, and then she fucking left like it meant nothing.

“Well then, I guess we’re even,” I manage to say. “She’s the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

Marissa shakes her head and starts to leave.

“Wait,” I say before she takes another step.

She turns to face me again. “What?”

“Who’s that guy?” I nod toward the dad.

“Oh, really?” She laughs humorlessly. “Now you want me to help you identify men who are a threat to you?” She scoffs and starts walking away, but thinks better of it and turns to me again. “*That* is a single dad who’s been waiting patiently for her to sort out her shit so he can finally make his move. He’s also her boss, but now that she’s done with her internship, he can ask her out.”

I knew I hated the guy.

“Why doesn’t he?”

“He won’t bring any woman, even Lyla, to his house around his daughter unless he knows it’s serious.” Marissa shrugs. “He must see Lyla as a possibility, since he hasn’t even gone on a date in like eight months.”

I glare at him again. “He told you all of this?”

“No, but people talk. Everyone knows it,” she says. “Just like they know that Wade is in love with her. They have a bet going in the center about when she’ll finally cave. Cooper isn’t participating for obvious reasons.”

I feel my jaw tick. If she’s trying to make me angry, she’s succeeding and she knows it.

“She doesn’t like either of them,” I say, like a fucking child in the playground.

“You’re right.”

I take a breath. “She seems happy here.”

“What would make you think that?” Her brows pull together, and her voice finally softens.

“You’re her best friend. I guess you’d know a lot better than I would.” I look at Lyla again. She’s picking up the cones while Wade talks to the group of moms. “She just seems happy.”

Marissa doesn’t say anything. She just stares at Lyla with a sad expression on her face that I don’t understand, so I keep talking, because I need to know her thoughts on this.

“She smiles here,” I say.

“She smiles here?” Her wide eyes shoot to mine, “She has her moments, sure. She’s happy when she’s with the kids.”

“I’ve seen her smiling.” I stare at Lyla. “The other day Prescott posted a picture where she was laughing while shit-head number one was carrying

her.”

“On my birthday?”

“Yeah.”

She blinks. “You thought she looked *happy* on my birthday?”

“I know what I saw.” I push down the urge to pull out my phone and show her the screenshot I took. She’s looking at me like I’m speaking a different language, so I repeat, “I saw her. She was laughing.”

“God, Lachlan. You’re so fucking stupid sometimes.” Marissa laughs, shaking her head. “She’s not happy. She’s just gotten very good at pretending.”

With that, she walks off. This time, I don’t stop her. I don’t even know what that means. I know what I saw. I know what I *see*. Marissa helps Lyla pick up the rest of the stuff. I should have probably gone over there to help a few minutes ago when she started, but I don’t want to step foot on that field. I may be angry. I may want to see her suffer, but I don’t want to take this from her. By the end of this, she’ll either love me and stay married, or leave me and change her identity again. It doesn’t really matter. If she does that, I’ll just find her again, and next time, I’ll be a hell of a lot faster. I’ll catch her when she steps foot off the damn airplane.

CHAPTER 33

DELILAH

I HAVE A THREE-HOUR BREAK, but I can't go home. I don't care if Lachlan follows me around the world, but I don't want him there when I'm feeling like this. My apartment is my sanctuary, and he's making me feel like a lunatic. I can't stand him right now, but watching Tammy flirt with him was maddening. Instead of going home, I go to Marissa's smoothie shop. It's a bit crowded today, but thankfully, the two comfortable accent chairs in my favorite corner are empty. I grab my usual smoothie and head to the chair. Wade walks in and picks up the smoothie he ordered to go, and when he sees me, he comes over. I wish he wouldn't. I just want to be left alone right now. He smiles as he walks over, though, and it's so genuine that I push away my annoyance. Instead of taking a seat across from me, he sits on the wooden coffee table between the chairs and sets his forearms on his thighs as he looks at me.

"You good?"

"I'm good." I take a sip of my smoothie.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay and help with the training session?" he asks.

"No. You already made plans. I'm fine," I say. "I'm serious."

"I can't tell with you." He exhales heavily. "Which makes me think you're not joking when you say you don't feel anything, but then he comes and. . ."

I don't even bother to ask him to elaborate. I know how I am when Lach's around. I mean, I don't even need the chime of the door alerting a new customer's arrival to tell me he's in here, right now. My entire body comes alive in his presence. I hate it. I glance up, and sure enough, he's standing by the counter, glaring at us as he waits for his smoothie.

I look at Wade. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

I don’t acknowledge him, but from my peripheral vision, I see Lachlan walking over with his smoothie. I don’t look up at him when he takes the chair across from me, either. I keep my focus on Wade. He doesn’t even notice anyone else has joined us. Maybe he does notice, but since the shop is so crowded, there’s no reason for him to think it’s Lachlan.

“You don’t have to say anything.” He scoots closer to me. “I just feel like if you can give him a chance, maybe you can give me one too.”

I glance away and look at the hallway that leads to the back door.

“Delilah,” Wade says after a moment. When I turn my face again, I catch Lachlan’s glare. Again, I ignore him.

“I can’t,” I whisper. “I’m sorry. I just can’t.”

“Am I not enough of an asshole for you?” Wade asks.

That makes me laugh. I bite my lip and glance up at Lachlan again, who now looks more amused than he does angry. He raises his eyebrow as if waiting for me to respond to that.

“If you want me to be an asshole. . .”

I bite back a laugh. “Wade, you wouldn’t even know how to be an asshole, and I like that about you.”

He exhales. Lachlan shoots daggers at me.

“So. . .?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Look, we’ll both be out of town the next few days. Just. . .when we get back here, go on a date with me. A real one. . .”

“Not gonna happen,” Lach says, his voice menacing.

Wade’s eyes widen for a moment and narrow, as he stands up and turns his body in Lach’s direction.

“You know what, asshole?” Wade says. “If it weren’t for you, she’d be dating me.”

Lach’s lips twitch. “But she’s not.”

“I can wait,” Wade says with a shrug. “She’ll get tired of the way you treat her, sooner or later.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Lach crosses his leg, setting his ankle over his knee, as he leans back in the chair. “The fact still remains that she’ll be with me.”

“Until she’s not,” Wade shoots back.

Lach’s face immediately darkens, but he remains seated. “If you want to

believe that, that's on you, but I'm telling you right now, she's never going to fucking date you."

"Just because I'm a nice guy. . ."

"It has nothing to do with you being a nice guy," Lach says, his green eyes hard as he uncrosses his leg and leans forward in his seat. "She won't date you because you're not me. It's that fucking simple."

The words that sting me, make Wade laugh. I look away. I know it only hurts because he's right. The last three years have proved it. Still, the fact that he knows it and says it so callously, hurts. I wish it didn't, but I can't change what he makes me feel. I take a breath and focus on remaining calm, and not showing him how much his words affect me. I keep my eyes on the back door the entire time I sip on my smoothie.

"Mark my words, 'Lachlan Duke,'" Wade says, as if Lach isn't real and sitting right here. I glance over again. "Sooner or later, you'll lose her again, and I'll be here, waiting to pick up the pieces."

Lach's jaw clenches but he doesn't respond. He continues to shoot daggers that I know would be fists if we were outside.

"Text me," Wade says to me.

I nod in acknowledgment. When I don't look at him, he exhales heavily and walks away. The moment he walks away, I spring up and go to the back. Marissa's office is tiny, but she has a comfortable chair. I set my cup on her desk, settle into the chair, and close my eyes. I'm trying not to kick myself for my actions, but it's hard right now. I shouldn't have signed that document. For him, I'd do anything, but my sanity isn't something I'm willing to lose.

I've been fine here. I've missed him so fucking much, but I've been fine. And I know some people, like Marissa, make the argument that simply surviving isn't truly living, but for me it is and I'm okay with that. For so long, I wanted to bring him here, and now that he's actually here, I just. . . I don't know what I feel. If I wish him away, I'd miss him. If he stays and continues to tarnish the place that has brought me peace, I'll hate him. I take a few deep breaths. I've survived worse and I know I'll survive this. I just wish I didn't have to.

When I open my eyes, I check my phone and realize I slept for an hour. *An hour*. Shit. Without Wade's help with my setup, I actually might be late. I spring into action and grab the emergency bag I keep here. I brush my teeth, fix my ponytail, apply deodorant, and wash my face. When I walk back into

the lounging area, Lachlan's still sitting in the same chair, doing something on his phone. He's so fucking gorgeous that for a split second, I want to drop all pretenses and kiss him. I don't. I won't. Good looks do not overshadow good hearts. *Ever.*

Outwardly, I ignore him when I grab my cup to toss it. Inwardly, my heart is skyrocketing. I say goodbye to Marissa and jog to the pitch. It's only a block over, so it's not like it's a huge feat, but I have a lot of shit to do before the kids I'm training get here. In my mind, I start going over the drills. I've never worked with a co-ed team, but since it's just drills and training, they could be poodles and still catch on. Wade usually trains the boys/men, and when he's out of town playing, Cooper does it or he has some of his friends drop by. Today, both of them were busy, so the kids are stuck with me. I'm walking out of the building with cones in one arm and dragging a bucket full of soccer balls with the other, when I get the tingling sensation that crawls up my arms and seeps into my core when Lach's around.

"Let me help you," he says behind me.

I think about it. If I let him help, I'm sort of letting him in, but I'll get this done faster. Fuck it. If he's dead set on following me around and trying to make me feel like shit at every turn, he might as well help. I let him grab the bucket, set the cones down, and go back inside for the nets. The only reason I'm emotional when he's around is that I let my guard down completely for him, once, and it felt good. I felt something. Now, I can't make myself not feel things around him. He makes me angry, sad, confused, and relieved. Worst of all, he brought butterflies with him and set them free in my stomach. He's not the Lach I once knew, though. He may look the same, walk the same, and smell the same, but it's not him. The imposter in front of me shouldn't even make me feel this way, and I hate it. I take a very deep breath and focus on soccer. Soccer and helping people are the only things that get me going these days. With his help, the setup is done fifteen minutes before the kids are supposed to get here.

"Thank you," I say, my eyes on the pitch.

"You're welcome." *God, his voice. His freaking voice still slays me.*

At least, he still has manners. He follows me and looks around when I walk back inside to grab my water bottle. Part of me wants to show him around the center, let him see my office, tell him all of the things I've done here and will continue to do, but I don't. So far, my head is winning the battle against my heart. It's not an easy feat. I want him to kiss me again, but I

don't. I want him to fuck me, but I don't. I want to show him this part of my life, but I can't. Letting him see what I do here would be letting him in more, and I don't know how to feel about it. It's a sad realization. Lachlan was once my best friend. Now he's just a stranger who makes my heart skip.

"You want Gatorade?" I ask, opening the fridge.

"Sure."

I grab the yellow one — his favorite — and my refilled water bottle, and head to the door. As I approach, he pushes the door open with his back and holds it that way for me. When I get right in front of him, I thrust the Gatorade into his chest — the closest thing I'll ever get to a punch. I know this because the impact makes my hand hurt.

My eyes stay on the bottle, which he still hasn't grabbed. "I don't know if it's still your favorite. We have other choices, if you want them."

He wraps his hand over mine as he grabs the bottle. Fireworks go off in my head, the remnants zipping through the rest of my body. Somehow, I manage to hold back the gasp in my throat and not react outwardly.

"There's only ever been one choice," he says, his voice a low rumble that vibrates against my hand.

Oh. My. God. Why does he do this? I glare up at him and find that cocky-ass smirk on his face. My heart, of course, does a flip. I take my hand and walk onto the field. I'm waiting for eight people today — four girls and four guys. Right now, I'm counting seven. Movement catches the corner of my eye and I turn to find the straggler running over. I can already tell he's trouble with his messy light brown hair, golden skin, and chiseled jaw. If his hair was a little darker and his eyes were green, I'd say he's related to Lachlan. I bet he's probably the hottest soccer player at his college. I glance at the girls. Two of them look like they're freaking out. The other two are rolling their eyes.

"Hurry up, Barlow," one of the guys shouts.

"I told you not to stay at the party last night," another one says.

I give them a moment. I used to hate when my coaches didn't let us talk before training. During was impossible, and after was exhausting. I look at my watch. They're five minutes early, so I'll give them that. The kid, Barlow, finally reaches us. He looks at me and whistles, one of those cartoon whistles that lets everyone know he likes what he sees.

I roll my eyes. "Start stretching."

I walk back to the chair to get my clipboard with all their information —

names, ages, schools, where they've played, for how long, etc. Lach is sitting in the chair, legs sprawled out like he's totally comfortable, which I know is a lie. That chair sucks. He's wearing sneakers, black joggers, and a plain light gray short-sleeved t-shirt. I'm sure he dressed this way knowing he was coming to the pitch, but I don't think he realized how hot it could get. Normally, it's a little cooler this time of year, but we had a weird winter and we're having a strange spring. Today, it's eighty-five and sunny. Not black jogger weather, in my opinion, but that's on him. Closing the distance between us, I grab the clipboard from underneath the chair and stand next to him as I scan it. There's no shade anywhere else, and in about thirty-five minutes, I'll be willing to sit on his lap if it means getting out of the sun.

"I bet these fuckers trip over themselves to sign up when they hear you'll be here," he says.

"You'd lose that bet." I shoot him a quick glance. "I don't usually train co-ed."

"Good," he says. "That last fucker who got here is already on my nerves."

"Why?" I raise an eyebrow. "Does he remind you of someone?"

He scowls. "Does he remind *you* of someone?"

"A little, yeah."

His scowl deepens. I keep reading. There's no point in telling him that while we're on the pitch, to me he's just another kid I'm training. Lach wouldn't care. He'd probably be bothered if a baby whistled at me. I have to admit, I'm kind of surprised to see him upset about the attention I've been getting from guys. With the amount of animosity he feels toward me, I wouldn't think he'd still be jealous. I will say, Wade is the only one who has ever publicly pursued me in three years, so it's funny that this happens when Lach happens to be here. The jealousy is the only part of the old Lach I've seen so far, and I like it.

I'm such a hypocrite. My father was a very jealous man, and I'd constantly tell my mother that it was a toxic trait. Now, look at me. I jog over to the group, taking the clipboard with me. There's no way I'll memorize any of this in the minute we have left. They're all still stretching when I reach them.

"Before we start," I say loudly. I've gotten used to being loud here. "My name is Coach Delilah; you can call me that or Lyla or Dee. I don't mind," I start.

"You can call *me* whatever you want," the Barlow kid says.

“Shut up. You may want to hear this,” I snap and go back to what I was saying. “I go fast. If you’re good enough, you’ll catch on quick. If you’re not good enough, this will be good for your endurance and you’ll get there. If you don’t want to work to get there, you can get the fuck off the pitch and go home, because I won’t waste my time on you.”

Some of them inhale sharply. Some of their eyes widen. Barlow, the little shit, nods with a smile. He’s really not that young, now that I’m seeing him up close. I know he’s not my age, since he’d have nothing to gain from being here, but he can’t be too far off.

“Another thing, no goofing off,” I say. “If you want to gossip, you can do it on your break or when we’re done.”

I nod my head sideways for them to follow me to the first drill I have set up. The field is pretty much an obstacle course. They’ve done all of these drills a million times by now, but here, they’ll do them and I’ll time them. I’ve never trained them, but I know they’re regulars here, and timing them is the only way we’ll know whether or not they’re getting better.

“This is your starting point.” I point at the little yellow cones I have set up. “We’re breaking it down and going one by one. When we’re done, we’ll go straight through. When *that’s* done, we go to the net.”

“Ladder drills,” I announce and look at the first person in line. “Natalie, you’re up.”

I set my timer. When she’s done, I look at the next one.

“Priya, you’re up.”

I set my timer. When she’s done, I look at the next one.

I keep going like this until I reach Barlow, who’s last in line. When it’s his turn, I expect him to be joking around, but he’s all business. *Huh*. He’s one of those. The only other person I know who can do that, turn it on and off, is Lachlan. I’ve never been able to. When the ball is at my feet or I’m focused on a drill, I barely hear anything, that’s how locked in I am. I set my timer and tell him to go. When he’s done, I record his time and we move on to the next one.

“Single leg weave,” I announce, nodding at the first one. “Go.”

I time her.

This goes on until they’re finished. Technically, we could stay working with these cones the majority of the time, but I set it up separately to make it a little different. We move to the orange cones. I catch Barlow talking and laughing with the guy next to him. The guy sees me looking and immediately

stops and looks forward with a straight face. Barlow also stops and looks forward, but he's smirking. I'm not gonna lie, if he was in my college while I was playing, I'd probably like the cocky little shit.

"Switch the line. The last person goes first, and the first person goes last."

I wait for them to switch. Barlow is focused on the cones with a serious expression on his face. I decide if his time is good enough, I'll let his talking slide. If not, he'll have to do frog jumps while everyone else finishes the drill.

"Outside foot. Start with your right," I say, and set the timer when he starts.

His time is great. They all do it before we switch feet and they do it again. We move on.

"Inside inside," I say and time them.

"Croqueta," I say on the next one. After this one, they're panting and sweating. "Take a three-minute break."

I set my timer to three minutes and they run off. I hear Lachlan running up behind me. I swear. . .

"I like the little speech you gave in the beginning," he says, his voice low and husky. I bite my lip to not react.

"Yeah? You still get off on bitchy attitudes?" I keep my eyes on the group.

He lets out a surprised laugh. "No comment."

No comment. *Asshole*. I look up at him. It's so sunny that I have to bring the clipboard up to shield my face. "Did you come out here to tell me you're leaving?"

"No."

"Did you come over here because you want me to add you to the line?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" He smiles that slow, sexy smile that makes my knees weak. I lock them.

"I would, actually." I let my arm fall and look back at the group.

"I'd do it for you."

My eyes catch his and I see something in them that makes my pulse race.

I blow my whistle and take a step forward. "Break's over."

Behind me, I hear Lachlan say, "Yes, ma'am," under his breath as he runs off. My heart skips again. We finish the rest of the drills, do them once all the way through, and finally get to the net. I let them do whatever they want there and go through the things I haven't filled out on the checklist.

CHAPTER 34

“THAT SHIT’S HARD,” Barlow says, standing beside me as he catches his breath.

“Life’s hard.”

“Yeah, but you’re making it harder.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Your coaches don’t make you do these drills?”

“Of course, but not like that, and normally we end with sit-ups, not doing the entire thing again.”

“You can do sit-ups on your own time.” I lower the clipboard.

“Hey, Coach D,” one of the guys calls out from the pitch. “Can you do the drills?”

“Of course, I can do the drills,” I say. “I wouldn’t make you do something without testing it out first.”

They all laugh, including Barlow, but he gets closer and says, “I’d let you test me out.”

“You’re something else,” I say, but can’t help the way my lips twitch.

“How old are you?” he asks seriously, as he turns his body to face me.

“None of your business.”

“Come on. Don’t be like that.” He cocks his head, his wild curls falling over his eyes before he swipes them back. It’s insane how much he reminds me of Lach.

“Twenty-five.”

His brows hike up. “That’s it?”

I blink. “What, do I look old or something?”

“No. I just figured since you’re not. . .” He shrugs. “I figured you were older and didn’t like younger men, but you’re only two years older than me.”

“Oh, my God.” That actually makes me laugh. I turn to face him. “You

thought that because I didn't jump on your advance, it must mean that I'm older?"

"Pretty much." He shrugs.

"No offense, Barlow," I start.

"Asher," he says.

"No offense, Asher, but one." I put up my finger. "That doesn't work on me. And two," I put up another finger. "I have too much baggage that I would never dump on you."

"And three, she's taken," Lach says behind me.

My stomach does a flip but I don't move, don't look at him, don't say anything. I keep my eyes on the guy in front of me, whose brows furrow momentarily as he looks over my head.

"Oh shit, I guess I should have asked if you have a boyfriend," Barlow says with a chuckle.

"But you didn't because you don't really care. You'd fuck her anyway," Lach says. Christ on a cracker. I'm going to *murder him* in his sleep. I glare at him.

"Well, I mean. Can you blame me?" Barlow says. He puts his hands up and his eyes widen suddenly and I can only imagine what Lach looks like behind me. "I meant that respectfully. I should have asked anyway."

"The answer would have been no because I *don't* have a boyfriend," I say.

As soon as the last word leaves my mouth, I feel Lachlan's heat at my back. He wraps an arm around me and pulls me to his chest. I can't breathe, think, or respond. Barlow doesn't seem bothered by this. I'd bet money the only reason he's not pushing is that he knows he'd get his ass kicked in a heartbeat. I continue to let Lach hold me. Not because it feels good or comforting, or because I instantly feel like I belong in them. No, I let him keep his arms around me, only because I don't want to make a scene, but the moment these people leave, it's on. God, I hope I can calm down by the time they leave.

"Well then, if you ever change your mind. . ." Barlow shrugs and sprints over to the pitch to join his friends.

"Jesus Christ, Lachlan." I shimmy hard and he finally drops his arm. I turn and glare at him, expecting that hard look on his face, but I'm met with dancing eyes that I've missed more than anything. I swallow and lower my voice. "You can't just scare off every man who comes near me."

“No?” He raises an eyebrow. “Watch me.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” I say. “I said no to him way before you came over.”

“You said no and he heard maybe.” His green eyes are hard on mine.

“I can’t deal with you, right now.” I turn around and ignore him.

I say goodbye to most of the kids and speak to a mom about her daughter. When everyone is gone, I take a deep breath and look at the cones I have set up. I was dying to join them on their last drill, and when that guy asked me if I could do it, I really fought the urge to. I decide to go through it once to see if I beat any of their times. I do it, check the stopwatch, and look down the list. Huh. Barlow and one of the other guys beat my time, but not by much.

When I’m done, Lachlan walks over and helps me pick everything up. He’s quiet the entire time, which makes me a little nervous. When I finish putting everything away, I walk down the hall to get some Gatorade and start wiping off my sweat. I’m finishing when I hear the door open and look over to see Lachlan walk in. I’m surprised it took him this long to walk inside. He lets the door click shut behind him and stands there, staring at me for a moment before he stalks over. The walk from the cooler to the door takes me thirteen steps. Lachlan seems to do it in three. His eyes are dark, filled with fury, and something that makes my heart pound harder.

Without warning, he lifts me up with his left arm and presses me against the wall behind me. He crashes his mouth to mine in a hungry kiss. My body reacts instantly, the way it always does — I wrap my arms around his neck and go to wrap my legs around his waist, but he stops me. I’m about to pull away to find out why, when I feel his grip on my ass tighten and he slips his other hand past the elastic of my shorts. I gasp into his mouth. We can’t do this here. My mind is screaming that, but he starts touching me, his fingers leisurely going up and down my folds, and I lose all sense. His lips leave mine, and he puts his face in the crook of my neck, nibbling me there. I moan deeply. He presses his thumb against my clit and slips two of his big fingers inside me. I throw my head back with another loud moan. I wouldn’t be surprised if the force gives me a concussion. He moves his fingers so deftly that I whimper and dig my nails into his back.

“Fuuuuuck,” he says, a rumble that I swear shakes through me and the entire building.

I’m shocked I don’t come from that alone. It’s been too long. He bites my neck and does the same to my collarbone. I don’t even have time to process

how sweaty I am right now because his fingers are moving in a way that'll set me off any minute. He knows how to do it, too. He's studied and memorized every one of my moans and gasps. He's holding at bay on purpose.

"F-f-f-f-uck. Oh my goooooood," I gasp, moving my hips to ride his hand. "Please, Lach, make me come."

I don't care that I'm begging. Apparently, he does, because he stops moving his fingers. I make an embarrassing sound in protest. My head is still thrown back against the wall, my neck stretched to give him access to it. I'm breathing hard. Waiting. Wondering why he's on pause when I need him at double speed. I lower my head and look at him.

"What the hell, Lachlan?" I say, my voice a raspy pant, needy. If this is part of his plan to torture me, it's working.

"Look at me," he growls, biting my lower lip and sucking it into his mouth. When he pulls away, he starts fucking me with his fingers and my brain explodes. I can't take my eyes off him even if I wanted to. "You're mine, Lyla James."

He adds a third finger, and I scream when he does something with it that sets me off.

"Ohmygodohmygodohmygod." My entire body shakes.

I come so hard that my eyes roll back, and my vision goes dark for a second. He doesn't move his hand as I try to catch my breath. I'm waiting for him to put me down, but his fingers start back up, slowly now, his thumb on my clit moving in slow, teasing circles.

"No, no, no," I say, gasping loudly. "I can't. I can't."

"Look at me." It's a command I can't deny. I open my eyes and find his burning into mine with such a force that the mix of that, the brush of his thumb, and his fingers hooked inside me makes me come again.

"Holyfuckingshit. HOLYFUCKINGSHIT, LACHLAN!" I squirm against him, riding the wave of the orgasm.

"Fucking mine," he growls again, as he takes his fingers out of me and sets me on the ground.

I immediately bend over, panting with my shaky hands on shaky knees like I just ran a marathon. *What the hell was that?* It takes me a moment to compose myself, but when I do, he's serious again, his eyes still burning as his jaw twitches. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Am I supposed to touch him? Kiss him? I've never been uneasy around him. I hate feeling this way.

“Why did you do that?” I ask quietly, to gauge his response.

“To remind you.”

I have no words. He’s robbed me of them. He’s robbed me of everything now — my thoughts, my emotions, my words, my freedom, and my sanity. I can’t figure him out right now. He does things that let me know he cares about me and then acts like nothing happened. Does he still love me, or does he just want to possess me? I don’t know if I’m strong enough to find out. I’ll willingly go down the rabbit hole if it’ll lead me to the man I fell in love with, but I’m scared that I won’t find him.

CHAPTER 35

LACHLAN

I CAVED. I'm a human being, goddamn it. I've been patient enough. I thought I was turned on before, but when everyone was gone, Lyla walked to the beginning of her fucked up obstacle course and set her timer. I watched her do the entire thing at record speed. She'd looked at the timer and nodded her head as if to say, "not bad." I almost went out there to scoop her into my arms but I didn't. I kept my hands to myself and helped her pick up what seemed like a thousand cones. I thought I wouldn't be as pent up by the time we finished putting everything away, but I was worse. All I could do was think about that little fucker Barlow. I didn't even take his picture. I know he's not a threat, but seeing her laugh with him was too much for me.

I stood outside, staring at the door, trying to convince myself to walk away, but I couldn't. It's physically impossible for me not to touch her. All day, I wanted to kiss, touch, claim, and make her remember how it feels between us. Honestly, I don't even know who I'm torturing anymore — her or myself. I'm still angry, but when I see her do things that make her come alive, like running the obstacle course or interacting with the little kids from this morning, I just want to throw her over my shoulder, take her to the nearest surface, and devour her.

After the nudity this morning, and now this, I'm going to need an ice shower today. Regular cold temperatures won't do it. I could've fucked her. I could still do it, but I'm not going to. I'm too angry right now, and it's not part of the plan. She makes me lose all reason, but I hold onto my anger. She fucked me over. She left me.

"What now?" I ask when she finishes her Gatorade.

"I normally shower, but I'll shower at home today." She shuts her eyes and takes a breath. When she opens them, she asks, "Do you want me to

show you around?”

“Sure.” I shrug. I’ve been dying to see this place.

I have to admit, this place is impressive as hell. Indoor pools, saunas, multiple gyms, and areas for doctors to work with patients. An X-ray machine. The list goes on. I personally think Lyla should be playing pro soccer, but I can see what attracted her to this career and this place. She guides me down a hallway and pushes the door at the end open, turning on the light as she steps out of the way so I can walk inside.

“This is my office,” she says.

“You have your own office?” My eyes widen.

“Yep. We get an office after six months,” she says.

It’s a good-sized space with a desk, three chairs, and a small bookshelf. No windows but Lyla doesn’t need shit like windows. She’d shut the blinds and never look outside anyway. I’m surprised she doesn’t have blinds on the glass partition with the view of the hallway that takes up half the wall. I take it in and picture her here. Does she dress in office attire? Scrubs? Fuck, I want her to dress in both and visit me at my office. She doesn’t have any personal items, only little owls on the bookshelf and a mason jar filled with colorful pens. There’s no display of her ribbons or her glass trophy. If you walk in here to have a conversation, you’d never really notice how bland it is, but I do. It’s the kind of office that you can pack up in under five minutes if you need to leave. Maybe Marissa’s right. Maybe Lyla’s pretending to be happy here. Fake it till you make it, right? Yeah, that hasn’t worked out very well for me.

I go around her desk and look up to see her standing by the door. She suddenly looks tense as fuck, like she’s trying to keep herself from moving. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her like this. Well, she was like this about the dildo, which I understand. But I can’t imagine she has one of those in her office.

“What, do you have a picture with that douchebag here?” I half-joke. If she does, I’m going to rip it. I should probably warn her.

“I have a picture with *a* douchebag,” she says in a bored tone and crosses her arms as she looks down the hall.

I’m not prepared for what I find when I step behind her desk. She has two unframed pictures taped to the bottom of her iMac. There’s no way to hide my shock when I see them. They have creases on them like they’ve been folded and unfolded — one of me in my Fairview Blaze uniform. I was

probably skating up to her when she snapped it. The other one is of us sleeping on her couch, her head over my heart, my arms around her. I've never seen it before, but I assume Marissa took it. We look so fucking peaceful. So happy.

I remember that day. We'd stayed in, made pasta, and watched Pocahontas. I got offended when I finally understood her John Smith reference, and she'd laughed and laughed. Fuck. I can still hear that laugh in my head. I can still picture her face. I swallow hard, trying to find my words. When she told me she didn't let her friends talk about me, I thought it was so she could try to forget me, but I guess I was wrong. Why the hell would she do this to herself? She'd have to look at these pictures every time she sat here. It has to hurt. It's hurting me, and this is my first time seeing them. When I look at her, she's looking down the hall.

"Why?" My voice is so quiet, I'm not even sure she hears it.

She looks at me, her eyes searching mine like she's trying to find something that she's not sure is there. I wish I knew what she was looking for so I could just fucking give it to her.

After the longest moment, she finally speaks. "It doesn't matter anymore."

She turns and walks out. An ache settles in my chest, the minute she's gone. I look at the pictures again. I have to go through with my plan. I will go through with it, but fuck, this is more difficult than I thought.

When we get to her place, we take turns getting ready. We don't speak. I know she's brooding as much as I am. And she's probably hangry, which is the worst, and probably the only time her bitchiness doesn't turn me on. She has to be starving, by now. I'm fucking starving, and I had two full meals on the field and a 40oz smoothie at Marissa's. She had a huge protein smoothie too, but she was too active today for that to be enough. Because of our mutual silent treatment, I'm not sure where we're going or how to dress, but this city doesn't seem very pretentious. The men probably wear fishing shirts to dinner and shit. I end up wearing a black v-neck t-shirt and dark jeans.

I check Lyla out for the fifth time. She's wearing a short black romper. A really short black romper. Jesus. She can wear whatever she wants, but I

don't know how I'm supposed to keep myself in check. As it is, I haven't been able to stop replaying how she looked when she came on my fingers. How she felt.

"What's the plan?" I ask as I comb my fingers through my damp hair.

She stares at the movement. Nothing in her expression changes, but I see the longing in her beautiful eyes. I almost pick her up and kiss her right there. I deserve at least three gold medals by now for the amount of restraint I'm showing.

"Burgers," she says simply, as she puts on some black sandals and looks in the mirror.

I bite my tongue to keep from saying anything, but I can't stop staring at the bottom of her romper. It's loose enough that I could push it to the side and fuck her with it on. I need to stop messing around and stay on track before she derails this train. I know I do, but she drives me fucking crazy. She turns to see how she looks from the back. She's perfect. I don't even know why she bothers triple-checking. I put on my sneakers and follow her out, staring at her ass the entire walk to the elevator, and picturing all the things I want to do to her.

"How'd you find this place?" I ask as we walk down the block.

I have to admit, it's a nice city. It's not Chicago or New York, but it's nice. I can tell it's booming, with the amount of people our age who live here. It's clean and everyone seems nice. Some of them are a little *too* nice.

"A travel magazine."

I stop walking.

She notices and turns around. "What?"

"A travel magazine?"

"We were in California and I already knew the only way I could get away was to change my name and location, so we skimmed through a travel magazine. We instantly fell in love with it, and it was within driving distance of one of the universities that accepted me into their program, so we moved." She shrugs.

I start walking again. "I'm assuming by 'we,' you mean you and Marissa."

"Yep."

I fight the annoyance building inside me. I know she did what she felt she had to do, but what the fuck? A travel magazine? That's absurd. This entire thing is absurd. I'm not going to say it, since this is the first normal

conversation we've had since I arrived. Even though she's hangry, she's not giving me clipped answers. She actually seems . . . cordial. I have to say, seeing those pictures is fucking with my anger.

"Well technically, Marissa fell in love with it," she says. "I just went along with it."

"So Marissa chose where she wanted to live, and you just agreed?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says. When she looks at the expression on my face, she adds, "Marissa has done a lot for me. Too much. She's never turned her back on me and doesn't have to hide with me. The least I could do was let her pick where she wanted to live."

She's not kidding when she says Marissa has done too much for her. It makes sense that Lyla would let her have this one thing. When we finally get to the restaurant, I hold the door open for her and follow her in. It's not what I expected when she said burgers. It's a fancy steakhouse.

"You look familiar," the hostess says the second we walk up to her.

"I must have a familiar face," I say. "Do you have any tables for two available?"

She stares at me, her eyebrows pulled. She probably saw the news about my retirement everywhere and can't piece it together. Honestly, any other time, I would have told her, but I'm hungry and the only person I want staring at me is currently focused on the stupid old world map they have hanging on the wall beside her.

"Table for two," I repeat.

"Oh." The hostess blinks. "We're all booked. You can sit at the bar if you'd like."

I look at Lyla, who shrugs and says, "I prefer the bar anyway."

I lead her there, instinctively moving my hand back and reaching for hers as we walk. Hers is the only hand I've ever held. I remember the way the smile broke across her face—the one I love most—when I told her that. After she left me, when I wasn't feeling angry, I regretted not being able to hold her hand in public. I expect her to ignore me, but she surprises me by not only putting her hand in mine, but lacing our fingers together. I almost die of a heart attack right there — from fucking hand-holding. I begrudgingly let go when we reach two stools at the corner of the bar. A few other people are sitting here, but the bartender practically runs to us.

"Hey there, Delilah," he says in a sing-song voice like the song. I roll my eyes. *Real clever.* "Gin, again?"

“Gin, again.” She gives him her ghost of a smile. “But I also want a burger.”

“Goat cheeseburger cooked medium, right?” he says.

She raises an eyebrow. “Yep.”

The fucker shrugs and smiles like he remembers everyone's order. Yeah, right. Jesus Christ. Does everyone in this city want to fuck her? I can't blame them, but damn. Give me a fucking break here.

“Oh, I see you brought a friend,” he says, smiling wide as he sets two napkins in front of us. “What can I get for you?”

A friend. It's like every man in this city read a manual on how to piss me the fuck off. It's probably a local bestseller. I'm starving and the burger will be the first meal she consumes all day, so I withhold my comments. I'm still giving him a blank stare when Lyla sets her hand over mine. The gesture sends a jolt through me. My eyes snap to hers.

“Just tell him the type of liquor you want, and let him work his magic,” she says, eyes twinkling.

I usually drink my liquor straight up, but I'll say yes to anything when she's touching me and looking at me like that. *A boat? A car? An airplane?* Yes, yes, yes. Unfortunately, nothing that can be purchased with coin would make Lyla's list.

I look at the bartender. “I'll take the gin.”

“Any specifications?” he asks. “Not too fruity? Spicy?”

“Surprise me.”

“Anything to eat?” he asks, as he's about to walk away.

“I'll have the same burger she's having.”

“Medium?”

“Sure.”

I usually don't order medium at restaurants since they tend to overcook the meat, but I'm trying to keep things simple tonight. Once he's gone, I pivot my seat slightly towards her.

“Is every man in this city in love with you?”

“No.” She rolls her eyes. “It just so happens that the ones you've met *like* me.”

Like her. Sure. Would *like* to get in her pants, maybe.

“Not that it's *any* of your business,” she says, nodding toward the bartender. “But Pat's gay and definitely not interested in me that way.”

Huh. I know that it shouldn't matter, but I take him off my shit list

anyway. He's officially the only person on the nice list for now.

"Besides," she says when I say nothing. "Look who's talking, *Mr. I just smile at a girl and her panties drop.*"

"Jealous?"

She takes her hand from mine and swivels her seat to face the bar. I hate it but I take it as another indication that she still cares about me.

"Really, though," I say when she doesn't speak. "Is there something in the water in this city? People have no boundaries."

"Do you even know the definition of boundaries?" She laughs. A real laugh. The one I've missed.

I feel my lips hitch. For a moment, her eyes soften, and I feel like I'm staring at the puck and my heart is about to leap out of my throat. I forget what we're talking about. The bartender comes back with two yellowish drinks in martini glasses. I'm already wary. We pick up the glasses at the same time and bring them to our lips.

The guy's watching us on bated breath, so I hope, for his sake, this is good. I take a sip. Damn. I don't know what's in it, but I immediately love it. It's a little spicy and a little citrusy, but it also has a hint of sweetness in it that balances it perfectly. It may just be my new favorite drink. We set our glasses down. He watches us. This is probably why he likes Lyla so much. She keeps him on his toes with her passive expression, and eyes only I can read.

After what seems like forever, she gives him two thumbs up. "Ten out of ten."

He lets out a relieved breath, then looks at me.

"I was a little skeptical when I saw the glass, but it's the best drink I've had in a while."

"I'm so glad you both like it," Pat says, smiling wide, and walks to the person on the other side of the bar.

Lyla turns to me slightly. "Do you really like it, or are you trying to be nice?"

"When have I ever tried to be nice?" I shoot her a look and add, "To anyone but you."

She studies me for a long moment, her eyes all over my face. When she moves to swivel her chair to face forward, I grab her forearm, then run my hand down to hers. I don't know why I do it, because now I want to touch her everywhere. Nothing about her expression changes, but I see the fire in her

eyes. It's a lick of a flame just starting, but it's there. Fuck, I want her. I don't even bother reminding myself that I'm mad at her. What's the point? I can be mad all I want, but I'll never stop wanting her.

"Why the pictures?" I ask because it's been driving me crazy since we left the sports center.

She immediately shuts down, takes her hand back, and swivels the seat to face forward again. Jesus Christ. It's a simple question. She looked nervous about me seeing the pictures, but she didn't make a move to stop it from happening. She could have shown me her office from the door and shut it. She could have rushed forward to hide them while I was looking around. How can she expect me, of all people, not to ask about them?

"Just answer the question," I say quietly. I just need this one answer, and then I'll drop it.

Her eyes flash to mine. "Last time you asked me questions, you humiliated me. That's the only thing you've done since you got here, so forgive me for not wanting to play your little game. I'm leaving with you tomorrow. I'm going to a place I thought I'd escaped for life. And you know what?"

She gets off of her stool. I'm shocked by this alone. Not that she's being loud or causing a scene, by any means, but she's always been mortified to lash out in public. I know I should probably be upset about it, but it's hot as fuck and shows that I can still make her feel like no one else can.

"I'm not doing this for the money. I'm doing it for you. If I wanted to, I'd tell you who attacked you and let whatever happens to you happen," she says, moving closer so she's only inches away from my face. "But for some stupid fucking reason, I can't do that, because despite what a piece of shit you've been to me, I can't bear anything happening to you and I feel like going with you might somehow save you from harm. So, fuck you, Lachlan Duke."

She takes a deep breath and turns to leave, but whips back around with renewed fire in her angry gaze. "And you know what else? You weren't the only one who was hurt that day. I was also attacked and sent to the hospital, so just. . .fuck you."

"What?" I pull back, her admission hitting me in the center of my chest. "What do you mean you were attacked? What hospital? What are you talking about?"

She looks at me in disbelief. I already know she's not going to tell me, which pisses me the fuck off. My jaw clenches so hard, I think I might break

it.

“You don’t deserve to know anything that happened to me. You don’t deserve to know anything about me at all,” she seethes quietly. “Don’t ask me for anything else. I don’t have any more to give.”

She throws her napkin on her chair and stalks off. She managed to rip me a new one in a low tone, so no one’s watching. I stare after her, my heart in the pit of my stomach when she turns the corner and I can no longer see her. *Fuck*. I can tell she’s been holding that in. Probably since the dildo incident. Maybe even before that. I can’t even process what she just told me. *She ended up in the fucking hospital?* That wasn’t in the folder. I should kick Liam’s ass for his half-assed job. I’m still staring across the restaurant as if she’s going to magically appear. Finally, I swivel my seat and wait to get the bartender’s attention to pay the check and take the food to go.

“Lachlan, right?” Pat asks as he walks over to me. I look at him for a long time, trying to figure out how he knows my name. Hockey fan, maybe?

“Yeah,” I respond after a moment.

“She’s told me about you.” He looks in the direction she disappeared to.

I can’t even imagine what she must have said about me. What could she have said? My curiosity must show because he smiles.

“Whenever they showed your face or said your name, she’d make me change the channel.” He points at the television on the other side of the bar. “One day, she saw you on the screen and. . .” He swallows, glancing away like it hurts, which further hurts me. “I asked who you were, so she told me.”

“She comes here a lot then,” I say.

“Only for lunch when the place is practically empty. She always sits right there, has her burger and fries, listens to me babble, and leaves.” He blinks and shakes his head, focusing on me again. “I’m sure it doesn’t mean much coming from me, but I’ve never seen her truly smile or laugh. Certainly not the way she did tonight.”

A harsh laugh leaves my lips. Yeah, she smiled, and then I went and fucked it all up. I take a large gulp of my drink, hoping it’ll get rid of the knot in my throat and the guilt in my chest. It doesn’t.

“I guess her lack of smiles and laughs isn’t an issue. She has a lot of admirers,” I say because I can’t seem to let that shit go.

“She does.” Pat chuckles. “Those poor souls.” I feel myself smile a little, which seems to egg him on, because he continues, “I know I’m a complete stranger, and I probably shouldn’t be saying this,” he says. “But that girl is so

fucking in love with you that none of the men in this city ever stood a chance.”

Fuck. I thought that was what I wanted to hear, but right now, all it does is make me feel worse.

“It was good to meet you.” He taps the bar twice and pushes off to help someone else.

I’m about to call him back to ask for the check when my body becomes aware of her presence. The way my cells seem to sense hers is inexplicable. It’s also how I know that this will never end. Lyla gets back in her seat, picks up her napkin, sets it on her lap, and takes a sip of her drink as if nothing happened. I stare at the side of her face.

“Don’t.”

It’s all she says.

It’s all she has to say.

She only speaks to Pat. Even with him, it’s just short answers and tiny pretend smiles. I realize that I’m seeing her shutting down right before my eyes, and the only things I can think about are that she has pictures of me in her office and that she has spoken to all of these people about me. I came into her life demanding things from her, and thought she agreed purely out of guilt, fear, or money, only to find out that she agreed because she cares. This is why Marissa and Prescott guard all of her secrets. This is why men chase after her despite her standoffish attitude. This is why I fell so fucking hard for her. I’ve met more people than I can count, so I know gems when I see them, and this fucking girl has a heart of gold. Black gold, if that’s a thing, but gold nonetheless.

I pull out my phone and text my brother.

Me: she went to the hospital the night i did. Why was that not in the file?

Liam: damn. She’s okay tho right?

I stare at his words. I didn’t even think to ask that. I mean, she’s obviously okay. I’ve seen her running and jumping since I got here, but still. I haven’t even asked her if she’s okay. I haven’t asked her if she’s happy here, or whether or not she missed me. I know she did, but I should have asked her. Nicely. I couldn’t. I’ve been holding onto this anger for too long. She fucking left me. That’s the one thing she knew — she fucking knew — would hurt me the most, and that was what she did. I understand that she thinks she had to do it, but I can’t just forgive her for that. The knife is buried too deep in

the wound. I take a deep breath and look at her again. Her expression is completely blank now. When she tilts her face and examines the bottles on the shelf, I can't even read her fucking eyes. Damn it.

Me: she's fine. Find out what happened

I put my phone away and get another drink when she does. I might as well drink my sorrows away.

CHAPTER 36

LACHLAN

WE WALK BACK to her place in silence. Broody, uncomfortable silence that makes me itchy. I'm trying to figure out when the last time I apologized to anyone would have been, and come up short. It's not that I can't apologize. I'm man enough to admit when I fuck up. It's just. . .what would I have apologized for? I've probably apologized to my mom and Liam at some point in my life. Never a woman. I need to apologize to her, though. I fucked up. I knew I was fucking up the moment I kissed her and demanded that she marry me and go back to Fairview. I knew it but I did it, anyway, because my anger overrode everything else.

She didn't deserve it. She *doesn't* deserve it. And yet, I can't right this wrong. I still need her to marry me. I still need to go back to Fairview. I know that until that's not handled, she won't be with me. I scoff at my own thoughts. I don't even know if that's an option anymore, but the thought of being apart from her any longer hurts too much for me to consider anything else. I'll chase her for the rest of my life and prove to her that I can be worthy of her, if that's what it'll take. We're quiet as we walk into the lobby, the elevator, down the hall, and finally, into her apartment.

"I'm sorry," I say, as soon as the door shuts behind us.

She sets down her purse and looks at me. Expressionless. Fuck, I can't let her do this. I can't let her go blank on me. I have a feeling that if she puts up walls between us, I won't be able to tear them down this time. It's a terrifying thought. A possibility I can't live with. I follow her into the bedroom.

"Lyla."

She ignores me, walks into her closet, and starts taking off her jewelry. She sweeps her hair to one side and tilts her neck a little as she unclasps her necklace. Even the way she does that is hot. Is that even possible? I stand at

the entrance, leaning against the wall, waiting for her to acknowledge me. She doesn't even spare me a glance to scowl at me. This is bad. This is *really* fucking bad.

"I'm sorry," I repeat.

"I heard you," she says.

"I really am."

"I said I heard you." Her eyes flash to mine. "I'm trying to figure out if I even give a fuck anymore."

My heart sinks. No, fuck no.

"Don't say that."

"I can't do this with you, right now. I'm tired. It's been a long day and tomorrow will be another one. I'm sure every day that follows until this contract is over will be, as well. Just let me have peace in my own fucking apartment, for fuck's sake."

I don't respond. What can I even say? She grabs her pajamas and I take a step back to let her walk out of the closet and go to the bathroom. She shuts the door and locks it. The sound is so jarring that it makes me realize this might be the first time she's locked it since I've been here. God damn, this is fucking bad. I sit at the edge of the bed and wait for her. I don't even remember what I'm supposed to be angry at her for. I was mad about my hockey situation. I was mad that I had to jump hurdles to find her. I gave up hockey to fucking find her, and when I finally did she was. . .it doesn't matter.

None of it matters anymore because she flipped this on me. She plays this game much better than I do, and I'm okay with that. God, she went to the fucking hospital. Was she attacked as badly as I'd been? My throat closes up at the prospect of that. She was probably alone in the hospital. I'm sure Marissa was there. Definitely, Prescott, since he was the one who gave me the news that she was gone. But that's it. Her dad visited me with all of my coaches, so he couldn't have been with her. Not that she would have wanted him there. All I know is that I wasn't there. She probably didn't even get any flowers. Fuck. She was in a fucking hospital bed when she sent me those flowers. I'm sure of it. I set my elbows on my knees and bury my face in my palms. I can't lose this girl again. It can't be too late to redeem myself. I don't know how I'm going to pull this off, but I have to.

When she's done in the bathroom, she ignores me and walks to the kitchen. By the time I'm finished showering, she's either sleeping or

pretending. I lie beside her, my mind running a mile a minute as I try to stay on my side of the bed and process all of this for the hundredth time. The woman I love, who I'd give anything to have — who I gave up everything to find — is finally next to me, and she might as well be on another planet, with how far she feels. I turn on my side and face her. I can't see her in the darkness, but I can make out the shape of her back since she's facing away from me.

I can't handle it anymore. My chest feels like it's going to cave in. I just want to touch her, hold her, something, anything. If she wants to kick me out, I'll leave. If she tells me not to put my hands on her, I won't, but I need to try. I move to her side, put my arm around her, and pull her to my chest, the way I used to before she left. Before my life lost its meaning. Before I let my anger drive my actions. A sense of peace instantly rolls through me when I bury my face in the crook of her neck and inhale her scent. She smells so good. She feels so good, so perfect.

"I'm so sorry, Lyla James. I don't even know what to apologize for first, but I'm sorry for all of it," I say against her neck. "Please don't stop caring."

She inhales deeply and lets it out. She doesn't say anything, but she lets me hold her, and that's enough for now.

CHAPTER 37

LYLA

WE LAND in Chicago around ten. It's a three-and-a-half-hour flight, all of which I spent curled up in my own little first-class cubby, trying to watch a movie that won a million awards. For what, I have no idea, unless they give awards for best snooze fest. I'm awoken by the skid of the tires as the plane touches down. The captain starts talking about our gate as I unfold myself and start to gather my things.

I switch my phone off airplane mode and text Marissa to let her know we landed. She texts back immediately with a string of emojis that I can't concentrate on, right now. The airplane parks and people immediately do what they do, getting up and trying to get their bags so they can be the first ones out of the airplane. I have no connecting flights, and I'm scared of what awaits me outside the airport, so I'm not in a rush to get out. I take my time, putting away my headphones, grabbing my charger, and looking for the chapstick I accidentally dropped during the first five minutes of the flight.

That's what I'm doing when Lachlan walks over and stands in the middle of the aisle to wait for me. We haven't spoken since my tantrum at the restaurant, which I loathe myself for. I still can't believe I did that. The only other time I've ever lost my cool like that was at Marissa's party a million years ago. I swear he's the only person who can make me this angry. I lose all reason around him. I look up and see people excusing themselves as they try to get past him, while he just stands there and stares at me like we're in the middle of an open field. Even this frustrates me. I say nothing. I find my Chapstick and follow him out of the airplane. When we step out onto the loading bridge, our suitcases are waiting for us. These aren't carry-on suitcases. They're big ones that rode in the bottom of the plane and are now somehow up here while everyone else rushes to baggage claims. The

employee smiles as he rolls them to Lach and smiles wider when he gets tipped for it. Lach rolls them both while I follow, trying to wrap my head around what just happened. It's probably best I don't know. The entire thing felt like a drug exchange. Knowing him, he would put me in the middle of a fucking drug cartel situation, as selfish as he is.

I truly feel like I'm going crazy. Maybe it's the lack of sleep or all of the things that were thrown at me at once, but I can't get my emotions in order. I let him hold me last night and let him apologize while I pretended to be asleep, but I'm not ready to talk about it yet. I'm too upset and still processing it. All of the spare glances I've caught from him have been wary, which is good. He's right to be scared. He probably thinks I'm going to bail on him at the last minute. Honestly, if he thinks that, he doesn't know me at all. We walk through the airport in silence. Since we already have our things, we head outside where a guy in a dark suit, who looks like he could kick anyone's ass, is waiting for us. He looks scary, but his smile reaches his eyes as he shakes Lach's hand. As he takes our bags, Ronnie introduces himself to me. When the doors open, the bitter wind hits me so hard that I take a step back and cross my arms. I checked the weather. It's not even that cold, but the Chicago wind doesn't seem to get the memo about the changing seasons. I remember the last time I visited with my parents, it was summer and still brisk at night.

Our bags are loaded into the trunk of a black SUV with heavily tinted windows, where another terrifyingly large man is waiting to open the doors. What even is this service? When Dad played pro, we were picked up and driven around in any city we went to, but the men didn't look like this. Not that I'm complaining. Maybe Lachlan is as paranoid as I am, after all. Once we're sitting in the back seat, I look at what he's wearing — charcoal dress pants, a brown belt, matching dress shoes, and a white button-down with the sleeves rolled up. He dresses so formally these days. It's weird. Hot, but weird. I'm wearing jeans, an oversized white dress shirt with rolled sleeves, and plain white sneakers. I open my backpack, take out my black cable-knit sweater and tie it over my shoulders.

I don't know where we're going, but I know I'd fit right in at a country club or a Ralph Lauren ad. I keep my eyes outside and get lost in the view. It's such a beautiful city. I don't remember much of it — The Bean and some face sculptures that spit water from their mouths. I never even got to go to a ballgame at Wrigley, because Mom didn't feel good and we had to stay at the

hotel while Dad played. Unfortunately, it's not in the cards this time either, with spring training going on.

"What's the plan?" I ask.

"We have a few places to go to." He looks at his watch. "Breakfast with some of my former teammates who are in town for a charity event. After that, we have a rooftop gathering, and tonight, we'll go to a cocktail/engagement party my parents are hosting for us."

"Fantastic," I say, deadpan. "When I visit cool cities, mingling with rich assholes is always on my itinerary."

Lachlan laughs. It's a real laugh, a carefree one. I feel my lips twitch, dying to break out in a smile, but I smother it and keep looking outside.

"Will we get married in a courthouse here?" I ask after a moment.

"We. . ." He clears his throat. "We *were* supposed to get married at the courthouse in Fairview."

My head whips to face him. "I'm sorry, *what?*"

"It's where we met," he says, studying my face.

Oh. My. God. This motherfucker. A heat wave rolls through me and suddenly, I feel like one of those cartoons with smoke coming out of their ears. I won't react, though. I won't react. This man, who claims he wants my forgiveness, is trying to fake marry me at the place he knows I loathe, and he's trying to make it sound romantic. I should slap some sense into him. I don't. I don't react at all. It's the best thing I can do right now. It's hard as hell to do with him, but I'm so livid that I manage.

"I said *were*, Lyla. Past tense," he says quickly before I can get a word in.

"The fact that you'd even think of doing that." I look outside.

The worst part is that I feel more betrayed than I do angry. A part of me wanted this to somehow work out. I thought I'd do this and somehow, we'd find our way to how we used to be together, but that seems impossible. My Lachlan, if he's even in there, is buried too deep. The only reason I'm even entertaining that being a possibility is that he was somehow able to reach me when I thought it was impossible. Still, I never would have purposely hurt him. I may have been a bitch now and then, but I would never purposely humiliate him. I would never take him somewhere I knew he hated and forced him to marry me there. I cross my arms and keep my eyes outside until the car stops in front of a hotel across from The Bean. At least, I was able to see that.

He gets out of the car and waits for me to get my small purse out of my

backpack and put some things in it, including my phone. When I slide over to his side, since it's against the sidewalk, he holds his hand out for me. My treacherous heart skips, the moment my fingers meet his. I take my hand back quickly and rub my palm against the side of my jeans, as if it'll erase the feel of him on it. I glance up to look down the street and notice his jaw clenching, as if wiping him off my hand somehow pissed him off. After speaking to the man up front, we take his advice and follow the signs that will lead us to the banquet room.

"What's the charity?" I ask.

"Breast cancer," he says. "One of the players' wives was diagnosed last year. This was what she wanted to do for her birthday."

"Oh."

I guess I'll find out soon enough how she's doing, but as I walk, I silently hope she's doing well. One of the girls I went to med school with was diagnosed while we were there. She went through surgeries and chemo and never quit school. Thankfully, she's doing well now. Last time I asked, she said her margins were clear and she's working with cancer patients.

We check in at the door, Lachlan gives the woman an envelope he had folded in his pocket, and we're let inside. It's a buffet and the room is set up beautifully with pink flowers on each table. A man who must be one of the hockey players walks toward us with a huge smile on his face.

"Lach," he says, stretching his hands and hugging him with a loud pat on the back. "Thanks for being here, man. Morgan will appreciate it."

"Of course." Lach smiles. "How's she doing?"

"Amazing," the guy says, grinning as he delivers the news, "She just got clear scans. She's. . .healthy."

"Fuck, that's amazing." Lach gives him a side hug and a pat on the back.

The guy finally looks at me and smiles, extending his hand to me. "Gunner."

"Lyla," I say with a smile. His eyes widen, as he looks from me to Lach and back to me. "It's nice to meet you. I'm so happy to hear your wife is doing well. I can't even imagine what you guys went through."

"Thank you." He keeps the smile on his face and my hand in his, as he looks at Lach again for some kind of confirmation. When he looks at me again, he smiles wider as he drops my hand. "Welcome to the Lightning Family."

"Uh. . .thanks." *I guess.* I don't add that part because this is awkward

enough.

He tells us about the breakfast and to help ourselves; we thank him and start walking away. Obviously, Lachlan's told them about me. God knows what he said. Probably that I'm a huge bitch who abandoned him. We speak to Gunner's wife, Morgan, who's the biggest sweetheart. The rest of the time, Lach does most of the talking. He introduces me as his girlfriend, which is a little far-fetched. Then again, I'm technically his fiancée. He's talking to some of his teammates when my stomach starts growling and I excuse myself. I'm about to grab a plate when a very familiar voice says my name, and I turn around to face Mason. My jaw drops and I get out of the line as he walks over.

"Today must be Fairview reunion day," he says as he envelopes me in a hug and lifts me in his arms. I smile as he sets me down. "How the hell have you been?" he asks, giving me a once-over. "You look. . .well, incredible, like always."

"Thanks." I smile. "How are you doing? Do you still play?"

He shoots me a faux-dirty look. "I'm wounded that you don't know the answer to that."

"If it makes you feel any better, I haven't watched a hockey game in three years," I say. He grabs my hand and pulls me further away from the line so we have some privacy to speak.

"Last I heard, you disappeared," he says, his eyes searching mine. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. . .I guess I'm back?" I say, then laugh. "I don't know what's happening. One minute, I'm in Rhodes living day-to-day, and the next, Lachlan shows up and, well, brings me here."

"He never stopped talking about you," he says with a laugh. "I mean, ever."

I don't know what to make of that. I bite my lip and glance away, my gaze clashing with Lachlan's on the other side of the room. I can't tell what he's thinking. He doesn't seem upset at all by my interaction with Mason, though, which is nice.

I look at Mason again. "How'd you end up playing on the same team?"

"Crazy, right?" His brows shoot up. "He dropped way down in the draft and ended up near me. He was picked up by them, and shortly after, I was traded over. It's been nice."

"I bet."

“What about you? Did you go back to soccer?” he asks. “Or med school. It was med school you’d applied to, right?”

“Yep. I finished recently. I’m about to start a residency program in a week.”

“Holy shit.” His brows shoot up. “So this is. . .what is this?” he asks, and I know he’s talking about Lach.

“I honestly don’t know.” I glance over at Lach again, and find him still watching me.

“That man. . .” He shakes his head. “Let’s just say the entire fucking team knows your full name.”

“I don’t even know what to make of that,” I say quietly.

He shrugs, looking away for a moment. “I wish he hadn’t retired.”

“Me too,” I say. “He was born to be on the ice.”

“Well, if anyone can convince him to come back, it’s you.” Mason smiles at me.

I make a non-committal sound, and we move away from the topic. We catch up on what everyone is doing with their lives, and before long, I look up and watch Lachlan as he makes his way over, his green eyes solely on mine. The way he makes my heart race is unnerving. I hate that despite any anger and disappointment I may feel toward him, he still affects me the way he does. I know Mason is still talking, but it’s hard to focus on anything with my erratic heartbeat.

“Leave my girlfriend alone,” Lach says, wrapping an arm around me and pulling me to his side.

Mason laughs. “I was just telling her that you two are meant to be together.”

“I agree,” Lach says, his deep voice making my stomach somersault. He lowers his mouth to my ear. “Did you eat?”

“Not yet.”

“Mase, my girl needs to eat, so you can get in line with us, or pick this conversation up another time,” Lach says, leading me back to the line.

One hour and two plates of food later, we say our goodbyes to everyone and walk out. I’m dreading being alone with him in the car again. So many things are spinning through my head: he spoke to his teammates about me, which is nice, but he also guilted me into this situation and wants to take me to the one place he knows I hate. He was planning to freaking marry me there. The thought creates a feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I have to

struggle to keep it at bay after everything I just ate.

“That was nice,” he says.

“It was.”

“You were great.” I hear the smile in his voice when he says this, but I don’t entertain it. I won’t, even though I’m dying to look at his infuriatingly handsome face.

“I know.”

He laughs.

In the car, I’m staring out the window, soaking up every single bit of the city as we head to our second event of the day. I hope it goes by fast.

CHAPTER 38

“DO I NEED A WHITE DRESS?” I ask, when the silence gets too loud.

“Do you want one?”

“Do I *want* one?” I blink at him, letting out an unamused laugh. The nerve of this guy. “I don’t know the protocol for a fake relationship and fake wedding.”

I feel movement and his warmth at my back, before he speaks. I brace myself for it.

“It’s not fake,” he says, a low growl, his breath on the shell of my ear. “It’s real. *This*,” He wraps an arm around me and pulls me against him, “is real. You have every fucking right to be upset, I’ll give you that, but don’t you dare say that what we have is fake.”

“Whatever, I don’t really care anymore,” I whisper, even though my entire body is betraying me.

He lets go of me, turns the other way, and growls so loudly that both men in the front seat look back to see if he’s okay. I keep my eyes on the flowers we’re driving by — blooming new, colorful life into this gray, dark world.

We end up at a place called Cindy’s Rooftop, where the view of the city is spectacular. I can only see it partially from inside, so I’ve been waiting until the socially acceptable moment to excuse myself. I don’t even know why we’re here, mingling with people who work for his absent father’s company, but I don’t ask. Maybe I’ll ask him when he’s done charming people. He’s had that fake ass million-dollar smile of his plastered on his face the entire time

we've been here, but I know he's brooding. He's upset about my fake comment, and I really don't care. I said what I said, and I stand by it. Despite that, he took a sip of my drink before handing it to me, which seems like a small gesture, but it means a lot to me.

After forty minutes of small talk, I've reached my limit. I take the opportunity to excuse myself and head to the glass doors. As I step outside, I revel in the cool breeze and make my way to the edge, where a surface wraps around the rooftop. There's a clear view of The Bean, the surrounding park, and a beautiful skyline backdrop. I set my drink on the surface and text Marissa a picture before putting my phone in my purse. I smell men's cologne and feel someone stand beside me as I pick up my cup. I take a sip of my drink and keep my eyes on the view ahead, hoping they'll get a clue and leave me alone. It's a networking event, though, so I don't have high hopes of that happening.

"Nice, right?" the man asks.

My eyes snap to his. "It's beautiful."

"It's even nicer at night."

"I bet."

"Are you new with the company?"

"No. I'm just. . .visiting."

"You sound unsure," he says with an amused smile.

I look at him again. He has kind dark eyes and a genuine smile. Both rare things to come across, these days.

"I'm visiting," I say with more conviction.

"That was me last year, and look at me now." He widens his arms.

"I'm guessing that means you love it here," I say, taking a sip of my drink. "You work for Duke?"

"Yep. Just got promoted."

"To what?"

"Head of Cyber Security."

"Fancy." I raise my eyebrows and look back at The Bean. "Does that mean you can hack into anyone's computer?"

He laughs. "I can but I don't."

"Have you done it?" I turn to him.

"I was a nerdy teenager once."

"And now?"

"A nerdy adult." He chuckles.

My lips twitch. “Nerds always get the last laugh.”

“Cheers to that.” He lifts his small clear cup. “I’m Sean, by the way.”

“Lyla.” I tap mine against his.

“So, if you’re not with the company, and you don’t know whether or not you’re staying, I’m assuming you’re here with someone.”

“You’d be correct.”

“Who’s the lucky guy? Or lady?”

“Guy. And I’m not sure he’s considering himself very lucky, right now.”

“Oh, trust me, he is,” he says. He doesn’t check me out, though. He keeps his eyes on mine.

I look over my shoulder, my eyes immediately captured by Lachlan’s. I can see his tense jaw from here. I sigh heavily and turn back around. At the last event, he stuck by me, and when he didn’t and I small-talked with one of his teammates, he didn’t get upset. Now, he’s upset. Well, he was upset when we got here, and I don’t care. The longer I sit with my feelings and think about all of it, the angrier I become — the way he showed up, angry and demanding, the fact that he guilted me into signing a marriage contract, the way he plucked me out of my life. I’m to blame for it, as well.

Ultimately, I chose this. I know this because everything I said last night was true. I’d rather do this than have him get hurt again. Love sucks. That’s what this comes down to. I can’t make myself fall out of love with him. I could ignore him and try to stop wanting him, but what’s the point? What’s worse is that I can’t stop thinking that if he’d shown up and proposed for real, I would have probably said yes. Even after three years apart. As crazy as that sounds, I just want him to be *my* Lach again.

“It’s complicated,” I say after a moment.

“Relationships are hard.”

I glance at him. “Maybe you should hack into his brain for me and tell me what he’s thinking.”

He laughs loudly, throwing his head back. “If only I had that power.. It may have saved my marriage.”

I laugh. “Honestly, I think it’s best that we can’t read other people’s thoughts.”

“Really?” He raises an eyebrow. “Not even your boyfriend’s?”

“Especially not my boyfriend’s.” My lips twitch when he laughs again.

“Do I know him?” he asks, turning toward the party. I turn with him.

“I doubt it,” I say.

Lach is staring so hard, I'm surprised I don't explode on the spot. I move the position of my fingers on my cup so that my middle finger subtly sticks out to him. His jaw ticks again. This time, he doesn't stay where he is. I watch as he starts excusing himself from the group he's speaking to. Oh shit. I hold my breath and turn my attention back to Sean, hoping he suddenly needs to use the restroom and leaves before Lach closes the distance between us. I know Lach won't do anything stupid, but the thought of him giving this man hard looks bothers me.

"Well, it was nice to meet you, Sean," I say, hoping he gets a clue.

He smiles. "Nice to meet you, Lyla."

"Good luck with trying not to hack into people's computers," I say as he starts walking away.

He laughs. "Good luck hacking your boyfriend's brain."

I laugh lightly. When I look up again, Lachlan is walking over with a fire burning so intensely, he looks like a charging bull. A very hot one, but a bull nonetheless. I throw out my empty cup and raise an eyebrow.

"Are we leaving?" I ask.

"Yes." He grabs my hand and watches Sean walk away before leading me to the elevator. "Did you enjoy speaking to Sean?" he asks, his voice low and controlled. I want to strangle him.

"I did, actually. He's a very nice guy." I look up at him, watching the way his sharp jaw tenses.

"I guess it's a good thing you don't like nice guys," he says.

We're not alone, so we're silent the rest of the way down. In the car, I think he's going to ask more questions, but he takes a phone call and speaks to someone that I assume is his agent. I try to listen to their conversation to find out if he's coming out of retirement, but he makes it hard with the way he's almost whispering. It's maddening. It's worse that I care to know. This situation is driving me insane.

CHAPTER 39

WHEN WE GET to his building, there's a group of guys waiting for the elevator. It's pretty clear they've been day drinking. That, or they're all insane. In my head, I'm stomping my feet. The last thing I need is to deal with annoying, overgrown frat boys. *Why, why, why* does the universe do these things to me? I avoid eye contact at all costs, as I step forward and push the already-lit button twice. I know it won't help, but it makes me feel like I'm doing something. Two of them look at me when I pull away from the button. I instantly get a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I silently pray that for all our sakes, they don't speak to me. I look at the other two elevators and see their out of order signs, so we're just waiting for the one in front of me. Lovely. Behind me, there's a guy bragging about how much ass he got last night, and another egging him on and telling him that it's what he's supposed to do at his bachelor party.

Disgust curls in my stomach. I glance back, because I'm too curious not to, and see one wearing a pin that says GROOM in the middle of words I don't want to concentrate on reading. He's now talking about the blonde who sucked his dick. I look at his face, then his friends, then cross my arms and turn around again. I fucking hate people. The feeling sitting in the pit of my stomach gets worse. I hope the bride is getting railed by a guy who looks like David Beckham or Idris Elba, and moves his hips like Channing Tatum. Maybe she's having a foursome. God, I hope she is. I wish I could call her and tell her to run the other way. I glance to my right and see Lachlan's fists curling. I step forward and hit the button two more times.

"I don't think that makes it move any faster," one of the guys says.

Even though I have ten comebacks for that, I ignore him. The same guy gasps loudly and turns to Lach, whose jaw has been ticking since we left the

rooftop. If he grinds it anymore, he's going to need a dentist.

"Heeeyyy, Duke, right? Lachlan Duke?" the guy says. Lach just looks at him, and because the guy is too drunk to understand that nothing about his face says that he wants to speak to someone, he keeps going. "Damn, man, why'd you retire? You were the best center we've had in a while and the best fighter."

Some others jump in to agree with drunk guy number one. I cover my face with both hands. Kill me now. I'm about to take the stairs just to not deal with any of them. Not that I know what floor we're going to. I hear Lachlan respond accordingly, telling him some bullshit about the family business. They ask more questions. The elevator finally — *finally* — arrives. Lach pulls me to his side as we step in, and I stand as close as I can to him, so I don't even brush up against the guy next to me. I don't know any of them, so I can't be sure, but I think he may be the drunkest.

There are so many of us in here that we're like sardines in a can, shoulder to shoulder with no room to move. One of them manages to hit the numbers. Another one makes the sardines in a can joke. Everyone keeps talking as if we're in an open space and not stuck in a steel tube. I try to look for the sign to see if we're at the weight capacity and about to be in a real-life Tower of Terror situation. I picture it happening and quickly refute it. I cannot die with these fucking morons.

"So where are you from, and what do I have to do to see you again?" the drunk guy to my right slurs, his beer breath hitting the side of my face.

I know he's only speaking to me because he's drunk, I'm the only woman in the elevator, and judging by their little bachelor party shenanigans, he probably thinks he's picking me up, but it doesn't make it less uncomfortable. I keep my eyes forward and bite my tongue.

"Sweetheart," the guy starts up again. "I just as—"

"Okay, fuck this," Lachlan mutters and I squeeze my eyes shut and hold my breath. "If one of you touches her, I will kill you. If you flirt with her, I will kill you," Lach says, the growl in his low menacing voice halting their conversations. "Don't look at her. Don't talk to her. Don't even fucking *think* about her."

They remain silent. The guy next to me stiffens and tries to move away from me. My eyes pop open, and I press my lips together to hold back my laughter. I can't believe they actually listen and shut up. He's a freaking lunatic and they're a bunch of idiots. They outnumbered Lachlan by a

landslide. If anything goes down, he'll be the one who's fucked, but for some crazy reason, they listen to him. Maybe it's his height and overall physique, or maybe his reputation on the ice precedes him. The doors open and they all file out quickly, muttering apologies and goodbyes. When the doors close, I step away from him, and the laughter I've been holding back bursts out of me. I look up at Lachlan and find him watching me with a pissed-off yet amused expression. The elevator stops again.

"You're fucking crazy, you know that?" I say between laughs.

"You think that's crazy?" He lunges at me just as the elevator doors open and hoists me over his shoulder.

I let out a surprised squeak but stay put. There's really no point in trying to fight him on this. He punches the code and opens the door to his apartment, kicking the door shut behind us. It locks itself automatically. I can't see much of it since I'm hanging over his shoulder, but the floors are marble and it takes him a lot of steps to reach what I assume is his bedroom, so I know the place is big. I make an oomf sound as he drops me on the bed. He says nothing as he starts ripping off his clothes — his shoes, socks, and shirt. I watch, enthralled. Lachlan Duke is so fucking hot, it's insane. It's not like I could ever forget that, but seeing his body, his face, his eyes right now, gives me an immediate reminder.

Everything about him is perfect. It's as if someone got the best parts from a handful of hot guys and put them all together to create him. My lips part slightly as he unbuckles his belt, my breathing picking up and my body tingling in anticipation. A small part of my brain is reminding me that I'm mad at him, but the bigger part of it is rooting for me to let him do whatever he's about to do.

"Take your clothes off," he demands as he works on his belt. I'm still ogling. He pulls his belt from the loops and whips it so hard on the mattress that I jolt with a squeak. "NOW, LYLA."

Holy shit. Okay. I spring into action, kicking off my shoes and unbuttoning my shirt. I stand next to him to take my pants off. His hungry eyes take me in slowly, waking up my entire body, as he finishes undressing — taking off his pants and boxers simultaneously. My breath halts at the sight of him. Before I can stop it, a soft moan leaves my lips, and he wraps his long fingers around his dick and starts stroking himself. *Holy fucking shit.* No fantasy I've conjured in his absence could ever do this man justice. I feel myself grow wetter as I stare. I lick my lips. I'm sure I don't mean to do it,

but I know that I do it, because when my eyes flash back to his, they're molten.

"You want this? You want me to fuck you?" His hand slows down, as his eyes take in my naked form again. They're darker than ever when they reach mine, a midnight forest. I inhale sharply and nod. "Or are you too angry to fuck me, De-li-luh?"

Of course, he knows he's making me angrier by calling me that, but he hasn't been inside me in three years, and I feel like I'll die if he doesn't fuck me. Right now, I don't give a shit what he calls me. I can be angry later.

"I want it," I say, glaring at him through my lustful haze.

"Come here."

I close the distance between us, stand in front of him for a moment, and drop to my knees. I don't know if he wants me to do this, but I need to. He lets out a deep grunt when I splay my hands on his muscular thighs and dig my nails in, as I inch my face closer to him. Before I even have a chance to lick him, he grabs my hair and pulls me so hard, tears spring into my eyes. His eyes are cold and shut off as he looks at me. It's a sight I've never seen on his face, but right now, I only care about what I'm doing.

"I'm not going to be gentle," he says, gripping my hair tighter. I suck in a breath, arching my back to relieve the pain a little.

"I don't care," I say, and manage to narrow my eyes despite the pain. "Just fuck me. Maybe this way I can finally get you out of my system."

He arches an eyebrow. "You're going to regret saying that."

He pushes my head back in position. I look up at him and find him watching me, as I lick from his balls to the tip of his dick. He hisses. I re-adjust myself on my knees and start teasingly swirling my tongue around him. I close my eyes and smile each time he grips my hair like he's about to lose control. I open my eyes to look at him, as I go back to the head and suck him into my mouth slowly, letting him stretch my mouth as I swirl my tongue around him.

"Holy. . ." His grip tightens on my hair. "Goddamn it, Lyla."

Hearing him say my name like that makes me go faster and take him deeper. He sinks both hands in my hair and holds the back of my head, pushing me to take more of him. I start to, gradually. His hands tighten on my hair and without warning, he pushes himself deeper than I can take him, so far that I feel him in the back of my throat. I gag, but he doesn't let up as he starts fucking my mouth, increasing the pace each time I make a sound of

protest.

My nails dig into his thighs and he groans so deeply, that for a millisecond I forget the pain. He thrusts again and tears start seeping out of my eyes. He fucks my mouth until he reaches the back of my throat again, and again, groaning deeply each time he does it, which turns me on despite the discomfort. Finally, he pulls out slowly and lets go of my hair. I land on my hands and start gasping for air as I wipe my face. I look up to tell him off and find that maddening, cunning smile on his face.

“What happened?” he asks, jaw ticking. “I thought you didn’t care?”

Asshole. I glare up at him. “I don’t.”

Before I can react, he picks me up like a rag doll and sits me on the bed. The look on his face is murderous. I definitely struck a nerve, but fuck him. He wants to play this game? Okay, then. Let’s fucking play. My mouth still hurts, but I manage to give him my fakest smile and watch his eyes turn to slits. I turn around, get on my hands and knees, and push my ass toward him. This was his preferred position when he fucked women before me. He’d told me that, one night. *“They were just fucks, nothing else. I didn’t even look at their faces. I didn’t care.”* Even though I hated every single one of them, the knowledge that he was different with me made me delirious.

I personally love this position, but that’s not why I’m doing it. This has become a power play and I know him. He may be pissed off enough to hurt me the way he knows he just did, but not seeing my face while he fucks me will hurt him more. When he doesn’t move, I look at him over my shoulder and push my ass back again. His jaw works as he steps forward, his eyes flashing, when he smacks both ass cheeks hard enough to make me yelp and jolt forward.

“You wanna play games, Lyla James?” He smiles ruthlessly, as he grips my hips and pulls me right back to him. “Is that what this is?”

“Just shut up and fuck me,” I breathe, as I turn away and stare at the white plush comforter beneath me.

My hair cascades on either side of my face like a curtain. The only warning I get is his fingers digging into my flesh. He spears me so fucking hard, it actually knocks the wind out of me. I’m really wet, but nothing can prepare me for his size.

I scream.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuck,” he says in a low, animalistic groan that makes my entire body tighten. He stops moving for a moment, pulls out, and does it

again. “Fucking hell, Lyla. You feel so fucking good.”

He does it again, and again, I scream. I don’t know what I say or sound like, but I know it’s enough to make him pause, just for a moment, before he starts fucking me. His thrusts are deep and ruthless. My stomach and pussy clench with each one. He curses under his breath when he feels it happen. I bite my lip to keep from shouting again. He feels so good. *Too good.* Somewhere in my jumbled thoughts, I realize he’s not using a condom. I don’t care right now, because I know him. I trust him. I know he’d only do this with me. I will ask later, though. Right now, if he stops fucking me, I’ll die. If he keeps fucking me, I might die. I gasp and tense up when I feel a wet finger coaxing my other hole and hold my breath for the intrusion.

“Relax,” he says, slowing his thrusts. I can’t relax, though. He squeezes my ass with his other hand. “Fucking relax.”

I bite my lip and drop my head, as I try.

“Look at me.” It’s a demand I can’t deny. I look at him over my shoulder. I wish I hadn’t. It only serves as a reminder of how fucking gorgeous he is. He holds my gaze. “Do you trust me?”

My eyes widen. He wants to talk about trust NOW? In the middle of this? He’s done this to me before, but it was when he had my unequivocal trust. His finger moves again. I tense and his eyes hood, making me wetter. It makes me feel sick, but despite everything, I do trust him. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have blindly signed the stupid contract.

“Do you trust me, or is that also gone?” His eyes are hard, as he asks the question. I know he’s upset, but fuck, why now? I take a breath and nod. His eyes darken. “I need to hear the words.”

“I trust you,” I whisper, looking at him.

“Relax for me, then,” he says, his voice softer now.

I feel my body relax and shiver when he dips his finger in. The moment he feels that, he starts fucking me hard again. He makes everything feel so damn good, even this. His grip tightens on my ass cheek and moves faster in my other hole, when I bring a hand to palm my breast and play with my nipple. I’m going to come. I know I am as long as he doesn’t stop.

“Don’t stop.” I moan as I tug it, my eyes rolling back. “Please don’t stop.”

“Fuck, baby.” He slows for a moment, and I know he’s watching me play with my nipple.

I push my ass back so he can keep moving, the motion making his finger

go deeper. I squeeze around him and moan loudly, feeling my entire body hum with the beginning of an orgasm. With his other hand, he slaps my ass hard, and that's what throws me over the edge. I convulse, gripping the sheets hard, as I squeeze and pulse around him with a loud scream that I'm sure the entire city can hear. My eyes roll back with the intensity of it. I don't want him to stop. I want him to lose his mind the way I just did. An angry growl rips through him, and he suddenly stops moving. He pulls out his finger first. My arms and legs are shaking as I hold myself up. I'm on the cusp of another orgasm when he stops moving.

"No. No. Don't stop," I say, panting.

I look over my shoulder and watch his jaw tick, as he pulls out of me completely. I wait for him to thrust back inside me, but he just pauses there, looking at me like he's about to fucking lose it.

"No." I say again, shaking my ass. His eyes darken as he looks at my movement, but he continues to just stand there. "Why the hell did you stop?"

He glances away but doesn't answer. It doesn't look like he's going to keep fucking me, which, what the hell? I turn and sit, looking at his cock to see if something's wrong with it, but it's hard and glistening with the pleasure he just gave me. Is this part of his punishment? He's not going to let himself come with me? I bury every single emotion that rolls through me at the thought of that.

"Lachlan," I demand. "What happened?"

He looks at me again, his eyes dark and molten. He doesn't say anything as he leans over, lifts, and pushes me gently so I'm on my back in the middle of the bed. He grabs my throat and squeezes it as he settles between my legs again and sinks into me ever so slowly. My eyes roll back as he fills me, inch by inch. He takes his hand from my throat and sets it beside my head as he lowers himself closer to me. His thrusts are slow, but just as deep, and not any less effective. He's still hitting me in places that make it hard to think, hard to breathe. He slows down even more, and drops his head to my chest, bringing his mouth to my breasts. He takes his time with each one, licking, biting, and sucking each nipple into his mouth.

"Oh, fuck," I whisper, my eyes rolling back and my hips moving on their own to meet each of his thrusts.

I'm so close again. So close. He can make me come right now if he wanted, but I can tell he's drawing this out, making it last, either as punishment or to make up for lost time. I'm not sure there's a difference

anymore. I try to stay in the moment and watch the way each muscle on his abs and arms clench. I bring a hand up and slowly run the tips of my fingers down his sternum. He shivers at my touch and I look up at him. My heart squeezes at what I find in his eyes. Yes, they're intense, but this isn't an angry fuck. This is something totally different. This is him before. This is him when he loved me, even though neither of us spoke the words aloud.

That's haunted me through the years. I wrote them down, but I should have told him. The way he's looking at me brings an entirely different kind of pain, the kind that crushes my chest and threatens to break it into pieces. For a moment, I get completely lost in his deep green eyes. I see his pain, his longing, his love. It's too much. Too raw. I feel my eyes prick with unshed tears and decide I don't want this. I don't want this version of him if he's just going to go back to being a complete asshole. My chest feels like it's caving, it hurts so fucking much. I turn my head away. He grabs my face and turns it back. I shut my eyes. I can't look at him. I can't. I can't. I can't.

"Look at me," he rasps, moving a little faster now. I feel the pressure building. I bite my lip and shake my head.

"I can't," I whisper.

"I need you to look at me."

"I can't," I repeat a little louder, tears rolling down the sides of my face and hitting my neck.

"I need you. . .to look at me." He lets out a deep breath and stops moving. My eyes pop open.

Butterflies flap deep inside my belly. I wish I could exterminate every one of them, but it's no use. He'd only resurrect them. He pulls out and rests back on his knees, lifting my hips so I'm off the bed and angled toward him. He holds my gaze as he thrusts in slowly again. A string of unintelligible words leaves my mouth. I feel out of my depth. I try but I can't hold his gaze when he's looking at me like this, like he's as consumed by me as I am by him. Tears prick my eyes again. Why won't it stop? Why does he do this to me? Why do I let him? I turn my head quickly and try to blink them away. I wish I could hide under a pillow. I wish I could get on all fours again. Or on the floor with him fucking my mouth. Anything but this. Again, he grabs my face and my eyes shoot to his. I know I can close them, but he'd just find a way to open them.

"Does this feel fake to you?" he grunts, as he fucks me harder now, his thrusts matching the anger in his tone. "Does it?"

I have no response. I can only gasp and shake my head. He slows his thrust and lowers my body, bringing his face down to lick the tears that trickle down my face. He continues with the slow thrusts, his face inches from mine. It feels intrusive. The way it did before when he became an addiction.

“Does this feel like something you can just get out of your system?” He takes my mouth in a bruising kiss. “Tell me.”

“No,” I gasp. “It doesn't. It's not.”

I'm not sure how much more of this I can take without my heart exploding out of me. I know I could live until I'm a hundred, and I'd never be able to get him out of my system. The connection we share runs deeper than any animosity we may feel. The chains that bind us are too strong. The only thing that could extinguish this is death. I bite my lip harder, as my chest heaves a little. I'm terrified I'll start crying again. He must see it, the way he sees right through everything else I say and do, because his eyes soften as he brings his lips to mine again.

“Come on, Lyla James,” he rasps out, taking my bottom lip into his mouth. “I want everything. Give me everything.”

“Oh fuck, Lach,” I moan loudly when he changes the angle of his hips, hitting me exactly where I need him. My eyes roll back, but I bring them right back to his, to ensure he won't stop moving. “Right there. Right there. Pleeeeease don't stop.”

“Fuuuuck you feel so good. So fucking perfect.” He bites his lips and brings a hand to my nipple, pinching it. “Come on my cock, baby.”

I come immediately, shaking and thrashing beneath him. I feel him expand and jerk inside me as he finds his orgasm. My name leaves his lips in a loud growl as he continues to come. My stomach clenches at the sight of it. He's so beautiful when he lets go. We're both panting as he sets his forehead against mine for a moment, before he pulls out, rolling onto his back. He faces me and sets a hand on my waist so I'm turned to him as well. I'm wet and sticky between my legs, but I stay put. I look into his eyes and the air in my lungs vanishes again. There's nothing more overwhelming than being consumed by Lachlan Duke. He infiltrates when you're not paying attention. He pokes little holes in you and waits for the right time to invade. By the time you notice, he's already formed a coup d'état against the emotions fighting against him.

He brings a hand up and cups my face. “I'm sorry.”

“Me too.”

He lets out a heavy exhale and pulls me into his arms. I hug him back just as tightly. We stay that way for a while. I wish it would last forever.

CHAPTER 40

LACHLAN

BECAUSE SHE WANTS to explore the apartment and we're pressed for time, we shower separately. We'll miss the cocktail event if we don't hurry up, and there's no way I can keep my hands to myself after what we just did. I follow her back to the foyer. She's wearing one of my black t-shirts, which fits her like a dress. It probably wasn't the best choice, since I still can't stop staring at her legs. I watch her face as she takes in the place. Lyla may have grown up with wealth, but she hates overly extravagant things, so this should be interesting.

The apartment, if you can even call it that, isn't mine. It's one of the many luxury residences my father owns. If an important client flies in from out of town to meet with him, he sets them up in one of these. I guess that's the kind of shit billionaires can do. He sent me to the biggest, most lavish one he owns. It's an obscene two-story, seven-thousand square foot, four-bedroom, six-bath fully furnished penthouse on East Grand Ave, with the most fantastic 360° view of the city. My first thought, the first time I walked in here was, "Lyla would hate this place." I'm sure she'll think it's nice, because it is, but it's too much for anyone without a family. Even then, there are too many cons to raising a child here. She looks to the left and frowns. I step up and look with her. Technically, I'm getting a tour as well, since I haven't cared to explore the entire place. She takes a few steps and looks to the left side.

"Is that an elevator?"

"Yeah, but they're currently replacing the flooring and mirrors, per my father's request, so we have to use the other one."

"Like peasants," she whisper-shouts as she turns to walk down the hall.

I laugh. Oh, yeah, she's reeeeeeally going to hate this place. She walks to

the kitchen, then the living room, and then she stands at the door of the bedroom I use but doesn't step inside. She turns and walks to the other side of all of this, where there's a second foyer that leads to a spiral staircase. I bite my lip to keep from laughing at the look on her face as she freezes at the threshold. She mutters something under her breath that I'd kill to hear and walks to the stairs. Setting a hand on the iron handrail, she walks slowly up the stairs. When we reach the second floor, she finds another large living room with a TV and shakes her head.

"Your thoughts?" I ask because I can't take it anymore.

"You don't even want to know," she says, as we continue.

I follow here to the next area — a room with a full bar, pool table, and six huge leather chairs. Next, to the three furnished bedrooms — one with a king size, one with two queens, and another with a toddler bed and cute play teepee. It's actually pretty nice. Lyla takes a deep breath and turns around to head downstairs, back to my bedroom. She walks past the bed, toward the sitting area with the bookshelf, and two plush white chairs. She sits in one of them and looks out the window. I put my hands in my pockets as I watch her take in the view, wishing I could snap a picture of her right now. Messy hair, no makeup, in an oversized shirt, and she's still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. So fucking perfect.

I turn and get our suitcases, which Ronnie brought in while we were at the rooftop event that I'm trying to not even think about. The way Sean was laughing at whatever she was saying pissed me the fuck off. Not because she was talking to another man and making him laugh (okay, that was part of the reason). Mostly, I was upset that she was giving someone else something she hadn't given me since I found her. I know I've been a dick and she has no reason to joke around with me, I get it. But still, that shit hurt. Especially after she'd just told me she didn't care, and that what we have is fake. That shit *really* hurt. Deep down, I know she cares and knows this is real, but it doesn't make it easier to hear those words. Not after I'd been the only person who could make her feel and care. I can't lose that. I won't. She slaps her hands on her legs as she stands and walks over to me. My heart beats a little faster as she sways her hips and holds my gaze. Fuck, she's hot. When she reaches me, she stops on the other side of the suitcases. Her beautiful face gives nothing away as she looks up at me. She truly has the best poker face I've ever seen.

"I hate it," she whispers.

My lips pull up. “I knew you would.”

I see the confusion in her eyes, but she says nothing else as she grabs her suitcase and wheels it to the closet. I should be unpacking. Instead, I lean against one of the tall cabinets and watch as she starts unpacking, shaking her head each time she finds a different article of clothing.

“You’re a dick, you know that?” She glares up at me.

“I know.” I offer her a smile that I hope looks apologetic.

Throwing her things into the suitcase like that for someone like her, who likes her clothes neatly folded, was a dick move. She said she didn’t know what to pack, and I knew less, so I just threw in the majority of her closet. Now that I’m looking at the pile of clothes, I feel kind of bad. I take a step forward to help her. She looks up at me again — not a glare, not a smile, just a hard stare.

“Please don’t try to help,” she says. “You’ve done enough.”

Ain’t that the fucking truth. The mess I made in her suitcase is nothing in comparison to what I’ve done to her — to us. I mean, fuck, she wouldn’t even answer a simple question because she thought I’d use it to taunt her. I’ll have to make up for it somehow. After she set the shoes where she wants them, she starts pulling out the dresses and hanging them. I’m shocked that only the green one is wrinkled, considering. I’ll have to iron it for her. Or steam it. Or whatever I can do to that material to take the wrinkles out. She puts the white one on a hanger and stares at it once it’s hanging. Up top, it’s a corset. The kind women wear in the bedroom to impress their partners. I guess sewing it onto a dress and wearing it outside the house is in style now. Images of her tits in that dress flash through my mind. Sweet Jesus, who the fuck decided that was a good idea?

I clear my throat. “You should wear it tonight.”

Her eyes shoot to mine. “If I wear it tonight, I won’t have anything to wear to our fake wedding.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I mutter.

Again with the wedding bullshit. I push off the cabinet and run my fingers through my hair. For someone who acts like they don’t care about anything, she sure as hell gives a fuck about this. Maybe I should’ve made her sign a paper contract instead of a digital one. Maybe I should draft a new one that just reads: THIS IS A REAL MARRIAGE. Anything. I can’t figure out which part bothers her. I know Lyla. Sure, she signed the contract for my sake, but I don’t buy that this is what she’s upset about. If she genuinely

didn't want to, she wouldn't have. Guilt or not. I don't care what anyone says. Besides, she would have made thirty snarky comments about the contract itself. Is it that she wants to walk down the aisle? Fuck. Maybe she needs a ring to make it real. I hadn't even thought of that. Lyla's not a materialistic person, but whether she admits it or not, buried deep, deep, deep, deep inside her is a hopeless romantic. She probably wants me to get down on one knee and declare my love for her. Fuck. That has to be what this is.

My palms suddenly feel sweaty. I rub them against my shorts. I actually have a ring for her — I've *had* one for her — and a proposal speech I've rehearsed countless times. I could propose to her tonight when we get home. But if I give her an option, she might say no. Fuck. If I get down on one knee in front of this woman and she flat-out says no to me. . . I can't think about it. It doesn't cease to amaze me that for my entire life, everything was a sure bet (my father's presence notwithstanding), yet with her, I never know where I stand. That really fucks with someone like me.

"You can buy a wedding dress," I say after a moment.

"You mean *you* can buy me a wedding dress," she says, with a twinkle in her eyes.

I just smile. If I talk and we start bantering now, we really won't fucking make it to this thing. She finally finishes hanging up the dresses and a few blouses that also need to be ironed. I'm really kicking myself for this right now. I fucking loathe ironing, but it'll show her that I care, so I'm going to do it. She moves on to her underwear, grabs them all in one hand, and walks over to the drawers on her side of the closet. I expect her to fold them, but she just dumps them in there and plucks out a little white thong that has the tiniest strip of lace. My mouth is already watering. I won't survive her. If I have to stand next to her, looking hot as fuck in that dress, knowing that she's wearing that underneath, I might have a heart attack at my father's estate.

"*That's* what you're wearing under the dress?" I ask, my voice sounding hoarse in my own ears.

She meets my eyes. "It's either that or nothing."

Oh, fuck no. I turn around as fast as I can and walk out of the closet with a raging hard-on. We don't have time for this right now.

CHAPTER 41

WE HAVEN'T SPOKEN a word since our interaction in the closet. It's a strangely comfortable silence. As comfortable as pent-up sexual tension between two people who have been apart for three years can be, anyway. When I walked out of the closet wearing my dress, he looked like he wanted to punch someone. When he walked out wearing his tailored black suit, I wanted to punch *him*. We stood for a full minute, checking each other out. Neither of us said a word, but when our eyes met, I knew the fire in mine matched his. Somehow, we made it downstairs without mauling each other — probably because we haven't spoken. I think if he would have even said "push the button" to me in the elevator, I would have jumped on him.

We've only been in the SUV for about five minutes, and we left a huge space between us. With the amount of heated sideways glances we've shared, I know I'm not the only one trying not to think about fucking right here in front of Ronnie. Fuck, that might be kind of hot. I shake the thought away fast and think about what a difference one day makes.

I'm choosing not to be angry about the Fairview courthouse thing. He corrected that mistake before he even made it, so I can't really hold it against him. I still wish he would have gone about this differently. I understand that he was upset at me, but that doesn't really excuse his behavior. I glance over and my heart dips when I find his hooded eyes on my cleavage.

"Can you play some music, please?" I ask finally. I need to distract myself somehow.

"Of course." Ronnie looks at me through the rearview. "What would you like to hear?"

"Honestly, I don't care. Anything."

"Maybe you should pick," Lach says next to me. "She has awful taste in

music.”

“Excuse me, I like a wide variety of music,” I say, shooting him a look.

“Can’t argue there. You have the wardrobe to prove it,” he says, the edges of his mouth tugging.

We stare at each other for a moment — his eyes burning, my stomach somersaulting, before I look away quickly again. It’s going to be a long night. Ronnie turns the radio to the first station they have on, and a Drake song fills the space. I’m happy for a quarter of a second, until I realize it’s a song about lacking communication and how beautiful things could be if this time would be different.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I mutter.

I look at Lachlan again and we share a laugh. It’s not even a new song, so I don’t know why they’re playing it. I don’t want to be a pain in the ass and ask Ronnie to change it. I wish I could telepathically fast-forward. Oh my God. Each verse makes me more uncomfortable than the previous one. I feel like I’m being emotionally attacked by a rap artist. I bet someone’s already tried to sue him for that.

Two upbeat songs later, we arrive at a gated house. I’m not sure you can even call this a house. It looks like a hotel. The front lawn looks like it could easily be the length of two football fields and the width of, I don’t know what, but it’s enormous. And the house itself? There are mansions and then there are *mansions*. I grew up in an extravagant home, and have been to plenty more. I’ve never seen anything like this, though, and I’ve seen some shit. I swear it takes two whole minutes to drive up to the estate.

When we reach it, Ronnie opens my door first. I step out and look around, taking it all in. Even if we’d had the money to afford such a place when I was growing up, I couldn’t imagine living like this. My parents were pretty mindful about money. From a young age, I was taught that not everyone was as fortunate to have what we had, and that we shouldn’t go around flashing our privilege. This isn’t flashing; this is floodlighting. I try not to think about it. Not my money, not my problem. I repeat the mantra a few more times.

“Impressive, right?” Lach walks up to me as I finish looking around.

I meet his eyes. “I hate it.”

He laughs, and it’s such a real, uncontrolled laugh that I smile wide, and I’m still smiling when I turn toward the steps that lead to the estate. I’m already by the door when he catches up and reaches for my hand. I look into his eyes as I let him take it, and we thread our fingers together, feeling that

instant flutter in my chest that I get when he touches me. I've always marveled at the way his touch can both turn me on and bring me comfort. Right now, it's doing both.

We stand just outside the door for a moment, holding hands and looking at each other, and it feels. . .right, despite where we are and why we're here. He looks away and taps the door twice with his knuckle. A man wearing a black suit on the other side opens and greets us. We return his greeting and walk into the grand foyer. Lachlan leads me down a hall with the most incredible statues I've ever seen, and art on the walls that belongs in a museum.

This entire estate should be a museum. It's the kind of place your parents take you to, and then threaten to disown you if you touch anything. I'm trying not to even look at anything as we walk by, just in case. The hall opens up to another foyer, just as big. This one has natural light seeping in from the dome glass up top. It's actually quite beautiful. Standing around the circle are three clusters of old men. We say hello as we walk past them. All I see are men and more men. Huh.

"Is it called a cocktail party because of the amount of cocks in the room?" I ask quietly.

Lachlan laughs, his eyes twinkling as his grip tightens on my hand. "God, Lyla."

He grins, shaking his head as we keep walking. I guess he thinks I'm asking as a joke. I'm not. As we walk, we say hello to more people, smile at their congratulations, and I finally see one woman amongst the men. She's older, but not as old as most of these men, who are easily my dad's age and beyond. They're obviously his father's friends. I smile politely and pretend to listen, as Lach speaks to one of the men about golf. This is his third golf conversation. Some of them asked about hockey, which is understandable, but golf? I've only been here ten minutes and I'm already falling asleep. As they speak, the woman excuses herself and walks over to me.

"Congratulations, dear," she says. "I'm Laura."

"Thank you." I smile. "Lyla. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"All of the women are in the tea room. You should join us," she says, smiling as she walks away.

"Thanks," I say, the smile frozen on my face.

Oh my God. The tea room. Kill me now. There's no way in hell I'm going in there, unless there's some kind of hallucinogen in the tea. After a couple of

minutes, my cheeks begin to hurt from fake smiling, so I drop it. We receive a slew of congratulations before we finally see his mother, who's the only familiar face in the room thus far. She's smiling as she walks over wearing a beautiful navy dress, with her dirty blonde hair picked up in a classy low bun. Lach lets go of my hand just as she reaches me.

"Hey, Valerie. You look amaz—" is all I can get out before she wraps her arms around me in a tight hug.

I have to awkwardly lift my hands and pat her, in order to sort of return it. This wasn't the greeting I was expecting, considering we've only met once, but I'm grateful for it. She pulls away and takes me in.

"Oh, my God. You're even more gorgeous than the last time I saw you." Her eyes flick to Lachlan. "Isn't she?"

"She is," he says, taking me in slowly from head to toe and back. His eyes are dark when they reach mine again. I feel myself shiver and look away quickly, my attention back on his mother.

"I'm thrilled about your engagement. You don't know how happy I am that I finally get a daughter," she says.

She still has that wide smile on her face that reaches her eyes, so I know she means it. Her statement hits me in the center of my chest and travels to my throat, but I manage to push past it and smile. Maybe it's the fact that I lost my mother at such a crucial age, but it feels good to hear that. Not that anyone could ever replace my mother, but having the support of a woman is unmatched.

"Thank you so much," I say, smiling. "That means a lot to me."

"I know this is a lot to take in, but you'll sort of get used to it," she says quietly.

"Yeah. I'm not sure about that," I say, laughing lightly as I look around.

She looks at my hand and focuses on her son. "Lachlan. Where's her ring?"

I watch the scene play out as she rips into Lachlan, who tells her it's being fitted because it was too big on me. I shoot him a look. *Nice save, asshole.* At least, he looks apologetic about it. I assume she knows about the situation if she asked him and not me. Lach has been telling everyone that the wedding will be intimate, "just us," which is technically true. I've always thought of an intimate wedding as romantic. This is everything but. I push that aside. If I get sad, I'll get angry, and I can't let myself get angry again. Especially here.

“You must be Lyla.” I hear behind me, and turn to see a tall man walking over.

It’s obvious who he is. Lachlan is a younger copy-paste version of him. And damn, if this is what he’s going to look like in twenty-plus years, I’ll take it.

“You must be Henry,” I return, offering my hand for him to shake.

He does but also pulls me into a warm embrace, which startles me. I’ve only heard negative things about this man. How he was cold and didn’t pay attention to his kids, so this is unexpected. He’s smiling wide, a real smile that reaches his green eyes, when we pull away. Okay, now I’m really confused.

“You’re as beautiful as Val said you were.”

“Thank you.” I give him a polite smile. “Your home is. . .” I start searching for positive words and come up short.

“Too much,” he offers.

I laugh lightly. “Yeah.”

“Hopefully, you’ll give us some grandkids to fill it and make it livelier,” he says, still smiling.

“Yeah, I don’t think this place is very kid-friendly.” I look around at the museum we’re standing inside of.

“We’ll have to get rid of a few things.” He pats my shoulder lightly, smiles, and says, “Welcome to the family.”

I smile politely, wondering if I should say the same to him. I don’t. That would be a bitchy thing to do in his own house. Lach says hello to his father and places his hand on my lower back to lead me away.

“I know it’s a lot, but you’re doing great,” he says low, near my ear.

I can’t even hide my shiver. He digs the tips of his fingers lightly into my flesh and I shoot him a warning look. He grins that sexy grin of his, and I swear, my knees go a little weak at the sight of it.

“Lach, a moment of your time, please,” his father says, making us turn around.

Lachlan looks at me.

“Go,” I say. “I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?” He searches my eyes.

“I’m sure.” I smile at him. “If all else fails, I’ll take myself to the lost and found.”

He brings his mouth to my ear again. “I better be the only one to find

you.”

My heart skips when he pulls away, and I see that dark look in his eyes that holds promises he can't make good on in front of an audience. My pulse races as neither one of us looks away. I get the immense urge to tell him that I love him, but I won't. Not here. Not yet. I have to make sure he's not going to flip on me again. He kisses my forehead and walks to his father, who's been watching us the entire time.

As I walk away, I take my phone out of my clutch and check it. I'd set it on airplane mode before I started getting ready and I forgot to unclick it. Sure enough, I have texts from Marissa, Prescott, Wade, and Cooper. I start going through them and responding accordingly.

Marissa: wtf you haven't updated me

Marissa: what's going on??

I'll answer hers when I'm done with the rest.

Prescott: mar told me everything. I can be there tomorrow but lmk if you need me sooner

Me: i'm fine. Really. Everything is fine. Not getting married in Fairview but i'll keep you posted

Pres: but you still are getting married?

Me: yeah

Prescott: you're okay with it?

Me: I am

As I type it, I realize that I'm telling him the truth. Marrying Lach was never the issue with any of this, though. The way he went about it was messed up, but the actual marrying him part is easy. I don't know what that says about me, and it doesn't matter. Nothing can change the way I feel for him.

Wade: hey, checking in, worried about you

Me: I'm fine. I'll update you later

Cooper: sorry to bother you on a weekend but I'm confirming that you're starting the residency next monday, not this monday?

Me: next Monday is correct

Cooper: cool. See you then :)

I go back to Marissa's and start typing fast.

Me: omg i'm at hte biggest mansion youll ever see in your ducking life

Me: like way bigger than cribs

Me: also- we're not getting married in fairview but idk what's happening otherwise

Ugh. I don't even bother fixing the texts. My hands are too shaky.

Marissa: lach's dad?

Me: when they said billionaire, they meant it

Marissa: damn take pics

Me: i can't. Even if i could i'm too nervous

Marissa: get a drink. It'll calm you down

Marissa: glad he saw the light about the wedding there. Maybe he's not mad anymore?

I think about the way he fucked me. Honestly, if that's what he does when he's pissed off, I'll take it.

Me: idk maybe?

Marissa: are we giving him another shot?!?

Me: maybe. I think so. IDK!!!!

Marissa: ugh I wish we could discuss this in person. Just go with your gut. love you

Me: love you

I set my phone on airplane mode again and put it away. Maybe I should get a drink.

CHAPTER 42

Turns out, it's not called a cocktail hour because of the cocks. Google says something about New Orleans, bitters, and Prohibition. I'm setting my phone back on airplane mode when I hear my name again and look up to see Liam heading over. He's smiling wide, his eyes twinkling, the way his brother's do when he's not being a perpetual asshole.

"It's good to see you," I say, returning his quick hug.

"Likewise. You look incredible," he says as he pulls back.

"You look great as well." My lips lift a little. "How have you been? How are you adapting to all of this?"

"It's. . .well, let's just say I've gotten used to having my breakfast and coffee ready for me in the morning, and I can't remember the last time I did my own laundry," he says. "That part took a little getting used to."

"I bet it did." I laugh. "But I guess it's not a terrible thing to have to get used to."

"Things could be worse." He grins. "How have you been? How's it going so far with my brother?"

"It's. . .going."

"Has he been pleasant?"

"Pleasant." I laugh. "I don't think Lach knows what pleasant even means these days."

"Really?" He frowns. "I mean, he's been awful for three years, but I thought when he saw you. . ."

"You thought he would swoop in like a knight on a white horse?" I ask.

"Pretty much." He shrugs.

I can tell he means that, which further amuses me. Either he doesn't know his brother as well as he thinks he does, or he's kidding himself. There's not

much of a difference between the two. Either way, he's clueless.

"He's getting better, I will say that," I say. "But you do know he's crazy, right?"

"He was like this when you were with him three years ago." Liam raises an eyebrow. He's not wrong.

"I guess." I bite my lip. "He used to be different, though. I still have hope. I'm just scared he'll turn back into an asshole."

"I'm sure it's tough." Liam sighs. "Bear with him. He has a lot to be angry about, but he'll work through it."

I blink at him. *He* has a lot to be angry about? I know Liam doesn't know all of the shit I've been through, so I can't expect him to be sympathetic toward me because of that. And he probably blames me for everything Lach had to go through during and after the attack, but what the fuck? Because he got screwed over, I should be okay with him uprooting my life like he had every right to do it? And the way he went about all of it? Hell no. Fuck all of these people.

"And I don't?" I ask after a moment. "You don't think this situation is fucked up?"

"I didn't say that." He points at the bartender behind us. "Do you want a drink?"

I debate it, as I look at the setup. There's even a bartender ready to pour drinks. It feels like I'm at an open-bar wedding. All of the bottles behind him are open, but I'm not worried about anything happening to me as long as Lachlan's around. He may be a lot of things, but I know he'll always take care of me.

"A drink wouldn't hurt," I say.

I ask for gin and lime. Liam gets another whiskey.

"You know what I don't understand? About the marriage thing," I say after taking a few sips of my drink. "He can get any woman in the world to agree to this. *Any*. Why would he go through the trouble of finding me?"

"You're serious?" Liam stares at me.

"Yes. I get it. We have something. . .special," I say. "But he could have paid someone else off and told them he never wanted to see them, since this was just a means to an end."

"You can't be serious." He keeps staring at me, searching my eyes like maybe I'm the one with some loose screws. "My brother was never, and I mean ever, going to marry anyone but you. Under any circumstance."

“I don’t see why,” I say quietly, as my heart skips.

I’m full of shit. I know exactly why. We both know we can’t have what we share with anyone else. Still, that’s a lot of trouble for a fake freaking marriage. I say that aloud, and Liam shakes his head, still giving me that look.

“Has my brother told you anything at all?” Liam asks.

“About what?”

“About any of it,” he says. “I can’t imagine you’d be this upset if he’d told you, so I’m guessing he didn’t.”

I take a sip of my drink. “Well, I’m all ears.”

“I know it doesn’t feel like it because his anger overrides everything else, but he loves you so fucking much,” he says. “He spent three years looking for you and didn’t stop until he found you. He fucking gave up hockey to work for our dad. *For you.*”

Surely, I didn’t hear him correctly. My heart is pounding so hard, I’m sure he hears it. “I thought he gave it up for the money, since he wasn’t getting paid what he’d been promised.”

“Dad owns a billion-dollar security company with programs that can help us find anyone in the world.” He shoots me a pointed look. “Lach wasn’t just going to ask Dad for help, for obvious reasons. But when Dad went to *him* with an offer, he took it. Up until that point, he’d tried everything to find you and failed at every turn. The only reason he quit hockey was because he knew it was the only way he’d find you.”

He watches me process this. When I don’t speak, he adds, “Marriage is a clause in his contract. Since he’s the oldest and has to be ‘the more responsible one,’ he has to be twenty-five *and married*. It’s total archaic bullshit, but that’s the way it is. He can’t get his inheritance without it.”

Holy shit. I think I say that aloud, but I can’t hear anything through the loud ringing in my ears. I’d been trying to piece everything together, but I just. . .I didn’t consider. . .oh my God. Why wouldn’t he just tell me this? He had to know that I’d agree to help him in a heartbeat if he had. I see it now. The reason he’s dead-set on going back to Fairview isn’t just revenge. It’s to get rid of anything that stands in the way of us being together, and since he knows that’s the only thing holding me back, he’s. . .Holy. Fucking. Shit. He gave up hockey for me. For me. My chest hurts so damn much right now, I don’t even know how I’m managing to breathe. I know how difficult it was for me to give up soccer, and I didn’t even do it at a pro level. He’s too damn

good to give it up. He can't. I don't even bother hiding my tears. I try to swipe them away as they come, but they won't stop.

"He can't do that. He can't give up hockey for me," I whisper.

"Lyla." Liam sets down his glass and gives me a sympathetic smile. "My brother would give up his inheritance, hockey, kidneys, and testicles if it meant he'd have you. I wish that was hyperbole, but it's the truth."

I bite my lip hard. That's why he's been so angry with me. Because he gave up his dream and when he found me, he thought I was living mine. Oh my God. I press my hand to the ache in my stomach. *Why would he do this?* Somehow, I manage to set my glass down. Each time I go over it, I feel worse. He gave up the thing he's loved since he was a kid. For me. To find me. He made amends with his absent father to find me. My heart is somewhere in the pit of my stomach. Soon, I'll have a crevice in its place. I wipe my face again.

"I hate you so much right now," I whisper, looking at the floor.

"I know and I'm sorry. You needed to know, though. The man you love is still in there," Liam says. "I know he is."

I nod, swallowing past the knot in my throat. "Where's the bathroom?"

He points me in that direction, and I practically sprint to it. The bathroom is as lavish as the rest of the estate. There's a fancy-looking chaise which is ridiculous, and mirrors everywhere. I look at my reflection. This is all my fault. If I'd told Lachlan everything back then, maybe he could have gone to the police with me, and they would have believed him. Even as I think it, I know it's bullshit. Even if all of us had made it to the police, it wouldn't have mattered. Fairview takes care of its own, and that extends to the police department, the courts, the freaking university. *Fuck.*

If I thought I was upset before, it has nothing on what I am now. This fucker ruined my life, fine, but to ruin Lachlan's? I don't accept it. God, I'm so angry at myself. If I'd let Marissa and Prescott fill me in on his life, I would have figured it out much sooner and maybe, I could have even helped him get out of that mess. For him, I would have lawyered up and gone back to Fairview. For him, I would have let them mock me and call me all sorts of names. He should have told me. As soon as he saw me that night when I signed that contract, he should have told me. I know why he kept it from me. Even if he hadn't been angry and tried to guilt me into this, he knew there's no way in hell I'd let him give that up for me. He has to know that, right? There's a knock on the door when I'm trying to fix my makeup, but I can't

seem to stop the damn tears.

“I’m almost done,” I say, dabbing my face again.

I look at myself again and take deep breaths. I can do this. *I need to do this*. I toss the hand towel in the bin that says “used” and open the door with my polite smile. I’m ready to excuse myself when I see a very pissed-off Lachlan Duke standing at the door. He studies me as he steps closer, and I’m forced to take a step back.

“Did something happen?” I ask.

“What did he say?” he asks, his voice low and menacing.

“Wh-what? Who?” I take another step back, trying to process what he’s asking, but I can’t think straight when he looks at me like this. My eyes widen when he shuts the door behind him. “Lach.”

“What. Did. He. Say. To. You?” he seethes, holding me so I don’t fall, as he marches me backwards until I hit the mirrored wall.

He has to be asking about Liam, but how would he have seen us? We were in completely different rooms. We were the only ones in that damn little gallery. He couldn’t have seen me crying, but he must have, and I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him this upset. His breathing is uneven as he sets his hands on the mirror and cages me in. My heart skips as I look at him. I slip my hands under his jacket and slide them over his dress shirt, pressing them to his chest, one over his wildly beating heart.

“Lach,” I whisper, keeping a hand there as I reach up and brush his hair away from his forehead with the other. His eyes soften for the tiniest moment, so I ask, “Are you talking about Liam?”

“He upset you.” His jaw clenches harder, if possible. “He made you cry. What the fuck did he say?”

I stare at him for a moment, thinking about this entire, fucked up situation, and maybe it’s because my emotions are all over the freaking place, but I start to full-out laugh.

“You’re *this* pissed off because *your brother* said something to upset me?” I search his eyes, still laughing. “Even though you’ve been trying to hurt me from the moment you found me?”

“Lyla.” He groans loudly, pressing his forehead against mine. “I apologized for that. You know I’m sorry.” He pulls away and looks at me again. This time his voice is calm when he asks, “What did he say?”

“He told me what *you* should have told me the second you saw me,” I say. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He had no right to tell you that.” His eyes narrow. “I’m going to fucking ki—”

I grab and pull the lapels of his jacket, pressing my lips to his before he finishes the sentence. He’s so shocked that it takes him a second to react. When he does, he snaps, grabbing my hair in a fist and pulling me against him like he wants to somehow mold our bodies together. He makes a sound in the back of his throat when I lick the seam of his lips, and wrap my arms around his neck to deepen the kiss. His hips surge forward. I moan and bite his lip at the feel of him on my stomach. I need more. I think I say that, or maybe he reads my thoughts.

Either way, he lifts me and walks to the bench on the other side of the bathroom that I thought looked ridiculous a few minutes ago, but I appreciate now. He’s still kissing me as he sits down and sets my feet on the ground. I pull away and lift my dress to my hips. His eyes are molten as they take in my body from the waist down.

I set my hands on his shoulders and straddle him, kissing him deeply again. We’re all tongue, teeth, and nails — two savages who have been apart for too long. It doesn’t matter that we did this a few hours ago. We have years to make up for.

“Fuck,” he breathes against me, pressing his lips to my jaw and dragging them down my neck when I throw my head back.

“God, yes,” I gasp, my hips moving against him of their own accord.

He grips my thighs harder and bites the tops of my breasts, as he moves his thumbs upward on my inner thighs, drawing slow circles that drive me crazy. I’m so drunk on him that I may come just from that. When he finally reaches where I want him, he brushes his thumb over my panties. He inhales sharply against my mouth and pulls away. I make a sound when he stops moving his hand.

“Fuck, baby,” he growls. “Are you always this wet?”

“Only for you.” I grind my hips, gasping when his thumb presses against my clit at the movement. He slips a finger underneath my panties but doesn’t move it. I grind again, feeling the pressure once more. “Lachlan, please. Please. Please.”

“Only for me?” he asks, the low gravel voice making me rock my hips again. I tug his hair harder, and his dick twitches against me. “Why? Because this pussy is mine? Tell me.”

“Yes. Maybe. I don’t know,” I say, breathing harshly.

“Tell me.” He strokes me and I throw my head back, my eyes instantly rolling to the back of my head.

“Fuck. Don’t stop,” I moan, grinding. Oh my god, he just needs to move his finger up a little. The tension builds in my stomach, coiling, and pulling. “Please don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

“Tell me you’re mine.” He pulls my bottom lip into his mouth, sucking it hard as he moves his finger slightly, brushing just where I need him and keeping me just at the cusp of an orgasm. Bastard. “Tell me you’re mine and only mine, and I’ll make you come. Fucking tell me.”

My breath is ragged as I try to move my hips again, but he holds me with his other hand, stopping my movement completely.

“No. Nooo,” I breathe. “Don’t stop. Don’t stop.”

“Look at me.” He slaps my ass hard.

I glare at him. “This isn’t funny, Lachlan.”

“I never said it was.” His eyes narrow on mine. “Tell me.”

I don’t know why I don’t just say it. We both know I’ll say just about anything right now, and it’s not like he doesn’t know the answer. I open my mouth to speak, when he lifts me and sets me on the floor to shrug off his jacket and unbuckle his pants. He lowers everything to his ankles and sits back down. My stomach clenches when I straddle him again. Holy. Shit. Fuck. He’s not even inside me and already feels so good. I rock my hips forward, my wet folds sliding up and down his velvety, hard length. My breath quickens as the tension continues to build. He hisses and stops me with a grip on both my ass cheeks.

I gasp loudly. “Ohmygod please.”

“Fuck. Were you this wet in the car?” he asks, his voice husky.

I don’t know how much more I can take. I let out a loud, frustrated groan. I look at him, at this beautiful, annoying, maddening man that I can’t seem to help not falling for. He stares at me, his eyes searching mine. His lips come down on mine again as he lifts me and positions me right at his tip.

“Lach, please,” I whisper shakily against his mouth.

“Tell me who you fucking belong to.”

“You, damn it. Always you. I’ve always been yours,” I practically shout.

He loosens his grip on me and I start sliding down. He stretches me so much that I have to bite my lip hard to keep from screaming.

“Fuuuuuuck,” he growls against my neck as I finish seating. I clench around him, still adjusting, and his hands grip my ass tighter. “I’m never

going to get enough of you.”

I start moving slowly, up and down, throwing my head back as I ride him. My stomach clenches, and when he brings his hand between us and finds my clit as I rock my hips, I have to bite his shoulder to keep the scream inside. The bite sets him off. He starts lifting his hips and using his grip on my ass to control the pace, going deeper, harder, faster. My entire body coils and starts to shake. He stops so suddenly that I whimper.

“Noooooo,” I cry out, lowering my head and looking at him. “I can’t take anymore.”

“Keep your eyes on mine,” he grunts as he starts fucking me again, grabbing my hips so hard, I know he’ll leave marks, but damn. *Oh fuck.* “You’re so fucking hot. Look at me when you come for me, baby. I need to see you.”

I do and I stop breathing. On his next thrust, I feel a bomb go off inside me. I shake uncontrollably, as he rips the delicate material of my already stretched and ruined panties and thrusts a few more times, going deep as his thumb finds my clit again. I’m so sensitive there. I don’t think I can take any more, but he feels too good. I sink my hands into his thick hair and start rocking against him to meet his thrusts. My eyes screw shut as the feeling in my core starts again.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, don’t stop, oh fuckkkk,” I chant, beginning to clench around him as he slows his thrusts.

“Open your eyes,” he says huskily.

I look at him and come so hard that I don’t know how the fuck I don’t scream the house down. My throat instantly hurts from holding it back. My body spasms as he empties himself deep inside me. We stay like that, our foreheads touching, as we try to catch our breath. He cups my face in his hand and tilts my head up, pulling back just a little so we can see each other better. He pulls away slightly, his thumb drawing slow circles on my cheek as he searches my eyes. In his, I see something I haven’t seen in a long time. The green is light enough for me to see the little brown specks that I love so much. I love him so much. I knew this, of course. It’s not a new realization, but it hits me hard at this moment.

“We need to talk. We need to talk about a lot of things,” I say quietly. “But right now, I think we should get back to our engagement party.”

He leans in and gives me the slowest, longest, sweetest kiss I’ve ever experienced in my life. When he pulls away, we just look at each other. Pain,

sorrows, and I'm sorry's passing through each of us. I kiss him again, another slow, soft kiss, wishing we could erase all of the bullshit and get a do-over. When we pull back, he sets his forehead against mine again. We stay like that for a long time before he speaks again.

“You fuck me up, Lyla James,” he whispers.

He pulls me into his chest and I smile against him. For the first time in a long time, I feel safe again. Loved.

CHAPTER 43

WHEN WE WALK into his apartment, he locks the door and sets the keys on the entrance table. I look at the key tray and decorations on the table — three little monkeys (see no evil, talk no evil, hear no evil).

“Did you pick anything at all in this place?” I ask.

He chuckles. “It’s not my place. My dad owns it.”

“Are you going to keep it?” I ask, watching him as he loosens his tie.

“You told me you hate it,” he says with a tiny smirk on his face, as he shrugs off his jacket.

“I really do,” I whisper, my heart pounding harder with each article of clothing he takes off.

I try not to let it show, because there are other things we need to do and we can’t get distracted. When he’s finished, he just stands there and I hold onto his forearm. His eyes dance as I grip him and reach down to take off my uncomfortable heels. He still has that expression on his face when I look up at him.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he says.

He searches my eyes for a moment, and my insides dance with what he doesn’t say aloud. I say it back with my own eyes. For some reason, I still can’t open my mouth to say them. Not yet. Yes, I love him. Yes, he loves me. That much is obvious, but we have a lot of ground to cover. I hold my heels in one hand and put my arms up, like a child wanting their parent to carry them. He chuckles as he lifts and cradles me in his arms. For a moment, we just look at each other, still saying nothing. He leans down and kisses me softly. It’s an emotional kiss that leaves a knot in my throat when we pull apart.

“God, Lyla,” he breathes, setting his forehead on the top of my head for a second as he carries me toward his bedroom.

When he sets me down, I take my shoes to the closet and turn around to find him taking his cufflinks off, then his black dress shoes and his belt. I let myself check him out again for a moment. It’s impossible not to. When our eyes meet, his are so dark that I know keeping our hands to ourselves is going to be difficult, but we have to. Otherwise, we won’t talk. Again.

“No sex,” I say.

His jaw drops. “What? Why?”

“Because we need to talk.” I point toward the bathroom. “I’m going to shower and change, then you’ll shower and change, and we’re going to sit somewhere and have an adult conversation.”

“We can shower together.” He bites his lip as he lets his heated gaze run over me.

“Lachlan Duke.”

His eyes snap to mine. “What?”

“This is serious,” I say. “Very serious, if you’re taking me back to Fairview.”

The heat in his eyes is replaced by concern, and he nods. He watches as I grab my things and head to the bathroom. I don’t have a hair cover, so I clip my hair up to keep it from getting wet. It might be an impossible feat, with the way the water shoots from all angles. I haven’t figured out how to turn on just one of the showerheads, so every time I get in here, they all turn on. It feels good, though, so I can’t complain.

I’m finishing rinsing off when a very naked, very hard Lachlan Duke steps in. I’m full-on ogling now, which seems to make him breathe faster, with the way his chest starts moving.

“I can be quick,” he says, eyes burning.

“Lach,” I say, but my voice is needy.

He doesn’t wait for me to say anything else. He lifts me in his arms, I wrap my legs around him, and we crash together against the shower wall. He positions himself and we both groan deeply when he thrusts inside me. He pauses, dropping his face to my neck as the spray hits him on the back.

“I won’t let you go,” he says, voice raspy beneath my ear. “I can’t. I wouldn’t know how to.”

“Then, don’t,” I whisper against his mouth and kiss him.

He makes good on his word. He makes me come fast and finds his own

release as I'm spasming around him. We finish up, dry ourselves, brush our teeth, do all the things normal couples do — that we used to do — and it feels so good, so right. When we're both dressed in what we're going to sleep in — me in a t-shirt and cotton Star Wars panties; him in soft gray sleeping pants — we walk over to his bed.

“*This* is where you want to talk?” He stops at the edge, as I crawl to the center and sit down with my legs crossed.

“Yeah. Why not?”

“There's no way in hell I'll be able to concentrate.” His eyes map their way down my body.

I roll my eyes. “Shut up and get in here. Just stay on that side.”

“I'll try,” he says in a voice that isn't very convincing, but he does what I ask.

We both grab pillows and set them on our laps, like we need lap desks to take notes or shields to keep us from climbing on each other again.

“You want to start?” I ask, giving him permission to ask whatever he wants.

He clears his throat. “Why the pictures?”

“Oh, my God.” I laugh. “*That's* your first question?”

“You never told me,” he says. “You know how I get.”

“What, you couldn't find the answer on my social media or any of my emails?” I raise an eyebrow and bite back a smile.

“You don't have social media.” He scowls. “And you changed the password to your email, and Liam won't help me hack you.”

I stare at him for a moment and decide not to entertain that, right now.

“I forgot what Luke looks like,” I say, my words catching at the admission.

“I think about him and Mom a lot now, but I can't remember his face anymore. His parents took down his profiles, so it's not like I can look for a picture online. I'd taken everything to my dad's guest house since I was going to pack that up as well, but then everything happened. . .”

I shrug. “I was terrified I'd forget what you look like, so I put pictures of you where I had to see you every day. It hurt, it still hurts, but I couldn't. . .” I blink rapidly. “I couldn't live with myself if I forgot your face.” I pause and take a breath. “I know I can always find you online, but it's not the same. I wanted those memories, you know?”

He's quiet for a long time, just staring at me. His face is impassive, but

his eyes are pained. “Fuck, Lyla,” he whispers after a moment.

“How long did you wait after you found out where I was?” I ask, taking a shaky breath.

“Less than a day,” he says, eyes dancing when he sees my shock. “I watched you all day.”

I purse my lips. “Yet you waited until Wade was about to kiss me, to make your presence known.”

His eyes darken. “He kept touching you all night. I wanted to fucking kill him.”

I keep what I want to say to myself. “He’s inconsequential,” I say. “And not worth discussing right now.”

He searches my eyes for a moment and nods lightly. I uncross my legs and get out of bed to get my phone. He’s quiet as I log into my therapy patient portal and click the video I want to show him. Well, I don’t *want* to show it to him, but I don’t think I can explain the accident myself.

“I went to therapy,” I start. “Prescott forced me, but that’s a story for another day. I did hypnotherapy since it’s supposed to ‘go deep and make you relive your trauma so you can cope’ or something like that.”

“Did it help?”

“It did, actually,” I say. “I had my therapist record some of my sessions.”

His brows furrow. “You can do that?”

“I asked and she agreed.” I search his eyes. “I want you to watch one of them.”

He swallows but remains silent.

“It won’t be easy,” I say. “You may feel differently about me once you know,” I say, looking at his hands on the pillow as I whisper, “when you hear about the rapes.”

I take a shaky breath and wipe my tears quickly. I hate this. Even though I was the one who was assaulted, I’m also the one who carries the burden of the secret and the shame of what happened. I’ve learned to live with that, but I love the way he looks at me, and it would kill me if that changes.

He puts both my hands in his and waits for me to look at him. “There’s nothing in this world that would make me feel differently towards you.” He squeezes my hands. “Nothing.”

“You can’t know that,” I whisper. He lifts a hand and wipes my tears with his thumb.

“I *do* know that.”

I flip the phone around, hand it to him, and let him decide for himself. He picks it up and clicks play.

CHAPTER 44

THE ACCIDENT

“WHEN YOU’RE ready and comfortable, I want you to go ahead and close your eyes,” Dr. Riley says in her soothing voice.

I fast forward that part of the video and stop when I see myself speaking. .

My legs feel like they’ll give out at any moment from the two games I played. I text my roommates and tell them I’m going to be at my parent’s house for a while, since my mom promised she’d make my favorite soup. While I wait, I ice my legs on my favorite couch. My eyes feel heavy, and since I’m pretty sure I’m going to pass out before mom gets home, I set the ice on the table.

It’s the kind of dream you’re aware you’re having but can’t seem to wake yourself up. In the dream, I’m at a party. There are people around, but I can’t make out their faces. I hear their laughter, though, and feel myself smile at the sound. I’m standing by the pool when I start taking off my clothes. The cool air that hits my breasts as I lift it makes me shiver. Someone walks over and stands beside me, and starts undressing as well. I can’t see the person, but my hands stop at the waistband of my shorts when I realize they’re there. I know it’s a man from their height and body type, but I can’t make out a face. Everything is blurry. I hear the flick of a lighter, and then, the smell of a cigarette. In my dream, I gag, the way I am now, just thinking about it.

The smoke clouds my face, and I cough and gag again. Despite this, I’m still pulling down my shorts and panties. He steps forward and grabs my breast roughly as he presses against me. I smack his hand away and shake my head no, making him laugh. It’s a sound that makes my entire body freeze in terror. In my dream, I’m confused, and suddenly I’m no longer by the

swimming pool. It's pitch black where I am. I can't see, but my legs are yanked apart, and I feel an intrusion that makes me scream. I'm completely dry and not prepared for him, but he keeps going. I whimper, feeling my eyes water as I struggle to get him off me. He laughs, that laugh again, and I open my eyes. That's when I realize what's happening isn't a dream. He's on top of me, staring at me as he moves roughly inside me. I scream and try to throw him off. I push his chest hard, and he slaps my face harder. So hard that I have to bring a hand up to the spot burning on my face. I keep moving until I buck him off me and kick him hard. I don't know where it lands, because I turn around fast to escape, but my shorts are locked at my knees and he easily pulls me back and presses me onto my stomach. I scream as loud as I can, and soon my scream turns into a pleading sob.

"Please don't do this." I keep saying that over and over.

He hasn't pushed himself inside me yet, but I know he's coming. I'm still dry and not ready for him, so he spits on his hand and coats me with it to make for an easier entrance. I screw my eyes shut and keep pleading. He presses his mouth to my ear and tells me he should've fucked me like this sooner, that my lucid begging makes it more fun. He tells me his last one used to beg. I don't know what this means, and in that moment, I don't care. I just want him off me. He positions himself between my legs again as he pins my back down, but he doesn't get a chance to do anything. My mom's shrieks fill the room and he's off me quickly.

"What the fuck is going on here?" she yells as she picks something up from the corner of the room.

I scramble, lifting my shorts, and lowering my t-shirt. I fall to my knees and sob harder, ashamed that my mother saw me like that. Terrified that she might think I wanted him to do it or that she'll believe him if he says that to her. I try to focus on what's happening, but my chest is raking with sobs and my eyes are filled with tears. I hear screaming. I hear a loud thwack followed by a louder thump. Someone yanks me hard once. Twice. Three times and I realize it's my mom.

"Let's go," she's screaming. "LET'S GO."

I finally snap out of it, adrenaline replacing the dread that previously filled me. I look at the floor and see him lying there. His hand moves, though. I grab my mother's arm and rush outside, stepping on the cracked eggs and flowers she dropped by the door. Mom's shaking so hard that she can't even push the button to unlock the car. Adrenaline replaces my fear as I look over

my shoulder and take the keys from her hand.

“Get in the car,” I yell.

Light brown eyes that mirror mine widen, but she moves and gets into the passenger seat. I lock the doors, start the engine, and take three big deep breaths. I can do this. I’ve survived this before. I’ll survive it again. I floor it out of the circular driveway and turn onto the empty street. I’m going over the speed limit and these roads are always crawling with police officers. Normally, I slow down. Today, I speed up. Best case scenario, one of them will chase after me and we’ll be safe.

“How many times has this happened?” Mom asks, crying.

“I don’t know. Three.” My hands are shaking, but I focus on turning at the stop sign. “He was drugging me before. He started when. . .he started when I was fourteen.”

“What?” Mom shrieks. I stop at the red light down the road, my knee bouncing as I look at her. Her golden tan face is ashen, her eyes wide and horrified. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know!” I press the gas on the green light. “I didn’t know until it was too late and then he hadn’t done it for years until today. I thought he wouldn’t anymore. I thought he’d stopped. . .”

“Oh my God,” she says, her voice catching. “Oh my God, Lyla.”

“It’s fine. It won’t happen again.” I look left and right at the next stop sign and drive forward.

“You should have told me!”

“I didn’t think you’d believe me.” I bite my lip to keep from crying. “I didn’t think anyone would.”

“Lyla James!” she shouts, still crying. “Of course, I would have believed you!” She remains silent for a moment. “Who does this asshole think he is?” she yells. “Who the fuck does he think he is? Keep driving to the precinct. I’m calling the cops right now so they’ll expect us when we get there.”

She starts to rummage through her purse for the phone. “Fuck,” she screams. “Stupid piece of shit. I can’t believe we trusted him. I can’t believe. . .”

Through the rearview, I see a familiar red sports car approach and start to panic, my hands shaking again. He’s still at least two blocks back. There’s no way he’ll catch up. Just in case, I swerve right and drive toward the two-lane street the cops are always at. If I can get one behind me, we’ll be safe. Please, please, please pull me over. I chant that in my head as if they’ll hear

me.

“Mom! Focus!” I move up in my seat as my eyes bounce between the rearview mirror and the desolate street ahead. He’s getting closer. “Fuck. MOM FOCUS!”

“I can’t find my phone!” She looks around, starts searching between the seats. “Goddamnit.” She takes off her seatbelt and reaches back.

His car appears behind ours. I speed up. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. His car is much faster than Mom’s SUV. Much faster. The shiny red car speeds up, almost hitting our bumper. There’s dirt and rows of trees to our right. I try to figure out how I’d turn the wheel without losing control, if it comes to that. God, I hope it doesn’t come to that. The SUV is an off-road vehicle. I remind myself of that. It was one of their big selling points. Off-road. We’ll be fine. A tap from on the bumper moves us forward in our seats.

Mom and I share a horrified look.

“Mom!” I snap. “The phone!”

“Shit!” She keeps reaching. “I got it. I got it!”

The car swerves and hits the bumper of our car on the left side. I speed up. Please please please please, let us be okay. We’re only blocks away from the police station, so close I can see it. Mom should’ve called from home, but instead, she grabbed one of Dad’s autographed bats and swung it. It was the right call. It was the only call. A sob rakes through me as I recall the look in her eyes, but I breathe through it. I can’t afford to lose my shit right now. I floor it, eyes forward. When he hits us again, it’s no longer a warning tap. He completely slams into the car, hitting it at an angle that makes us spin out of control once. We scream loudly. I slam on the breaks and steady the car, flooring it again. He hits us hard again. This time, the car spins once, twice, and on the third, we slam into an oak tree head-on. The air whooshes out of me as I press against my seatbelt. The airbag slams into me, pushing me back with force. I hear my mom scream. I hear bones snap. I know it’s bones because it’s the same sound a teammate’s knee made recently. Glass breaks, but I still haven’t been able to take a breath, let alone open my eyes. I think I pass out. Or maybe I’m in shock. It’s hard to blink, or move, or even speak.

“Mom?” I say as loud as I can when I finally find my voice.

“911, what’s your emergency? Hello? 911, what’s your emergency?” The phone is on speaker.

“MOM!” I scream, pushing the airbag off, ignoring the pain that slices through me with each movement. The operator speaks again. I take my

seatbelt off and fight with the airbag searching for my mother. The operator speaks again.

“Mom!” I scream when I’m finally able to see her.

She’s slumped forward. I start screaming, crying, and shaking uncontrollably. I say, “Mom!” more times than I ever had in my life, as if that will resuscitate her. I don’t know how I know she’s dead, but I know. When move her head back to assess the damage on her head, I scream louder. There’s a chunk of glass lodged into her left eye, the cut so deep it goes into her skull and cheek. I scream again and again. I can’t stop screaming.

The hospital is a blur. I hear my father wailing in the hall. I repeatedly apologize—to him, to the empty room, to anyone who has come near me, including the nurses. They tell me to get some rest and give me something to help me sleep. I don’t want to go to sleep. I’m terrified I’ll have that dream again. I don’t dream, though. I haven’t dreamed since.

CHAPTER 45

I WATCH as Lachlan lowers my phone and looks up at me slowly.

“Fuck, Lyla,” he whispers. “We have to tell the cops.”

I shake my head. That’s the logical thing to do, of course. It’s the first thing Mom thought of doing, the first thing Luke thought of doing. I know better, though. I know going to the cops will only lead to trouble. Last time, it led to death before we even made it to the precinct. This is the first time Lach’s hearing this, so of course, it’s his first thought. I’m sure seeing me lose my shit at my therapist’s office didn’t help. I wait a moment before I speak.

“I’m going to go back to the beginning. My dad was signed with the Mets back in DR, but he moved here when he was eighteen and went to the minors. He started playing in the major leagues, six months later, and that’s when Mom came over. They were both nineteen, and back home, Mom had been studying to be an ophthalmologist, so she enrolled at Fairview to continue.”

I bite my lip, pausing for a moment. Lach sets his hands on mine. “That’s how they met David Jameson.”

Lach’s hands tighten on mine. “No.”

I nod and try to swallow, but it hurts.

“No,” he says again, his face ashen, like he’s witnessing a nightmare all over again. I watch as he processes this — see him go from disbelief, to hurt, back to disbelief, and finally, anger. “He did this to you?”

I nod.

“He. . .you think *he* put us in the hospital?”

“I know he did.”

His eyes are still wide when he lets go of my hands and covers his face with them. He drags them down and shakes his head as he looks at me. “He

was there, every day. At the hospital. He was talking to my agent about different things we could do. He spoke to my mother. . .”

“He fucked you out of those contracts,” I say. “Toronto? Boston? Jameson knows those coaches. Some of them were once *his* coaches. I don’t know what he told them, but I know he’s at fault for this.”

Lach is still just staring at me.

“I really wish I’d let Marissa and Prescott talk to me about you” I whisper, looking down. “I could have told you. Or told them to tell you. I’m sure it crossed their minds, but they’re also scared. I could have. . .”

“Stop.” He grabs my hands again; his eyes are hard now. “None of this is your fault. I was a fucking idiot to blame you.” He brings my hands up and kisses them.

“Do you want me to keep going, or will it be too much for you?”

“Keep going.”

“My parents were having this party when I was fourteen,” I start. He stiffens. “Mom made punch. Jameson served me some and was around all night, which I didn’t think was too weird. He was my godfather and always looking after me.” I purse my lips at that. “The morning after that party, I woke up in my bed with my shirt pulled up to my neck, the skirt I was wearing, and no underwear. I was still wearing my socks, still had on my jewelry, and I was. . .” I clear my throat. “I was sore and had some dried blood between my legs.”

“Fuck,” he says, his voice so low I barely catch it, but the rage on his face is unmistakable.

“I genuinely didn’t know what happened. My friends hadn’t started having sex yet, so it’s not like we talked about what it was like. I didn’t really think anything of it,” I say. “I thought I must have been extra tired and passed out. Maybe I’d gotten my period or something. I was naive. Stupid.”

“No, you weren’t.” He brings a hand to cup my face. The look in his eyes breaks my heart. “You had no reason not to trust him.”

“It happened again like that. The third time, I was already suspicious. I poured out the soda he handed me and replaced it with another flavor. I wish I hadn’t, because that time, I remember.” I shiver. Lach’s eyes darken. “He knew that I knew since I was screaming and fighting him. He didn’t do it again after that, until the day of the accident.”

“We have to tell the cops,” he says quietly.

“And then Luke, I told him what happened. He’d been demanding to

know what was wrong with me since I'd been acting differently. He wanted to know why I was suddenly wearing baggy clothes. He went to Jameson's house and took a bat to Jameson's car, punched him, and said he was going to the cops. . .” I look at our hands, focus on how much bigger his look against mine. “He'd been with me the night before and told me what he was going to do. I tried to talk him out of it, and he promised he wouldn't go. He fucking promised. And the next day when he didn't show up, I got worried, and then Prescott and I found him. . .”

“That's why you're sure it wasn't suicide.”

My eyes snap to his. “His body was sitting upright on the chair. Half his fucking head was blown off, but his body was in a sitting position? Afterwards, Pres and I were on the lawn, taking turns vomiting and shaking while being questioned, and in the midst of police and detectives and news reporters, Jameson walked by smiling. He smiled at us.” I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment. “I'll never forget that smile. I'm sure Prescott won't either.”

“That's why Pres and Marissa won't say anything or go to the police,” he says.

“Jameson's cousin is the chief of police now, but even back then, he had major pull in the department. And Jameson has always been the golden boy.”

“Fucking bastard.” Lachlan's jaw ticks. “He recruited me. He coached me for two years.”

“I know. And then he moved on and became the head of sports. Of *all* sports.”

His eyes flash. “That's why you quit.”

“I didn't want to give him any more power over me. He started showing up at our practices, going into the locker room, when he thought I was alone. I knew he wasn't going to stop.” I grit my teeth and wait a moment. “For reasons I can't comprehend, and trust me, I've thought about it a lot, he thinks I belong to him.”

Lachlan, who was already angry, looks even angrier now. “You don't.”

“I know I don't,” I say quietly. “He knows it, as well. He wouldn't have attacked you otherwise.”

“I told the team that you were my girlfriend before the game, and he was there,” he says. “I thought it was safe and I told them.” He runs his hands through his hair. “Fuck.”

“It isn't your fault.” I grab his chin the way he does mine all the time.

“People had been talking about us since Marissa’s birthday, and he saw me at the game wearing your jersey. I’m sure he saw you watching me at that football game screaming like a lunatic.” I smile. Nothing can tarnish that memory. “You giving us a title probably pissed him off more, but he was going to do it anyway.”

I wait until he speaks. He doesn’t.

“Why the hell do you think I left? Why do you think I stayed away from you?” I ask. “I couldn’t walk around with a public figure and risk him finding me. Finding us. I knew if you were alone, he wouldn’t do anything to you, so I stayed away.”

“I’m going to fucking murder him,” he says after a moment, in a low voice that sends a chill down my spine.

“You can’t just show up. . .”

“Yes, I can.” His eyes flash to mine. What I see in them terrifies me. “I’m going to show up and I’m going to kill him.”

CHAPTER 46

I WAKE up in the middle of the night and immediately feel his absence. I sit up, expecting to find him in the sitting area, but the room is empty. My heart pounds hard. I look at the time. It's five in the morning. I throw off the covers and rush out of the room. If he left without me, I'm never going to forgive him. I halt when I see him sitting at the edge of the couch, facing the city. It's a beautiful view, especially at night. With him still shirtless and in his gray pajama pants, even more so. His head snaps up as I walk over, but he doesn't say anything. My heart stops when I see the troubled look in his eyes. I walk between his legs and kneel. The cold marble floor on my shins makes it difficult to stay in place, but I manage.

“Hey.” I bring a hand up to his face. “What's wrong?”

“You don't have to marry me.” He swallows hard and looks above my head and into the city. “It was fucked up of me to make you sign that marriage agreement, to begin with.” He shakes his head. “I already lost you once,” he continues, running his fingers through his hair as he looks down at me. “I don't want to lose you over this. I don't want you to wake up one day and remind me that the only reason you married me was that I forced you to. I don't want to be. . .” He swallows again, his jaw tensing. “I don't want to be your nightmare.”

I take in a sharp breath as I feel his words slice through me. I know saying them hurt him just as deeply, and from the troubled look on his face, I know he's fully expecting me to walk away from him. That's the thing about him that I've never quite understood. He's the hottest man alive, successful, funny, smart, and charming. He's never had issues getting any woman he wanted. It's one of the reasons he's always been so damn sure about everything. Yet, when it comes to me, he seems to question everything. To

question this, though? It kills me that the thought even crossed his mind. Even at his worst, I'm not sure he could ever become my nightmare. He showed me love when other people wouldn't have. He made me feel when no one else could.

"The way you went about this was fucked up." I set a hand on his face and sit up on my knees so I'm closer to him. Pain flashes in his eyes, and he doesn't even bother to hide it. "You want to know something crazy?"

He just stares, so I keep going.

"If you'd showed up that night, kissed me the way you did, gotten down on one knee, and proposed to me right there in front of Wade, I would have said yes," I say. He tries to move his face to look away, but I hold it hard. "I think it's insane, but for you, *with* you, I'd do just about anything."

"No, Lyla. I don't deserve you," he says, his voice is gravel and scrapes along my insides. "I don't."

I lean in and kiss him softly, dropping my hands from his face and pulling away as I stand up. He tilts his head to look up at me, his eyes shutting when I comb my fingers through his hair. When I take too long to speak, he opens his eyes. I bite my tongue to keep tears from forming again. Fucking therapy. I bend a little so we're eye to eye.

"You could never be my nightmare, Lachlan Duke." I stand straight and wait until he's fully paying attention. "I love you more than I hate anything."

His lips part like he's completely shocked by my admission, which makes me smile. He stares, his eyes taking in my face, as if he's trying to catalog my features or memorize this moment. After what feels like an eternity, he stands and lifts me off the ground. Once my arms and legs are wrapped around him, he sits back down and brings his hands up to brush my hair out of my face.

"I love you so fucking much, it physically hurts," he says, voice hoarse as he grabs my right hand and sets it on his rapidly beating heart.

His words open up a net of butterflies in my stomach. They spread to my chest, my ears, my toes. Our lips meet in a kiss that starts out slow but turns frantic, with our hands in each other's hair and our teeth grazing each other's lips. We kiss the way we used to — with every bit of us we have to give. With everything we had before we thought we lost it. When I pull away, we're both breathing heavily.

"We should get married," I whisper. "I'm serious. I want to, but I do have some conditions."

"Anything," he breathes, searching my eyes.

“You can’t quit hockey.”

He lets out a short laugh, shaking his head. “Of course, this is what you ask for.”

“I’m serious. I can’t live with myself if you quit.”

“Lyla James.” He groans, grabbing both sides of my face, and pressing a hard kiss on my lips. “Why are you so difficult?”

“Because I love you more than anything.” I grab both sides of his face and watch his eyes darken at my words. I lower my hands and bite my lip for a second to keep my emotions at bay. “You not playing really hurts me, Lach.”

“Fuck. Don’t say that.” He shuts his eyes and exhales, as he drops his hands from my face. “I signed a contract. I don’t think I can back out of it.”

“If Henry really loves you, he’ll understand.” I shoot him a hard look. “Tell him to put a fucking pin on it. You’ll come back in a couple of years.”

“Put a pin on it?” His brows rise, his eyes dancing.

“Yeah, old white rich men love saying shit like that.”

He bursts out laughing, making it impossible for me not to laugh with him.

His lips pull into a sexy smile. “You’re my favorite person in the world, you know that?”

“Good, because you’re mine,” I say. “It helps that you’re one of the few people in the world I can actually stand.”

He throws his head back with a laugh.

I kiss his neck before he looks at me again. “Do you agree to my condition?”

“I don’t know what teams are looking, right now.” He brings a hand up and brushes his thumb against my bottom lip. The butterflies are instant, but I tame them. He’s trying to distract me.

“Your agent can get you a deal on any team you want,” I say. “And if he can’t, he can fuck off. I’ll do it myself.”

He grins. “I love it when you get cocky.”

“Lach.” I pin him with a serious look.

“I’ll try my best, okay?” he asks. “You’re the one who should be playing pro.”

“Nah.” I shake my head, smiling.

“Well, we’re going to have to ‘put a pin’ on that,” he says, eyes dancing.

I roll my eyes. “So, what do we do? Make an appointment at the

courthouse for next week or something?”

“I think I should propose first, don’t you?”

My heart flutters. “I mean. . .that’s the least you can do, right?” I whisper.

He kisses me. “Are you going to be mad if I tell you I bought you a ring?”

I pull away to look at him. “When did you buy me a ring?”

“I’m not answering that,” he says, and I can tell he’s had it for a while.

“You’re fucking insane, you know that?”

“A couple of people have mentioned that I might be.” He kisses me again, stands up, and carries me toward his room. “But only when it comes to you.”

CHAPTER 47

HE WALKS me over to the bed and pulls away from me as he sets me down on the edge.

“Don’t move,” he says, turning to disappear into the closet.

I’m about to ask him what he’s doing when I spot a little black velvet box in his hand. My wide eyes shoot up to his, to the box, and back to his again. He doesn’t say anything, but the amusement in his eyes is unmistakable. My pulse races. Oh my god, he’s actually going to propose. He told me he would, but I didn’t expect it to be *right now*. I feel like throwing up. My hands start shaking when he reaches me and gets down on one knee. Oh, fuck. I am so not prepared for this. I wanted it — I *want* it — but I didn’t expect to feel so nervous about it. It’s Lachlan, for fuck’s sake. But that’s the thing. It’s Lachlan. I don’t trust myself to stay quiet right now. I can’t. He sets a hand on my bouncing knee, stopping the movement.

He searches my eyes, but keeps the box closed.

“I think you’re supposed to open it,” I whisper, my heart pounding wildly.

He shoots me a look. “Can you not?”

“Okay, but I don’t think it’s fair that you’re not wearing a shirt while you’re doing this,” I say. “You have an unfair advantage.”

“Seriously?” He cocks his head. “You’re not wearing pants. I’ve been hard since you walked out there, and you don’t hear me complaining.”

“Fine.” I bite back my smile. “Continue.”

“Believe it or not, I had something planned, but I haven’t rehearsed it in a while,” he says, laughing when my eyes widen. *In a while?* “From the day I met you. . .” He shakes his head and laughs hard, making me smile even though I’m pretty sure he’s laughing at my expense. He clears his throat and

gets serious.

“You captured my attention the moment I met you. I think I might have fallen in love with you that night, standing against that wall, without even realizing it. I’ve never chased anyone before you came along. I went after you the way I only go after a fucking hockey puck, and I don’t regret it. I’ll chase you forever, around the world if I have to, but I hope you don’t make me. Stay with me forever, Lyla James. Marry me.”

I’m biting my lip hard to keep from crying. He finally — finally — opens the box, and my jaw drops. I had no idea what I was expecting, but. . . holy shit. A dam breaks and my tears start falling fast. I bring my hands up to cover my face.

“Oh, my God. What is this ring?” I whisper hoarsely, wiping the tears away quickly, and stare at the ring as the knot in my throat expands.

“It’s a black speckled diamond, for your little black heart,” he says, smiling as he takes it out of the box and slides it on my ring finger.

“Holy shit,” I whisper again, my bottom lip wobbling as more tears form.

I don’t know if the band is white gold, silver, or platinum. In the middle is an enormous round stone. It’s not entirely black. It’s speckled, as he said, and sits on the most beautiful halo, covered in regular diamonds to contrast the one in the middle. Not only is it the most beautiful ring I’ve ever seen in my life, but the thought that went into it. My heart squeezes again. More tears trickle down my face. The fact that he picked out something so unconventionally perfect for me. . . I shake my head and swallow hard, wiping more tears.

“I know.” He winks with that cocky smirk. “I did good, right?”

“I don’t hate it,” I whisper.

His jaw drops, for a second, before he gets up and tackles me onto the bed. Between laughs, I manage to say, “I’m kidding. You did amazing. I love it. I love it. Stop.”

“You didn’t say yes.” He pulls back and looks down at me, serious again, as he sits us both up.

I laugh. “Would you even let me say no?”

“Of course, I would, but I’d just wear you down until you said yes.”

“You realize you didn’t ask, right?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Lyla.” He groans, shutting his eyes.

“Lach,” I say quietly, bringing my hands to his face. I wait until he opens his eyes. “Ask me.”

He looks at me for a long moment, takes a deep breath, and blurts. “Will you marry me, Lyla James?”

“Yes.” I smile wide, giving him the smile he once told me he wanted to possess. “And I’ll stay with you forever. And ever. And ever.”

His face is a mixture of relief and amazement as he stares at me before grabbing my face and kissing me deeply. We fall onto the bed again and pull apart to catch our breaths.

“Let’s get married tomorrow,” he says. “Here. We’ll call Marissa and Prescott and get them to come here.”

“Absolutely not. I’m only getting married once, and I want to do this right.”

His eyes widen. “You’re not going to make me wait a whole year, are you?”

“No.” I laugh at the horrified look on his face. “Maybe a whole week, though.”

He scowls. “I don’t like it.”

“We’ll do it when we get back from Fairview. I just need a few days before the actual—”

“No. Hell no.” He pulls away. “You’re not going to Fairview.”

“Are you still going?” I ask, my heart beating harder for different reasons. I knew this was going to happen. I freaking knew it.

“Yes, but I don’t want you anywhere near him. I don’t want you there.”

“There’s no way you’re going without me,” I say. “I’m going.”

“Lyla.”

I narrow my eyes. He doesn’t seem to understand that I may be the only person who can protect him. I’m not sure how, but I know if I’m not there, one of two things will happen: he’ll kill Jameson or Jameson will kill him. There’s no freaking way he’s going without me.

“I have to pick up my things from my dad’s house anyway,” I say.

“I’ll get them for you.” His eyes flash. “You’re not going.”

I stare at him. “If you go without me, I’ll get out of the contract. I’ll file for divorce, if I have to, in order to void it. I’m not joking.”

“Jesus Christ, woman.” His eyes widen and he pulls me flush against his chest. “We haven’t even gotten married.”

“I promise, this is the only time I’ll ever threaten you with that. I can’t let you go alone, Lach. Please.”

He groans deeply. “I just want to take care of you, damn it.”

“Well, this is me taking care of you.” I kiss his collarbone. “I love you too much to lose you.”

He growls deeply and kisses me. We stay in bed for another hour, celebrating our engagement.

CHAPTER 48

WE AGREED to meet at Duke Tech so I could see the place and go to lunch with his parents afterward. In the meantime, I text Marissa and Prescott a picture of the ring. I get Prescott's generic message: out of town on business, spotty reception, leave a message, or call the office. Marissa video calls me right away.

"WHAT?" she screams, eyes wide on me. "WHAT? WHAT? WHAT? OH MY GOD."

I laugh. "Obviously, I said yes."

"Fuck. Obviously," she breathes. "Let me see it again. Holy shit, Lyles. He really did good."

"I know." I smile wide as I stare at the ring on my finger.

"How did he propose? Did he propose? I'll kill him if he didn't."

"He got down on one knee and proposed." I sigh contentedly. "It was beautiful."

She grins wide and lets out a little shriek. "When's the wedding? I bet Lach wanted it to be five minutes after he proposed."

I laugh. "I told him we need to wait a week."

"To get everything in order?" she asks. "Will you do it at a venue, or just the courthouse?"

"I'm going to try to look for a small venue," I say. She smiles. "I know a week is short notice, but I only need you and Prescott there."

"Well, obviously," she scoffs at me, and looks up to smile at whomever she's handing a smoothie to. "I'm the maid of honor."

"Obviously." I laugh.

"Does that mean you're no longer going to Fairview?" she asks, eyes serious as she searches my face.

I sigh. "I have to, Mar."

"I wish you wouldn't," she whispers.

"We can't keep living like this," I signal between the two of us, because she's been as affected by this as I have.

She nods, concern etched on her face.

"It'll be fine," I say, taking a breath. "Is Pres still taking the red-eye back to New York?"

"I think so," she says, frowning.

"I guess I'll have to tell him tomorrow," I say, looking at the closet. "Anyway, I'm going to let you go. I'm meeting Lach at the office and then we're going to lunch with his parents. And I haven't even gotten dressed!"

"The office," Marissa says, eyes wide. "I can't even believe he goes to a legit office."

"I know." I drop my hand and look at the floor. "I hate it. Like really hate it."

"Do you think he'll go back to hockey?"

"I'm trying to get him to. I don't think I can live with myself, knowing he quit because of me and got stuck at a regular office job, regardless of how much money he'll be making."

"I don't think you should feel guilty, Lyles," she says, walking around the back room of the shop. "If the tables were turned and you gave up soccer to find him, would you hate him?"

"Of course not, but I actually did give up soccer. This is different."

"Would you hate him if he made you walk away from soccer or your sports medicine career?"

"He wouldn't do that."

She sighs heavily and stops walking, shooting me a look. "Just answer the fucking question you know I'm asking."

"No," I say plainly. "I'd give up anything for him."

"Now, multiply that times ten. That's how much that man loves you," she says. "Don't beat yourself up over it."

"I'm going to get him back on the ice."

"Well okay, then, you used your no-bullshit voice on that one, so I believe you," she says, smiling.

I stand up and start walking toward the closet. "Oh my God, I need to find a wedding dress."

"I'll start looking." She shrieks, grinning wide. "Love you. Bye."

I laugh and hang up. I have no doubt she's going to look at every wedding dress within driving distance.

Marissa sends me a handful of wedding dress links for me to look at, which made me go down a wedding rabbit hole. We'll have a very intimate wedding with a handful of guests, so a week should be more than enough time. I save the dresses I like. Since it's Marissa's account, I'm sure she'll go through them and text her opinion, soon enough. I should be getting ready, but instead, I'm watching videos of small weddings. Every single one has the father walking the bride down the aisle. I've been so upset at my father for so many things that I can't imagine asking him to attend the wedding, let alone walking me down the aisle. I have to admit that it hurts a little. I try to think back to how we were before the accident and keep coming up blank. I know I have fond memories of him, but it's as if the person he became after the accident erased the man he was before. For me, Prescott is the only choice. He's been there for me as long as I can remember, and his friendship and love never wavered. Our first two years of college, we'd both been busy with different things and didn't make time for each other, but after the accident, he was there for me as much as he could be. As much as I let him.

I log out and get dressed quickly. Most of my wardrobe consists of light or dark tones. The only color thrown in is whatever Marissa forces me to buy "just in case." Today, I wear all black and throw on my dark beige coat. The only thing I hesitate on are the shoes. I'm definitely wearing flats. I'm just not sure if I'm in the black loafer mood or black high-top Converse mood. I go with the sneakers, hoping we grab deep-dish pizza instead of ending up at some fancy restaurant.

When I leave the room, I find Ronnie still sitting on the couch, watching the same movie he was watching earlier. It looks like a tearjerker, and nothing I'd picture him choosing. He switches it off and stands when he sees me.

"Have you cried yet?" I ask as we head to the door.

He laughs. "No, but I almost did a few times."

I shake my head, laughing as we walk to the elevator. We talk about movies, and he tells me how he ended up working at Duke, and how much

more he enjoys it than at the security company he used to be in. I tell him about med school, and how I want to get Lach back on the ice, which he agrees with me about. The drive only takes ten minutes, but by the time we park, I feel like we know each other, which is nice since he seems to be sticking around, for now.

Back at Duke, we take the elevator to Lachlan's floor, and Ronnie leads the way to his office. It's a massive space. He has a secretary who has his own huge space in front of two large doors that lead to his office. We greet the secretary, who seems to know who I am and tells me to go right in. Ronnie continues to speak to him as I open the door to Lach's office. My jaw drops as soon as I step inside and shut the door behind me. It is. . . holy shit. I don't know if I'd be more productive or less, with that view of the city as my backdrop. The room itself is three times the size of my office — with a bookshelf, couches, a large desk, and two chairs across from his. Sitting behind the desk is Lachlan, looking hot as hell in his crisp white dress shirt and blue tie, watching me take it all in. I close the distance between us and stand between his legs.

“You look so fucking beautiful,” he says, voice husky, when his smoldering green eyes reach mine.

“That's funny. I was thinking the same thing about you.” I smile as I grab his tie to kiss him. He pulls me and adjusts me, so I'm straddling him.

I rock against him as we kiss and gasp. “Lach.”

“What? I get hard just fucking thinking about you,” he says, as he untucks my t-shirt and slides his large hands underneath it, stopping just beneath my bra. I ground my hips again, needing the pressure he provides. He hisses out a breath, his hands tightening on my rib cage. “And then you show up at my office looking like this.”

“I'm not even wearing anything tight.” I roll my eyes, smiling as I pull away.

He gives me one of his sexy lopsided grins. “Do you not remember how you used to dress when I fell in love with you?”

“Good point.” I sink my fingers into his thick hair and kiss him again. He groans as he deepens the kiss, and exhales harshly when he pulls away.

“Fuck, I want you.” He kisses my jaw, then my neck. “You should’ve worn a skirt.”

“We’re supposed to go to lunch with your family soon,” I remind him breathily.

“They can wait. I need you.” He lifts me off him, practically runs to the door, locks it, and undoes his belt as he walks back to his chair.

It takes me longer than I’d like to take off my sneakers since they’re high tops. I take off my socks and start lowering my pants as he sits back in his chair and watches. He bites his lip, eyes burning as they drift down my body. When he brings them back to mine, I feel the fire in them in my core. His hands grip my thighs when I finish undressing from the waist down. He pulls me forward, pressing me to his face and licking between my legs.

“Oh, fuck.” I shiver, sinking my fingers into his hair. “We don’t have time for that.”

He grunts and lets me step away, as he continues to work on his belt and pants. My breath quickens as I watch him. His pants are to his ankles, but he leaves his boxer briefs on. My eyes snap up to meet his.

“Take my cock out,” he says, voice hoarse.

My heart is beating hard as I lean in and do as I’m told. I love it when he says that to me. He knows it too, from the way his eyes darken even more at whatever he finds in mine. He lifts his hips so I can drag his boxer briefs down his legs to join his pants. I lick him from his balls to his tip, and he groans deeply, grabbing the back of my neck and pulling me away.

“We don’t have time for that,” he says, smirking.

I huff and turn around, facing the city.

“Oh, fuck,” he breathes. “I wish I could take a picture of this view.”

I smile as I position and lower myself onto him. We both moan as his cock enters me slowly. I bite my lip hard to keep from shouting, as his fingers dig into my waist when I’m almost seated.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” he says on a harsh breath.

When he’s to the hilt, I let my head fall back, a loud moan escaping me as I start to ride him slowly. He brings an arm around me. I gasp loudly when he slides his hand underneath my shirt and starts playing with my nipples, as I move.

“You’re so fucking hot,” he says, low into my ear. “So hot fucking me in my office like this.”

My stomach clenches. His words drive me to pick up the speed a little,

and I start riding him harder, faster.

“Oh my. . .oh my. . .holy shit, Lach,” I whisper.

“I know, baby” he groans, pressing his face into my neck. “You feel so fucking good. So fucking good. Turn around.”

I keep riding him, eyes rolling back, too lost in the way he feels inside me to comply with his request. He removes his hand from underneath my shirt and slaps my ass hard. I inhale sharply and arch my back, but keep going.

“Now,” he says through gritted teeth, squeezing my ass. “Get on my desk.”

I shiver, standing up slowly until he pops out of me. I look at his desk. It’s not full of papers, but it’s not empty. I look at the couches in the corner and wonder if maybe we should go over there instead.

“We’ll get there,” he says, voice gruff. “Today, I want you on my desk.”

“How do you want me?” I ask, bending over his desk and wiggling my ass as I look up at him.

His eyes darken as he takes me in. He closes them and takes a deep breath before he stands between my legs. I grab the other edge of the desk, so I’m spread completely across it. He winds my hair in his hand, making my chest come off the desk, and thrusts into me slowly. I set my hands on the desk and push back onto him.

“Jesusfuckingchrist,” he mutters under his breath, as he lets go of my hair.

He pushes my back so I’m on my chest again, and starts fucking me so deep and hard that everything out of my mouth becomes incoherent. I feel the pressure building, but he stops suddenly and pulls out.

“No,” I start, but he lifts and turns me so I’m on my back, pulls my legs up as he spreads them, and thrusts into me with enough force to pull the orgasm I was on the cusp of out of me.

He keeps fucking me until I’m close to another one, pressing his thumb against my clit as he watches my face. He slams into me three more times, and we both go overboard. I can’t breathe. I don’t know how my feet get back on the ground, but Lach envelops me in his arms as we catch our breath.

“I like your office,” I say quietly.

He laughs against me. “I like having you in my office.”

CHAPTER 49

WHEN WE FINALLY WALK OUT OF his office, he holds my hand and introduces me to everyone on his floor. He does the same on every floor of the building that he visits, including Liam's. When we get to Liam and he sees us holding hands with smiles on our faces, he grins.

"Finally." He looks at my left hand, and I step closer to show off my ring. "Oh, trust me, I've seen the ring more times than I can count."

I laugh, shaking my head. Lachlan grumbles something. And Liam smiles and explains to me what he's doing. He can't explain much without getting into details, but it sounds crazy nonetheless. We say goodbye to him and tell him we'll see him downstairs to head out to lunch together, and Lachlan keeps walking me around the security department.

"This place is insane," I whisper-shout, to not disturb everyone on their computers.

"You have no idea," he says, tugging my hand and leading me down another long hall.

He stops in front of a door and knocks. On the other side, I hear a familiar voice give us permission to step inside.

Oh. My. God. I try not to laugh when I see Sean sitting behind the desk. He raises an eyebrow when he sees us, and laughs as he stands and walks around the desk. I can only imagine what he must be thinking, since I told him he *might* know Lachlan freaking Duke. I let go of Lach's hand and wait for Sean to greet us properly, because that's what he looks like he wants to do.

"Mr. Duke, always a pleasure," he says, shaking Lach's hand.

"Likewise," Lach says. "I'm showing her around the building," he says. "This is Lyla, my fiancée, and very soon-to-be wife."

My eyes shoot to Lach's and I have to bite back a laugh at the mischief in them.

"We've met. Great to see you again, Lyla." Sean grins, as he takes my hand in his.

"You too." I smile, dropping my hand.

"So, I guess this means you were successful?" His eyes twinkle as he asks.

"God, no. I already told you, that's not happening." I laugh. He laughs harder. Lachlan scowls.

"Well, congratulations," he says looking at me, and then at Lach. "You got yourself a good one."

"Trust me, I know." Lach pulls me into his side.

We talk a little longer before we walk out of his office.

"You are so obvious, Lachlan Duke," I say, laughing, as I glance up at his face when we reach the elevator.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." His lips tug up slightly, as he pushes the button. "What was that about, anyway?" he asks. "That little inside joke."

"Inside joke?" I frown. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

We step into the empty elevator, and after he pushes the button for the lobby, he walks over until he has my back against the wall. My heart skips when he lifts my chin so I can meet his eyes.

"Just tell me," he says, voice low, moving his hand to my throat, his thumb over my pulse as he leans down and kisses me. I shiver against him. He pulls away slowly, searching my eyes.

"I asked him to hack into my boyfriend's brain," I say.

"What?" He lets out an unexpected laugh. "Leave it to you to make this the topic of your small talk."

"It's why I'm the most fun at parties," I say with a shrug.

"What did Sean say about that?"

"He said if he could do that, he may not have gotten a divorce," I respond, laughing as we walk out of the elevator. Lach shakes his head and I keep talking, "I told him I wouldn't want to hack into your brain anyway, because I'd be terrified of what I found."

"What do you think you'd find?" He turns to me with an amused look on his face and a twinkle in his eyes.

"Honestly, I have no idea. Probably people's socials and what hospitals

they were born at.”

“I’m not that bad.” He laughs, and laughs louder when I shoot him a pointed look. “My brain would feel like you’re in one of those mirror things at a carnival, where you see yourself everywhere.”

“Those things are scary,” I say, raising an eyebrow. “Which proves my point.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t scary in there.” He shrugs, still amused. “I’m just saying, all you’d find in there is yourself.”

“And hockey,” I respond.

“Yeah.” He nods in agreement. “But mostly you.”

We’re both smiling when we reach his parents and Liam.

After lunch, Lach and his parents head back to the office, while I stay behind in a cute little coffee shop across the street from the building. I’m looking at all of the links for dresses Marissa sent me when I see her text on my screen.

Marissa: did you see this? Isn’t this the event you were at?

I click the link she sent. It’s an article about the charity party we went to. In the first picture, two couples were photographed, and in the background, David Jameson, laughing with Mason. Holy shit. I grip my phone to keep it from slipping out of my hands. He was there. Mason’s comment runs through my mind. He’d said it was a Fairview reunion. I thought he meant because I was there with Lachlan. I didn’t think. . .oh my God.

I’m still looking at my phone when someone takes the seat in front of me. My entire body freezes, as the cloud of cigarettes that follows him, reaches my nose. I keep staring at my phone as if that’ll make this less real. I just know he’s been following me everywhere and waiting for his time to strike. For how long? Since the charity event? Fuck. He was probably keeping his distance, since Ronnie had been with me the entire time.

“You’re being very rude, Lyla,” he says. “You’re not supposed to ignore your own godfather.”

My heart pounds fiercely. I finally look up and meet his cold blue eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” he says. “But I already have an idea.”

His hand comes down on mine. He does it so fast, I don’t have time to

react. It's my right hand. He hasn't seen my ring. He hasn't seen my left. Underneath the table, I turn my ring so the diamond is in my hidden and fist my hand closed. I try to yank my hand from underneath his, but his grip tightens. *I need to scream. I need to scream.* Why can't I fucking scream?

"Did you not learn your lesson?" he asks, tone grating, squeezing so hard I think he might break my bones. "I guess I'll have to keep you drugged until I'm done with you."

"Let me go," I say, barely audible. I couldn't seem to get my voice any louder.

"That's not going to happen," he says calmly as he loosens his grip. "You're going to get up and follow me out back."

I shake my head. *Why can't I scream?* I look around, wide-eyed, trying to catch anyone's attention, but they're all on their phones and computers. Fuck.

"If you try anything stupid, I'll wait outside of the Duke building or the apartment until your little boyfriend leaves," he says, eyes narrowed. "Is that what you want?"

My lip trembles. I shake my head and look outside, breathing easier when I see Ronnie. He doesn't come inside, though. He's on the phone, pacing up and down in front of the doors. Since my voice won't work, I wave my left hand wildly in the air, trying to call his attention. Suddenly, Jameson lets go of my hand, stands up with his glare set on me, and walks toward the back. I count to five, get up, and run to the front door. I'm sure the people quietly drinking their coffees think I'm insane right now, but I don't stop running until I exit and hit Ronnie's muscular back. He turns around with a frown and hangs up the phone when he sees me.

"What's going on?"

I point at the coffee shop. I'm shaking hard, and I can't speak. Ronnie springs into action and goes inside. I follow him. I can't stay on the sidewalk by myself right now. We look around, but Jameson is gone. Just like that. I almost think I may have imagined him, but when I get inside the SUV, the scent of cigarettes on my hand makes me gag, and I know it was real.

CHAPTER 50

LACHLAN BOOKS A TWO-NIGHT stay at a swanky hotel in Fairview that overlooks the ocean and is just a ten-minute drive from the university. We take two separate SUVs — one for us and one for the security coming along — to a private airport where Lach’s dad’s jet is waiting for us. I’m too nervous to comment on carbon emissions, even though it is on the tip of my tongue. It wouldn’t matter anyway. This is the fastest way to get there and the quickest way to leave. He hasn’t left my side since I told him what happened. I almost didn’t, since I didn’t want to worry him, but I couldn’t keep it from him. I haven’t told Marissa, and I’m not going to tell Prescott. When this is over, I will, but I don’t want more people to worry about me.

Thankfully, talking about the wedding lightened the mood, and he hasn’t brought up the coffee shop again. His mom is helping me plan an intimate wedding, so I’m getting the romantic wedding I wanted. We have an idea for a venue to host us, and everything should run smoothly since it’ll be a daytime wedding. At least, that’s what Valerie said.

On our way to the private airport, I pull out my phone and go to Settings to text Prescott about where we’re going. I already sent him pictures of my ring, so it doesn’t surprise me that there are texts from him when my phone comes back on.

Prescott: WTF!

Prescott: CALL ME NOW

“Why do you always set it on airplane mode?” Lach asks beside me.

“Because that way, I only deal with people when I choose to.”

He starts to shake against me, and I look up and find him laughing. I nudge him hard, and he wraps an arm around me and pulls me even closer. My phone rings immediately.

“Did you say yes or did he force you to say yes?” Pres asks, as a greeting. Lachlan makes a disapproving sound but stays quiet otherwise.

“I *chose* to say yes,” I say. “And I’m *choosing* to go to Fairview right now.”

“You told him everything?”

“Yes.”

“Lyles, you shouldn’t go back there.”

“We’ll have security. It’ll be fine,” I say. “Besides, I never packed up my stuff. I even left my freaking Hermann trophy behind.”

“And what exactly are you guys going to do when you get there?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Pres sighs into the line. “You do realize Lachlan is going to actually murder him, right?”

“He won’t. I’ll. . .”

“Lyla, listen to me,” Pres says interrupting. “If you told him everything that happened to you and showed him the pictures we took at the hospital, Lachlan will commit murder. I’m telling you right now, he will. He’ll kill him and end up in jail.”

My eyes widen. I bite the inside of my cheek and look out the window. Oh, fuck. Lachlan doesn’t know about the pictures, and after what happened yesterday, I was hoping to keep it that way until Jameson was locked up and we got back to Chicago. I know he heard what Prescott said, so the fact that he’s completely silent is not a good sign. I know Prescott’s worry isn’t for naught, which terrifies me.

“I’ll keep you posted on what happens,” I say. “We’re getting married next Saturday in Chicago. Can you make it? I know it’s super last minute, but. . .”

“Of course, I’ll be there,” he says before I can finish speaking.

“Will you walk me down the aisle?” I ask and bite my lip to keep my emotions at bay. This is a big deal to me. I’m sure it is to most brides who have a ceremonial wedding, even one as unconventional as this one.

“Pres?”

“Fuck.” He clears his throat. “Of course, I’ll walk you down the aisle.”

“Thank you.” I smile. “I’ll keep you posted on what happens.”

“Please don’t let him do something he can go to jail for.”

“I won’t.” I hang up, set the phone on my lap, and glance up at Lachlan, whose jaw is ticking already.

“You didn’t show me any pictures.” He looks at me, barely contained rage in his eyes. *Shit. This isn’t going to end well.*

“What you know is bad enough.” I reach up and caress his face with the back of my hand, his stubble causing a shiver to run through me. This usually calms him down. Not this time.

“I need to see them.”

“It’s not worth it.” I drop my hand. “The only thing seeing them will do is make you even more upset, and you’ve already reached Hulk-level anger.”

That makes him pause for a moment. “You know I’ll just look through your phone.”

“You don’t even have my passcode.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Wanna bet?”

I sigh. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Give me your phone.” He sets his palm up, waiting.

“What if I have nudes in here?” I ask to bide time, even though this will probably make him as angry as the pictures from the attack.

“Do you?”

“Maybe.” I shrug. “What if a guy sent me his nudes and I have them on there?”

“Then I’d find out where he lives and pay him a visit.” His jaw ticks. “Stop fucking with me, Lyla. Let me see the pictures.”

I grip the phone on my lap, ignoring the holes Lachlan is burning through the side of my face. This isn’t really a battle I want to fight him on, but now that Prescott put the thought of Lach going to jail in my head, I’m terrified. I don’t know what I thought would happen. I knew he’d want to kick Jameson’s ass, but killing him was never an option. I mean, it crossed my mind for a brief moment, but I wasn’t seriously thinking he’d do it. Now, I’m not so sure. I turn to him, pulling my seatbelt so I can set my knee on the seat.

“First, I need you to calm down. Take some deep breaths,” I say.

He shoots me a look. “Show me the pictures.”

“Not if you’re going to be like this already.”

He glares at me but takes a couple of deep breaths.

I open up my picture app and click on the folder I saved them in. I hand him the phone and look at the pictures as he does. My face is swollen and bruised, and my nose is broken since they were taken before they set it back to normal. The right side of my torso is covered in purple bruises from when he pushed me to the ground and stepped on me, and effectively broke one of

my ribs. My arm is in a cast from the fall. That's it, but then, how much more could he have done short of killing me? I'm completely unrecognizable. When Lachlan looks at me, the sadness in his eyes breaks my heart.

"He didn't. . ." I say, knowing he'll understand. He didn't rape me.

"You were alone," he whispers. "I was in the hospital hating you with everything I had, and you were going through this alone." He swallows hard. "Fuck." A second later, he punches the other side of the seat. "Fuck!"

I reach for his hand. "I wasn't alone."

"I wasn't there, Lyla."

"It doesn't matter. I'm fine. We're both fine." I squeeze his hand. "I need you to promise me you won't kill him. I can't have you end up in jail."

"I won't go to jail."

"Promise me you won't kill him," I say again.

"I can't," he says quietly, his eyes troubled. "I'm not going to make you a promise I'm not sure I can keep."

I scoot as close as I can get with the strap around my waist. I don't know if this shit will even be effective if we get into an accident, but for some dumb reason, I think it still might be and don't snap it off.

"I'm not telling you not to kick his ass," I say. "I'm asking you not to kill him. To listen to me when I tell you to stop, and if I'm not there, to somehow keep it in your mind to stop."

"I don't know if I. . ."

"If you kill him, they will arrest you. Even if we leave, they'll arrest you. It doesn't matter that you're a billionaire's son. They'll arrest you," I say. "If you don't stop before that happens, I will not go back to Chicago with you."

His eyes darken. "I thought you said you were only going to threaten me with that once."

"We're not married," I raise an eyebrow. "I wouldn't be divorcing you. I'd be leaving you."

"And I'd fucking find you," he growls, closing the space between us. "I'd find you again and again and again."

"Not if you're in jail," I point out calmly. "If you're in jail and I'm forced to go back to Rhodes and decide in a few years that I'm tired of being alone. . ."

He scoffs. "You love being alone."

"Yeah, but if you're in jail for life, in a few years, I might want to date someone new."

“Stop.” He shoots me a warning look.

“Maybe in a few years, I’ll want to have a husband and some little kids running around our yard and...”

“STOP.” His hands form fists as he screws his eyes shut. “Stop stop stop, Jesus fucking Christ stop. I won’t kill him. I’ll stop when you tell me to, just shut the fuck up.”

“Okay. I’m stopping.”

He opens his eyes, pins me with an angry glare, and moves his face close to mine. “Don’t *ever* put those thoughts in my head again,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Don’t *ever* make me,” I respond with narrowed eyes.

His angry eyes search mine for a moment, then he leans back and exhales deeply. He sits there for a couple of seconds, fury on his face before he starts to laugh. I stare at him, thinking he’s really gone mad this time. He looks at me for a long moment as if in disbelief.

“Every time I think I have you, you one-up me somehow,” he says, eyes dancing, even though he’s still a little angry. “One of these days, Lyla James. . .”

I bite my lip remembering the last time he said that to me. God, it feels like a lifetime ago.

“Well, last time you said that, you made me fall in love with you, so anything is possible.” I shrug, smiling.

He stares at me for the longest moment and somehow calms down. The anger gone, the anxiety gone, all of it. He moves toward me again, takes off my seatbelt, and pulls me onto his lap. He kisses me. A long, soft kiss, and when he pulls away, he holds me closer.

“I don’t know if there’s something that goes beyond love, but whatever it is, that’s what I feel for you,” he says, his breath on my forehead. I snuggle into him deeper and relish the moment.

“Hey, Lach.”

“Hm?”

“If we get into a car accident and the car flips over and lands at the bottom of a cliff, you know we’ll both die, right?” I ask. He pulls back to study my face as I continue. “Or we’ll be seriously injured and lose limbs and then. . .”

“Lyla James.”

“What?”

“Stop talking.” He kisses me again and makes me forget what I was even saying.

CHAPTER 51

LACHLAN

IT FEELS weird to be back here with all of this information. The only thing I can think about is all the ways I want to kill Jameson. I want to fucking slaughter him into goddamn pieces. I won't, now that Lyla put the image in my head of her starting a family with another man. When she threatened me with that, I thought I might actually die right there in the back seat of the SUV. It's a risk I'm not willing to take. Especially now that she's finally — fucking finally — wearing the engagement ring I bought her, and she's agreed to marry me. I swear this plan gets more complicated by the second. Originally, it was going to be simple. I was going to use her as bait to get the person responsible. Now that we're here, I wish I could leave her in our hotel room with two security guards at the door, to prevent her from getting out until all of this was dealt with. I considered it, but I don't want to know what she'd do if I went through with it.

She says I'm crazy, and maybe I am, but I'm fucking terrified of this woman. Whether she knows it or not, she holds my heart — my life — in her hands. I look out the window again, my eyes on the tall buildings we're heading toward. Even though I think she should do it tomorrow, she's adamant about going to her dad's house to pick up a few things before the luncheon. She won't say it, but I think she's doing it since she has less of a chance to see him since he'll be busy.

We decide to go to the hotel first. It's early enough that we can do both before the three o'clock luncheon. I sent the RSVP to include a guest, but there's no way anyone would think that she's my plus one. Not that it matters. I wanted to catch Jameson off guard, but he obviously knows about us. Fuck. I'm livid about him showing up at all, but what pisses me off the most is that it confirms to Lyla that she did the right thing in leaving me.

“I’m still shocked Dad’s not hosting at his house,” she says beside me, as she looks at the invitation on my phone.

“He didn’t last year either.”

She looks at me. “You went last year?”

“No, but I received the invitation.”

“Was it at the school?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Really?” She frowns deeply and looks back at the invitation. “And there’s no theme either. That’s so strange.”

“Maybe he got tired of themes.”

“I guess a lot can change in three years.” She purses her lips, still looking at it. “It says formal. I guess that’s good enough for him. I still can’t believe it’s not at home.”

“It’s that new state-of-the-art building they were working on before we left,” I say. “The one with the Olympic-sized pool.”

“I know which one.”

“He probably wants to show off.”

“He would.” She huffs out a laugh and hands me my phone. “His donation practically built the entire thing.”

“Yeah, well, it has your last name on it,” I say and look out the opposite window.

She sets a hand on my forearm and waits until I look at her. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I pull her to my side, so she doesn’t see the lie on my face.

Not that it matters. She knows I’m not okay. It’s going to take everything in me not to charge at him when I see him. Not because he screwed me over, but because of the horrifying things he did to Lyla. His obsession with her is really fucking with me. That may be hypocritical of me, considering, but we’re completely different. He’d rather kill her than let anyone else have her. I’d rather die than live in a world without her in it.

Lyla unpacks everything as soon as we’re settled in the suite. I usually leave my shit in the suitcase and only take out whatever I don’t want wrinkled, but even on a trip this short, she unpacks like she’s staying here for a month. She looks at me as she’s zipping her empty suitcase back up and setting it aside

where it won't be a disturbance.

“Do you want me to unpack your stuff?”

“Do you want to?” I'm amused by this, but the look on her face is so serious that I don't want to laugh.

She narrows her eyes at me like she can hear my thoughts, and grabs my suitcase. They're both carry-ons and it's not like I brought a lot of shit, so it won't take her long. I watch as she starts setting my things on the bed. I should be checking emails from my dad and responding to the latest one Lang sent. I asked him what my options were if I had proof that someone sabotaged the draft. I don't know that I'll get physical proof, but now that I know what happened, I need to know if I can use it. Depending on how things go down, I might. I don't want to play for either coach, if they're good friends of Jameson's.

I don't know if I can go back to playing at all because of my agreement with my father. He made it pretty fucking clear that I couldn't get out of the contract once I signed it. I'm more concerned about what Lyla's next move is. I'm assuming she'll want to stay in Rhodes and do her two-year residency at the sports center. I'd rather she travel with me, but I can't force her to quit. If I was going to force her to do anything, it would be to get back on the damn field and play professionally. She's not open to that idea, though, so I guess she'll go back there and do the two-year residency at Cooper's center, and continue working with Wade whenever he's in town. It doesn't even bother me. I'm over it.

She's going to be my wife, and they'll have to accept that she'll never be theirs. Not that there was ever a chance in hell that would've happened regardless, but having her officially puts all those worries aside. Rhodes is nice, but if I get back on the ice, between practice and games both at home and on the road, we'd never see each other. I'll have to figure it out, but the thought of not seeing her every day doesn't sit well with me. Away games are one thing, and even that's going to suck, but I want to come home to her. Even if just to watch her do simple shit like this. I smile as she folds my underwear and puts it away in a drawer. She does the same to my t-shirt, and then hangs the suit I'll be wearing next to the sexy, deep green silk dress she's going to wear. I haven't even seen it on her, and I already want to tear it off.

“This is very domestic of you.”

She glances over from the closet. “Don't get too comfortable. You'll be

doing the laundry.”

“I don’t mind doing laundry.” I grin, stretching my legs and linking my fingers behind my head. Lyla’s eyes heat as they rake over me slowly. Fuck. I lower my arms and extend a hand to beckon her. “Come here.”

She closes the closet door, and moves until she's standing between my legs. Her hands rest on my shoulders as she straddles me. She feels so damn good in my arms. So perfect. I'm not sure if I'll ever get used to the fact that she's officially mine forever, but I look forward to showing her how much I love her every fucking day. She lifts her gaze from my chest, and I stare into those brown eyes that make me weak. The uncertainty in them kills me.

“I’m scared.” She closes them and sets her forehead against mine.

I sigh heavily and sit up, wrapping my arms around her. “I know, baby.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt again because of me,” she whispers.

Of course, that’s what she’s worried about. I can’t remember the last time I prayed. I gave up on faith a long time ago, but the fact that I got lucky enough to land this woman twice, really makes me question my belief system. I know I don’t deserve her. No one does, though, so if someone is going to have her, it’s going to be me.

“Don’t worry about me,” I say after a moment. “As long as you’re unharmed, I’ll be fine.”

“Lach.” She pulls back and looks at me for a long moment. “I would die without you.”

My heart dips. “Yeah?” I slip my hands under her shirt and set them on her waist. “You wouldn’t just run off and marry another man?” I lean forward and kiss her again. She smiles against my mouth.

“Maybe, maybe not,” she whispers as she pulls away, a spark of mischief in her eyes.

Oh, she wants to play. I’ll take this over her uncertainty.

“Maybe, huh?” I stand up with her in my arms and set her on her feet. I tap her chin so she looks up at me. “Strip.”

Her eyes widen a touch, but she steps back and starts taking everything off slowly, holding my gaze the entire time. I’ve been hard since she gave me that look from the closet, but I was trying to contain myself, since she told me she was scared. Now, I’m so hard it fucking hurts, but I continue to restrain myself and keep watching her. When she’s completely naked, I let my eyes roam her perfect body, and walk behind her to do the same to her back. I grab her ass then slap it, making her gasp, and stand flush against her back. Her

breathing picks up when I dip down and rain kisses from her neck to her shoulder. I love that everything I do to her affects her. I slide my arms under hers and tweak her nipples, making her head fall back in a moan. She moans again when I grind my cock, still in my dress pants, against her naked ass. My hands leave her breasts and roam down her body.

“Maybe?” I ask when I reach her mound.

She gasps again. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Oh, baby,” I say quietly when I slip my hand between her legs and my fingers brush her already wet pussy. Fuck. I need to concentrate on my task. If I don’t, I’ll bend her over and fuck her right now. I keep moving my fingers and don’t stop until I’m at the tip of her other hole. She tries to move against my hand, but I cup her hard, not letting her use me to get herself off. I bite the shell of her ear. “You think another man can make you this wet, just by looking at you?”

“Lach.” She arches her back, trying to get me to move my hand.

I leave it there, grin against her temple, and reach around with my other hand to play with her nipples again. Fuck, she’s perfect. “Tell me what I want to hear.”

“I don’t know. Maybe,” she says, shimmying her hips a little. I slide my hand and dip a finger inside her cunt. She takes a sharp breath. “Oh my God, yes.”

“Yes?” I stop moving. “Yes, you can find another man who does this to you the way I do?”

She growls, throwing her head back. “Lachlan.”

“You know what you have to do. Just say the words.” I add another finger and start fucking her with both. Fuck, she’s so damn wet I need to be inside her, but I want her to give in and tell me what I want to hear. I brush my thumb against her clit.

“Holy. . .” Her body bows off my chest. When I stop, she’s still breathing hard, but she rocks back against me. “Pleaaaseee. Just do it.”

“Do what?” I stop moving my fingers.

“Make me come,” she pants.

“No, I don’t think I will.” I take my hand out, and then turn around to walk to the bathroom. She grabs my arm before I’ve even taken my second step. I turn slightly and meet her glare. “What?”

“You can’t just leave me like that.”

“No?” I arch an eyebrow. “You’re telling me you would die without me,

on one breath, and on the other, you say you might find another man.”

She growls, her eyes narrowing as she pulls me so I’m facing her completely. She’s still scowling, as she works on the buttons of my dress shirt. Still scowling as she unbuckles my belt, and takes off my pants and boxer briefs. I bite back a laugh, as I help her take off my clothes. When I’m completely naked, I just stand there, waiting. I watch as her hungry eyes roam down my body, taking in every muscle until she reaches my cock. She licks her lips when she gets there, and I have to restrain myself from throwing her on the bed and fucking her. Her hand closes around me and she starts stroking, meeting my eyes again. With her other hand, she cups my balls and starts massaging them. My stomach contracts.

“Fuck, Lyla,” I whisper.

She takes her hands off and pushes my shoulders so I fall on the bed. I don’t, but I indulge her and lie down anyway. She climbs on me and starts sliding on my cock, using it to pleasure herself. I bite my lip to keep myself from stopping her. She’s so fucking hot I can’t stand it. She brings her hands to either side of me, and I position my cock where she wants it — where I need it. She hovers there, her pussy over my cock, her face over mine as her hair falls around us.

“Would you go find another woman?” she asks quietly, her eyes searching mine.

“No.” I scowl. “Fuck no. You know I wouldn’t.”

She smiles that ghost of a smile of hers, and she begins to move up and down my cock slowly. So fucking slowly that my breath leaves me each time she does it. I think I might die from this alone. I’d say it would be a good way to go, but there’s no way in hell I’m dying and letting some other asshole have her. I hold her and flip us over, so I’m on top of her. I pull out and thrust in hard, groaning at the feel of her.

“Fuck, Lach.” She digs her fingernails into my forearms. I set my forehead on hers and breathe for a moment. When I pull back, I wait until she’s looking at me.

“Tell me you’re mine.”

“Tell me *you’re* mine,” she counters with a pant.

“You know I’m yours and only yours.” I thrust again.

She bites her lip to keep from crying out, but sounds escape her anyway. She narrows her eyes on me again when I stop moving.

“I’m yours. Only yours. Forever,” she says, crying out when I really start

to fuck her.

I know it's the calm before the storm, and I don't know how this will end, but this moment is one I'll remember for a long time.

CHAPTER 52

LACHLAN

“I’M SHOCKED he didn’t change the locks to this place,” she says, pushing open the door of the guest house in her father’s yard.

We both step in. It must feel weird for her to be back here. It’s weird for me and I’ve only been once. God, that luncheon feels like a lifetime ago. In a sense, it was. Even though time normally seems to fly by, these past three have been the longest of my life. I shut the door and set the empty box we brought on the bed.

“They cleaned it,” she says quietly as she looks around. “But they left it the same.”

I’m not sure if she’s talking to herself or me, but I remain silent. What am I supposed to say? I sit at the edge of the bed as she walks to the bookshelf and stares at it for a moment before she picks up her trophy. It’s so heavy that she needs both hands to carry it, and even then, I can tell she’s getting a bit of a workout from it. I stand up and take it, setting it on the bed for her. She stands over it and stares. I wish I could crawl into her brain and find out what she’s thinking. Is she regretting the decision to quit the sport she loved? Is she sad that instead of trying out for a professional team, she went to med school? I can’t imagine it’ll be easy for her to do that, especially when it comes to soccer players.

I’m sure any kind of medical field is difficult to get into and graduate from, and I’m proud as fuck of her for doing it, but I wish she’d go back to soccer. She’s too talented to let it go to waste. There’s no age limit to become a doctor. She can go back to it later. Of course, I can’t say that aloud because I’ll sound like the ultimate hypocrite, but my situation is entirely different. She felt forced to quit, and over time, became used to the idea of not playing. I chose to step away from hockey. I hate that she’s shouldering the blame for

it, but I made peace with it even before I signed with Florida. The only reason I even played was because I didn't want to regret not doing it. Three years was enough. Well, it wasn't, but without her, I felt like I was dying a slow death anyway, so what's the point? Hockey went from being an escape to becoming a burden. Each time I scored, she was all I could think about. Each time my skates hit the ice became a reminder that it was another moment without her, so I hung them up. I don't regret it at all.

Lyla snaps out of her trance, reaches for the bubble wrap and tape in the box, and starts to wrap the trophy. By the time she's finished, it looks safe enough, so I pick it up and set it in the box. She goes back to the bookshelf and scans the books quickly, not taking any, then moves to the drawers. I watch her face as she takes out each item — mostly her baggy shirts — and sets them on the bed.

“Are you taking those?” I ask, my eyes on Lauryn Hill's face on the one on top.

“Maybe.” She shrugs. “I can use them as pajamas.”

I smile, glad that she no longer wants to use them as a shield to hide and protect herself. I hate that she felt like she needed to in the first place. I don't know how women survive in this world, let alone thrive, shouldering all of their burdens and everyone else's. I couldn't do it. Next, she starts taking out sweatshirts and placing them into two different piles.

“What pile are you keeping?” I ask.

“This one.” She taps to the right side, where the Lauryn Hill shirt is.

She turns around and keeps taking things out. My muscles tense the moment she brings out the Yale sweatshirt.

“Whose is that?”

Her eyes snap up, as she holds the sweatshirt over herself. “Mine.”

“Did you get it from a guy?”

She stares at me for a long moment, frowning as she tries to recall either where she got it, or how I'd know where she got it. Finally, her jaw drops. I expect her to be upset, and I'm ready for the argument. No way am I letting her keep that shit. I watch her watch me, and suddenly she bursts out laughing. A real, doubled-over laugh that makes my lips pull into a smile and chuckle a little, even though I know she's laughing at me. She's so beautiful when she lets herself go like this.

“I cannot believe you,” she says, gasping as she wipes her eyes.

“You went to prom with him.”

This makes her pause for a moment, staring at me like she can't believe this, before she falls into another fit of laughter. Jesus Christ. I already know she's never going to let me live this one down.

"How?" she asks between laughs. "How can you possibly know that?"

I cock my head. "Come on, Lyla."

"OH MY GOD." She loses it again, her laughter making me laugh now. She wipes her face and takes a couple of deep breaths before she calms down enough to stare at me again. "You know what I find crazy?"

"Let me guess." I shoot her an unamused look. "Me."

"Well, I think that's pretty obvious," she says. "What I think is crazy is that you're so fucking hot and popular, and you're this much of a stalker."

I stare at her. She can't possibly think I've done this before. My entire life, women have thrown themselves at me. I've never even had to speak in order to get one to fuck. Really, I can't think of a time that I initiated something. Maybe that's arrogant and makes me sound like a douchebag, but it's the reality of it. I know I'm hot. I've always been aware of it. All I have to do is smile, and it's in the bag. No speaking required on my end to close the deal. The first time I ever even remotely hinted to someone that I'd take them home was to fucking Lyla at the sorority party where I met her. First time ever. And sure, I'd stalked my father a little, but even that wasn't this extensive. She sets a hand on her hip and waits for me to respond.

"I've only ever stalked you," I say finally. "I've never even asked a woman to go home with me."

"Really?" She shoots me a droll look. "I clearly remember—"

"A woman who's not you," I say, interrupting her. "Don't you understand by now that you're the only person who makes me do crazy shit?"

She purses her lips. "Well, I stand by my words. You're too hot to be a stalker."

"And you're too hot not to be stalked," I respond. "I wanted you, and you wouldn't give me any information, so I had to go looking."

"I can't even. . ." She laughs again. "How the hell did you even find him?"

"I went down some rabbit hole that led me to him and then I looked through all his posts," I say, "Which by the way, the only straight men who post as much as he does are cocky and annoying as fuck."

"Says the cockiest man on the planet," she says, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm not cocky." I set a hand on my chest, taking a step back because I'm

not.

“Lachlan Duke,” she says, walking around the bed until she’s right in front of me. “You are the cockiest person I know.”

“Says you.” I pick her up and kiss her, as she wraps her legs around my waist.

“I’m only cocky when it comes to sports and things that require competing,” she says, a smile blooming on her face. “And is it even cocky, if you’re actually the best?”

That makes me laugh wholeheartedly. As I laugh, I kiss her three times in sequence. “Well, there you go. I’m not cocky. I just know I’m the hottest, best hockey player on the planet.”

She searches my eyes for a long time before kissing me thoroughly but pulls back when I groan into her mouth and try to deepen the kiss. “I’m going to show up at your mom’s house, ransack your old room, and burn anything your exes gave you.”

“Hm.” I bite her lip. I fucked her not even an hour ago, and I really feel like if I don’t fuck her right now, I’ll go out of my mind. “I don’t think anyone’s given me anything, and if they did, I sure as hell didn’t keep it.”

I let her kiss me one last time, before I throw her on the bed and yank her leggings down. She claws at me like I can’t get inside her fast enough. I sink my fingers between her legs and find her wet and ready for me, and when I finally thrust inside and her pussy squeezes my cock, the last bit of control I was holding onto snaps.

CHAPTER 53

“YOU’RE SO FUCKING BEAUTIFUL,” he murmurs behind my ear, looking at our reflections in the full-length mirror, as he wraps his arms around me.

“You’re beautiful,” I say, taking him in.

He’s wearing a navy blue suit, no tie, with the top button of his crisp white dress shirt undone, his beard just a tad fuller than a five o’clock shadow, his deep green eyes hungrily taking over me, and his hair disheveled in a way that drives me crazy and makes me want to strip off all his clothes. Again. Despite the fact that I’m really sore there right now.

My silk dress reaches beneath my knees and the green tone almost matches his eyes. With my gold heels, the top of my head reaches his nose, so he doesn’t have to dip as low to kiss me, which I love. He does dip, though, and kisses the side of my neck.

“God, you smell good,” he murmurs, nuzzling into me.

A shiver rakes through me and I dig my nails into his forearms. His eyes snap up to mine again, and despite the soreness between my legs, the mischief in his eyes makes my stomach clench and heart somersault.

“We don’t have time for that,” I warn.

“I know.” He groans against me, making another shiver run through me. I feel his incredibly hard cock on my ass and shoot him a warning look that makes him grin as he straightens. “I’ll behave. For now.”

“You know I bought this dress because it reminded me of your eyes?” I smile as I turn in his arms and meet his gaze.

“When did you buy it?”

I think about it for a moment. “Like two years ago.”

He stares at me and looks so deeply into my eyes that I get completely lost in the depths of his. He cups my face, brushing his thumb back and forth

over my bottom lip. I wrap my arms around him and kiss him, the reality of who we're going to see hitting me as our tongues meet. I hold him tighter. I'll die if something happens to this man. One thing was being apart while I thought he was living out his dream. Losing him forever is completely different and unfathomable to me. When I pull away, he gives me one more soft peck and sets me down.

"The things you do to me, Lyla James." He exhales, shaking his head slowly.

"The feeling is completely mutual." I smile wide. He stares at me and kisses me one last time.

"Let's go." He grabs my hand and starts walking toward the door like his feet are on fire.

"Slow down." I laugh, pulling my hand. "I need to get my purse."

He lets go of my hand and pins me with heated green eyes, "If we don't leave in the next two seconds, I'm going to toss you on the bed, spread your legs, and devour you."

My breath quickens and I'm forced to squeeze my legs shut and bite my lip to keep from saying anything at all. I turn, grab my purse, and put my hand in his again, letting him lead me to the elevator, the feeling between my legs still present even after we're inside, sharing the elevator with strangers.

"Stop," he says quietly, his voice husky in my ear. "I know what you're thinking about, and if you don't stop, I won't stop, and we'll never make it to the luncheon."

I swallow hard and nod, replacing thoughts of us in bed together with the reality that we're about to experience. I'm not ready, but I don't think I ever will be. In the SUV, we have a security briefing of sorts. It ends in an argument. Our security detail thinks we should go with the original plan of using me as bait, which I agree with, but Lach is completely opposed.

"I don't want you anywhere near him," Lachlan says next to me.

"It's our best shot at a full confession," I say for the fifth time since the argument started.

Lach glares at me. "I don't fucking care. I don't want you anywhere near him."

Ronnie, Derek (the other bodyguard), and I exchange a look. If we were to take a vote, Lach would be in the minority. I know David Jameson. I know he'll come after me first. He's too blinded by his sick obsession not to. The obsession is the extent of Ronnie's and the rest of the security team's

knowledge. As far as I'm concerned, it's all they need to know.

"Mic me up," I say, ignoring Lach's glare burning holes in the side of my face. "Better to be safe than sorry."

I watch enough reality television to know how bulky mics can be. This isn't that. This is thin and untraceable unless you purposely look for it. When they're done, Derek takes out a tablet and shows me the drone footage they're currently recording. It shows a bird's-eye view of the building from all four angles. They explain the rest — one of them will be inside the building, while the rest of them hang back, listening and watching.

They'll step in when they have incriminating footage, unless something goes sideways and they have to interfere. We're both quiet once 007 Training 101 is finished, but I can feel Lachlan's disapproval. He has to know that there's no way in hell Jameson will go after him. The only reason he was able to take him down, the first time, is that Lach had his guard down and the attack was completely unexpected. Jameson's in great shape and not a small guy, by any means, but there's no way he can take Lachlan in a fight. He'll go for me first. I know it. The only reason he left me alone in Chicago is that he knew someone was with me.

Once the car starts moving, I scoot closer to Lachlan. Despite his annoyance with me, he puts an arm around me and lets me sink into his side. I stare down at the ring on my finger and wonder if Jameson will be even more upset about the engagement. I made sure he didn't see it the other day, but he won't miss it today. A part of me wants to take it off and hide it. Another part wishes we'd just gotten married. Maybe then, he'd leave us alone. I can see why he'd think he owned me when I was young.

He was doing things with me that I wasn't even aware of. Even when I was in college, he could have held soccer over my head, once he became the director of the athletic department. There's nothing he can use as leverage now besides Lachlan. If this is a sick competition, and we're married, he has to know Lach already won. Maybe not, I don't know. Whenever I try to understand his actions, I come up short. You can't really try to find logic in insanity without losing your own.

"Do you think it makes a difference whether we're engaged or married?" I ask.

Lach pulls back slightly and searches my face. "What do you mean?"

"To him. Maybe if we were already married, he'd drop this whole thing. Of course, we still need to do something about him, but I mean as far as

trying to . . . own me,” I say. “Maybe we should just tell people we’re already married.”

“I’ll say whatever you want me to say,” he responds, “But it’s highly unlikely that it’ll make a difference.”

My brows furrow. “How do you know?”

“Because, baby.” He kisses the top of my head and holds me closer. “It wouldn’t make a difference to me.”

I sit with that for a moment. Lachlan’s done a lot to try to get me and then to keep me, but there’s no doubt in my mind, that if I put an end to this and made it clear that I didn’t want him, he’d stop. It would kill him. I know that because it would kill me as well, but he’d do it because he loves me. Jameson doesn’t love me; he just wants to possess me. It occurs to me that I may not be his only victim. For years, I thought I was, but when you take away the love aspect, and are only left with obsession and control, things look a little different. It would make sense if he gets off on doing this to multiple people. God, I hope not. I wouldn’t wish this on anyone. I put it out of my head and focus on the familiar buildings we’re driving by.

I haven’t been here since that night, so seeing my shared apartment with Marissa feels strange. It’s currently being rented by two guys. Her mom packed up all of our things, and put most of it in storage. Marissa hasn’t been back here either. She only sees her parents out of town, which kills me since I know how much Gina loves to have her daughter home for the holidays. She’s told Marissa countless times to bring me along, and still always sends me a present for Christmas. She knows enough not to ask any questions, or bring us up to my father or anyone else in Fairview. She’s how I got those pictures of Lach that are in my office.

When we drive by Prescott’s old place, I smile at the memory of being there with Lach. I When I look at these streets, the only memories that come to mind are the ones with him. I look up at him and catch him lost in thought as he looks outside.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, pulling away so I’m no longer leaning against him.

“That you’re the only thing I miss about this place.” He links our hands together, his eyes still outside.

“Not the parties or the girls?” I raise an eyebrow, hating the way the question makes me feel.

Amused eyes flash to mine. “Are you jealous, Lyla James?”

“No.” I scowl.

He chuckles and leans in to kiss me softly. “I don’t miss the parties or the girls. You were in my life for less than three months, and you managed to become the best thing of my college experience.”

“I’m not sure if I believe you, but I accept that answer.” I smile and look outside again. “Have you been back here at all?”

“Once.” He lets out a harsh laugh. “I met the new team and had lunch with Coach Rob and Jameson.”

Anger shoots through me. “I hate him.”

“It really makes me wonder if all those times he reached out, he was just trying to get information on where you were,” he says. “Or trying to find out whether or not we were together.”

My anger grows. We spent three years of our lives apart, because of him. I’m all for “everything happens for a reason,” but this was forced by a person with an obsession and a God complex. He killed my mother and one of my best friends. He tried to kill me and was unsuccessful, but I still missed out on a season and a half of soccer. I missed out on the rest of my college experience. I ran from the love of my life because I was terrified of what might happen to him. All of those things sit heavy over my chest as we turn onto the street that leads to the new building.

“I really hate him,” I whisper, as Ronnie parks at the curb.

Lach opens the door and I take his hand, as he helps me out of the car and keeps it in his while he speaks to Derek again. Ronnie looks at me when I lean into the backseat.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen, but if he gets me alone, try to get everything he says before you come for me.”

Ronnie stares at me for a long moment before he gives a sharp nod. I step back out and look around, over my shoulder, down the street, and inside the building. There are people arriving behind us — women wearing nice dresses and men in suits. I see a few familiar faces, but I don’t know anyone. It isn’t until Lach tugs my hand that I realize I’m just standing there. He looks at me, eyes full of concern, and I squeeze his hand to let him know I’m fine. I’m not; I’m shutting down, but I don’t need to tell him that. He knows me better than anyone. His green eyes scan my face for a moment.

“You can shut out the entire world, Lyla James.” He kisses my lips hard, making my heart skip a beat. “But never me.”

I take a breath and let him lead me inside the building.

CHAPTER 54

LACHLAN

WE SAY hello to some of the current and former athletes who walk up to us, as we make our way through the facility's enormous lobby. I thought coming to the event would be torturous, but it's not bad. I'm sure we'd have a great time if Jameson weren't a concern. I'm not letting these interactions distract me, but I am trying to only focus on my attack and not on what he did to Lyla. If I think about that, I'll fucking lose it. Lyla lets go of my hand while I'm talking to the current left and right wing. She only moves a couple of steps away to speak to some girls. She's right there. But without her hand in mine, my adrenaline instantly spikes and my senses go on high alert. The guys ask for a selfie with me, which I gladly take. Of course, they ask about my retirement.

The second we move away after saying goodbye to everyone, I grab her hand again. We walk to the check-in section, and I speak to the woman behind the table. While I'm giving her my name, Lyla lets go of my hand again, and I pause mid-sentence to see what the hell she's doing now. I didn't think of it before, but I should have bought one of those leashes parents use on their kids.

"What?" I ask when she doesn't turn back around.

"Banks is here." She looks at me. "I haven't seen him since. . ."

"Let me finish here." I give her a look that I wish would freeze her in place.

I continue the check-in process. The woman starts talking about the facility and everything it has — Olympic pool, tennis court, basketball court, weight rooms, etc. Then she moves on to the banquet room we're about to sit in. I'm sure whatever she's saying about the place is great, but I'm so tuned into Lyla that I'm only half-listening. I thank the woman, get the gift and

table number, and grab Lyla's hand to lead her away from the crowd behind us that's waiting to check in.

"He probably hates me," she says, as she watches him laugh with some guys who take pictures with him.

"I'm sure he doesn't. He's probably worried, though."

"I need to talk to him."

I look around the lobby area once. Twice. When I don't see who I'm looking for, I give a nod in Banks' direction. "Let's go."

When we walk up, Banks halts mid-conversation and looks at Lyla like he sees a ghost. I let go of her hand so she can adequately greet her friend and watch Banks go through every emotion — disbelief, confusion, sadness, joy, and relief. He settles on that one and smiles, even though he looks like he's about to start crying. It's doubtful that Lyla will, since she's already adopted her poker face, but she's a lot more emotional these days, so I can't be sure. The guys Banks was talking to are also watching the interaction and giving him space before they pat him on the back and walk away.

"Holy shit," he whispers when he finally gets in front of her.

Lyla says nothing. She just launches herself at him and gives him the tightest hug I think she's ever given. Her impassive expression cracks as they pull away, and he brings a hand up to her face, as if to make sure she's real. I know the feeling. He glances over at me, jaw still open, then back at her.

"Were you together this whole time?" he asks.

"No. He just found me." She smiles that ghost of a smile. "I'm so freaking sorry I had to leave like that. I'm sure you hate me, but I swear I had a reason."

"I don't hate you." He frowns and hugs her again. "I'm so fucking glad you're okay."

Her eyes get watery as she nods, but she manages to hold her tears back. Either way, it shocks the fuck out of Banks. I bite back a laugh at the confused expression on his face. Lyla catches it and laughs.

"I went to therapy," she says, as if she can't possibly just be emotional otherwise.

This time, I laugh. She shoots me a dirty look and I laugh harder. Banks looks at me again, shaking his head in disbelief before he focuses on her.

"Marissa told me you were okay, but that was ages ago. I haven't heard from either of you since."

"I know. I swear I'll tell you the whole story after the event," she says.

“Marissa’s fine, though.”

He just stares.

“What about you?” Lyla asks, punching him lightly on the chest to break the moment. “I saw you were signed by San Diego.”

“Ah.” He grins. “You watch football now?”

“Sometimes.” Another ghost of a smile.

I know Banks is her friend, but that bit of information stings. Knowing that she didn’t watch any of my games sucks. I understand why she couldn’t watch, and I can’t fault her for it, but it sucks. I remind myself that what they share is entirely different from what we have. I’ve known that from the start, which is why I never cared too much about them hanging out. Besides, it’s not like they ever hung out alone. And if Banks wanted to make a move, he would have done it by then. Who knows, maybe he did and got rejected. Either way, I’m not worried about him. We should probably invite him to the wedding. I’m sure it would mean a lot to her to have him there. As if she hears my thoughts, she looks at me briefly, and I know that’s what she’s asking. I smile and give a shrug. She smiles wide, my smile, only at me, before she turns to him.

“We’re getting married next Saturday,” she says, her words rushed. “In Chicago. It’s totally spur of the moment. We just decided like two nights ago, so it’s nothing big, but we’d love for you to be there.”

“Damn.” Banks grins at me. “I guess you got on her list after all.”

I laugh wholeheartedly. “It took a while, but yeah.”

I knew I’d dominate that damn list.

“Congratulations,” he says, smiling at the two of us.

“You should come celebrate with us,” I say. “Bring a date if you have someone.”

“Nah,” he says. “Just went through a pretty rough break-up.”

“Oh God.” Lyla rolls her eyes. “Every time you say that, it means one thing. Tell me you didn’t cheat on this one.”

“No.” His brows shoot up. “But she thought I did.”

“She thought?” She laughs lightly. “I don’t even know what to make of that.”

“I’ll tell you about it later,” he says with a laugh, as he looks at me again. “And I would love to go to your wedding.”

“I’ll text you the details.” I extend my fist for him to bump, and he does.

His brows hike up. “You have my number?”

“Did you change it from the time we were here?”

“No, same one,” he says.

“Then I should have it.”

“Huh.” He frowns, but it’s quickly replaced with joy. “Text me the details. I’ll be there.”

We say goodbye and walk away. Lyla puts her hand in mine again.

“You got his number from my phone, didn’t you?” she asks, eyes dancing when she looks up at me.

“You hung out with him a lot,” I say. “I did what I had to do.”

She laughs quietly, shaking her head, but doesn’t say anything. We’re not near the crowd, so we can stand here without causing a disturbance. I stop walking and hold her hand steady, so she stops walking and faces me.

“If the tables were turned, what would you have done?” I ask, because I’m genuinely curious.

Lyla’s jealous as fuck when it comes to me, and if she says otherwise, she’s a damn liar. It’s not a trust issue between us. I know she’d never be with anyone else and I sure as hell hope she knows I wouldn’t either. Still, the jealousy remains. I think it’s healthy. I don’t really care if it’s not.

“What would you have done?” I ask again. “If some girl was always around me and we spent hours together on the ice.”

She scowls and looks away. For a moment, I think she’s going to say she wouldn’t care. Honestly, I’ll leave it at that because of where we are and why we’re here. But she looks at me again, that fire in her eyes that instantly turns me on.

“I’m not sure what I’d do, but I know she’d wish she’d never met you at all.”

I laugh and dip to kiss her. “I think you may be a little crazy, Lyla James”

“Only when it comes to you,” she says, smiling.

I’m stuck on that smile for a long time, until I remember something. “Is your mic on?”

She pulls the material of her dress forward, checks, and looks mortified when she meets my gaze again. I burst out laughing.

“What, you don’t want people to know you’re so crazy about me that you’re jealous?” I grin, as I pull her toward the doors.

“It’s not funny.” She scowls, then drops her head to speak into the mic. “Please ignore that little lapse of judgment.”

I laugh again. I can only imagine them back in the SUV. They must be

laughing their asses off. They're used to serious jobs, so to them, this feels like a very well-paid vacation. My smile drops when we walk inside when I spot Jameson. I have never hated a person so much in my life. I've never been this angry. Even when my father didn't show up for us when I knew he could, I didn't feel this way. I remind myself to keep my face impassive. He glances up and waves when he sees me, a forced, fake smile on his face. I don't even bother returning the greeting. By now, he has to know I know. Still, I can't fucking believe the nerve of him saying hello to me like that.

The smile instantly drops when his eyes shift and he sees whose hand I'm holding. Cold eyes and hardened features immediately replace the cordial look on his face. I'm going to fucking kill him. He blinks it away and tries cordial again. I tear my eyes from him and squeeze the hand not holding Lyla's into a tight fist. She hasn't noticed him. If she had, she would have squeezed my hand. She looks over her shoulder and stops walking. I'm not sure what she sees on my face, but she turns around and faces me immediately. The second she does, I pull her into my arms and kiss the fuck out of her, making sure it's clear that she's mine.

CHAPTER 55

LYLA

I DON'T KNOW who came up with the idea of sitting a group of strangers together at social gatherings, but it may go down as one of the worst ideas in history. Obviously, my father loves it. He thinks it's great networking. I think it's an extension of hell. I've been talking to the Fairview volleyball coach for ten minutes now. Lachlan is speaking to the NFL player next to him, but he's tense and hasn't let go of my hand since we sat down, even though I've tried to take it back three times. I know this means he saw Jameson, but I've swept the room twice and have yet to see him. I saw my dad. Well, I see my dad. He gave a quick speech in the beginning and thanked everyone for being here. Now, he's sitting a few tables over with his back to us. The curious thing is that Marie is nowhere in sight. My phone buzzes in my purse, and Lach looks at me. This time, he lets go of my hand and keeps talking to the guy. I didn't set it on airplane mode, in case of emergency.

"Excuse me a moment," I say to the volleyball coach, as I take my phone out.

Marissa: update pls

Me: at luncheon. Haven't seen him but i think lach did bc he's acting weird

Marissa: shit. Be careful

Me: i know <3

Marissa: Coop asked ab you

Me: what'd you tell him?

Marissa: that you had a fam emergency and went out

Marissa: i think he's going to ask you out when you get back

Lachlan tenses. I look up and find his eyes narrowed and dark as he looks from the screen to me. I ignore him.

Me: it's not gonna happen obv. I'll have to talk to him

Lachlan signals for me to hand the phone to him. I look up with a frown but hand it to him anyway, because I'm curious to see what he's going to do next.

Me: mar, it's lachlan, do me a favor and tell him to go fuck himself

Marissa: LMAO i can't do that

Me: tell him she got back together with her ex and that he proposed and they got married right away and she's very very very happy

"That happy, huh?" I ask, amused.

He shoots me a look and types again.

Me: tell that shit head wade the same thing

Me: and whoever else i didn't meet and wants to fuck lyla

Marissa: LOOOOLLLLLLLLL youre insane but i'll tell them if i see them again before i leave

Me: thanks

He hands back the phone. I stare at him for a moment and put it away. Regardless of what happened, I was going to tell them both about Lachlan, the moment I got back. That was before things escalated so quickly. They're going to be shocked when I tell them that not only did I get back with my ex, but we got married. I can't even blame Lach for wanting to put an end to their advances. If the tables were turned, I'd do the same. I look around again but still don't see Jameson. We remain seated during lunch and afterward, as we wait for dessert. They bring us glasses of wine — red or white. They're already poured, and on the trays, so I pick red, even though I doubt I'll drink it. Lach does the same and also sets it in front of his plate. Another server comes back with water and tops mine off before he continues to the next table. I take a sip of that instead. I've been drinking it the entire time, and it's been fine, so I'm not worried. The dessert is placed in front of us — a slice of chocolate ganache cake that looks amazing. Neither of us touches it.

"Have you seen Coach Bev?" the volleyball coach asks me, as she digs into the slice of chocolate cake.

"Not yet." I look around.

"She's at the very last table over there. The same one we're in, but on the opposite side."

"I'll have to say hello." I smile a little.

"I'm sure she'd love to hear all the amazing things you've been up to." She smiles.

My gaze drifts over to where Coach Bev is sitting. Banks is the only person I recognize at the table. I wait a few more minutes before scooting my chair back and rising from my seat. Lach follows suit, so we politely excuse ourselves and head to the lobby. One of the men traveling with us is walking the lobby and turns to acknowledge us.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I say, loud enough for him to hear. “Do I turn this off?”

“You don’t have to,” he says, his lips pulling into a smile. “Trust me, there’s nothing in this world we haven’t heard.”

I look at Lachlan and shoot him a look that amuses him, but he has the sense not to laugh. I don’t want to leave the mic on while I’m actually in the stall, but I’m more scared than I am embarrassed. At least, I think I am. The doors beside us open suddenly, and we turn to see my father step out, jaw dropped when he looks at me.

“I thought it was you,” he says, his voice hoarse as he walks over to me.

Before I can even say hello, he throws his arms around me and hugs me tight. I’m not sure what I expected would happen when I saw him again, but it wasn’t this kind of greeting. He showed me indifference for so long that this doesn’t feel real. I know it’s genuine, but it doesn’t feel real. When he pulls away, he holds me by the shoulders and looks at my face again, tears brimming in his eyes.

“Oh my God, Lyla.” He shakes his head, blinking back tears as his hands leave my shoulders. “Where have you been?”

“In med school.”

“Med school?” He blinks, brows shooting up. “Wh-how?”

I know what he’s asking is, “with what money?” He’d be right to have that question, since he paid for everything I’ve ever had. I may have been ignored many times and shown indifference to others, but money and the things it could buy were never something I lacked. That included school. When I left, I forfeited all of it. Since I didn’t want to be found, I didn’t even get into the bank account that had been set up for me as an infant. I’d borrowed money from Prescott and Marissa.

Even though they’d been adamant about not paying them back, I did. Of course, paying them back meant I could only pay the bare minimum of my school loans, but I couldn’t complain about the financial struggle I was experiencing for the first time, when so many lived paycheck to paycheck their entire lives. Dad’s still staring at me like he can’t believe I’m real. I

study him just as intently — his light brown eyes, smooth dark complexion, and the natural waves in his short hair. He'd always seemed larger than life to me, and in stature, he still is, but right now, I feel bigger and stronger than him in every other aspect. I clear my throat when I realize we've just been standing there, staring at each other.

"I did it on my own," I say.

His confusion is replaced by a proud smile. "Wow, your mother would be so proud."

My heart stops for a moment. He's never spoken a word about her since the accident. Not when I needed him to. I'm not sure I like that he's doing it now. He doesn't deserve to, but he was with my mother longer than I'd been alive at that point, so I can't say a thing about it. I take the compliment for what it is. My mother would be proud of me, but she would have been proud, regardless of what I'd accomplished.

"You didn't say goodbye," he says, clearing his throat, his eyes filling with tears again. "I know I was a shitty father, but I thought I'd at least get a goodbye."

"I wish I had been able to say goodbye," I say, because it's true, even though I won't apologize for not doing so. "It's a long story."

Even if I had the time to get into the entirety of it, I'm not sure I would. What am I supposed to say? That his best friend sexually assaulted me multiple times, and because of him, my mother and friend are dead? In my mind, it sounds far-fetched, so I can't imagine what his reaction would be if I said it aloud. His gaze drops to the ring on my finger. It's kind of impossible to miss. He looks up at me again, the question clear in his eyes, but he doesn't ask it.

"Will you come to the house tomorrow?" he asks instead, then looks over at Lachlan like he's just realizing he's standing here. "Hey, man. I'm sorry, I just. . ."

"Don't apologize to me," Lach says, his voice and expression hard.

Dad stares at him for a moment. I'm sure the bite in Lach's tone caught him off guard. Instead of addressing it, my dad focuses on me again. "Will you come to the house tomorrow?"

"I. . ." Shit, I hadn't been expecting that.

"Are you two. . ." He looks at Lachlan and then at me.

"Getting married, yes," Lach says.

I elbow him. Not because I'm upset he told him, but because of the

disdain in his voice when he said it. He may have been, as he said, a shitty father, but he's still mine.

"Wow." My dad inhales sharply. "Wow. Congratulations."

"I would have asked for your blessing, but I didn't feel like I needed to, considering," Lach says.

I'm going to freaking kill him when we get out of here.

"At what time?" I ask. "We're leaving tomorrow."

"Breakfast, then," he says.

"Shouldn't you check with Marie first?" I don't bother to hide the disdain in my voice.

"I haven't been with Marie for over two years," he says. "I've been. . ."
He shakes his head. "Please, come over tomorrow. We have so much to catch up on."

I look up at Lach. I know that even though he's glowering, he'll go along with whatever I decide. "Okay. We'll be there," I say.

Dad gives me another hug and wipes his face again when he pulls away. Lach grunts his goodbye and holds my hand a little tighter, as he walks me to the bathroom.

CHAPTER 56

I'M WASHING my hands and wetting a paper towel to fix my eyeliner when I hear the door open and shut. I glance up, half expecting to see Lachlan checking on me, but see no one. I look for feet under the stalls and find none. Weird. When I bring my eyes to the mirror again, Jameson is standing right behind me. I open my mouth to scream, but he covers it so hard with a gloved hand, that I can only hope the mic is able to pick up my muffled struggle. He doesn't smell of cigarettes today. Or his strong cologne. Fuck. *Did he do that on purpose?* He stares at our reflection for a long moment, his angry blue eyes set on my very wide brown ones. He says nothing, as he drags me toward the door that leads to the hallway where Lach is waiting for me. My heart beats faster as he reaches the door. Instead of opening it, he locks it. I scream as loud as I can, hoping that the sound in my throat is transferring.

Jameson drags me to the other side of the bathroom. For a moment, I think he'll take me into a stall and rape me there. I'm ready for it. I'm ready to fight and scream and do whatever I need to do to get away from him, but I'm also prepared to shut down if all of my attempts are futile and he goes through with it. I don't want to be. I don't want to even consider it a possibility. Not again. Not after all of these years that I lived in fear and shut everything out, in order to protect myself from the trauma. After I worked through it with a professional so that it would no longer dictate the way I live my life. But I have to be prepared, and sometimes that means numbing myself until I reach a place in my mind where none of it exists, even as it happens. He walks past the stalls. I keep kicking, screaming, and thrashing against him. I can't kick him with my heel because of the way he's dragging me, but I will the moment he lets me go. I'll kick him so hard and scream so loud that the ears of the bodyguards listening to the feed will ring for the rest

of the day.

“You know what I like most about this facility?” he asks in my ear, as he pushes another door open with his back. “The bathrooms open to the outside.”

I jerk my body harder, my eyes wide on the Olympic-sized swimming pool, as he drags me past it. Oh my god. Where is he taking me? Is he going to drown me? Is this really how my life ends? Drowning at the hands of a psychopath? He stops walking suddenly and I jerk harder, elbowing wildly behind me in the hopes I hit him hard enough for him to let go. I connect, but not enough for him to move. I see his cell phone in his left hand, watch as he clicks something, and suddenly, the fire alarm in the building goes off. *No. Oh my god. No.*

“Technology, am I right?” he says with a laugh, as he continues to drag me to the side of the building.

I'm not exactly sure where we're headed, but I'm praying it's not the parking lot. I know I'm doomed if he manages to get me in a car. He releases his grip on my mouth. I start screaming, a loud shrill that any other time would have carried for blocks but is currently drowned out by the alarm.

“Side of the building by the pool,” I yell anyway, as loudly as I can. “Please, please, please, please, please.”

I kick back, hitting something — his shin, his foot? Whatever it is makes him grunt. Once we reach the side of the building, he pushes me to the ground, slaps me with the back of his hand, and straddles me. It's not a hard slap, not hard enough to mark me, but hard enough to make me shut up. I don't, though. I won't. I thrash my head side to side, trying to find someone. The people in the event have to be outside or on their way out by now. I realize that we're in a pocket on the other end of the building, and even if they do walk out back, they may not see us. It's a golf area, I realize. Fuck, I need to get out of here.

“David, please,” I scream, my eyes tearing up as I beg. Somehow, I hold them back. “Please don't do this.”

He's struggling to hold me down and take his jacket off at the same time, glaring at me when I try to buck him off me. His expression is as menacing as it was that night, when he pinned me on my parents' couch and I fought him. Up until the time before that, he was used to me being submissive, drinking whatever he gave me until I was unconscious and he could do whatever he wanted. That night, he'd told me that my fighting turned him on. A part of

me wants to stop, but the survivor in me won't let me.

"We have some unfinished business," he seethes. "Don't you think?"

I scream again, kick, and move my hips. I know they'll come for me. I just need to hold him off until they do.

"If I could," he says, setting a hand over my mouth again and holding me as still as he can with his body over mine. "I would take you somewhere and take my time with you, so you remember who the fuck owns you. Unfortunately, we don't have time for that today."

My chest rakes with the screams bottled up in it and the tears I know I won't shed. Not for him. Not ever. He's hard on my stomach, and I know nothing I do will make a difference. He starts to unbuckle his belt with the hand not covering my mouth. My chest is heaving as I continue to struggle. He's having trouble with his fancy belt, so he lifts his hand from my mouth again.

"Nooooo," I beg. "Please. Please don't do this." I scream again. "David! Don't do this!"

"This is on you. You know what happened to the last little girl who stepped out of line?" he asks, cold and cynical. "She's dead."

My stomach heaves. I start to gag.

"You keep stepping out of line. I guess your mother's death wasn't enough. Luke's death wasn't enough. Not even attacking your boyfriend," he shouts. "Was enough."

"Please," I whimper as he starts lifting my dress, his hand rough on my thighs.

"You know, even though you're not my first toy, you are the only one who was a virgin," he says, eyes gleaming proudly as he pulls back so he's lower on my legs, near my shins.

My chest heaves again, but I scream and use all my strength to lift my leg and kick him in the groin. He grunts loudly as he doubles over. I roll out from under him, push him away, and stand. My body trembles, threatened by the strong memories of the last time I found myself in this situation. I push through it. I cannot clam up right now. I can't let him win. Not this time. I start running, cursing myself for choosing to wear heels with straps that I can't just kick off.

I scream as I run. *What's taking them so fucking long?* I hear him come up behind me. He's fast. If I wasn't wearing these fucking heels, I'm sure I could get away easily. I'm almost at the exit when my heel goes down into

one of the holes in the ground. Strong arms wrap around me, and he lifts me, taking a few steps to the side wall of the building. He presses onto me, still hard in his pants, as he breathes harshly against my face. He brings his arm up, and for a moment, I flinch, thinking he'll elbow me in the face. Instead, he sets his forearm against my chest so he's blocking my arms from lifting and starts hiking up my dress. I scream again, as loud as my raw throat allows. When I go to shout the second time, a dry cough is what comes out. He brings a knee up and sets it between my legs, bringing it all the way up so I feel it. He's still struggling with his belt.

"Please, David," I shout, shimmying against the wall as I try to move my arms up to hit him. "Please don't do this!"

"You can blame yourself for this," he grits, blue eyes narrowed on mine. "And for whatever happens to your boyfriend when I'm done with you."

I inhale sharply and move harder, bringing my knee up again, but his shin is blocking it. I move hard again and manage to free one of my arms. I punch him once, twice. He laughs, but he spits blood as he does it, his eyes even more menacing as he adjusts his arm and pushes me again.

"Do that again and your boyfriend dies."

My chest tightens. I know he'd make good on his promise. I was wrong before when I thought he couldn't hold anything over me. He can use Lachlan. I stop struggling for a moment and squeeze my eyes shut to think about how I can get out of this situation and ensure Lach remains unharmed. When I stop, he laughs. Suddenly, the fire alarm stops. His eyes widen on mine and I scream again, but my throat is hoarse.

"Side of the building," I say as loud as I can. "Golf area!"

His belt comes off and he tosses it aside, working on the button of his pants next. He brings a hand to my thigh and starts making his way up, and I know that all I can do is wait. I keep struggling, though. I'm exhausted, but I keep at it.

CHAPTER 57

LACHLAN

“DON’T FUCKING TELL me you’ve looked everywhere!” I shout at Ronnie and Derek over the fire alarm. “He couldn’t have gotten far!”

My entire body shakes as I take off running in the other direction. With the deafening alarm, they haven’t been able to speak to the two guys who stayed back in the SUV and are listening to her mic. The drone is still flying somewhere. I know it’s just a matter of time before we locate her, but we don’t have time. She doesn’t have time. I don’t have time. I try to concentrate and push away the images that flash through my head, but it’s impossible. I can’t stop thinking about that fucking psychotic creep touching her. The idea of him even touching her arm is enough to set me off, but that’s not where the images stop. Everyone is mostly contained on the left side of the building, since that’s where the event space is. The bathroom is on the other side, but we checked it, we checked outside, we checked. . .oh, fuck.

I take off running to the other side of the building. We checked it, of course, but we didn’t check all of it. We couldn’t have. I take off my jacket and tie, tossing them behind me as I run. The buttons of my sleeves pop off when I jerk the material up to my elbows. The alarm finally stops fucking ringing and I hear her scream. I run faster. I reach the side of the building and look around. There’s an area there that we missed. It looks like a picnic area. As I get closer, I realize it must be for golf.

I scan it but can’t see the entirety of it. When I finally do, I see one of his hands moving up her leg, almost near her ass. Lyla’s trying to push him off her; her attempts are weak, as if she’s tired and can’t hold him off any longer. Even as she does this, her expression is blank, like she’s already taken herself elsewhere. My heart can’t possibly break any more than it does right now. My rage grows as I get near them. By the time I reach them and yank him off

her, I say a silent apology to her in my head, because I know I won't be able to stop until he's dead.

CHAPTER 58

LYLA

ONE MINUTE JAMESON is breathing on my face, touching me in ways that make me want to vomit, and the next, he's hauled off me. I instantly sag to the ground, my body trembling uncontrollably. I hear shouting and see two pairs of dress shoes just a few steps away from me, but my body is too paralyzed by adrenaline to move.

"This is none of your business," Jameson screams loudly.

I look up and see both men towering above me. Jameson's in shape, but not like Lachlan. And even if he wasn't in superior shape, Lachlan has two advantages: his age and an anger that holds the weight of a thousand men.

"You thought you were going to get rid of me?" Lach screams, punching him so hard that I hear his bones crack as his face turns. Lach keeps going, "You're a fucking coward."

I quickly start working on unstrapping my heels and stand up, using the wall beside me to support my shaky legs. Lach throws another punch, and Jameson manages to dodge it. He swings at Lach, who also tries to dodge it, but it grazes his jaw.

"This is none of your business," Jameson screams again, the rage showing on his face as he pushes Lachlan. "She's not yours!"

I see the moment Lachlan processes that. I see the fury practically coming out of his ears. He grabs Jameson by the throat and slams him against the brick wall.

"She's my fucking wife," he says, in a voice so quiet it sends a chill down my spine.

Jameson's eyes widen. He pushes Lach hard enough to get him off, and throws another punch.

"That's right, motherfucker." He punches Jameson once. "MY fucking

wife!” He punches him again, so hard that Jameson staggers back.

He seems to fall in slow motion, or maybe that’s just how I see it. The minute he hits the ground, Lachlan is on him again, straddling him and punching. Jameson doesn’t react.

“She is mine,” he growls as he lands another punch. “She was never yours.”

For a moment, I’m still frozen. Part of me doesn’t want to stop him. I don’t want this man to live, but I can’t risk losing Lachlan. Out of nowhere, a wave of calm energy courses through my body and I snap out of my daze. It’s almost as if I’m floating when I walk over to Lachlan. I surge forward and scream his name once, twice. He pulls back, panting so hard that it looks like he might hyperventilate, but I can tell he’s not going to stop.

“LACHLAN!”

His eyes are wild when he looks at me, then looks down at Jameson.

“Lach. Stop.”

He growls, eyes narrowed, as he continues to look at the man on the ground. He’s too far gone. I try everything. I pull his arm, I grip his shoulders. I try to slap him.

Jameson finally makes some kind of sound, a puffed, gargled breath — the only sign of life I’ve heard so far. Lachlan’s face transforms again, rage spiking. I wrap my arms around his neck. He’s shaking, uncontrolled rage or adrenaline or both coursing through him.

“Look at me!” I yell. “LOOK AT ME.”

He’s still breathing hard. In the distance, I hear sirens. He needs to get the fuck out of here. I shift and fall to my knees, grabbing his face, turning it to look in his eyes. My breath catches. There’s a faraway look in them that tells me he’s here, but not really. The sirens grow louder. I’m sure Jameson’s Officer Hugh isn’t there. As Chief of Police, he no longer shows up to sites, but if he hears Jameson is involved, he may, and that’ll be a shit show.

When we left three years ago, Marissa called the Fairview cops and told them everything. They said they would look into it and get back to us. They never did. We knew they wouldn’t. We knew the moment the news hit Officer Hughes, it would be buried underneath all of the other corrupt shit they buried.

Lach moves as if he’s trying to get me off him, so I grab his face harder.

“Baby, please,” I whisper, searching his eyes. “Please. Please. Please, don’t do this. I can’t lose you again.”

His jaw is still set hard. He tries to move his face, and again, I hold him tight.

“Please, Lachlan. You promised,” I say, my chest shaking with tears that can no longer be held back. “You fucking promised.”

He tries to move again. I wrap my arms around his neck and squeeze him tight this time. “I can’t lose you,” I say, voice hoarse from screaming and crying. “Please, Lach. Don’t do this to me. I’ll never forgive you if you don’t stop.”

I pull back and watch him swallow. His expression relaxes a little, his jaw loosens, and his breaths start slowing. He’s still shaking and still has that faraway look on his face. I drop my hands from his face and reach for his hands. His knuckles are raw and bloodied as I pry his tightly balled fists open, which I’m sure has to hurt, but his expression doesn’t falter. His eyes don’t leave mine as I help him get off Jameson. He stands slowly, letting me hold his hands in mine. I’m careful with them, avoiding contact with his wounds. His eyes begin to slowly regain focus as they stay on me. I manage to walk him a few steps away from Jameson’s body.

“I love you.” I let go of one of his hands to bring mine up to his face, running the back across it softly. I examine his face. He has a small cut on his lip, but otherwise, he looks unharmed. I lick my lips, tasting tears on them as I meet his gaze again. “I love you,” I repeat, making sure he hears me.

He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and brings both hands to my cheeks, tenderly wiping away my tears with his thumbs. He sets his forehead against mine and takes a deep breath, as if trying to take some of my oxygen with him. Maybe he is. He can take it all, for all I care. I just need him to be okay. He presses his lips against mine. The kiss starts slowly, his tongue brushing against the edges of my lips before slipping inside my mouth. When our tongues meet, he moves his hands further back to cup the back of my neck with his long fingers and bring me as close as possible to him, intensifying the kiss. He lets out a deep moan that travels through me, all the way down to my toes. In the distance, I hear people shouting, the sirens still wailing. They seem far away as we kiss. Nothing else exists — only his lips on mine and his hands holding me, as if he’s afraid I’ll disappear. I pull away first, setting my feet on the ground, but I don’t back away from him. I can’t. The intensity in his eyes makes it difficult to breathe.

“You’re mine,” he says, his voice so quiet, I almost don’t hear it over the noise.

“I’ve only ever been yours.” I bring my hands over his wrists and hold him there.

He takes a deep, shaky breath as he holds my gaze, as if he’s relieved to hear the confirmation from my lips. I wish I could wrap him up, hide him inside me, and take him far away from this mess. I wish I could make him go someplace safe, while I deal with all of this the way it should have been dealt with from the beginning.

From my peripheral vision, I see people running toward us. I lower Lach’s hands from my face as I take a step back. Ronnie reaches us first. He takes one look at Lach, his eyes widen, and he turns his attention to me. Behind him, Derek and the two other men appear. They go straight to Jameson and check for a pulse.

“Are you okay? Do you need medical attention?” he asks. “Does he?”

“I’m fine.” I look at Lach’s knuckles. “I don’t know. He needs to get these cleaned up.”

“The drone kept going over the area. . .” He looks troubled, so I put a hand up to stop him.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Did you. . .” I swallow. “Did you get anything on the mic?”

“Everything,” he says. His hard expression doesn’t change, but I see the sadness in his eyes. “You two can leave. Derek will take you back to the hotel. If you stay, you’ll have to answer questions.”

“I know.” I bite my lip and look toward the sound of the ambulances and police sirens.

I can’t see anything from here. It’s like we’re encased in a box. I hear more chaos unfold. I think about it for a moment. If I stay, I’ll have to answer questions that should have already been answered. For a long time, I blamed myself for not speaking up sooner, but I refuse to carry that burden any longer. I was a child. I didn’t even know what was happening to me, and when I finally confirmed it, my mother and best friend were murdered. I couldn’t have done anything to stop this back then. I didn’t have the support I needed. Sure, I had Marissa and Prescott, but they’ve also been scared shitless. We were kids. We did what we had to do to survive — Mar partied, Pres buried himself in hockey and school, and I detached. Survival looks different on everyone. We can’t be judged for what we did or didn’t do, but enough is enough.

I look at Lachlan. “Go with Derek. I’ll handle this.”

“No.” His eyes narrow slightly on mine. It’s all he says and does. He’s still coming down from the adrenaline rush.

“Do you think what we got on the mic will be enough to . . . get us out of this mess?” I ask quietly.

“Yes,” he says. “Everything will be taken care of. You don’t have to worry about it. You don’t have to stay.”

“I want to,” I whisper, clearing my throat. “I want to speak to the police, even if it’s just to expose the kind of man they’ve been protecting all these years.”

Ronnie gives a small smile and sets a hand on my shoulder. Beside me, Lachlan makes a sound. We both look at him and find him staring daggers into Ronnie, who squeezes me gently before dropping his hand.

“I just want you to know that we all think that you’re a fucking badass,” he says.

It happens in an instant — tears swell in my eyes and my lip begins to wobble. The sound that leaves my throat is a mix of a laugh and a sob. None of what I’ve done has felt heroic or very badass, but the fact that I’ve survived this long proves my resilience. I take a breath and wipe my face quickly.

“Thank you,” I say and begin to walk out of the area.

The other two guys have already taken Jameson away. I don’t know and don’t care to ask what they’ll do with him. They can turn him over to the authorities or bury him in a ditch, for all I care, as long as nothing comes back to Lachlan. Right now, he’s all I care about.

“I’m right behind you,” Ronnie says as he follows.

I hold Lach’s arm as we walk. As soon as we step out of the area, an officer charges toward us. My entire body clenches in fear. I’ve seen what happens next one too many times.

Ronnie stands between us and the officer. “They need to be checked out by a medic. They’ll answer questions if and when they’re ready.”

My eyes go wide as I watch, waiting for the officer to tase him or something. He doesn’t. He just backs away and lets us continue walking. When we reach the sidewalk, I notice a lot of the people from the luncheon are still here. Two paramedics rush over to us, so I drop Lachlan’s arm. One comes up to me, and the other to him. They both speak to each of us as they lead us to the ambulances. I glance over my shoulder to make sure Lachlan is still walking, and see the paramedic trying to usher him to a separate ambulance. He shrugs him off and strides over to me.

“I go where she goes.” It’s all he says, but his tone doesn’t leave room for argument.

We share a seat inside the truck as they check us out. I know I’m fine but I let them do it because, in the state he’s in, I’m not sure Lach will let them if I don’t. We move to the ledge of the ambulance as they clean his wounds. I’m looking at the lights when I spot my father running through the chaos, rushing around. He runs to Jameson, who I now see is being wheeled away on a stretcher. The police officer that rushed at us earlier points over at us, and Dad’s eyes go wide when he sees me. He jogs over and is stopped by Ronnie immediately. They’re both tall and wide, but Ronnie wins the stare down and my father takes a step back, looking at me over Ronnie’s shoulder.

“It’s fine,” I say, clearing my throat. Ronnie looks over at me. “He can come through.”

“Oh my God, Lyla. What the hell happened?” he asks, rushing over and setting a hand on my forehead like he did when I was little and had a fever. That was probably the last time he cared. “Are you okay?” he asks quickly.

“I’m fine.”

He looks at Lach, down at the wounds they’re cleaning, and back at his face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he snaps, glaring at my father.

Dad takes in his expression and looks at me again. “What the fuck happened?”

“Ronnie,” I say and wait for him to turn around. “Tell the officer I’m ready to speak now. A woman. I’ll only speak to a woman.” I look at Dad again. “Stay here and listen.”

He does, a concerned look on his face. A woman officer walks over. Most officers introduce themselves by their last names. She just tells us to call her Amy. Probably a tactic she uses to make people comfortable. It works. I recount everything — from what happened when I was fourteen to what happened the night of the accident. When I get to that part, Dad, who was already crying, loses his shit. He steps toward me and I pull back, because it’s a sudden movement and I’m on edge as it is. Lach shoots up and gets in my dad’s face.

“Don’t fucking touch her,” he seethes. “You don’t deserve to call her your daughter.”

“Lach.” I hop off the ledge and from behind, I wrap my arms around his middle. “It’s okay. Let them finish cleaning you up.”

He does what I ask but keeps his glare on my father, who hunches over, setting his hands on his knees as he doubles over, crying harder. I've never seen my father cry. I've seen him laugh and scream, but never cry. It hurts a little to witness, but not enough for me to comfort him. When they finish bandaging up Lachlan's hands, they explain what he needs to do and how often to change his bandages. I tell them I know how to do it, and finally, they check us off their list. We stay on the ledge as another police officer walks over. Despite me telling Amy everything, the police want me to go down to the precinct.

"No," Dad says, his voice hard as he collects himself. "They're not going to a fucking police station without a lawyer." He looks at me. "Where are you going now? Do you want to come home?"

I scoff. *Home*. I can't remember the last time I thought of his house as my home. I'm not opposed to going. A part of me still hopes that I can salvage whatever is left of my frayed relationship with my father. That same part of me wants to prove that I can walk into that house and walk out unscathed. I haven't stepped foot in that house since the night my mom died, and it feels long overdue for me to do this.

"I'll let you know. Maybe we'll drop by," I tell my dad after a moment. "We have to go to the hotel first."

"Please do," he says and stops speaking when his words catch. "I'm so sorry, Lyla. I'm so, so sorry." He begins to sob again.

This time, I hop off the ledge and hug him. Dad's a big guy. Powerful sobs rake through him and I tremble in response. He apologizes repeatedly. I try to hold back my tears, but they run down my cheeks freely. It's the way he holds me, the way I had wanted him to so many times in the past. It's another reminder of what he didn't do and the realization of something I didn't know I was missing. When I step away, we both wipe our faces.

"Please come by," he says again.

"I will." I try to smile. "Maybe tonight. Definitely, before we leave."

I leave him with that promise and let Lachlan, no longer in shock, lead me to the car.

CHAPTER 59

LACHLAN

I SHOULD HAVE KILLED HIM. The thought has been running through my head on loop. I did as Lyla asked and stopped myself when she asked me to. I'm still considering showing up at the hospital and putting a pillow over his head while he's there. We have clear audio of him taking the blame for the accident that killed her mother, Luke's supposed suicide, and killing another girl, which should be enough to put him away for life. I thought the punishment would be enough, but it's not. He has too many connections, and I don't trust our justice system to keep him behind bars. I want him dead. Every time I replay what happened, my anger reignites. When I saw him touching her, and unbuckling his pants, ready to lower them. . .fuck. And then, he had the nerve to call her his. I think that's what ultimately sent me over the edge the second time. He fought back, but he stood no chance.

Everything about it and whatever happened afterwards is a blur. I remember Lyla hugging her dad and walking away. I don't remember showering when we got here, but I must have, since I'm sitting in bed under the covers in a t-shirt and pajama pants. I have the worst fucking headache. I'm not sure if I say it aloud, but Lyla has a bottle of ibuprofen in her hand as she walks out of the bathroom. She gives me the medicine, holds a cup of water to my lips, and sets it on the nightstand. I watch her grab clean bandages and climb on the bed, sitting in front of me on top of the covers.

I protest and make her get up, so she can sit underneath the covers with me. The moment her ass is on the mattress, I pull her into me, burying my face in her neck and breathing her in for a couple of seconds. Minutes. Hours. Days. I'm not sure. I don't really care. When she pulls away, she kneels between my legs and sets the bandages down. She runs the back of her hand over my face softly, as she looks at me with those beautiful brown eyes of

hers I want to live inside of.

“How are you feeling?” she asks quietly, as she sets her hand on her lap.

“Fine.”

She shoots me a look. “Try again and tell me the truth this time.”

I sigh heavily, bringing my bandaged hands to her face. “I wish I’d killed him.”

“I know,” she whispers. “I’m just happy you’re here with me.”

“He hurt you.” I let my hands drop and pause to swallow past the pain in my throat. “He could have. . .”

I can’t even bring myself to say the damn word. It fucking hurts to think about, let alone speak into the universe.

“He didn’t. He wouldn’t have.” She reaches up and holds my face tight when I try to look away. “I knew you’d come for me. You always do.”

This fucking girl. I pull her to me again, holding her tighter this time. I don’t know what I would have done if he had. I guess I would’ve gone to jail for murder. But then I wouldn’t have this. I wouldn’t have her. And I know I’d be lost without her. I *was* lost without her before I found her again.

“I love you so much,” she whispers against my ear. “I would die without you.”

She wouldn’t. We both know she wouldn’t. I probably would, but she’s too strong to die of a broken heart. Still, it feels good to hear her say the words, even if they make my chest ache. The thought of being without her is insurmountable. I shut my eyes and focus so I don’t hurt her by tightening my grip on her, but it’s what I want to do. I want to mold her to me. I want to make her entire being a part of me so I never have to live a moment without her.

“Fuck, Lyla James.” I breathe out.

“I need to rebandage your hands,” she says when she tries to pull away and I don’t let her.

I let her go, only because I know she’ll fight me on it if I don’t let her do this. She holds one of my hands and begins unwrapping the bandage gently, slowing down even more when she reaches the wounds. I really fucked myself up this time. I’ve never been an enforcer, so I don’t get into a lot of fights. At least, I didn’t until I played in Florida and was always angry. On the ice, it’s never personal. With Jameson, it was too personal.

“Are you in pain anywhere else?” she asks, her concerned eyes snapping to mine for a moment. “Your ribs are a little bruised, but you didn’t complain

about it in the shower.”

“You bathed me?”

Her lips twitch. “Yep.”

Fuck. She bathed me and I don't even remember? “I'm probably going to need a lot of help bathing for the next couple of days.”

“Really?” She laughs, and her lips pull into one of those incredible smiles of hers.

“Really.” I yank my hand from hers, the bandage hanging off as I cup her face and kiss her. “Thank you.”

She blinks, her brows rising with my words, and I wonder if she thinks I'm an ungrateful fuck. I've thanked her in the past. . .right? Damn, maybe I haven't. I should probably start doing that every day she's with me.

“You don't have to thank me,” she says. “I should be the one thanking you.”

The grip in my chest loosens and I smile at her. “You never have to thank me for protecting you. That's my job.”

“Your job?” Her lips quirk as she goes back to the bandage on my right hand. “What's the job title exactly?”

“Husband.”

At this, she smiles — my smile — and meets my eyes. Fuck. How the hell did I get this lucky?

“Husband,” she repeats, still smiling as she starts cleaning my knuckles with antiseptic wipes. “What else is in this job description? Definitely laundry.”

I laugh. “Laundry, sometimes cooking even though I'll need recipes, taking out the trash, pumping gas in your car. . .”

“I can pump my own gas.” She laughs, shaking her head.

“I know you can, but from now on, I'm going to.”

Her eyes flick to mine and she sets my hand down gently on her lap. “What else?” she asks, genuinely intrigued now.

“Orgasms.”

She smiles wide again. “I guess you're hired.”

“You want me to try out for the position?” I ask, feeling my body heat instantly.

She bites the side of her lip, her eyes burning as she looks at me, but she shakes her head. “I need to finish up here.”

“It's a standing offer,” I say, and her eyes darken even more.

How the hell does she expect me to sit in bed with her and not fuck her? It's an impossibility. I try to think back, but can't pinpoint the exact moment I started feeling this way. It doesn't matter. The feeling's here to stay and I don't think I can sit here and not fuck her. I try to distract myself by looking at her hands, but her ring catches my attention and I want to fuck her all over again. Jesus. I stare at the oversized Fairview Blaze sweatshirt she's wearing, but now I want to know whether or not she's naked underneath it. I exhale heavily and look toward the bathroom.

"What's wrong?" Her hands stop moving.

"I'm trying to distract myself so I don't fuck you in the middle of this."

She laughs loudly, throwing her head back, and I feel myself grin and laugh along a little.

"Just focus on what I'm doing," she says. "Or turn on the television."

"Nope. I'm focused. I'm focused." I round my shoulders and take a breath. She looks at me, amusement lighting her eyes as she shakes her head. I look at her hands again as she rolls on the bandages. "Did they teach you how to do this in medical school?"

"Can you believe they didn't?"

"What the hell?" I ask. "And you're a doctor?"

"Not yet." She looks up at me. "I'm prepared for my residency program, where I'll learn essential things."

"What about drawing blood?"

"I can do that."

"What about IVs?"

"I can also do that." She glances up at me. "I've been wrapping my wrists and ankles since I was thirteen."

"Oh? You were out in the field, fighting people?"

She laughs. "Sometimes, I fell and caught myself wrong or punched *the pitch* a little too hard after a loss, and my ankles. . .well, that's obvious."

"You punched 'the pitch' when you lost a game?" I hiss, jerking my hand away from her when she wipes a nasty cut I have on my left middle knuckle.

"No, we won the games." She meets my eyes again and pulls my hand back. "It was usually when I missed a penalty kick."

"You got mad enough to punch the field because you missed a penalty kick?"

"The pitch," she says, sounding annoyed. I bite back a laugh. "And yes, penalty kicks are freaking easy. I shouldn't have missed those."

I stare at the top of her head for a moment, while she looks down and wraps new bandages around my left hand. I don't care what she says, she's meant to be on the field — pitch, whatever the fuck it's called.

"You're too competitive not to play," I say.

"I'm not going to play, but if I did, if I decided to try out for the pro team," she starts, "We'd never see each other."

"Of course, we would."

Her head snaps up and she stares at me. "You're getting back on the ice before the next season starts."

"Let's say some miracle happens and I do get back on the ice," I say. "I'd be done around the same time your season is starting."

"How do you know?"

I cock my head. "Come on, Lyla James."

"You're insane." She laughs as she starts picking up the bloody bandages and used tape. "What are you going to do, travel with me?"

"That's exactly what we'd do. You'll travel with me and I'll travel with you."

"Lach," she says in a voice that asks me to *be realistic*. I don't like it.

"We'll 'put a pin on this,'" I say, smiling when she rolls her eyes.

"Fine." She gets out of bed and walks to the bathroom. I stand up and follow her.

I cross my arms and lean against the door frame. "Have you spoken to your dad?"

She looks at my reflection as she turns off the faucet and dries her hands. "He texted."

"And?"

"He wants us to go over."

She walks over and stands in front of me, her back against the other side of the frame. Personally, I don't want to see her father at all, but if she wants to go, I'll support her decision and go with her.

"Do you want to go?"

"I . . ." She covers her face with both hands and rubs her eyes. "It's complicated."

"Tell me." I reach out and gently grab her wrists, lowering her hands from her face.

"I haven't been inside the house since my mom died."

I blink. "At all?"

“At all.” She bites her lip and averts her gaze for a moment before meeting my eyes again. “I wasn’t living there at the time. I moved to the guest house afterwards, not because I wanted to be anywhere near the house or my dad, but because. . .” She bites her lip again and looks away. I grab her face and turn it to me.

“Tell me.” I run the pad of my thumb over her cheek.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t be around my teammates anymore. They were so sweet and really supportive, but I couldn’t do that to them. I went to the guest house for a night because I needed to get away, and one night turned into a year and a half, and then Marissa convinced me to go to the apartment.”

“And you never went into the house afterwards?”

She shakes her head. “Not even for a glass of water. I had everything I needed and whatever I didn’t have, I’d have delivered or pick up when I drove to school and back.”

“Are you sure you’re ready to go back now?”

“I am.” She gives a decisive nod.

“Because he’s no longer a threat?” I ask.

“Because you’d be with me,” she says quietly.

My chest squeezes again. She was numb when I met her, closed off to everyone, and somehow, she let me in. Somehow, she decided to put her trust in me. *Me*. I’m going to spend the rest of my life protecting this woman. I dip my face down and kiss her deeply, my heart beating uncontrollably as she leans into me. When I pull away, I set my forehead against hers.

“I love you so fucking much,” I breathe.

“I know,” she says, and I pull away fully, only because I hear the smile in her voice and I need to see it, need to experience it for myself. I’m glad I do, because that smile is everything.

CHAPTER 60

DAD'S HOLDING a drink in his hand when he opens the door for us. He looks rough — red eyes, dark bags under them, and a disheveled shirt. I reach for Lachlan's hand and link the lower part of our fingers so I don't hurt him. It's hard enough for me to step foot in this house, but it'll be worse if Dad starts crying again.

"Just so we're clear," Lachlan says before we walk in. "I don't think you deserve a second of her time."

"I agree, which is why I'm so grateful she's here at all." Dad steps back to give us space.

At first, I try to keep my eyes on the massive dual staircase past the grand foyer, but my eyes drift off to the side anyway. My breath catches, but the awful couch I was attacked on isn't here. He replaced it. I let out a breath and loosen my grip on Lach's fingers. The house still has the distinct smell of the purple product the cleaning ladies use on the floor. Dad shuts the door behind us, and I let go of Lachlan's hand as we head to the kitchen, where all conversations happen. We settle into the informal dining space.

"Can I get you a drink?" Dad asks, looking at each of us.

"What are you drinking?" Lach asks.

"Bourbon."

"I'll have some bourbon then."

"I'll have the same," I say, as Dad walks away. I smile at the amusement in Lachlan's eyes. "What? I like bourbon."

"I didn't say anything." He leans in and kisses me softly. "Are you okay?"

"I am." I swallow and whisper, "He changed the couch."

Lach's expression darkens as he looks away. I take his face in my hands

and bring it back to mine.

“I’m fine,” I say. “I’m fine because you’re here with me.”

He stretches his long arms and pulls me into his hard chest, burying his face in my neck. I feel like I disappear every time he holds me. It’s my favorite place to be.

“God, Lyla James,” he says on an exhale that tickles a little. “You’re the strongest person I know.”

Dad clears his throat and I pull away, sitting back in my seat. Dad sets the drinks in front of us and takes a seat with his own. Lachlan reaches for mine and takes a sip first. Dad watches with a frown on his face.

“Your best friend used to drug her before he raped her,” Lach explains, voice hard.

I shoot him a look but he doesn’t acknowledge it. Dad’s face crumbles. He covers it when he starts to cry. We take a sip of our drinks and wait for him to recover. He wipes his face and takes a breath.

“I’m so sorry,” he says, shaking his head. “I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“I wish you’d told me,” he says quietly. “I would have believed you.”

I squeeze my hands under the table, struggling with that. I know he means it, but I’m not sure it would have made a difference. Even if I thought he might have believed me, I was too ashamed to speak. Maybe if I had, maybe Mom would still be alive. Luke would still be alive. I push those thoughts aside. I can’t change what happened.

“Mom caught him,” I say, clearing my throat. “The last time. It was how the accident happened. He ran us off the road.”

“Jesus Christ.” Dad shuts his eyes and takes a breath. “He was there the entire time at the hospital, mourning with me. He was at that same hospital when she gave birth to you, for Christ’s sake.”

“He’s a psychotic sociopath,” I say plainly and move on to the topic I’m really interested in discussing. “If he dies at the hospital, would they blame Lachlan?”

“It would be up for debate, but it was self-defense,” Dad says. “I don’t think he’ll die, at least not while he’s there, but even if he does, I’ll handle it.”

“Can we keep Lyla’s name out of this?” Lach asks. My face whips to his. He holds my gaze. “I don’t want you involved.”

“I don’t want *you* involved,” I say sharply.

“He involved me the very first time he touched you,” he says, eyes narrowed. “He involved me again the night he attacked us. He involved me when you left me, when he fucked me out of my contracts, and when he tried to rape you earlier today. Trust me, I’m fucking involved.”

“Jesus,” Dad whispers across from us. “What the fuck.”

“Stop,” I set my hands on Lachlan’s forearms when I feel his anger building. His muscles flex underneath my hold. I wait for his anger to dissipate, at least a little. “Take a breath.”

He swallows hard, his muscles flexing again before he does it. I turn back to my father.

“He also killed Luke,” I say.

“WHAT?” Dad’s eyes widen even more. “H-how?”

“Luke told him he was going to the cops, so Jameson shot him and staged it to look like a suicide,” I say. “Which it didn’t. Luke wasn’t even on the ground when I found him.”

“Fuck, Lyla.” Dad looks like he might throw up, but he manages to breathe through it. “You’ve been shouldering all of this on your own? All this time?”

“No, Marissa and Pres knew. I became so detached after a while, that I couldn’t feel anything,” I say. “It was the only way I survived.”

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

“I forgive you,” I say. “I’m done with it. All of it. I just need to make sure that Lachlan isn’t charged with anything.”

“He won’t be,” Dad says instantly. “If it comes to that, I’ll take care of it,” he says again, taking a sip of his drink and staring at the table. “Luke’s parents are still so fucking torn up about it,” he whispers. “Understandably so. I’m still torn up about your mother.”

I let out a laugh. “What happened to Marie? Wasn’t she helping with that?”

“She’s gone.” Dad’s eyes flash. “And yes, I caved and gave in to her advances. I was fucked up and Marie was always there. That doesn’t mean she took my pain away or replaced your mother. Nothing can do that.”

“Yet, she was there.” I purse my lips and look away. “Before, during, and after.”

“That’s fucking bullshit, Lyla,” Dad shouts, pounding the table with his fist.

“Careful,” Lach says, his voice low and menacing. I grip the bottom of

his shirt so he doesn't stand. His knees start to bounce. "Don't fucking talk to her like that," he seethes.

"I'm sorry, but that's bullshit," Dad says, his voice lower as his jaw ticks. "Your mother and I had our issues when we were much younger. I didn't have an affair with Marie. She was always around helping with campaigns, but your mother was always there and she knew I wouldn't."

"Well, I guess if she was always there, her intuition was probably right," I say.

"That doesn't mean I cheated on her."

"Whatever. It doesn't even matter," I mutter.

"Marie's gone. When you left, I . . ." He shakes his head, eyes watering again. "I lost it. I couldn't bear the fact that I lost you and your mother. I gave up my position as mayor. I told Marie to fuck off. For a year, I just sat here." He stops speaking, anger flashing in his eyes. "David was the only one who could get through to me."

He continues, "I was heartbroken when you didn't say goodbye, and worse when I called you and your phone was disconnected. Prescott told me you were fine and I did everything to get him to talk, but he wouldn't. I tried to have him followed to see if I could find you, but I was unsuccessful." He scoffs. "Now I'm grateful for it, since it would have led David to you." He bangs both fists over the table. "That motherfucker."

"You wouldn't have found me," I say. "I changed my name and moved to Rhodes."

Dad's brows pull. "Really?"

"Yep."

"Will you stay there now that . . ." He swallows. "Now that it's safe?"

"I'm not sure. Probably." I shrug.

"Really?" he asks, his voice dripping in disbelief.

"Really." I laugh. "It's an actual city, you know. It's growing pretty quickly. It's a city with a small-town feel. It's cute. I love it."

"Yeah, I've heard a lot of people are moving there," he says and looks at Lachlan. "Will you move there?"

"I go wherever she goes," he says, setting a bandaged hand over mine. "We haven't decided where we'll live yet."

It occurs to me that we have a lot of important things to discuss. I'm not concerned about any of it, but they're still decisions we need to make together.

“What are you up to now that you’re no longer mayor?” I ask.

“I’m just focused on the car dealerships. Some real estate,” he says. “Things that keep me busy but don’t rely on me making life-altering decisions.”

“That’s good,” I say and mean it. I take too big of a sip of my bourbon and try not to flinch as it burns my throat.

“So, you’re getting married,” Dad says.

“Yep.”

“That’s nice.” He smiles his genuine smile, not the smile he’s had on his face for nine years. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Lach and I say in unison.

I should probably take this opportunity to invite him to the wedding. I’m a sucker for second chances and I know after this conversation, I’m going to let him back into my life. I don’t know to what capacity, but I know I want him in it. I’m not sure how I feel about him being at the wedding, though. Or how he’ll feel about being there and not walking me down the aisle. I think it’ll hurt both of us if he doesn’t, but I don’t know that I want to give him the privilege of doing that. I take another sip of my bourbon and make a decision.

“Prescott’s walking me down the aisle,” I say. “I... if you want to be there, I...” I clear my throat. “I’d love to have you there, but I don’t know how you’d feel about sitting in the audience and not walking me down the aisle.” I lower my gaze for a moment. “I don’t know how I’d feel about you being there and not walking me down the aisle, despite everything, but. . .”

“But you’re not entirely sure if you want me to,” he says. “That’s fair. I understand I lost that privilege a long time ago. And yes, I think it’ll hurt to watch someone else walk you.” He pauses, tears filling his eyes. “But it’ll hurt more if I’m not there the day my little girl gets married.”

My mother won’t be there either. Emotion crawls up on me quickly, lodging in my throat. I already know I won’t be able to stop my tears, so I turn my face to Lachlan, in an attempt to hide it. He pulls me into him, his large body shielding me from everything. It’s not like my father doesn’t know I’m crying, but I’m just not used to crying in front of anyone. Maybe one day, I’ll get there. Not today. I sniffle against Lach’s t-shirt as his hands move soothingly up and down my back.

“I got you, baby.” He kisses the top of my head. “You’re okay.”

I swallow and take a few shaky breaths, wiping my face as I pull away. Before I turn back to my dad, Lach tilts my face and presses a kiss on my

lips. It's chaste, no tongue or anything, but it still feels weird doing it in front of my father. This is the man who didn't even agree to let Luke be my official boyfriend until junior year. Of course, he didn't know that the very thing he was trying to prevent was happening right underneath his roof without his knowledge — and without mine. Lach continues to hold my face. He has the same look on his face that he had the first time I cried in front of him. Compassion, understanding, love. I smile up at him and even though he doesn't return my smile, his eyes light up. I turn back to my father and find him smiling proudly. I can't remember the last time I saw *that* smile on his face. My high school graduation, maybe.

“So, when's the wedding?” he asks, still smiling.

“A week,” I say, laughing at the look on his face.

“Where is it?” Dad asks.

“Chicago. I know it's last minute, but we just decided last night. It's a loooong story, and no, I'm not pregnant. Can you be there?”

“Of course.” Dad smiles softly. “I wouldn't miss it for the world.”

We keep talking. I tell him about med school and Tackle Sports Center. He tells me about what's been happening around our neighborhood and at the country club. I show Lach my old bedroom, which I haven't even seen in years. His curiosity is the only reason I brought him up here. It's clean and looks exactly the same as I left it, which is a mindfuck in and of itself.

When we're leaving, I give Dad a tight hug and a kiss and tell him I'll see him soon. He seems surprised by my gesture, but smiles so wide when I fully pull away. He turns and hugs Lachlan. His eyes have tears in them again as he pats him on the back.

“I haven't seen my daughter smile,” he starts, swallowing hard, “or show any kind of emotion in years. I can see the love between you two, and I'm happy you found each other.” He clears his throat. “I know I've been a shitty father, but if you hurt her, I'll kill you.”

“Noted.” Lach's lips tug into a small smile. “I'm not worried about it. I would never risk losing her.”

By the time we leave there, I feel lighter and know that conversation needed to happen. It should have happened years ago.

CHAPTER 61

LACHLAN

I LOOK up from the email I'm typing when Liam barges into my office, breathing hard, as if he just took three flights of stairs instead of the elevator.

"What the fuck, Lee?"

"Have you looked at your calendar?" he asks, walking over quickly.

"Shit, did I forget a meeting?" I open up my calendar and look at it. I have three conference calls set up. I already went through two of them. I look at Liam again. "What am I looking at?"

"So you didn't know," he says, taking control of the mouse and clicking different things on the screen.

"Didn't know what?"

"Do you know where Lyla is right now?" He looks back at me over his shoulder and clicks something else.

My heart sinks. "Did something happen?"

We received word yesterday that David Jameson would probably be in a coma for the rest of his life, and his loved ones decided to pull the plug and let him go. I know I should feel remorse for being the cause of it, but I don't. He hurt Lyla in ways I still can't think about. He hurt others, according to the confession we got from Lyla's mic. The only thing I regret is that he wasn't alive to see this downfall and watch his own people turn on him when they found out what a monster he really was.

"No. It's not about that," Liam says.

"Well then, she's buying a wedding dress right now."

"She's not."

I'm trying not to panic, but Liam doesn't act this way unless he's freaking out or knows that I'll freak out. She's definitely not in danger, so it can't be that. *Did she leave?* She wouldn't. *Right?* No, she wouldn't. I know she

wouldn't. When I left the apartment this morning, she was perfectly happy. I look at the time. I've only been here for four hours. What the hell could have happened in four hours? A lot. That's the answer.

"Liam, what the fuck? Spit it out already."

He moves out of the way so I can see. It's my father's calendar and there's Lyla fucking James' name blocking two hours of the day. I'm frozen for a moment, staring at her name and my father's up top, as if one of them will change to something that makes sense. What the fuck is this?

"She's been here for an hour?" I push my chair back and stand quickly.

"Yep," he says.

"How the fuck did you just find out?"

"Because I don't fucking stalk her," he says behind me as he follows me out of the office. "Do you think Dad called her? Do you think he's making her sign more papers? Do you think. . ."

"I don't know what to think," I snap.

We stand outside our father's office for a moment, looking at each other. We've never just barged in there, but there's a first time for everything. I push the door open and halt so fast that Liam crashes into me. Lyla, my mother, *and* Prescott are sitting across from my father, all smiling. They have glasses of champagne set in front of them like this is a fucking weekend brunch. Their smiles drop when they see me. I was never the one left without an invitation to parties when I was younger, but I understand what it feels like now.

Lyla stands up immediately as I charge toward them. I pause mid-step as I fully take her in. She's wearing black heels and a beige dress past her knees but molded to each of her curves. Fuck. I would have hired her on the spot if she wasn't mine and had shown up dressed like that for a job interview. *Or not*, since that would definitely end with an HR complaint. I feel the tension in the room building as I check her out and remember why I'm here.

"What the fuck is going on?" I close the distance between us and glare at Prescott, who looks amused, which further pisses me off.

"We just finished up a meeting," my fiancée says simply.

"Why's Prescott here?" I look at him again.

"Because he's my lawyer," she says, answering for him.

The motherfucker leans in and plucks his glass of champagne from my dad's desk and starts to sip on it. *Oh, I'm going to kill him.* He was my right wing for four years, my enforcer, my boy. Does that mean nothing to him?

“Why are you here?” I look at my mother, who looks worried.

She probably thinks I’m going to cause a big scene, and start flipping and breaking shit. The verdict is still out on that.

“Because we were dress shopping and she asked if I wanted to tag along,” she responds.

My eyes narrow. “Why the champagne?”

“Because everything is set for the wedding and I found a dress,” Lyla says.

I narrow my eyes at everyone and land on my father. “Is that what the TWO-HOUR meeting is about?”

“I’m not getting involved,” he says, putting up his hands.

“My wife is sitting in your office.” I snap. “You’re already involved.”

“Your fiancée,” he says with a smile.

Oh-ho-ho. I’m going to jail today.

I try to focus on breathing and look at Lyla again, since she’s the only one in this office I’m not liable to kill, even if it is her fault they’re all here.

“Is this really about the wedding?” I ask as calmly as I can.

“It’s partially about the wedding, yes,” she says.

Partially? I turn around momentarily, sinking my fingers into my hair, exhaling in frustration, and turn back to her. “Why didn’t you tell me you were here?”

“Because I knew you’d come in here and try to take over the entire thing.”

I scowl. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“Really?” She shoots me a look.

A wave of snickers spreads throughout the room and I feel my anger rising. I give each person an intense glare again, since the first one didn’t seem to work. I wrap my hand around Lyla’s wrist and pull her away from the group. The office is massive, but it’s not big enough to provide enough privacy for us. And I can’t take this out into the hall and risk employees hearing us argue. I drop her hand when I feel we’re at a good distance.

“Why do you need ‘your lawyer?’” I ask, air-quoting as I glare at Prescott again. He’s drinking and typing on his phone with his free hand.

“I wanted to go over the contract you made me sign blindly that night.”

“And you had to do it today?” I ask. “The day before our wedding?”

My heart sinks. What the hell does this mean? She can’t walk away. I can’t fucking lose her again. The rational part of me knows she won’t. But

the angry, emotional child inside me is terrified she might. She means more to me than anyone in the world. If she does that, it'll fucking crush me. She brings her hands up to caress my face. My eyes shut instinctively. I'm addicted to everything she does to me, and she knows it. I grab her wrists and lower her hands from my face.

"Yes, it needed to be today," she says simply.

"Did you change something?" I ask, searching her face.

"Some things, yes."

"What things?"

"Some things I didn't like. I also added some stipulations," she says, as if that's a better explanation.

"What. . . things?" I grit my teeth. She raises an eyebrow at me. I ignore it. Fuck that. "What things, Lyla James?"

She stares at me for a moment — that stare of hers that gives away nothing, the one she never uses with me, the one I fucking hate more than anything. After a moment, a deep, worried frown appears on her face. I almost laugh. *She's* fucking worried?

"I would never leave you," she says quietly when she finally speaks. "You know that, right?"

Oh, fuck. My chest squeezes hard. I try to look away, but she grabs my face. I shut my eyes. It's not like I didn't have abandonment issues before her. I don't need a therapist to confirm that — though one did, when my anger became a problem at home. It's one of the many reasons I never let anyone in. And I didn't just let Lyla in. Of course not. Like her, I can't do anything half-assed. I allowed her to fucking consume me in a way I never thought possible. I remind myself again that she's not going to leave me, but the uncertainty creeps up anyway.

"Open your eyes, baby," she whispers, and fuck, when she says that. . . I take a deep breath, open my eyes, and find her looking at me with the kind of love she reserves only for me. "I love you so much. So, so much."

"I know you do," I mutter under my breath. "But you can still leave me."

"Lachlan Duke." She drops her hands, an amused expression on her face. "Any signed contract, marriage or not, won't bind me to you if I wanted to leave you or vice versa."

"I would never leave you," I growl quietly.

Her eyes heat instantly and damn it. Now I need to fuck her. She crosses her arms, the heat still in her eyes, but she's much better at containing the

urge than I am.

“Just tell me what you added,” I say quietly, my voice softer.

“Stay here,” she says and walks away.

I watch her go up to Prescott and say something. My mom, dad, and now Liam, who’s joined the party like a FUCKING TRAITOR, are sipping their champagne and looking at me like I’m the one who’s acting crazy. My wife is making important decisions without me and they’re just sitting there, enabling her. Lyla walks back with papers in her hands and hands them to me.

“Can we go to your office?” she asks.

My heart sinks. She wants more privacy. I simply nod. She turns around and tells them she’ll be right back, and then we walk out. I follow her, papers in my right hand and my heart in my throat. Once we’re inside my office, she shuts the door behind us and walks to the couch. I follow and sit next to her.

“I asked them not to write it in legalese,” she says, sounding amused by this.

Maybe I would be amused too if I wasn’t so damn nervous about what I might find. The first few pages look the same, but what do I know? I don’t know legalese, either. I’ve only looked at merch and hockey contracts, and then, I’m only primarily interested in the length of time I’m committing to and how many zeros will be on the check. I keep flipping. What kind of arrogant, pretentious douchebag decided that contracts should be more than one page anyway? Finally, I find new things on the very last page. She wasn’t kidding when she said she made them write it in plain English.

Lyla James Marichal agrees to waive the right to the money owed to her for her marriage to Lachlan James Duke. *The sum of two million dollars will be donated to women’s clinics and hospitals in need.

Lyla James Marichal agrees to put her shares of Duke Tech Enterprises in an account for any future children she has while married to Lachlan James Duke. The account will remain untouched until their children are twenty-five (not married!!!!).

That part makes me laugh a little.

Lyla James Marichal agrees to provide her medical services to any veteran employed by Duke Tech Enterprises for the next three years (at least) during and after her residency, so long as she is able. In return, Lachlan James Duke’s contract with Duke Tech Enterprises is void and left pending, upon agreement that Lachlan James Duke forfeits his

duties with Duke Tech Enterprises for the next three years (at least).

Lyla clears her throat. “You’ll still get your inheritance since we’ll be married.”

I keep my eyes on the paper. I can’t remember the last time I cried. Probably when I was a kid and my father didn’t show up for something. I’m pretty sure I’m crying right now, if the wet drops on the contract are any indication. I inhale a shaky breath and wipe my face. I had my lawyer look at the contract I signed with Duke Tech a second time, and he said it was iron-clad and nearly impossible to get out of.

He suggested I speak to my father, but I hadn’t figured out a way to do that without feeling like an ungrateful bastard. Duke Tech is the only reason I found Lyla. There’s no way I can ever repay him for that. It’s why I made peace with not going back to the league. I choose her over hockey any day. Every day. Fucking Lyla. I read it again. She agreed to work for Duke when called upon. She forfeited all of the money she could have used to pay her debt, for me. Of course, I’m going to pay it for her, but that’s not the point.

My mother loves me, my brother loves me, my father claims he loves me, but none of them have ever done anything that comes close to this. I’m not certain that they would, if they were in this situation. Lyla scoots closer and sets a hand on mine. I lower the contract and look at her. She smiles but starts fighting her own tears when she sees the ones brimming in my eyes. I open my arms and she launches into me, the way she did with Banks the other day. I pull her into my arms. We hold each other until she pulls away. I take a breath and she wipes her face again.

“This is a terrible negotiation.” I swallow. “You get nothing out of it.”

“I get you. I get to see you do what you were meant to do,” she says, and fuck, I might start crying again. I don’t. I take a breath, and then another, and manage to remain composed.

“Lyla.”

“It’s the best contract I’ve ever signed,” she says.

“But soccer. . .”

“It says ‘so long as she is able,’ for a reason.” She smiles with a shrug. “I’m pretty sure that ship has sailed, but just in case.”

“Fuck, Lyla.”

“You’re not going to fight me on this,” she says, serious again.

“I don’t think I’d win, if I tried.” I laugh at the truth in my words.

She kisses me again, a deep kiss I instantly feel in my pants.

“Why are you wearing this?” I squeeze her hips and groan against her mouth.

“Because it looks good on me.”

“Too good.”

She gives me one more kiss and stands up. My eyes trace her body from the hem of the skirt to her beautiful eyes.

“Lift up. . .”

“No,” she says quickly before I finish the sentence. She backs away even faster, until she reaches the door.

“No?” I toss the papers aside and stand up. “Come here.”

“Lachlan Duke, I am not fucking joking,” she says, in her no-bullshit voice that turns me on even more.

I groan. “I’ll be fast.”

“They’re waiting for us,” she says, but the fire in her eyes tells me she wants this as much as I do. “We’ll come back after the meeting.”

I take a breath. “Fine.”

“I still think my fiancée should have consulted me,” I say when we walk back into my father’s office. “But I understand why she didn’t. For the record, I still think all of you are assholes,” I say, and look at my mother. “Except you, Mom.”

She laughs. “Well, I guess we should leave so you can pack a bag,” she says to Lyla.

“A bag for what?” I ask. “Aren’t we all having dinner tonight?”

“Of course,” my mother says.

“We’re getting married tomorrow, which means we won’t be sleeping together tonight,” Lyla says, a glint in her eyes.

I blink. “What? Why?”

“It’s tradition,” Mom says.

“Fuck tradition,” I say. “I’m not spending a night apart from you.”

“It’s one night,” Prescott says.

I glare at him. “I don’t care.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. I’ll go to the second floor then.”

“My bed.” I lower my face and suck her lip into my mouth. “*Our* bed. That’s not up for negotiation.”

She laughs. “Maybe Pres wants to take you to a strip club or something. This was all so quick that you didn’t have a bachelor party.”

“I don’t need a bachelor party.” I scoff. My entire life was a fucking

bachelor party.

“Maybe she wants to go to a male strip club,” Liam says.

My eyes snap to hers. “Do you?”

“Are you going to be one of the strippers?” she asks.

“If you go, I’ll have to be.”

She laughs along with everyone else, but I’m too lost in the sound of hers to pay attention to anyone else.

CHAPTER 62

LACHLAN

HENRY DUKE HAS ENOUGH PULL to get an officiant, rent out the rooftop of a popular restaurant, and set it up for a wedding ceremony — complete with fake grass, chairs, and a nice arch of flowers in under twenty-four hours. I'm standing in front of the nice arch right now. Because of my father, they were able to plan all of this in less than a week. I have to say, I'm very impressed. The only hiccup was that the restaurant only let us rent the place out until five o'clock, since they have to open it to the public for dinner. My dad was willing to dish out whatever they asked to cover the cost of dinner, but Lyla freaked when he said that, so he didn't. He's already done enough. Besides, five o'clock is perfect. I haven't even seen Lyla yet, and I'm already dying to whisk her away.

I can't, though. I need to let her enjoy this. She picked the colors and the music, and pointed at things on the menu my mom showed her. She ran things by Marissa — not me. As long as she's happy, I don't really care. She could've picked a dirty fucking subway station to get married in and I would've agreed. The beginning dun-dun-dun-dun of "Back That Azz Up" starts blasting through the speakers when the door opens, and I'm kind of regretting not sharing my input on the music.

Some of our guests look around in confusion. Behind me, the officiant starts hiding his laugh with a cough. Banks, Mason, Nolan, Logan, and Mae burst out laughing from the seats, and when Marissa and Liam walk out, they're smiling wide and shaking their heads. My mother, father, Lyla's dad, Marissa's parents, and my agent have no idea what's happening. Thankfully, the song stops before the rap actually comes on, but I'm sure the photographer got a lot of pictures of the confusion and amusement on our faces. Leave it to Lyla. . .

The door opens again and she yells out, “JUST KIDDING!”

This fucking girl. I look at the crowd again, shaking my head, as I laugh along with them. It’s a bigger crowd than we thought. We kept it close friends. Admittedly, most are my friends, but Lyla met the three she didn’t know last night at dinner, and they instantly hit it off. When she saw Nolan, she gave him an accusatory look for messing with her at the finals game in college. He spent at least fifteen minutes trying to piss me off by flirting with her. He did piss me off, but I pretended I didn’t care.

I would have loved to extend an invitation to Cooper and Shit-Head Wade. They would’ve gotten the VIP treatment, front-row seats to watch her marry me. I smile at my petty thoughts. Those guys are inconsequential now that she’s officially mine. Besides, I already created an IG account for Lyla, friend-requested them, and posted two pictures of us together. I’ll have to tell her about the account later, so she can hear it from me and not them.

A Bruno Mars song about weddings replaces the rap song, and part of me expects Liam and Marissa to break out into one of those flash mobs I’ve seen online. They don’t. They’re tossing rose petals on the ground as they walk, since they’re playing the roles of maid of honor, best man, and flower people, all in one.

When they reach the altar, Ed Sheeran replaces the song by Thinking Out Loud. This song I’ve heard; Mom is obsessed with Ed Sheeran. I glance over at her; sure enough, she’s already crying her eyes out. Lyla’s father, who’s been pointing his phone in the direction of the door, turns to get a better angle. The door opens and Prescott walks out, offering his arm to Lyla. When I see her, I stop breathing. That feeling of watching the puck flying toward the goal rushes through me. I don’t think I’ll cry, but the emotion sits heavy in my chest and throat as I watch her walk toward me, holding a bouquet of gardenias. She’s always the most beautiful person in the room, but this is just. . .wow. Her brown hair is down in waves, and she’s wearing a sleeveless white dress that I can only describe as willowy. It has a deep cut between her breasts, hugs her body up top, and expands at her waist. The bottom is a thin material that I’m sure would be see-through if it weren’t overlapping a million layers of the same fabric. I don’t know what the fuck it is. I don’t care. I’m ripping it off, the moment we leave this place.

She looks at me and smiles when Ed Sheeran says something about falling hard at twenty-three. The emotion in my throat gets harder to swallow past. She starts walking and pauses again when she reaches her father,

extending her hand for him to take. He hesitates, like a deer caught in headlights. I'm shocked by this move, and I'm sure he's ten times more shocked by it. He stands and she holds his arm, walking toward me with both him and Prescott at her sides. Her dad wipes his face. Prescott wipes his face. These fuckers are going to make me cry.

The song fades out when they reach me. Prescott lets go of her and gives me a tight hug that I return. One full of love and gratitude, because he's been such a good friend. Even though I hated that he warned me about her and didn't tell me where she was, he kept her safe all these years, and I can never repay him for that. His eyes are filled with unshed tears as he lets go. Her father hugs me next, patting me on the back. When they both walk away, I take a breath and wipe my face to make sure I'm not crying. I'm surprised to find that I'm not. At least not visibly. Lyla smiles as she gives me her hand. It takes everything in me not to pull her against me, right now. It takes even more effort for me not to kiss her.

When we get to the vows, I stop the officiant and tell him I'm going to speak my own. I clear my throat and look into her beautiful eyes.

"You are, by far, the most difficult person I've ever come across in my entire life. You shut me out repeatedly. You made me chase you, which is ludicrous," I say, pulling a face that makes everyone laugh. "You were rude, mean, standoffish. . ."

"Okay," Lyla interrupts, squeezing the tips of my bandaged hands lightly. "I think we need to go over what wedding vows are supposed to be like."

Everyone laughs again.

I continue, "But then you let me in. *Me*. Even after you knew what my reputation was, you gave me a shot. You are the most selfless, brave, loving person I know. And you're funny as fuck. You quickly became my favorite person on the planet, and I became addicted to you. I'm in love with you. I'm *obsessed* with you. I promise to do everything in my power to keep you happy, so you can be mine forever."

She blinks rapidly and reaches up to wipe her eyes before tears fall. She swallows and takes a deep breath.

"When I met your mother, she told me that love has no logic. You're the reason I believe that. You're relentless, annoying, cocky, possessive, and hands down, the most insane person I've ever met in my life." She raises an eyebrow when I scowl. "But you make me feel safe, cherished, loved, and wanted. I walked around completely numb to everything before you came

along and made me feel. You understand me in ways that I can't explain. You've ruined me for anyone else. You're my best friend, my husband, my everything, forever."

Fuck. I take a shaky breath and swallow hard.

We exchange rings and finally — fucking finally — he tells me to kiss my bride. I lift her in my arms and crash my lips against hers. She brings her hands to my hair and sinks her fingers into it. The flowers Marissa handed her a few seconds ago drop. The world vanishes, replaced by a world where only Lyla James exists. With me and only me, of course. She pulls away slightly with a huge smile — mine, only mine, and maybe our children's if we have any in the future, but that's it.

"You fuck me up, Lyla James," I bring my forehead to hers. "You fuck me up."

That makes her start laughing and crying. I kiss her repeatedly until my mother laughs and shouts from the crowd that I need to stop.

EPILOGUE

FITZ IS CARRYING his toddler as he skates toward us. They wear matching jerseys, as usual. Will celebrated his first birthday recently, and I'm pretty sure his jersey collection already rivals his father's.

"Say hi to your uncles, Will," Fitz says, stopping in front of us.

"Ey," Will says, smiling as he extends his tiny fist for us to bump.

"You're such a smart guy, Will," I say.

"He is, right?" Fitz smiles wide and kisses his son's cheek.

"Okay, hand him over," Nolan says, dropping his stick and taking him from Fitz. "Why are you wearing his jersey again? You're supposed to root for me."

Will giggles loudly when Nolan does a swift turn with him. He's so fucking cute. I drop the stick in my hand and open my arms for Will, who likes to switch between the three of us like he's a hot potato. I'd never held a baby before this one. I didn't even like babies before this one. I'm still not sure I do, but I love Will, and I know I'll love mine. Since Fitz and I play for the same team, I've seen Will at every stage. It's pretty cool, but it makes me want to start my own family with Lyla.

If it were up to me, we already would have, but this will only be her third season playing pro soccer, and I don't want to be the reason she hangs up her cleats. Lately, she's been complaining about all the traveling, which I get. We're never home, and when we are, it doesn't feel like much of a break with all of the events we still have to attend. Lyla says she's content with the years she's played and wants to return to sports medicine. I think she's only talking about it since I'm retiring after the championship this summer. For good this time. I love hockey, but it's started taking a toll on my body, and I don't want to be one of those dads who can't run around with his kids because of back

issues. Fitz and Nolan are in the same boat. We're going to win another Stanley Cup together this year and then walk away. I'm sure I'll miss the hell out of this, but the last three years have been a wild ride, and I couldn't ask for a better team to close out this chapter with.

Oddly enough, I've been looking forward to going back to Duke Tech. Unfortunately, it'll mean I won't be able to go to as many of Lyla's games as I'd like, but we'll figure something out. I guess that's where the perk of being a billionaire comes in handy. Not that we take full advantage of the perks. Lyla won't even take the jet anywhere, unless it's our last resort or we're taking a family trip and my parents beg her to.

Will starts slapping both sides of my face to get my attention. He's been doing this to me and Nolan for a couple of months. He showers our wives with kisses and winks, but we get slapped. Smart kid.

"Are one-year-olds supposed to hit this hard?" I flinch when he does it again.

"No slapping, Will," Fitz reprimands softly.

"No lapping," Will says, giggling and making the three of us grin.

"He's so fuu—cute," I say, catching myself.

He repeats everything these days. I hand him back to Fitz and turn at the sound of his wife's voice.

"Logan!" Mae yells. "Bring him."

He shakes his head with a laugh. "I'll be back."

We watch him skate off with his son, and I'm hit with an image of me doing that with my own kid.

"You're fucking dying to have a kid," Nolan says, shaking his head, as we start walking back to the locker rooms to get ready for the game. "Why don't you have a serious conversation with Lyla about it and stop skirting around the subject?"

I scowl. "I don't skirt around the subject."

"Please, dude." He shoots me a look. "At Thanksgiving, when my mom asked you about wanting kids in front of Lyla, you got all flustered."

"I never get flustered." I feel my brows pull.

He laughs. "Every time that topic comes up, you get flustered."

"You're so full of shit."

"Okay." He shrugs.

"I think Lyla wants to wait," I say when we walk into the room and start grabbing the rest of our gear.

“She’s been talking about retiring since last season,” he says. “Maybe that’s part of the reason.”

“I doubt it.” I reach for my bag and look for my phone. “If I have that conversation with her, she’ll think I want her to retire.”

Lyla talks about retiring all the time, but she usually brings up going back to medicine. I usually try to listen and not give her my input. Of course, the selfish asshole in me wants her to retire, especially now that I’ll be home, but I love her too much to hint at it. The look in her eyes when she’s on the pitch is worth waiting a million years to start a family. I just really hope I don’t have to. I look at my phone and see a text from her.

Lyla: YOU BETTER KICK ASS OUT THERE TONIGHT! I love you

I smile, shaking my head as I type.

Me: have a great game, baby. Wish i was there. I love you more

I wait a few seconds, and when she doesn’t respond, I put the phone away and keep getting ready.

As we skate off the ice during the first intermission, we read the signs the fans are holding up. I never pay attention to them during the game, but I try to read them when I get a breather. I swear they get more ridiculous every week. In the best way. One reads **LEAVE YOUR WIFE FOR ME B4 I THROW A FITZ**. We laugh and check for Mae to see if she caught it. Our wives think most of the signs are hysterical. The baby ones, not so much, but they have a laugh at the rest. Another reads **DUKE-I’LL BE YOUR DUCHESS. PUT A BABY IN ME**. I’ve been seeing a variation of that one for years, and I’ve never thought twice about it.

Lyla hates it, which I used to get a kick out of, but now that babies are on my mind, I wish I could rip it from their hands and throw the damn thing away. A couple of similar ones about marriage and babies are directed at Nolan and some other guys. I don’t know how they do it, but they never seem to run out of creative shit to write. As we skate by, my eyes fall on Lyla’s empty seat. I hate not seeing her in it. I wonder if she feels the same when she sees my usual seat empty at her home stadium.

The night goes on. We’re up four to two, but I narrowly score a fifth goal with ten seconds left and the crowd goes wild, as if we’d been losing all along. This energy is what I’ll miss when I retire. I throw up my arms in celebration, as my teammates all skate over and squeeze the shit out of me. When the game officially ends, I make my way around the ice, putting my

hand on the plexiglass as I go to celebrate with the fans.

When I reach the section our wives sit in, I wave at Mae and Nolan's wife, who's standing behind her cheering. I'm about to turn around when I see a ridiculous sign. When I read this one, my heart drops. I blink to make sure I'm not seeing things, but the words remain the same.

GET READY "DADDY" DUKE! WE'RE HAVING A BABY!

My heart is pounding hard as I skate over. The person holding the sign is in Lyla's seat, but it can't be her. There's no way. It has to be a prank. A fucking horrible, twisted prank, if it is one. As I get closer, the sign covering my wife's beautiful face lowers, and she smiles wide — my smile. She's holding ultrasound pictures in one hand and the sign in the other. I'm still in shock, my brain struggling to process all of this information — Lyla's here, not at her game. Lyla's pregnant? We're having a baby? Fuck. A knot forms in my throat as I reach the plexiglass and stand in front of her. I set a hand on it and look at her face, the ultrasound pictures, the sign, and her face again.

I swallow hard. "You're serious?"

I'm sure she can't hear me over the noise, and I can barely see her with my eyes blurring, but I catch her nod. I feel like I'm moving in slow motion, as I drop my helmet and skate to the nearest door where she meets me. When I open it, she tosses the sign behind her and launches at me, wrapping her arms and legs around me. I bury my face in her neck, inhaling that gardenia scent that always comforts me.

"You're serious?" I ask, voice hoarse.

She nods against me, and I pull away to look at her face. She wipes the tears from it and smiles, brushing some off my face for me. I hold her tight and skate us to the other side of the rink, setting her down on the ground. I step off the ice and grab her hand to pull her to the hall that leads to the locker rooms. I'm still in shock when I stop walking and lean against the brick wall.

"I... what are you doing here? Was your game canceled?" I ask, as my eyes take her in from head to toe and back.

"I know you hate it when I make decisions without you, but I've been talking about retiring for a while now, so I did it."

"When?"

"A little over a week ago. I was supposed to sign my contract again and told Lang I wanted to retire."

"Lang knew?!" My eyes go wide. He's been my agent longer than he's

known her — that traitor.

She hands me the ultrasound pictures, and points and explains what I'm looking at, while my throat closes up again. A baby. Holy shit. She has been a little bloated lately, but it's always something with the female body. Bloating, bleeding, fucking ovulating. I don't question it anymore.

"A baby," I whisper, setting my hands on her stomach. "We're going to have a baby."

"I know." She smiles wide. "Did you like my sign, Daddy Duke?"

I lift her into my arms again and start walking. "It's my new favorite."

"Now, everyone's going to take my idea and call you that," she says against my ear.

"But only you're going to call me that when I fuck you," I respond, smiling when I hear her gasp.

"I like that idea," she whispers.

"A baby," I say again. "When did you find out?"

"Remember when I thought I had food poisoning?"

"In Phoenix?" I ask, frowning as I set her down.

She nods. "I took a test while I was there."

"That was two weeks ago." My brows pull tighter.

The moment she told me she had food poisoning, I told her to fly home immediately. Why would she keep this from me for two weeks? How could I not have known? I bet she texted Marissa about it. I wonder if she had it on her calendar. It's not like I'd know. I don't go through her things. Marriage has changed me a lot. I still don't like men checking her out for too long, but I don't go through her phone or emails. I don't have to. She tells me everything. At least, I thought she did.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me," I say quietly, looking at the pictures again.

"I wanted to tell you so bad," she says, "But it took a week for the doctor to see me, and I didn't want to get your hopes up." She bites her lip and looks at the ground. "I know how much you want this."

"Hey." I lift her chin. My chest tightens when I see the uncertainty in her eyes. "I want *you*. Of course, I want to start a family with you, but you're my priority. You're the only thing I need. You know that."

"I know," she whispers, visibly swallowing and blinking back tears.

"Is this why you've been crying during commercials?" I ask.

"Stupid fucking hormones," she mutters, wiping her face.

I laugh. “Are you going soft on me, Lyla James?”

“I hate you,” she says, her lips twitching into her ghost of a smile.

“Yeah, you hate me so much that you announced to everyone in this arena that you’re pregnant with my baby.” I raise an eyebrow.

“I know,” she says, laughing as she shakes her head. “That was Marissa’s idea. It was worth it, though. The look on your face was priceless.”

“I can fucking imagine.” I kiss her quickly. “I’ll shower fast, and then we’ll have dinner somewhere.”

“Pizza,” she says, eyes lighting up.

I’ll get her pizza from every fucking pizza parlor in the country, if that’s what she wants. I grin as I walk into the locker room. Holy shit. I have to text my brother and my parents. I wonder if she already told her dad. He practically lives at our house when either of us is home. He bought a place a few blocks from us and recently started dating a lovely woman Lyla loves.

My face hurts from smiling so much when I make it back to the hall, but Lyla’s no longer standing where I left her. I look down the hall and see her walking back over, as she types something on her phone. My chest squeezes when she looks up and smiles at me. I take her hand as we start walking toward the parking lot. A baby. Fuck, I can’t believe it.

“When can we tell people?” I ask, as we sit in my car and pull our seatbelts on.

“I mean, my sign kind of told everyone.” She laughs. “I found out pretty late. I’ll be twelve weeks in a few days, which means a lower chance for complications.”

Complications. God, I don’t even want to think about anything going wrong.

“So, we tell everyone?” I ask as we stop again.

“Who do you want to tell?” she asks warily.

“No one. I’m just asking,” I say, driving out of the parking lot.

I wonder what caption I should use to post it on her IG. I’m thinking, “She’s mine forever, assholes.” It’s not like I’m worried about any of them. Lyla’s been mine. I just like reminding them from time to time. Maybe saying marriage changed me is a little far-fetched, but I’ve gotten better. Besides, Lyla loves it and if she says otherwise, she’s lying.

“Lachlan Duke,” she says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“What?”

“Are you trying to figure out if you can post it on my social media?”

“What?” I scoff. “No, that’s an invasion of privacy.”

She throws her head back in laughter, and I feel myself smile. She’s still laughing when I park, and I take off my seatbelt and turn toward her, just to see the twinkle in her eyes. She smiles and laughs a lot more these days, but experiencing them still feels like a gift.

“Stop laughing at me,” I say, although I’m also laughing now.

It’s impossible not to around her. Her laughter dies down when I grab her hands and kiss the backs of both. I have to take a breath when her expression heats. If this starts now, she won’t get her pizza, and I refuse to have my pregnant wife go hungry.

“Lyla,” I warn.

“What? I didn’t even say anything.” She glances away quickly, a smile playing on her lips as she takes her hands back and folds them on her lap.

“How do you feel?” I ask her after a moment.

Between the disbelief and elation, I completely forgot to ask her the most important question.

“Good.” She smiles. “I’ve been so tired, and then had that stomach bug that wasn’t a bug, but I feel great now.”

“How do you feel about being pregnant?” I grab her hands and bring them up to my lips again.

I know she wants this. Maybe not as much as I do, but I can tell she’s happy. Still, I’m not the one carrying a human being inside me for the next nine months. She takes a breath and looks out the window again, and my heart stops.

“Lyla.” I squeeze her hands softly and wait for her to look at me again.

“How do you feel about being pregnant with my baby?”

“I mean. . .” Her lips pull into that smile that makes my heart skip a beat.

“I don’t hate it.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “One of these days, Lyla James. . .”

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The hairs on the back of my neck began to prickle as I felt a presence looming behind me, so I clicked the side button on my phone and glanced over my shoulder. It was the rude guy I'd bumped into—Fitz was what Hailey had referred to him as. He took a seat beside me. I tore my gaze from his and noticed his left hand was covered in a white wrap, blood seeping through the bandage where his knuckles were. My eyes snapped back to his.

“Let me guess, someone bumped into you and made you angry.”

“Are you stalking me now?” His lips curved.

“Don't you wish.”

“It wouldn't be the first time a beautiful girl followed me around.”

“Rest assured. This beautiful girl will never follow you around.” I stared at him. “Why did you come over here? Did you get tired of your agreeable minions?”

“I don't have minions, I have friends, and they're not as agreeable as you think.”

I leaned forward, setting my elbow on the bar and resting my chin on my hand. “Did you come over to apologize to me for being rude?”

“I wasn't the one who bumped into someone without looking.”

“What a crime.” I cocked my head, my hair cascading over my left shoulder with the movement. “You did bump into me on purpose the other day though.”

“Well, I'm sorry about that.” He raised an eyebrow.

“What? You expect me to clap for you? You shouldn't have bumped into me in the first place.”

“Neither should you.”

“That was completely different. I was—“I stopped talking and took a

deep breath. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. I apologized, you apologized. Let’s move on.”

“Okay.” He looked even more amused now. “What’s your name?”

“I’m not sure I want to tell you.” I pulled back, sitting up straight.

“I’m just asking out of courtesy.”

“Out of courtesy?” I swiveled my seat to face him, my knees tapping his as I turned. “Meaning, you already know.”

“Amelia Bastón,” he said. “Daughter of Felipe Bastón. Lincoln Bastón’s sister.”

“Wow. Do you keep a file of family trees for all the girls you’re interested in?”

“Who says I’m interested?” Again, the ghost of a smile appeared and disappeared just like that.

“I’m deducing, you know, based on the fact that you left that to come over here and sit by me.”

I nodded to the table where his friends were sitting. They were flanked by girls on all sides, no longer just a group of guys having drinks at a bar. It had become a spectacle.

“Maybe I’m not interested in that.” He nodded over there.

“Which means you’re interested in this.”

“I am interested in you, yes. I’m trying to figure out how we’ve never met,” he said, “My older brother is friends with your brother George. Obviously, I know Lincoln, and yet, I’ve only heard of you in passing.” He paused, his gaze searching mine. “Why is that?”

“Maybe there’s nothing to tell. Maybe what you see is what you get, and as you can see, I’m not worth talking about.”

I didn’t mean to sound as self-deprecating as I did, but it was the truth. Yes, I was pretty, beautiful even. Yes, my family was wealthy, but I wasn’t any more spectacular than the guy sitting beside me. We were just spoiled kids with good genes. To some people that would be the epitaph of their life, I never wanted it to be mine.

“I think that’s a very unfair and false assessment of yourself,” he said, watching me a lot longer than was the norm for two strangers at a bar who were not going home together. Because I wasn’t—going home with him. He licked his lips before speaking again and I felt myself flush despite myself. “Do you play sports? Are you in any clubs?”

“I thought you knew everything about me.” I raised an eyebrow.

“If I knew everything about you, I wouldn’t have walked over here.”

“No, I don’t play sports and I’m not in any clubs. I am part of the newspaper as of a few days ago so I’ll be taking pictures of those who play sports and are in clubs.” I shot him a pointed look.

“Good to know.” He nodded, still watching me closely, so closely that I had to look away. My heart was beating too fast, too hard with his proximity. I kept my eyes on the bar even as he spoke again. “Are you planning on joining any other clubs?”

“If you’re asking me if I’ll join a sorority, the answer is no. I’m limited on friendship capacity at the moment.”

“You have too many friends?”

“I have two at the moment and that’s enough for me.”

At that, he chuckled. Our gazes caught again. The sound and the way his eyes twinkled made my heart skip. I seriously needed to get away from this guy.

“That’s an interesting take on friends.”

“It’s what I know.” I shrugged.

To be fair, I couldn’t really count Celia as a friend. So far, she’d proven to be a great roommate, with her absence and all, but friend? I guess technically Hailey was my only one here. I searched for her and found her standing on the other side of the bar, enthralled in conversation with someone. I guess as a bartender and barista, she was everyone’s friend.

“Why’d you transfer over here senior year?”

“You know, you ask a lot of questions and you haven’t even given me your name.”

“You haven’t asked.” His gaze flicked over mine. “You haven’t asked me anything.”

“So tell me. I already know you play hockey, obviously you go to school here so I’m assuming you’re smart, unless your hockey abilities are the only thing keeping you here, but this isn’t that kind of school.” I searched his eyes, God, it was so hard to search his eyes without seeming interested, or *more* interested. “What’s your name?”

“Logan.”

“Logan.” I nodded, looking at him. “I can see that.”

“What? I look like a Logan?” His lips spread into a slow, wide smile, and I swear my heart stopped beating altogether.

“Yeah, you do.” I nodded slowly, mouth slightly ajar. His friends started

shouting, being loud. We both turned our attention in that direction. One of them seemed to be getting in some kind of confrontation with another guy.

“Well, I have to go, Amelia.” He stood up, moving closer to me, close enough to touch me, without actually doing so. The hint of cologne he had on smelled really good as he turned toward me. My gaze slid up his obviously toned torso and thick neck as I aimed to look into his deep green eyes as he spoke. “I’ll see you around.”

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